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Arlington Street Church
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A Sense of Being Led

For my birthday, Kem gave me a GPS, a global positioning system, so I could more effectively find my way out of our driveway, for starters.

Whatever it is in a person that helps them know they're facing east, or that taking three lefts will take them around the block and back to where they started, whatever it is, I don't have it. Or I didn't have it, until I got my TomTom, whose name is David. David, like his namesake, our hiking friend David Thompson, speaks with a New Zealand accent; he says Dah – I' – vid. He also says things like, "Stay on the right lane!" and "Enter the roundabout, straight on!" And when he gets me where I'm going, a little racing car finish line banner appears on the screen, and he declares, triumphantly, "You have reached your destination!"

What happens between the time I get into the car and ask David to take me where I'm going, and the time when I "have reached my destination," is really extraordinary. All I have to do is drive; really, if my life depended on it, I couldn't tell you how I got to where I've arrived. This is an exercise in surrender like I've never experienced surrender. And he's so modest! And – best of all – he's never crabby. Nor does he make fun of me. If, through operator error, I take a wrong turn, he quietly recalculates the route. Sometimes, in a calm, even voice, he'll say, "Turn around, when possible." He has never, even once, used the word "idiot!"

Not having to sweat over directions has significantly freed me up for theological reflection; recently, as we made our way, David and I, through the wilds of Wilmington, wherever that is, I wondered, in my composed repose, my state of complete surrender, "Is this what people mean when they speak of a sense of being led?"

Here's my answer: Yes. And no. Yes, turn it over to a higher power, and – what was that old Greyhound bus commercial? Leave the driving to us!

That's what I read into this brief passage from Alan Lightman's *Einstein's Dreams*; illustrating the way in which seemingly random and not terribly momentous events can create a throughline to greatness, he writes,

...Peter Klausen is making his way to the apothecary on Spitalgasse this afternoon of 16 April, 1905....

If Klausen is sufficiently delayed, he may not [be in time to] buy the ointment for his wife, who has been complaining of leg aches for weeks.

In that case, Klausen's wife, in a bad humor, may decide not to make the trip to Lake Geneva. And if she does not go to Lake Geneva on 23 June, 1905, she will not meet ... Catherine d'Epina walking on the jetty of the east shore, and will not introduce Madmoiselle d'Epina to her son, Richard.

In turn, Richard and Catherine will not marry on 17 December, 1908, and will not give birth to Friedrich on 8 July, 1912. Friedrich Klausen will not be father to Hans Klausen, [born] on 22 August, 1938, and without Hans Klausen, the European Union of 1979 will never occur.¹

So that's the "yes, surrender, and all will be well" response to embracing the idea of being led. But what about the "no," no, that's not all there is to being led? This is the Unitarian Universalist response; no Unitarian Universalist gets off that easy. We have to prepare, and make ourselves ready to receive, and be on the lookout, and connect all the dots, study and process as much as we can, before the journey is truly meaningful, and the insights profound. And then sometimes, just sometimes, something truly extraordinary happens.

It's like that Sidney Harris cartoon of two mathematicians or scientists at the black board, which is covered with numbers and symbols on both the left and the right. In the middle, in between the two sets of equations, it says, "Then a miracle occurs." And pointing to that, one man is saying to the other, "I think you should be more explicit here in step two."²

Here's a wonderful story:

Alferd Williams was born in Eudora, Arkansas, in 1937, the fourth of nine children. When he was just eight years old, Alferd went to work with his

¹ Alan Lightman, *Einstein's Dreams*, "16 April 1905"

² <http://www.sciencecartoonsplus.com/gallery.htm>

sharecropper father, picking cotton, corn, potatoes, and cabbage. At the end of a long, long day in the fields, there was no reading hour. “We were just too tired to learn anything,” he says.

His mother could read, but his father could not. People took advantage of his father his whole life; Alferd vowed it would not happen to him. But while his twin sneaked off to school, Alferd stayed in the fields. “Someone had to work so we could eat,” he says. “Mama cried that I couldn’t go to school. She made me promise that someday, I would learn to read.”

For 69 years, life took him elsewhere. He married at 18. Eventually he had ten children. He worked as a metal worker and a roofer. He just never made it back to school. And then one day, walking a friend’s kids to Edison Elementary School in St. Joseph, Missouri, Alferd met Alesia Hamilton, the first grade teacher. “She called her students ‘friends;’ never did she raise her voice,” he recalls. “I thought, ‘Maybe she could teach me.’”

And so it was that in August, 2006, Alferd Williams matriculated at Edison Elementary as a first grader. Attending daily from 9 a.m. ‘til noon, Alferd is now in his second year in Ms. Hamilton’s class. “Using a finger roughened by years of physical labor to follow the words as he reads, he [now] counts his accomplishments by the books in his reading nook – *The Three Little Pigs*, Bill Cosby’s *The Best Way to Play: A Little Bill Book for Beginning Readers*, and a children’s bible.”

