

Good morning.

The phrase “spiritual travel” may conjure up different pictures for different people. There is actually quite a growth industry in Spiritual Tours right now - goddess tours in Turkey, mystery tours in Egypt, sacred site tours in Southern France, vortex tours in Sedona. Yet others may think of going on retreats – meditation retreats, hot spring retreats, even UU retreats such as Eliot Institute family camp.

Another way of having a spiritual connection while traveling is visiting other UU churches while on the road. We have visited Unitarian or Unitarian Universalist churches in Scotland, Vermont, Illinois, New York, California, Oregon, Washington, and British Columbia; and in New York City we also visited the UU UN Office to learn about the good work they do. It is fascinating to see the variety of expression in our faith tradition.

But when I thought of the topic, “Travel as a Spiritual Practice,” I was thinking about some of the *meaningful experiences* I have had while traveling, and what it was that allowed for these experiences to reach me the way they did.

In the Phoenix Spiritual Pathways Examiner, Maryellen O’Brien writes “. . . a vacation . . . is not the same as travel. And a tourist is not the same thing as a traveler.” To put it in different, perhaps more *extreme* words, we could be talking about the difference between taking a trip and being on a journey. One takes a trip to the grocery store, but one journeys on a pilgrimage.

How does one prepare for such a journey?

In 1998, Richard and I spent nearly a month in Japan. We spent a great deal of time planning and preparing, as anyone might do to visit a foreign country. We took classes in the language and read about the different temples we wanted to see. But we both felt a particular *connection* to Japan – Richard because he lived and studied there his senior year of

college, and I because I had been studying sumi – Japanese brush painting, and Reiki – Japanese healing touch.

But perhaps more *important* for me, I had recently finished co-facilitating the UU Women and Religion curriculum “Rise Up and Call Her Name.” This curriculum uses the metaphor of taking a spiritual journey as it presents different spiritual traditions from around the world. This put me in the right frame of mind for taking a spiritual journey, particularly since one of the stops on the metaphorical journey in “Rise Up” is in Japan to learn about the Shinto goddess Amatarasu. Included in the “Rise Up” course materials is a list of *what is required to take a journey*. I will be sharing some of these “requirements” with you, and how I relate them to our *Japan Journey*. From the list:

- Taking a journey requires feeling rather than thinking at times.
- Taking a journey requires appreciating mystery.

One day, after we had been in Japan for about a week, I had reached the point where I was feeling pretty relaxed. I could now distinguish *separate words* when people were speaking, instead of *one long string of sound*. That didn't mean I could understand what they were saying, but my ear at least was *attuned to the language*. That day we went on the **Philosopher's Walk**. It is just a pathway in the city of Kyoto that connects several temples, but it is wooded and peaceful, instead of crowded and busy. I just let myself be in the surroundings, and experienced a sense of calm that was much needed and much appreciated. And then I noticed a very odd, perhaps mysterious thing – I had not seen many cats in Kyoto, but here along the philosophers walk were dozens of cats lazing about in the sun. Maybe, I remember thinking, they are the philosophers!

- Taking a journey requires trusting the process of discovering and becoming. Also -
- Taking a journey requires engaging from the heart in a way that is different from intellectual study alone.

My experience with sumi painting, which is a meditative as well as an artistic practice, gave me a focus of the heart for our *Japanese Journey*. In a sense, this portion of my journey started several years before when I began taking Sumi classes. I never gained confidence in my skill, which means I have a long way to go on that journey, but still, I love the art form and looked forward to seeing great art and selecting some traditional art supplies to enjoy at home. My homework in Sumi enabled me to really appreciate the beautiful and ancient art we were privileged to experience. And I found some wonderful ink sticks and paints in a Kyoto department store, which typically have an entire floor devoted to art gallery and art supplies. Imagine our surprise and delight when we discovered an extensive and representative exhibit of the work of Mark Chagall in one such department store!

- Taking a journey requires experiencing without always understanding or being able to fit what we see or feel into a predetermined explanation.

One day, again in Kyoto, we found a pretty little *tea and sweets shop*. There were a few small tables, and a small stream that flowed in one side of the shop and then back out. This made the shop quite unique in my limited experience. And then, as we were sitting and enjoying our tea and cake, a most delightful thing happened. An elderly man walked in, and he was being followed by a row of ducks. He walked in one door and out another, just taking his pet ducks for a walk! It turns out he raised them from hatchlings, and they thought he was their mama.

- Taking a journey requires respecting what may seem strange, compared to what we normally experience. Also -
- Taking a journey requires accepting a partial picture with the faith it will become more defined later.

