

Sermon

Journey to the Crossroads

I have been a fan of blues music since I first heard Stevie Ray Vaughn rock my world with his guitar. I went on to discover Eric Clapton, Robert Cray, Buddy Guy, B.B. King, John Lee Hooker, Carlos Santana and many other wonderful blues musicians. But it is the story of Robert Johnson that fascinates me like no other. Robert Johnson is a legend within blues music. He is widely considered to be the father of modern blues music. Today he is remembered for primarily for two things: his incredible talent as a blues musician and songwriter, and his journey to the crossroads where he sold his soul to the Devil in exchange for fame and fortune.

The legend goes something like this; in 1931, after several years of working as an itinerant farm worker – picking cotton and any other odd jobs he could find – and struggling to make a living as a musician, Robert Johnson made a fateful decision that would forever change his life and the music of the blues. They say he was living in Clarksdale, Mississippi at the time. One dark and sultry summer night he gathered up his guitar and went for a walk. His life was about to change as he arrived at the lonely crossroads of Mississippi State Highways 61 and 49.

He wasn't alone for long. At the stroke of midnight he is said to have recited an ancient incantation in order to request an audience with the Devil. Johnson offered to trade his immortal soul in exchange for increased talent that would allow him to gain the fame and fortune that he so desired. He gave his guitar over to The Devil who is reported to have tuned it, played a song or two, and handed it back to Johnson. The rest is blues music history. Johnson went on to earn the fame and fortune that he so desperately desired only to have it end a few years later with an untimely and painful death from poison on August 16th, 1938. He was only 27 years old.

I am fascinated by this story. It has all the drama for a great movie and if it weren't for the curse associated with Johnson's most famous song, "Crossroad Blues" I am sure somebody would have brought to theaters long ago. I am

intrigued with this story primarily for two reasons. First, I am curious about specificity of the details. We have the time, the place, and the year; the only thing missing is the exact date. Most myth stories or legends that I am aware of are not this detailed.

But what really intrigues me the most is the back story – his journey to the crossroads. Why did Robert Johnson go there? What drove him there? Why did he make the decisions that he did?

We'll never know the whole truth of course, but in Johnson's case the story seems to start at age 17. He had married his childhood sweetheart. Not long after their marriage she died during child birth. His unborn child also did not survive. For the next three or four years he roamed the south, playing his guitar wherever and whenever he could, but never making enough money to survive. Over the years his heartache, sorrow and frustration is said to have turned into a deep seated bitterness. His survival instincts mixed with his anger and bitterness led him to the crossroads where he made his fateful choice.

I have been thinking about this story a lot lately. I am on a journey to my own crossroads these days. As some of you are aware I am a casualty of these tough economic times when I was "re-organized" out of a job last fall. Since that time I find myself on a journey of discovery of transferable skills, of re-awakening my passions, of re-imagining who I am, who I want to be, what is important to me, and where I need to be heading.

At some point in all of our lives we find ourselves at the proverbial crossroads. We come to a point in time where we need to make a decision; a decision that may have a profound impact on who we are or how we lead our lives. The decision may be career related – do I take the job offer in a distant city? Do I quit a job that I have no passion for or that offers no self-fulfillment, but that pays well?

The decision may be more personal; should I spend the rest of my life with my partner? Should I have children? We have all been to the crossroads. We may not have made a deal with the Devil as Robert Johnson did, but we have all been faced, at one point in our lives, with that life altering decision.

Our choices may not be as easy as to turn left, right, or to stay on the same road and drive straight ahead. Dr. Seuss had it right when he wrote, “How much can you lose? How much can you win? And IF you go, should you turn left or right... or right and three quarters? Or, maybe, not quite? Or go around back and sneak in from behind? Simple it’s not I’m afraid you will find for a mind maker upper to make up his mind.”

These sage words come from the classic Seuss book “Oh, the places you will go”. The story illustrates in beautiful language the potential ups and downs that occur to us all as we progress on our journey thru life. At some point we all experience the joy and excitement of finding, “the bright places where Boom Bands are playing” as well as the “bang-ups and hang-ups” that can happen. The story ends happily in the book, but that isn’t always the case in life unfortunately.

It’s those “bang-ups and hang-ups” that we need to be mindful of because, as Dr. Seuss warns, “un-slumping yourself is not easily done.” If we are not careful we can end up in the in what Seuss describes as the “Waiting Place.” A place where everyone just waits for life to happen to them.

The late Unitarian Universalist Reverend Forrest Church in his book “Bringing God Home” would describe this “Waiting Place” as being in limbo. He describes limbo as a place where people take themselves to just simply exist until they find the courage to break free or they die.

Reverend Church wrote, “Limbo is holding out for the wheel of fate to spin in your direction.

Limbo is dropping out the moment life gets difficult, when the going gets to “interesting” for you.

Limbo is for people who postpone decisions, who want to ensure that they will never be wrong.

Limbo is where we remain every day we determine that we will change our lives tomorrow”

There are advantages to being in limbo. There is little sharp pain. We numb ourselves against the pain by not allowing ourselves to risk, to love, or to live our lives fully. Instead, we feel the dull throb of regret, self-doubt, uncertainty, and fear. Certainly there is happiness in Limbo, but it is muted in comparison to what is possible when we are fully engaged in our lives. Limbo is a place that is easy to get to, but hard to leave.

