

“SONG OF THE OPEN ROAD”
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A mere handful of weeks ago, on what turned out to be that last bitterly cold day, I had just walked in the door. I unwound all my layers of protection against the elements into a big heap on my kitchen floor. Breathing a sigh of relief, I cranked the heat... and realized with horror that I had neglected to grab the mail before I headed upstairs to my duplex.

Well, that was just too bad! Venturing outside was too much to face again. The mail would have to wait until tomorrow. Right then, I needed something that would make me feel comforted, warm and hopeful. Poetry. I needed a good poem to sink into while I waited for spring to lift my spirits and restore me to right and friendly relations with the earth.

Ah, I knew just the right one. Walt Whitman’s epic *Song of the Open Road* does justice not only to my soul’s stirrings for milder, gentler weather and my longing to be liberated from winter dreariness but it addresses the very nature of freedom itself, which is our theme this month. And it is no small wonder that it can handle such big themes; it’s 15 chapters, not one of your short and sweet haiku.

But sitting in my warm and cozy home, I discovered that when Whitman talks about the indoor realm, he sees it as a place of confinement. His imagery of the inside is containing. “Home to the houses... form upright, death under the breast-bones... under the gloves... and artificial flowers, keeping fair with the customs, speaking not a syllable of itself, speaking of any thing else but never of itself.” Yikes. Maybe I should have braved the mailbox.

In order to extol the virtues of the outdoors, which is after all the point of a poem with “open road” in its title, he challenges us, “You must not stay sleeping and dallying there in the house... Out of the dark confinement! Out from behind the screen...” (And no, he probably didn’t mean an iPad or Android screen.) Outside is associated with good weather, with springtime, even. And all of that, at least according to Whitman, is about the autonomy of freedom. Outdoors is a utopian, democratic space in which all may come together. No one is denied, he promises. Not “the felon, the diseas’d, the illiterate person.” Equally welcome are “the drunkard’s stagger” and “the rich person’s carriage.”

These words felt like a breath of fresh air, especially when I returned to this poem on that first soft and gentle day we had a couple weeks back. I’m sure Whitman exactly meant for his words to caress the reader like a breath of actual fresh air because he says so:

“You air that serves me with breath to speak!... under the spacious clouds and along the landscape and flowing currents. Here is a realization, the past, the future, majesty, love—if they are vacant of you, you are vacant of them... allons!... we will sail pathless and wild seas, we will

go where winds blow, waves dash, and the Yankee clipper speeds by under full sail. Allons! With power, liberty, the earth, the elements, health, defiance, gayety, self-esteem, curiosity.”

Whitman’s attitude is carefree and the structure of his writing is flexible, laying out his case that the greatest joy in life is to live independently and freely. All this, just from the sight of an open road, just from the opportunity to travel it?

“Oh yes,” said my friend Cassie when I read her a chapter of *Song of the Open Road*. Cassie has been a friend of mine for years but lately we’ve had something particular in common. Both of us have had abundant cause to contemplate the metaphors and meanings of travel because we’re each in long distance relationships. (As a side note, I’m happy this phase of my life is coming to a close because my spouse Amy got a job locally and will be moving to Appleton in a few months.)

Recently, Cassie emailed me that she had been to see her boyfriend for a weekend and she gave me permission to share her words here. She wrote, “As I was driving up Michigan today, back to Traverse City, I thought about the freeing feeling of a good road trip. And how that freedom is connected to pushing boundaries.”

That was interesting! So I called her and she told me that the freedom of the open road, its “song of freedom” Whitman might say, is made all the more precious and worthy by the various limits encountered during a journey. When she’s behind the wheel, all kinds of boundaries shape her travel.

Crossing the county line, leaving one highway for another, seeing mile marker signs stream by with a burst of pressure on the accelerator. All these actions give a sense of movement that can feel like a real accomplishment, a task that once surmounted grants the freedom to leave it behind and face the next adventure, great or small.

It is not only a road trip that offers opportunity to rub up against the boundaries of freedom. Cassie and I have both noted that the joy of seeing our beloveds is in some ways more poignant because time with them is finite. Knowing that Monday will mean packing up and heading home alone can spur one to cram all sorts of sweet togetherness into a quick weekend.

Some level of hemming-in can enhance even congregational life. At the Fellowship, we use a form of organizing ourselves called policy governance, which is famous for its Thou Shalt Not statements. It means that basically our rules are a big list of don’t-do-this. Oh and don’t-do-that. Sounds annoyingly bossy, right? But in reality it gives us incredible freedom because everything else is on the table. For example, your Executive Team (that’s both ministers and our administrator Siri Witt) is instructed to not mistreat members of the Fellowship staff in any unlawful or unethical way. That is a great rule! It’s not only fair to workers. It protects our freedom to organize our staff in any other way imaginable. The sky’s the limit in terms of how we can creatively collaborate as a team.