As I mentioned earlier, “Rise Up and Call Her Name” includes a metaphorical stop in Japan to learn about the Shinto goddess of the Sun, Amatarasu. We spent a couple of days away from Kyoto to journey to Ise, home of Jingu, the temple complex devoted to Amatarasu and her followers and servants. Here there are outer temple grounds, where everyone can go, and inner temple grounds, where only certain people can go. The boundaries are not always clear, and it’s *important to let go of any feelings of entitlement, and respect the culture you are visiting*. We had a similar experience in Scotland, when we were refused entry into a castle ruin we had traveled some distance to see because Prince Harry and his party were in there. There’s no point in being upset, that’s just the way it is.

Anyway, back at Ise Jingu, we saw a gate being opened and a large group of people were going through it. We started to follow at the end of the line, and were *firmly but politely* told we could not go in. We learned that this was the entry to the inner temple after the man who stopped us found an English language brochure for us. Interestingly, this entire, \$20 billion temple complex is rebuilt every 20 years. The 62nd rebuild is scheduled for 2013.

- Taking a journey requires being able to, over time, build a more complete picture from blocks of experience.

We had a good idea of what we wanted to see and do while we were in Japan, but we did not have every day planned out. We left a lot of time just to wander and discover. Riding a bus to see where it took us, we found a rural area of rice fields on the edge of a large urban center. Walking near the train station one day, we saw a sign posted that said: Walk in Kyoto – Talk in English. Meet here at 10:00 AM. We showed up the next morning and met Mr. Hajime Hirooka, better known as Johnnie Hillwalker, who showed us HIS Kyoto. He showed us small shops and cottage industries where women were crafting beautiful fans or creating batik fabric. He also showed us the everyday spirituality of Japan, with little shrines in shopping centers, and took us to his Buddhist temple and told us about his Buddhist

beliefs. These glimpses of his personal Kyoto filled in some of the gaping holes that would be left if one only went to tourist sites.

- Taking a journey requires seeing with fresh eyes and the ability to remember what it was like to learn something new as a child. Also -
- Taking a journey requires experiencing inner and outer journeys which stimulate one another.

One day in Kyoto we went to a temple called Nanzen-ji. It's a large temple with many buildings. After looking through the central buildings we enjoyed a traditional vegetarian lunch that featured tofu prepared many different ways. I discovered how truly wonderful tofu can be! After our lunch, we noticed a trail that led away from the central buildings, under an aqueduct and up the hillside. For me, this was to become a path of learning. Because though this was a Buddhist temple, at one point on this path you had to pass through a Shinto shrine to continue on. Is this not true in life? We may evolve from one belief to another, or we may combine them, finding them to be compatible on the same path. They both fit. Room for all. And when we returned down the path, I took time to look at the plaque at the bottom of the path. It was a poem, in English. I copied it down because I was so moved by it. It seemed to capture the spirit of the place, how everything works together, everything is one. It has stuck in my mind over the years, and it is this poem that inspired my talk this morning. It is titled:

Summer, Saisho-In

The evening bell, solemn and bronze
In the grandfather temple down the hill,
sounds dimly here.
Slow beat of the mountain's heart, perhaps,
or determined pulse of pine tree (gift of the birds)
growing out of a crotch of the slippery monkey tree.
All one, perhaps –
bell, mountain, tree
and steady cicada vibrato

and little white dog
and quiet artist-priest, carver of Noh masks,
fashioning a bamboo crutch for the ancient peach tree –
symbol of strength, symbol of concern.
All cool under nodding crowns of the vertical forest,
All seeking in this place,
All finding in this place –
Hidden yet open to all –
The spirit in the cedar's heart.

Twelve years later, these are the images that stay with me. These were the experiences that made the trip to Japan feel like a spiritual journey.

It may take some conscious effort, some thought and planning, to turn a vacation into a spiritual journey. Or it may just happen if you go with an open mind, an open heart, and a willingness to learn, experience, and connect.

I feel privileged to have experienced the spirit of that special place where I copied the poem. The world is an amazing place, filled with moments of awe just waiting to be experienced. I'm sure everyone has a story to tell.

But the world is also a place with much work to be done, and for Unitarian Universalists, doing good work to make the world a better place is also spiritual practice. I mentioned early in my talk that we had visited the UU UN Office in New York City. When we attended the UUA General Assembly a few weeks ago, we discovered what a huge difference in the world this small group of Unitarian Universalists has made. This is the end of my presentation, and now I would like to introduce Richard Rhine, who will share his travel experience, learning about the work of the UU UN Office.

Richard . . .