

Unitarian Universalist Small Group Ministry Network Website

“The Land Between”

Unitarian Universalist Community Church of Washington County, Hillsboro, OR
Daytime Covenant Group Topic, Kathryn Warrior and Gary Conaway, February 26, 2015

Chalice lighting:

We light this chalice to affirm that new light is ever waiting to break through to enlighten our ways,
That new truth is ever waiting to break through to illumine our minds,
And that new love is ever waiting to break through to warm our hearts.
May we be open to this light and to the rich possibilities that it brings us.

Charles Howe

Opening Words:

"For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven: a time to be born, and a time to die; a time to plant, and a time to pluck up what is planted; a time to kill, and a time to heal; a time to break down, and a time to build up; a time to weep, and a time to laugh; a time to mourn, and a time to dance; a time to throw away stones, and a time to gather stones together; a time to embrace, and a time to refrain from embracing; a time to seek, and a time to lose; a time to keep, and a time to throw away; a time to tear, and a time to sew; a time to keep silence, and a time to speak; a time to love, and a time to hate; a time for war, and a time for peace." --Ecclesiastes 3: 1-8

Check-In: How are things with you today? *Reminder—this is a time for deep listening and not a time for response and cross-conversation.*

Focus Topic: The Land Between

What is the land between? It is a place where life is not as it once was, where the future is a question. Unemployment. Foreclosure. Moving to a new home. Family Crisis. New job. These are some of events that launch us on unknown journeys into the land between. It is our response that determines whether our journey through the desert results in deep lasting growth or proves destructive to our soul.--**Pastor Dave Neal Owen O'Quill**

Ernest Hemingway's short story "The Battler" begins with young Nick Adams inspecting his wounds. He's just been thrown from a moving train.

"Come here, kid," the brakeman had said, "I got something for you." And then—*wham!*—Nick's on his hands and knees beside the track. As he stands, the lights of the train caboose disappear around a curve and leave him in darkness. He's bruised, scraped up, and stranded in the middle of nowhere.

This is the image that comes to mind when I think of people I know who have received disruptive news that has radically reshaped their lives, leaving them dazed and stranded.

We always tend to remember where we were when the news came.

"Your position has been eliminated."

"The tumor is malignant."

"Your mother and I are getting a divorce."

"There's been a terrible accident."

"Dad's had a stroke—how soon can you get to the hospital?"

"I just don't love you anymore."

With a single sentence, we're thrown out of normality and suddenly find ourselves at sea in a new world. We're hurled into the world of the unemployed, or the land of the suddenly single, the valley of grieving, the new language of chemo, the second home of nursing facilities. In our more confident, faith-filled moments, we know that at some point, we'll regain our footing and find some kind of balance in a new normal, but for now, we're in between and have no idea how to navigate the terrain. This is "the land between." We're no longer where we were, and don't yet know where we're going or will actually end up.—Excerpt from an article appearing in InTouchMinisteries.org/magazine **The Land Between, Keeping Faith on the Way to Somewhere**,--Jeff Manion

"I, a stranger and afraid in a world I never made." From poem "The Laws of God, The Laws of Man"--A E Housman

Focus Discussion/Questions

- What "land between" experience that presented changes in your own life have you experienced? How did you respond/cope at the time? What got you through it? What did you discover about yourself? How did it change the future?

Checkout/Likes and Wishes: What did you like about this meeting and what might you wish for at future meetings; or what is your "take away."

Next Meeting: March 12th

Closing Words & Extinguishing Chalice

To Risk

To laugh is to risk appearing the fool

To weep is to risk appearing sentimental.

To reach out for another is to risk exposing our true self.

To place our ideas—our dreams—before the crowd is to risk loss.

To Love is to risk not being loved in return.

To hope is to risk despair.

To try is to risk failure.

To live is to risk dying.

Anonymous

Loving Kindness Blessing

May we be filled with loving kindness;

May we be well, to whatever degree possible;

May we be peaceful, and at ease;

May we be joyful!

Additional Resource Material for “Land Between” session (Rest of the Jeff Manion article from InTouchMinisteries.org)

Wandering the Wilderness of Complaint

The Israelites’ desert wanderings between Egypt and the Promised Land provide insight into the unique challenges and opportunities that accompany the tough transitions of our own undesired seasons. Having been delivered by God from four centuries of slavery, the children of Israel make their way to Canaan, the land promised to their ancestors Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. But their journey is hardly straightforward—in fact, they travel in circles for decades.