Contrast this with a congregation I know with a different style of governance; their requirements state explicitly that the secretary will supervise the custodian...even though the secretary doesn’t

work on the weekend when the custodian is present. It doesn't make sense and causes problems but that's how it has to be. A Thou Shalt Not policy—one that says simply what's prohibited and allows for all other forms of flexibility—would have actually been more helpful and freeing in this case.

Poetry also provides limits and parameters. *Song of the Open Road* has an expansive style, free of a formal pattern. But a strict form can also produce great works of literature! It's a paradox, really, that confinement can provoke creativity and the example of this in the poetry world with which I am most familiar is the haiku. Haiku is an ancient form of Japanese poetry, typically containing a total of 17 syllables shared between three lines, with 5, 7 and then 5 syllables. Here's one written by the Japanese master Masaoka Shiki, who lived from 1867 to 1902:

Toward those short trees
We saw a hawk descending
On a day in spring

That's it. That's all. Haiku is like a short visit with a dear one from far away; every moment counts. The author must carefully consider where and how to spend each and every syllable. If done skillfully, so much can be communicated! Just by describing the hawk as descending, we are given such a sense of movement, of distance transcended, of a whole journey towards those short trees on a day in spring.

This sense of journey fits with our theme of freedom because freedom too is a journey. A process. It's a perfect theme for April, when this year April hosts both the Christian holiday of Easter and the Jewish one of Pesach or the Passover. Both of these holidays/holy days are about freedom and in the story of neither of them does freedom come all at once. It must be longed for, worked towards and traveled to in a process that never ends and is still being brought into being today, even as the events commemorated are ancient.

Neo-Pagans would remind us that Passover and Easter are also celebrations of the earthly spring, which is itself a process-driven event. Spring doesn't just suddenly arrive. It seems like it sometimes, I know, but the crocus push up bit by bit, beginning to unfurl even before they break ground, whether or not we notice them all-at-once. Snow melts haltingly; when it doesn't, beware of flooding. The seasons journey along, and we winter-dwellers are part of that journey as we notice and greet the changes.

These ideas feel very Unitarian Universalist to me—and not only to me. My colleague Terry Sweetser also understands freedom as a journey, maybe even an open road. The word freedom gets tossed around pretty casually but Terry suggests we dig a little deeper. “The word freedom” he writes, “comes from an ancient Norse root verb that means to become loving. Freedom is not properly a state of being then, but more accurately a choice for becoming. So, in our religion [Unitarian Universalism], freedom is about becoming, never about being.”

Freedom is about becoming. Never about being. And it's about becoming something specific: loving. Being free means becoming more loving. Maybe the reason that I felt so free when I curled up with *Song of the Open Road* in the bad weather is that it restored my love for the

seasons. Its promise of spring reminded me to welcome the weather with gladness in my heart. A good poem can definitely help us become more loving.

This must be why *Song of the Open Road* is a regular reading at weddings. I've officiated at enough weddings that in my mind I have two distinct categories for the poetry that appears frequently in marriage ceremonies; one is for the readings that have all the right key words but they aren't strung together in ways that express anything meaningful or real about what it's like to love and be loved. Pretty but no substance.

Song of the Open Road is in the other category. For example: "Camerado," promises Whitman, "I give you my hand! I give you my love more precious than money, I give you myself before preaching or law; Will you give me yourself? Will you come travel with me? Shall we stick by each other as long as we live?"

I've even worked with couples who used this text as their vows, as the shared promises that bind and guide their life partnership. This second category contains the readings that surpass a Hallmark card's understanding of love. I'm married so I know it's not quite that simple, even though there's a whole industry devoted to convincing everyone—especially single people, who often get the short end of the stick of media messaging—that it's as easy as anything to just fall into a love that never changes or challenges.

What's more profoundly romantic (at least to me) is the kind of freedom championed by Walt Whitman. A creative sense of being called to commit to that which beckons you forth "out of the dark confinement! Out from behind the screen..." and into "a realization" that "the past, the future, majesty, love—if they are vacant of you, you are vacant of them."

The freedom melody of *Song of the Open Road* calls us to move, as Whitman says, with "power, liberty, the earth, the elements, ... defiance, gayety, self-esteem, curiosity" into this spring season and into love however it might be present or waiting for you. May life itself be a great journey, a never-ending process of becoming loving. In Whitman's own words, may you "take your lovers on the road with you, for all that you leave them behind you," and may you "know the universe itself as a road, as many roads, as roads for traveling souls."

Amen.

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