Wandering in the Wilderness

by Rev. Diane Dowgiert, March 17, 2019

The journey of life is an expedition through change. As they say, change is the only constant in life. You would think, then, that we would be well-practiced at change and therefor good at it. Yet, observers of human behavior tell us that only about 20 percent of people embrace change. The rest either actively resist change or take a wait-and-see attitude before accepting change. Personally, I am one of those who fall in the latter category. I don’t particularly like change, which probably says something about me, given that my chosen vocation of interim ministry requires a big change every year or two as I move from one congregation to the next. It has taught me to be more accepting of change and to intentionally appreciate everything about the place where I am.

Let’s face it. Change is hard. It asks something of us: new learning, new ways of thinking, new ways of being. It requires new habits. The fact that an overwhelming majority of people don’t embrace change easily may explain why some of society’s most vexing problems are deeply entrenched and resistant to change.

Truth is, change is hard, even stressful. Herodotus, Greek historian of the fifth century noted that “disease always attacks [people] when they are exposed to change.” William and Susan Bridges, who have been studying and writing about organizational change for more than a quarter century tell us “it isn’t the changes that do you in, it’s the transitions. Change is situational: the move to a new site, the retirement of the founder, the reorganization of the roles of the team, the revisions of the pension plan. Transition, on the other hand, is psychological; it is a three-phase process that people go through as they internalize and come to terms with the details of the new situation that the change brings about.”

The three-phase process consists of ending and letting go, entering the “neutral zone,” a wilderness experience where the old way of being is gone but the new has yet to fully materialize, and finally, the new beginning. This journey through change and transition is a recurrent theme in literature. It is also the basic plot-line for most stories and movies.

Joseph Campbell named this recurring theme as the Hero’s Journey, which has three parts: the departure, the initiation, and the return. The departure is an ending, venturing out of ordinary life, leaving behind what is known and familiar. The initiation is being in the neutral zone which is neither here nor there – the wilderness experience. The return is a new beginning, a return to ordinary life but with a new normal because things are now different – changed – even transformed.

Let me note here that Campbell’s term, the Hero’s Journey is problematic. Not all heroes in literature and in movies are good guys. Their heroic efforts often leave harm in their wake. They are not necessarily characters to be emulated. The gendered language of the Hero’s Journey leaves out women and people whose gender is more fluid. And yet, I think we can all recognize ourselves in the movement of the journey from ending and letting go to wandering in the wilderness to arriving at a new beginning. It’s a familiar journey to all of us.

The book of Exodus is the story of a journey from bondage to liberation. It is a compelling story no matter what religious beliefs one subscribes to, an epic tale of the journey we all take through change and transition, so compelling, in fact, that slaveholders in the earlier history of this country removed the book of Exodus from the Bibles they gave to the people they enslaved because it literally would have provided them a guidebook for their own liberation. What the slaveowners failed to realize was that many of the people they enslaved had been Christians in Africa, so they already knew the story. They carried it inside themselves.

According to the story, there came a time when the Hebrew people were enslaved in Egypt. Now, there is no extra-biblical evidence in history or archeology that indicates that the ancient Egyptians ever kept slaves, at least not in the way we think of slavery in this country. One interpretation is that the Hebrew people were more likely wage slaves doing hard labor for subsistence pay like minimum wage workers today or undocumented immigrants being exploited and kept in the shadows. Anyway, the story goes that the Hebrew people were enslaved in Egypt. Remember, a story need not be factually true to speak truth to our lives.

Moses, who had been raised among Egyptian royalty, was sympathetic to the plight of the Hebrew people as he was also of their lineage. Pharaoh, after being visited by a series of 10 plagues, relented to Moses’ demand to let his people go so Moses could lead them to the Promised Land. Moses and the Hebrew people left in a hurry. By the time they had reached the shores of the Red Sea, Pharaoh had changed his mind. Egyptian soldiers were now close on their heels.

