

**A Treasured River**  
**A Lay Led Sermon by Marjorie Loring © 2010**

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**River of Grass Unitarian Universalist Congregation**

My name is Marjory, and I am here to talk about the River of Grass. These words have been said before, but not by me.

At 79 years old, Marjory Stoneman Douglas stepped forward to help protect the Florida Everglades. “For 29 years, she was a crusader for the preservation and protection of this important south Florida natural resource. Her most influential work was a book: *The Everglades: River of Grass*, which redefined the popular conception of the Everglades as a treasured river instead of a worthless swamp.”<sup>1</sup> One that must be protected not neglected.

Let me start again.

My name is Marjorie, and I am here to talk about the River of Grass. At 52 years old, this Marjorie is stepping forward to protect the River of Grass Unitarian Universalist Congregation. This Marjorie is just one among many, **all** of you in fact, who is charged with becoming a crusader for the preservation and protection of this important south Florida *spiritual* resource. Luckily, I have a mentor who shares my name.

Starting at 79 years old - yes, you heard that right, I said STARTING at 79 years old, Marjory Stoneman Douglas devoted 29 years of her life defending something she valued, loved, and cherished.

Hmm. So much for the excuse, “I’m too old for this!”

I wonder, though, what will be my most influential contribution when I look back from the River of Grass of the future? My hope is that, like Marjory Stoneman Douglass, my words and my actions will have inspired a community to come together to preserve a valuable resource by giving it everything they have to give. I want to inspire each one of you to give your heart and your hands to this treasured spiritual resource we call the River of Grass Congregation, to support it, to protect it, to preserve it, to nurture its growth, to love it, and to look through Marjorie’s eyes and see the inherent beauty of a treasured river.

Preserving the Florida Everglades required a variety of approaches, talents, and expertise. These included building up interest and appreciation for the land, advocating awareness of the issues that threatened it, and contributing to the solutions. Marjory Stoneman Douglas did not do it alone.

Preserving OUR River of Grass and nurturing its growth requires these same approaches, talents, and expertise - and this Marjorie can’t do it alone, either - Thus, my hope to inspire.

If we are going to travel on this road together, we need to ... get in the car. This is the first step that each one of us must take. It means that you are with me on this journey – and whether you are taking your turn as a passenger or a driver, you are there to contribute what you can along the way. Whether it is taking the wheel, watching for road signs, paying the tolls, comforting the carsick, changing a flat, or asking for

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<sup>1</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Marjory\\_Stoneman\\_Douglas](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Marjory_Stoneman_Douglas)

directions – there will always be something for you to do to help keep us moving in the right direction!

### **It begins with a goal – a destination – a dream – and direction**

In our story for all ages, the Noble Gnarble wants to do something that no Gnarble has ever done before. It wants to dance on the surface of the sea in the glittering reflections of light from the sun shining on the water. He knows it will be a long and risky journey, and he doesn't know what he will face along the way. Not everyone believes that he can achieve his goals, but he believes in his ability, and has faith that even with his limited resources (specifically, his small fins and floppy tail, as he's been told) he can, and will, make it to the surface.

### **Getting Directions**

“You can't get thayah from heeyah” is a popular New England saying, particularly in Maine, where I am from. Go ahead. Try it. Say after me: “You can't get thayah from heeyah”. Nice.

And this is not said to discourage travelers; it is said as an observation of the impossibility of traveling a direct route between certain places. Not the impossibility of a route, mind you, but the impossibility of a *direct* route. It just means that you will have to take some interesting twists and turns, and even drive a few extra miles to get where you want to go - and feeling a little lost along the way is not just a possibility, but a distinct probability.

So when you ask me how we get to the place where we finally have our own building, a settled minister, a choir, a growing congregation, and financial security, my answer will be, “You can't get thayah from heeyah”.

Say it with me...“You can't get thayah from heeyah”. Perfect.