On a recent morning, he is beginning a new book with his two six-year-old reading buddies, Denisse and Jessica. It’s Denisse’s turn to go at *Too Many Puppies*. Alferd interrupts, “What did you say that word was?” “I think it’s *yikes*,” says Denisse. Jessica agrees. “I don’t hear that one very often,” says Alferd.

Edison is a school where 87 percent of the students get free lunch and one-parent families are the norm. The help is going both ways; Alferd is making a difference in their lives. Leah, now a second grader, says, “[Alferd] showed my now to stretch out words if you couldn’t figure it out. He’s helped so many of us. He’s a great person to have in your class.” Alferd says, “I tell the kids that can have anything they want in life if they stay in school.”

His first book is the one he cherishes most: *Little Bear*, about a mother bear caring for her cub. “I’ll never forget it,” he says. “That was like

saying to my mother, ‘I did it. I did what I promised I would do. I learned to read.’”³

Alferd Williams was led by his mother, and by his commitment to keep a promise – love, and devotion. He allowed himself to be led, and he was determined to be led. I’m deeply compelled by those twin directives: love, and devotion. We could be talking about a higher power, here – higher than a promise, higher than a mother, even, if there is such a thing! – but we don’t need to unless we want to. A sense of being led starts with something small, or something big – a thin stream of light in the darkness, or a great flash of vision, or clarity. Either way, it’s nothing but water under the bridge unless we decide to give it our attention our love, and our devotion.

Do you know the biblical story of the burning bush? The book of Exodus, chapter three, verses one through five:

Now Moses kept the flock of Jethro, his father in law ... and he led the flock to the backside of the desert, and came to the mountain of God....

And the angel of the Lord appeared unto him in a flame of fire out of the midst of a bush, and he looked, and behold, the bush burned with fire, and the bush was not consumed.

And Moses said, “I will now turn aside, and see this great sight, why the bush is not burnt.”

And when the Lord saw that he turned aside to see, God called unto him out of the midst of the bush, and said, “Moses, Moses.” And he said, “Here am I.”

And he said, “Draw not nigh hither: put off thy shoes from thy feet, for the place whereon thou standest is holy ground.”⁴

That’s my favorite part: *you are standing on holy ground*. The truth is that we are, all of us, always standing on holy ground. But it takes turning away to look, as it were – that movement of stopping and seeking and sizing-up – to get the deepest meaning from an experience. David, my GPS, affords me the luxury of surrender – he leads, I follow – which means it’s up to me to take in the sights, and appreciate them in all their glory, even if he and I are the only ones in the car.

³ Alicia Dennis, “A First Grader at Age 70,” *People* magazine, 4/7/08, pp. 93-98

⁴ rendered from the King James version

In his “Mountaintop” sermon, Dr. King said, “I just want to do God’s will.” Can you hear his voice, the rolling cadence of that magnificent voice, saying those words? “I just want to do God’s will.” They are imprinted on my soul. Even in his darkest hours, even on that Memphis night before he died, Dr. King kept the faith that he was being led. He called it God. I’ve come to call it God, shorthand for “good,” for love, service, justice, and peace. But there’s no need to squirm; as Unitarian Universalists, we’re called to call it what we will, or to argue passionately against calling “it” anything. But I have learned that you who are the most firmly avowed atheists in this beautiful, pluralistic congregation are among our most spiritual people. I know you know what it means to be possessed of a sense of being led.

In Wednesday’s *Globe*, there was a tiny story out of Baltimore that we all might have missed, but shouldn’t. Last Saturday, “Johns Hopkins surgeons transplanted a half-dozen kidneys simultaneously,” the first time this has ever happened, anywhere. The operations “were made possible when an ‘altruistic donor,’ a person willing to donate to anyone, was found to be a match for one of five transplant candidates, each of whom had a willing but incompatible donor. That enabled a chain of donations involving six donors and six recipients on a waiting list.”⁵

Imagine what led that altruistic donor to give up their kidney. Imagine how you would feel if you needed a kidney, and someone who loved you gave you theirs ... let alone how you would feel if a complete stranger made the decision to step up and stand between your life and your death. How would you feel, then?

The world would never be the same, would it? Suddenly, anyone might be the person who gave you back your health, and your future. That one, stunning move – the decision to be an ‘altruistic donor’ – would touch untold numbers of people for the rest of your life, including me, and, now, including you. The very fact that such a generous and courageous person is among us is uplifting. The fact that we inhabit the planet with them can give us faith in humanity.

We don’t know what led the “altruistic donor” to that decision, but we can celebrate their having arrived at *yes*. And we can seek to open to the

⁵ “Daily Briefing,” *The Boston Globe*, p. A2, 4/9/08

source of awakening and inspiration that empowers us to give ourselves away ... which, in the end, and in the beginning, is to where we might pray to be led.

My spiritual companions, GPS or not, may we embrace *surrender*. Whether we string together seemingly random events and call them “fate,” or give ourselves to the mystery of “then a miracle occurs,” let us attune to the sense of being led. May we be carried on the wings of love and devotion, and an abiding sense of goodness: love, service, justice, and peace. Lost and found, when we remember that everywhere is holy ground, we have reached our destination!