**“Letting Go to Carry On”**

**© 2015 Rev. Wendy L. Bell**

**First Parish in Malden**

**October 18, 2015**

Brrrr. It was chilly this morning, wasn’t it? Snow is starting to fly in parts of northern New England. It’s beginning to get dark so early. We are well on our way toward winter. Winter hats, winter boots, winter coats, scarves and mittens…it’s time to unpack them all from storage.

This is the time of year when my thoughts often turn to tales of polar adventure. And as the cold winds were starting to blow and the bright yellow leaves were tumbling in droves from the trees in our yard, I was reminded that it was a tad more than a century ago tomorrow, that Roald Amundsen, the great Norwegian polar explorer made his second start with – men and dogs and sleds – to find the South Pole.

It was October 19, 1911, and it was his second start because his first had not gone as planned. Amundsen had been forced to make the hard decision to turn back and to try again later in the season when the conditions were more favorable.

Amundsen was a special kind of polar explorer, one willing to learn. He learned from the Eskimos how to dress and eat and travel with dogs and sleds in cold-weather conditions (93). He learned something from every one of his own mistakes and from every obstacle he encountered in nature. He learned to adapt to conditions rather than expecting conditions to adapt themselves to him. And his patience and adaptability paid off. He was the first explorer to reach the South pole.

English explorer Robert Falcon Scott also set out to discover the South Pole, the same year, in fact, as Amundsen. But Scott was a different kind of explorer. According to one biographer, he “came from a tradition which assumed that civilized man always knew best” (157), “forced observed facts to fit preconceived ideas” (157), “expected the elements to be ordered for his benefit” (xv), and believed “there was a virtue in doing things the hard way.” (131)

Scott and his crew were ill-prepared for the harsh conditions of the Antarctic. He insisted on doing things the way he thought they should be done, the way they’d always been done…in England, that is. He refused to master skis, preferring to trudge through the snow and ice on foot. He refused to master the skills involved in dog-sledding, preferring instead to rely on English ponies which were entirely unsuited to travel in the Antarctic. And, when that didn’t work, he insisted on having his men pull their own supplies over the snow and ice by sledge, while wearing clothing and footwear unsuited to the extreme cold, and consuming a diet inadequate to meet their caloric and nutritional needs.

Scott, his journey filled with hardship multiplied upon hardship, did eventually make it to the Pole, but only to find that Amundsen had already been there, having traveled in relative ease. And unlike Amundsen, Scott and his crew never did make it back alive.

We are talking about remembering this month. But this morning I want to suggest that not all memory is helpful. More specifically, the ways that we remember things having been done in the past are not always the best ways to do them in the present. Sometimes trying to do things the way they have always been done – or the way we’re comfortable doing them, or the familiar way – is actually destructive.

In the Tao te Ching it is written,

At birth, humans are soft and supple

At death, they are hard and stiff

Plants and trees are soft and fragile while alive

They are dry and withered at death

The unyielding person is the companion of death

The yielding person is the companion of life

An army that is not flexible will be defeated

A tree that cannot bend is broken in two

The strong and unyielding will be laid low

The soft and yielding stand above them.

*(#76, McNeil)*

Amundsen learned to bend, to adjust, to adapt, to learn, and in so doing, he succeeded and stayed alive. Scott was unyielding, inflexible in his ways, and was therefore a companion – or a disciple – of death. If only he had read the *Tao te Ching*, which says elsewhere:

Of those who would try to take control of the world

And conform it according to their will,

They will never have success…

The world is constantly changing…

*(#29, McNeil)*

Have you ever tried to take control of the world and conform it to your will? Have you ever tried to resist circumstance, to continually attempt to gain entry through a metaphorical door that was closed tight to your passing, to shape or control some part of your life without success? Have you ever held fast to a plan, even when everything around you was screaming, “This isn’t working anymore!”

Of course you have. So have we all. The *Tao te Ching* says many understand this principle of yielding, but few put it into practice.

Is there anything that you are holding onto that you have thought to be really important, but which may, now, be proving a hindrance? Something that may be weighing you down? What is it? What nonessentials can you give up?

What assumptions are you making about how things “ought to be done,” how they’ve “always been done,” that aren’t serving you well anymore?

What is the real goal, or the real mission…what is it that you are really, ultimately seeking to achieve? Now…Is it that? Or is it something else?

Now step back and look more closely…Is there another way forward? A path you haven’t yet considered that might we worth exploring? Is there a way around the obstacle that lies in your path? Or must you simply pause in your journey for a time and patiently wait for a new path to open up?

In our reading this morning on adapting, Deng Ming-Dao says that what is true of armies is also true of individuals. I would add that what is true of individuals is also true of congregations.

A mere decade or so ago, this was a very different congregation, a very small congregation, held together by a handful of loyal and hard-working members who were doing everything they could to keep it alive. In fact, they were doing everything.

Now this this congregation has grown to 70 members. There is a bustling Religious Education program for your children. There are multiple committees. There are multiple part-time staff members, paid nursery workers, and a full-time minister. Yours is the fastest growing congregation in the district and probably in the New England region…perhaps even in the entire association of Unitarian Universalist congregations. Your growth has been remarkable.

But what is important to remember is that each size of church has a different culture, a different way of doing things. And congregations of similar sizes do things in similar ways.

Then years ago, this was what is called a “family-size” church, and in family-size churches, the focus is on survival. Decision-making is usually based on doing things the way they have been done in the past. Communication is informal. Individuals have strong influence. Few policies or procedures are written down because “everyone knows” how things are done.

Now you have become what is known as a small “pastoral-size” church. You are not as homogeneous as you once were. There is more diversity, and therefore more opportunities for disagreement and conflict. Communication is more complicated. A mere handful of people can no longer do all that is required. Not everyone does know how to do things here anymore, or who is supposed to do them. And, as is common in this size church, there is more tension around who has the authority to make different kinds of decisions.

Yours is a congregation in transition, caught between the way things were and the way things are coming to be. Some things continue to be done in the way they always have been. And at the same time, there are new voices yearning to be heard, new ideas ready to be tried. In some cases, the old and the new are in conflict, and in other cases, they seem to coexist peacefully side by side. But as a result, it is not always clear who does what, who makes what decisions and by what authority.

And so this interim time is an opportunity, for reflection and for decision. You have some choices to make. If you neither reflect nor decide, you may find yourselves stumbling about in confusion. If you hold on to old ways…if you don’t adapt to current conditions…you may find yourselves pulled backwards.

But if you are able to adapt to conditions, you could become a great congregation, a force to be reckoned with…a vibrant center of Beloved Community in Malden with a clear sense of mission…the holder of a great vision, a home for spiritual seekers, peace makers and justice seekers alike.

You may find that more and more people are drawn here and inspired to stick around, including ministers and other religious professionals who want to partner with you in serving your shared mission.

But the accomplishing of such a vision will mean learning new ways…new ways of relating to one another, new ways of communicating, new structures, new policies, new clarity, and new levels of participation – both in terms of financial giving and volunteerism. No longer can you allow a handful of people to do the work of this church. And no longer can you allow a handful of people to guide you forward.

You’ll need to consciously and intentionally let go of some of the old ways of being together and develop new ones that reflects who you are now and who you want to become.

I believe you can do this.

I pray with you that you will have the wisdom both to honor the past and to see clearly the present, and that you will find both the courage and commitment you will need to move boldly into the future….together.

So may it be.