### **Experienced Drivers**

For 11 years now, River of Grass members have been traveling together as a congregation. We have hit roadblocks, we have taken detours, and we have pulled into rest stops. We have been in the fast lane, and we have been in the breakdown lane. We have picked up passengers along the way, and we have had passengers leave us to take different roads. We have taken right turns, and we have taken wrong turns. And for those of you out there who have volunteered to be on committees, at times it could be said that we have driven in circles... wouldn't you agree? We have even found ourselves stuck in a few ditches along the way... and we have pulled ourselves out.

This reminds me of a story I once heard that has stayed with me. It's about a horse named Buddy and it goes something like this:

“An out-of-towner drove his car into a ditch in a desolate area. Luckily a local farmer came to help with his big strong horse named Buddy. He hitched Buddy up to the car and yelled, “Pull, Nellie, pull!” Buddy didn't

move. Then the farmer hollered, "Pull, Buster, pull!" Buddy still didn't respond. Once more the farmer commanded, "Pull, Coco, pull!" Again, Buddy stood motionless. Then the farmer nonchalantly said, "Pull, Buddy, pull!" and the horse easily dragged the car out of the ditch. The motorist was most appreciative and very curious. He asked the farmer why he called his horse by the wrong name three times. The farmer said, "Oh, Buddy is blind, and if he thought he was the only one pulling, he wouldn't even try!"<sup>2</sup>

We might not always see what others are doing to help make this congregation run, but knowing we are not alone in our efforts does make a difference.

### **The UU turn**

Esther and I have been on a lot of road trips. Our travels started early in our relationship. In fact, within a few months of first meeting, we took a trip to Atlanta. There was so much we wanted to do in this city, and since we didn't know exactly where we were going at any given moment, we made a lot of U-turns to get to the places we set out to find.

Now for many couples, in a car with a set destination in mind, say, a museum, a show, or a restaurant, missing a turn or passing an exit is cause for anxiety, tension, and, maybe even bickering, especially if there are reservations or show times involved. But in Atlanta our relationship was new and we were still starry eyed. These U-turns just made us laugh because they were little things ... what really mattered as we drove around the streets of Atlanta was that we had finally found each other and that we were sharing the first miles in our life journey together.

Our congregation, however, is not in the starry eyed bliss once experienced by our founding members. We are at that stage where we have a history we carry with us. A lot has happened in those 11 years. We have a set destination in mind, and missing a turn, passing an exit, or making a U turn is cause for anxiety, tension and, *gasp*, bickering. Yes, we are at THAT stage. That's where our covenant of right relations comes in. Thank goodness we're prepared!

U-turns can have profound implications when applied to life. Making a U-turn means that, for some reason, I want to go back to where I just came from. Maybe I missed something because I was in a hurry. Maybe I discovered that I made a wrong turn. Or maybe I was simply on the wrong side of a divided roadway and need to get to the other side. Whatever the reason, the bottom line is that I have to turn around. And when I do, what was behind me is once again ahead of me.

So, maybe it is time for a River of Grass U Turn.

Embracing the U-Turn is like going back to the drawing board - which is not a bad thing at all. Thomas Edison went back to the drawing board many times. When working through failed design after failed design for the electric light bulb, he said, "I have not

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<sup>2</sup> Blogs by the staff of the Ohio Meadville district: <http://ohiomeadville.org/blogs/?m=201005>

failed. I've just found 6,000 ways that won't work." Eventually, he succeeded. A step repeated is not a wasted step but rather the opportunity for a richer experience of a particular and sometimes all too familiar place.

I believe that there is an "Aha!" moment waiting for us back on our River of Grass drawing board, one that will help us to clarify our vision and map out new ways to achieve it.

With all that we have accomplished, with all we have at stake, we cannot move in the direction of our goals without revisiting where we have been and redefining where we want to go. In fact, I see a UU-turn! That first U in our UU-turn will take us back to discover where we were and what we missed. The second U-turn will allow us to re-travel the road to our future better prepared and with a clearer sense of direction and purpose - because sometimes you have to go back in order to move forward.