According to the story, Miriam, sister of Moses, stepped into the sea and the waters parted. Now, biblical scholars find no there is no geologic or historic record of such a phenomenal event. They suggest that it was not the Red Sea that they crossed, but the Sea of Reeds, a much shallower body of water, that the Hebrew people crossed. But remember, a story need not be factually true to speak truth to our lives. Who hasn’t reached a point in life when obstacles seemed insurmountable, when it seemed impossible to move ahead – and then – a way opened?

When Moses and the Hebrew people reached the other shore of the Red Sea, or the Sea of Reeds, depending on which version of the story you prefer, the waters closed once again, drowning the Egyptian soldiers.

Having arrived in the wilderness, the food they had brought with them soon ran out. They began harvesting manna, a bread-like substance that appeared on the ground each morning. Some scholars believe the manna could have been a form of algae or lichen that the Bedouins of the region still gather and eat today. In other words, in the wilderness, the Hebrew people foraged for their food.

Free at last, with enough food to sustain their bodies, you might imagine that the people were happy. And you would be wrong. There were murmurings of revolt. The people longed to go back to Egypt. Yes, their old life had been hard but at least it was familiar. They missed the familiar sights and sounds, and yes, they missed the familiar food. Life in the wilderness was just as hard as life had been in Egypt and life in Egypt had not been without its pleasures. They grieved the ending of their time in Egypt and loss of the life they had before

But they didn’t go back. Instead, they wandered in the wilderness for 40 years before entering the Promised Land. If you look at a map, the distance between Egypt and Israel is only about 240 miles as the crow flies. In other words, they traveled only 6 miles a year, which seems exceedingly slow even for people traveling on foot. It’s not that they wandered because they were lost. Moses had been to the mountain top. He had seen the Promised Land. The people wandered because they needed to find themselves again. They needed to learn how to live in freedom. They needed to learn how to live together as a people, to form a covenant with each other and with their God. They needed to remember who they were at their core, not worth less than their Egyptian overlords, but beloved people of dignity and worth.

The number 40 recurs throughout the Bible. It is shorthand for a very large number. In other words, the Hebrew people wandered in the wilderness for a very long time. A generation. Long enough to unlearn their old ways of being.

Moses didn’t make it to the promised land. He died of old age in the wilderness. Moses didn’t make it to the promised land, but the Hebrew people did. The Promised Land turned out not to be the land of milk and honey as Moses had told them. Still, they arrived there changed, even transformed. They weren’t the same people they had been in Egypt. Their new life in the new land was not without its challenges. Strengthened by the journey, they were ready for the challenges of a new way of life in the land they had been promised.

This story of leaving Egypt, wandering in the wilderness, and entering the Promised Land has all the elements of the journey through change and transition: ending and letting go, the neutral zone, and the new beginning. It can be an anchor for how each of us moves through our own experiences of change and transition. When we are on a shared journey with other people, it can be helpful to remember that not everyone will be at the same stage in the process.

Some -- the visionaries -- those 20 percent who embrace change, will be on the leading edge like Moses, with a clear vision of where we are headed. Others will still be leaving Egypt, letting go of old ways and grieving what has been lost. We all must go through the neutral zone.

We must wander in the wilderness to find our internal bearings. The wilderness can be uncomfortable, even disorienting. The temptation to go back to the old familiar ways is always present. It is in the wilderness that we discover our strength, learning to trust ourselves and each other. The wilderness is where we learn to trust in life. It is where new possibilities and new identities emerge. The wilderness is a place of liberation and freedom, where we learn the true cost of these.

Freedom is not free. It asks something of us. It asks us to remember that not a one of us is truly free until all of us are free. In the wilderness we discover that the Promised Land, the beloved community, is always right at hand, not so much a physical place on a map but a place that we cultivate within our hearts and minds and ways of being together.

Ours is community of liberation, this liberal faith community of ours. Ours is a shared journey through life, through change and transition. Though each of us may be in a different place within the process, as a community we know that we do not journey alone. As a people, we are known to say, whoever you, whatever you are, wherever you are on your journey you are welcome here. We are all pilgrims here, on a hard journey to sacred places. May we each endeavor to carry the vision of the beloved community in our hearts, a burning flame of light to guide our journey home.