In Numbers 11, they’ve been trudging through the desert for two years, and things are already not going well. God has provided sustenance in a new food He calls *manna*, which arrives daily with the morning dew. The Israelites are suffering, but not from hunger; what they perceive as the drudgery of eating the same thing day after day and week after week is turning into riotous complaint ([Num. 11:5-6](#)). Waves of disappointment flood the camp as grumbling spreads from tent to tent and family to family. “If only we had meat to eat!” they moan. “We remember the fish we ate in Egypt at no cost—also the cucumbers, melons, leeks, onions and garlic. But now we have lost our appetite; we never see anything but this manna!” ([Num. 11:4-6](#) NIV).

Do you hear the longing for what was known and predictable? Their bitter complaint was about more than cafeteria food. It was about their weary existence. In a sense, they were saying to God, “We were better off in slavery. We were better off without You.” A serious charge.

It’s easy to criticize the Israelites’ ungratefulness, but complaint is a real snare for any of us traveling through life-altering transition. Take a moment to examine your own heart. As you journey through the “land between,” what’s wearing you out? What’s eroding your energy and draining your joy? As you hear the voices swell into a choir of the discontented saying, “We’re sick of this!” is it possible that your own voice is rising with theirs? Where might honest frustration be morphing into the spirit of complaint and taking up residence in your heart?

“I’m sick of enduring wave after wave of tests without a clear diagnosis!”

“I’m sick of being asked what line of work I’m in and fumbling for an answer!”

“I’m sick of waiting for this house to sell!”

“I’m sick of living in my in-laws’ basement!”

“I’m sick of visiting a mother who repeatedly asks who I am!”

“I’m sick of this manna!”

The heart drifts toward complaint as if by gravitational pull—after all, protest seems a reasonable response to a series of disappointing events. Generally, you don’t have to extend an invitation for grumbling to show up. It arrives as an unwelcome guest. You return home from yet another frustrating day to discover that disgruntlement has moved in, unpacked its luggage, started a load of laundry, and is rooting through your fridge. Even as you try moving its bags to the curb and changing the locks, it crawls back in through the basement window. Complaint is a master at resisting eviction.

While negative attitudes expel positive ones, the opposite can also be true. To discourage grievance from taking root in our hearts, we can invite another guest to move in: trust. When we make the choice to place our confidence in God amid life’s disappointments, complaint has far less space to maneuver. While attempting to unpack for an extended stay, it discovers that faith has taken all the drawers in the guest room and already occupies the empty seat at the table. Trust and complaint are incompatible roommates. One inevitably pushes the other out, depending on who is made to feel more at home.

Missing the Journey—and the Destination

The tragedy of the Israelites’ reaction is that it undermined God’s initial purpose for the wilderness experience. He was attempting to forge a relationship of trust with them. As they escaped Egypt, they were more fully acclimated to the world of their captors’ idolatry than they were influenced by the character and presence of the Lord.

As we watch them enter the desert, we shouldn't imagine a neatly ordered multitude of mature followers of Yahweh. They are more of an unruly mob of people who had gotten used to slavery and survival as a way of life. At least their Egyptian taskmasters were predictable; the former slaves often resented Moses' leadership, which involved last-minute or mysterious directions from an unseen God. And so, with all the hardships that came up on the journey, they longed to return to Egypt. To actually become the people of God, the Israelites desperately needed the spiritual transformation that life in the desert would achieve. Their wilderness experience was intended to shape and refine them into a community of trusting followers who would be prepared to enter the Land of Promise.

While the "land between" is prime real estate for trust to grow, it's also a space in which we can become resentful and cynical people if our choices are unguarded. The wilderness where faith can thrive is the very desert where it can dry up and die.

In painful times, you frequently hear the saying *Time heals all wounds*. But I don't find this statement always to be true. Some people do heal over time, while others allow their wounds to fester and then poison their hearts. Time spent in such inhospitable surroundings usually forces us to choose one way or the other. The challenging conditions of that environment can strengthen us and make us more authentic and reliant on the Lord so we eventually emerge prepared for what lies ahead. Or it can become a desert of endless wandering where our faith dries up, if we let it. The habits of the heart that we foster—our responses and reactions—are where our choice begins.

As you journey through chaos, uncertainty, or pain, ask yourself, *What is the Lord desiring to cultivate in me as a result of this wilderness?* The seemingly barren land in which you feel lost or deeply wounded is also fertile ground for your spiritual transformation—and for God's miraculous grace to be revealed to you and through you in magnificent ways.

The choice is yours.

Jeff Manion is the author of The Land Between: Finding God in Difficult Transitions.