### **Are we there yet?**

Have you ever experienced a backseat filled with kids asking, incessantly: "are we there yet"? Doesn't that make you want to get there even faster even if it means missing something important along the way? Impatience and anxiety makes people want to move faster. Taking the superhighway to congregational success is not going to work for us. So let's slow down a bit. Maybe we should start a new spiritual trend; we can call it the "Slow Faith Movement". Or, even better, how about a Slow Faith Oversight Committee - any volunteers for Chair? You think I'm kidding! Think about this:

At what speed do we begin to miss the things that are the most important to us? At what speed do we begin to focus more on the horizon and the technicalities of staying on the road than what there is to learn from the road we are on?

I know that when I drive on the highway, the faster I go, the more I focus on maintaining control of my steering wheel, on what all the other cars are doing, and on the road ahead of me. I even stop listening to the music and the conversations of others who are in the car with me. It is not intentional; it is automatic. (And yes, at times I even scare the passengers).

Sound familiar? When we move too fast, we stop listening to the passengers, we stop seeing the signs, and we miss the exits and on-ramps. We stay in the fast lane... but on the road to where?

In 1911, Albert W. Palmer, a social activist, who later became President of the Chicago Theological Seminary, and Pastor of the First Congregational Church of Oak Park, Illinois wrote "The Parable of Sauntering" to share a conversation he had with John Muir, the naturalist philosopher. It goes like this:

"There are always some people in the mountains who are known as "hikers." They rush over the trail at high speed and take great delight in

being the first to reach camp and in covering the greatest number of miles in the least possible time. They measure the trail in terms of speed and distance.

One day as I was resting in the shade Mr. Muir overtook me on the trail and began to chat in that friendly way in which he delights to talk with everyone he meets. I said to him: "Mr. Muir, someone told me you did not approve of the word 'hike.' Is that so?" His blue eyes flashed, and with his Scotch accent he replied: "I don't like either the word or the thing. People ought to saunter in the mountains - not hike!"

"Do you know the origin of that word 'saunter?' It's a beautiful word. Away back in the Middle Ages people used to go on pilgrimages to the Holy Land, and when people in the villages through which they passed asked where they were going, they would reply, "A la sainte terre,'which means, 'To the Holy Land.' And so they became known as sainte-terre-ers or saunterers. Now these mountains are our Holy Land, and we ought to saunter through them reverently, not 'hike' through them."

John Muir lived by his words. He was usually the last man to reach camp. He never hurried. He stopped to get acquainted with individual trees along the way. He would hail people passing by and make them get down on hands and knees if necessary to see the beauty of some little bed of almost microscopic flowers.

Now, whether the derivation of saunter Muir gave me is scientific or fanciful, is there not in it another parable? There are people who "hike" through life. They rush along the trail of life feverishly seeking to break a record or reach a goal. How much better to "saunter" along this trail of life, to measure it in terms of beauty and love and friendship! How much finer to take time to know and understand the men and women along the way, to stop a while and let the beauty of the sunset possess the soul, to listen to what the trees are saying and the songs of the birds, and to gather the fragrant little flowers that bloom all along the trail of life for those who have eyes to see!

You can't do these things if you rush through life in a big red automobile at high speed; you can't know these things if you "hike" along the trail in a speed competition. These are the peculiar rewards of the man who has learned the secret of the saunterer!<sup>3</sup>

And so it is with our journey. We need to take the time for presence and contemplation. We are learning these ways and are beginning to do this now. We are trying to find the solutions – together – slowly and with mindful intention. I think we are on the right path.