As I reflect on my current journey it has occurred to me that I had been in limbo the last few years. I would get up every morning and go to a job that I increasingly disliked. A job that, at the beginning, I enjoyed immensely and had great passion for. But slowly over time my passion drained away. I still enjoyed my coworkers and the job, but I had lost that special something that had initially drawn me in. I had settled into limbo.

I knew that something had to change. I applied for new jobs, but with a tough economy opportunities were few and far between. How hard did I really try to get these jobs? I'm sure I could have done more, but when in limbo the status quo is preferable to the risk it would have taken to not only get a new job, but to also start a new career somewhere else. I wasn't getting anywhere. It felt like I was just spinning my wheels and in doing so digging myself in deeper and deeper with little hope of breaking free.

But break free I did. In my case fate did intervene when I was laid-off. The lay-off came as a huge shock and came completely out of the blue. It was the wake-up call that I needed. I am determined not to make the same decisions that I have in the past. I don't know where I am heading at the moment and that is a little scary, but I am committed to getting there.

I feel a sense of personal freedom that I have never felt before. I have before me an opportunity to reshape or redirect my life. I feel like I am living my life with my eyes wide open for the first time in a long time and the view is amazing.

My newly awakened vision has allowed me to experience thoughts and feelings that have long been in a sort of semi-sleep. I find myself faced with the task of trying to fully experience these awakened emotions – the joy of having plenty of

extra time to play with my kids as well as the fear and anxiety that goes hand in hand with a loss of income - all the while still feeling the gravity of limbo still pulling on me.

I am suddenly very aware of my journey to the crossroads. I am beginning to understand what it means to be living in the present – actually fully experiencing life to the best of my ability - like I never have before.

But how will I recognize the crossroads when I get there? Deep down, will I just know when I get there? I don't know the answer to that, but I hope so. I suspect that in the coming months I will get to several crossroads with each offering the potential for a life changing event. Now that my eyes are fully open, now that I am doing my best to live and experience my life completely, I feel confident that when I get to the crossroads I will be ready.

But ready for what? I am ready to make the necessary decisions and ready to accept the consequences that each of those decisions will bring. When I was living in that waiting place, that limbo, I feel certain that I crossed several crossroads and either did not recognize the option to change course or I just kept my head down and continued moving forward without ever acknowledging where I was.

But no more. I have escaped the Waiting Place and I'm not going back. To paraphrase Dr. Seuss,

“On I will go though the weather be foul.

On I will go though my enemies prowl.

On I will go though the Hakken-Kraks howl.

Onward up many a frightening creek though my arms may get tired and my sneakers may leak.

On and on I will hike.

And I know I'll hike far and face up to my problems whatever they are.”

As you are making your journey to the crossroads I recommend keeping your eyes and heart open. Crossroads have a way of appearing when they are least expected. If you find yourself in limbo give yourself a break. We all go there at some point in our lives. But by recognizing limbo you are taking your first steps out of that life numbing existence. Give yourself a pat on the back and keep walking with your head up high.

Will you and I succeed? 98 and ¾ percent guaranteed!

Let it be so. Amen.

Meditation and Prayer

Let us enter into a spirit of meditation.

Much of our human struggle is with what we do not know or understand.

It is often difficult not to want answers -- or even more difficult, not to think we have them already.

May we experience what we do not know not as an individual failure but as an invitation to community.

May we seek not the true answers so much as the true questions, knowing that true questions make of our lives meaningful even if sometimes restless journeys.

May we be grateful for the restless voices in our communities.

Let us take a few moments of silence to listen for the restless voices within ourselves.

Reading 1

The Web of Life by Robert T. Weston

There is a living web that runs through us
To all the universe
Linking us each with each and through all life
On to the distant stars.
Each knows a little corner of the world, and lives
As if this were his all.
We no more see the farther reaches of the threads
Than we see of the future, yet they're there.
Touch but one thread, no matter which;
The thoughtful eye may trace to distant lands
Its firm continuing strand, yet lose its filaments as they reach out,
But find at last it coming back to him from whom it led.
We move as in a fog, aware of self
But only dimly conscious of the rest
As they are close to us in sight or feeling.
New objects loom up for a time, fade in and out;
Then, sometimes, as we look on unawares, the fog lifts
And then there's the web in shimmering beauty,
Reaching past all horizons. We catch our breath;
Stretch out our eager hands, and then
In comes the fog again, and we go on,
Feeling a little foolish, doubting what we had seen.
The hands were right. The web is real.
Our folly is that we so soon forget.

Source: "Day of Promise: Collected Meditations, vol. 1" edited by Kathleen Montgomery (Skinner House, 2001)

Reading 2

The Journey by Mary Oliver

One day you finally knew
what you had to do, and began,
though the voices around you
kept shouting their bad advice --
though the whole house began to tremble
and you felt the old tug at your ankles.

"Mend my life!" each voice cried.
But you didn't stop.
You knew what you had to do,
though the wind pried with its stiff fingers
at the very foundations,
though their melancholy was terrible.
It was already late enough, and a wild night,
and the road full of fallen branches and stones.
But little by little, as you left their voices behind,
the stars began to burn through the sheets of clouds,
and there was a new voice which you slowly
recognized as your own, that kept you company
as you strode deeper and deeper
into the world, determined to do
the only thing you could do --
determined to save the only life you could save.

Benediction

And now in our going
May God bless and keep us.

May the Light of God shine upon us
And out from within us,

And be gracious unto us,
And bring us peace.

For this is the day we are given,
Let us rejoice and be glad in it.

Amen