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<sup>3</sup> *The Mountain Trail and Its Message* (Boston: The Pilgrim Press, 1911)

## **Filling Stations – How do we refresh and renew our spirits?**

Members of other religions and maybe even some within our own spiritual community trust God's will. They are comforted by it in times of need, discouragement and despair. It gives them hope – as our hymn says, “when hope is hard to find”. Unitarian Universalists are more likely to rely on each other to get through the hard times. We are here because our leap of faith rests on our ability to believe in one another, to put our trust in our spiritual community, and believe that we are valued and will be taken care of by our River of Grass family. We attend services for personal and spiritual nourishment and we have covenant groups to provide time for getting to know one another on a deeper level, letting shared moments nourish the soul and lift the spirit through gathering, listening, and sharing. We have this life, the here and now, and we have one another - this is the true test of our faith tradition. Sometimes prayers go unanswered and some wishes don't come true. No matter what faith tradition a person belongs to, there will be unanswered prayers and wishes – we need that leap of faith to secure our commitment to our chosen faith tradition.

## **We are not the only ones on the road**

Marjory Stoneman Douglas knew that survival of the Florida everglades, as an ecosystem, would not just ensure the survival of alligators, snakes, gar, mosquitoes, cypress trees and saw grass. The Everglades nourishes all of life in many ways – some obvious, some subtle. Many other species, including our own, survive because of it. So it is with our own River of Grass. Our health and our survival ensure the survival of liberal religion in South Florida that, in many ways, nourishes and saves lives. The effect we have is sometimes obvious, sometimes subtle. We celebrate and support each member of our spiritual community by organizing our Sunday services, bringing meals and love to the sick, visiting those who are housebound, offering comfort to the grieving. But our support doesn't stop with our own members; we are also connected to our local and global communities.

Just this past year alone we supported the Cooperative Feeding Program of Broward County by donating half of our collection plate each week, collecting canned goods, working the kitchen and the pantry on weekends, facilitating the Empty Bowls annual fundraising event, and participating in food drives – their survival is linked to ours. We supported a local homeless shelter for teens and children by providing holiday gifts and backpacks for school. We supported education for women in Africa by donating money to CAMFED. We participated in walk-a-thons and bike-a-thons to raise money to help find a cure for diseases. We petitioned for a fair wage for migrant farm workers and we held concerts to raise money for causes like the Malaria Project. We sold hand crafted paper bead jewelry that supports women in Uganda, added our voices to support GLBT Rights and raised money to help rebuild countries like Haiti who have been devastated by natural disasters.

Their survival is linked to ours.

The Florida Everglades is once again facing potential threats – this time from the Gulf oil disaster. It is an unprecedented threat to the Florida ecosystem. Marjory Stoneman

Douglas is gone, she passed away at 108 years old, but those who are inspired by her words and her wisdom will carry on her legacy of protecting this treasured river.

Our own River of Grass is struggling to survive as well. We are one of many congregations, not just UU congregations, struggling through tough economic times. The transitions we are facing are opportunities we can celebrate. They are opportunities to live our faith, to recognize our strengths, and to build our potential. We are a treasured river.

Think about what you feel makes River of Grass a success.

Think about what you feel makes River of Grass Special.

Think about how life would be different for you, and for the world, without it.

As we face this time of transition together, I hope that you are inspired to join the many among us who have graciously given their time and talent to nurture and grow our faith community.

We have an exciting journey ahead of us. The potential is limited only by what we are willing to give.

Let's learn from the Noble Gnarble. Who was told he couldn't make it to the surface - that he couldn't accomplish his dream, but he believed in himself, was determined to try. A tiny Gnarble, who worked his way past the Blyfish, and the spongy gishy gosh. Who detoured around the warkle block, and paused just long enough to protect himself from a subbalubble who was determined to hold him back. Let's learn how as he got closer to his goal, he focused too much on the surface, stopped paying attention, and was gobbled by the hungry plink. And most of all, lets remember how when all seemed hopeless, he pulled through, and how what seemed to be his weakness (his floppy tail) turned out to be his greatest asset.

If each mile we travel is joined by more of you, then there will be no need to chase our dreams - our dreams will unfold naturally. We have what it takes.

At the end of the road lies a path to our dreams – let's drive, let's saunter, let's dance on the surface with the Noble Gnarble.

Amen, and may you live in blessing.