



What To Do When Navigating the Unknown: Wandering From The Path Already Made

By Michael Mervosh



*"Each entered the Forest Adventurous
at the point which he himself had chosen,
where it was darkest and there
was no way or path."*

The Quest For the Holy Grail
- Anonymous 13th Century monk

Choosing The Path Of Wandering – The Acceptance of Being Lost

Another one of Campbell's aphorisms (one that in hindsight is self-evident) goes something like this: *"What you cannot experience positively, you will experience negatively."* The hero action step here is the willingness to purposely wander from the already made path.

We need the necessary ego strength and courage to tolerate any feelings of being *lost*, before we can have any worthwhile or meaningful of 'being found' on our journey, either through our adventures or through our ordeals.

It is essential that we find a positive, open-minded orientation towards becoming or being lost, so that we don't immediately succumb to the existential panic that can take over whenever we realize that we have no idea where we are, where we are going, or what we are doing – in any given moment.

In fact, for all of us on the journey, the stark realization of being lost is actually the thing that really gets the adventure under way.

David Wagoner, a poet from the Northwest, wrote a poem inspired by a teaching story from Native Americans of the Northwest. They told this story to their young so they would know what to do if they ever found themselves lost in the woods.

Wagoner's poem was the very first poem that I actually 'heard' many years ago. It awakened in me a deep fascination with the ability of a spoken word to touch people

deeply, in a way beyond any rational understanding. It was a moment in time some 30 years ago that I have not forgotten, and often recall. I was in Cleveland, Ohio at the time, immersed in a Gestalt therapy training weekend. I heard it recited by an emerging poet at the time, David Whyte.

Annie Dillard, a wonderful contemporary American writer, sums up my experience of awakening to poetry like this: *"It was if I had been my whole life a bell, but never knew it, until the moment I was lifted and struck"*. This is the poem that first lifted and struck me, and resounds within to this very day. It's called 'Lost':

*Stand still,
the trees ahead and bushes beside you
are not lost.
Wherever you are is called 'here',
and you must treat it like a powerful stranger,
ask permission to know it, and be known.*

*Listen
the forest breathes, it whispers
'I have made this place around you,
if you leave it,
you may come back again,
saying 'Here'.*

*No two trees are the same to a raven,
no two branches the same to a wren.
If what a tree or a branch does
is lost on you,
then, you are surely lost.
Stand still,
the forest knows where you are,
you must let it
find you.*



Wagoner's poem offers an essential teaching for any of us who are courageously pursuing their own journey, and who wish to be guided through the elusive depths of their own soul's calling. It is essential because an authentic journey will inevitably bring forth moments of being profoundly lost.

Whether experienced as profoundly acute or as pervasively chronic, this sense of *lost-ness*, emanating from our psyche, can have a debilitating impact on the ego. The immediacy of the experience begins to chip away at how we think we knew ourselves. It can all at once 'un-do' our sense of place in the world, and it can elicit a rapid downward spiral into existential terror.

I know, because around twenty years ago, I found myself alone and completely lost in the Adirondack Mountains in upstate New York.

*Stand still,
the trees ahead and bushes beside you
are not lost.*

Stand still. This is sometimes the hardest thing in the world to do whenever we come upon the dramatic realization of being completely and utterly lost. Finding the strength of will to slow down, and to do the opposite of our tendency to flee, is never easy whenever we enter a state of deep fear.

Whenever we enter the darkness of the deep unknown, we must cultivate the ability to slow down and become grounded just as our fears escalate. We must develop the capacity to look beyond our immediate self-concerns in the tension or distress of feeling lost. We need enough discipline to focus our eyes on the newness of the landscape before us, that can only be seen from where one truly is. To recognize that ‘the trees ahead and bushes beside you’ have long established their place in the world, and indeed, they are not lost.



*Wherever you are is called ‘here’,
and you must treat it like a powerful stranger,
ask permission to know it, and be known.*

The panic and dread of being lost takes us out of the moment. Panic, in particular, un-grounds us and further disorients us. Our mind leaps forward and creates spiraling projections of catastrophic outcomes. Panic causes us to lose sight of our senses. Feelings of safety, security and certainty quickly evaporate into thin air.

Coming back to the lived moment is what we must be able to do, to re-orient and re-assess things more clearly. Coming back to our breath must be first, slowing our breathing down. Then slowing down into a felt sense of our bodies, and slowing down the racing thoughts in our minds. Stop going in circles. Actions based on panic usually create useless, futile outcomes. We have to do the hard work of slowing down the runaway train of fearful thinking. Finally, we have to bring our full attention back to our immediate surroundings.

When dis-oriented, the unknown space and place must begin to become known to us. As we bring our focus back to the here and now, we meet this powerful stranger, the one who has become ‘lost’. We have to work through the same internal process, whether this unknown space is in a literal forest, or in an uncertain encounter with another, or in previously un-navigated territories of the psyche. We must practice ‘losing’ our panicked mind by coming back to our senses. By listening deeply.

*Listen
the forest breathes, it whispers*

*'I have made this place around you,
if you leave it,
you may come back again,
saying 'Here'.*



My initial feeling, as I realized how lost I had become, was not fear and it was not panic. My initial reaction was anger. I was mad that I had missed the turn. How could I have missed it? That didn't happen to me the other times I was here.

The next feeling was embarrassment. Now what will happen if I don't find my way out of the mountains? What if I have instead headed deeper *into* the Adirondacks, and not out of them, without knowing it? Then people would eventually have to come searching for me. This thought caused me to begin feeling distressed.

I took stock of my situation. Having 'adventured' on short notice, I wasn't planning to explore new areas, so I didn't bring a compass. I had already used up my food supply, and also most of my water. I had no timepiece. Not good. And finally, besides not knowing where I was, I had no idea where to go next.

Looking ahead, there was no horizon I before me, no orienting point. The forest had enclosed itself in on me. I could see no clear way to navigate forward, and going back the way I came was also no longer clear. It was at that particular moment I could feel panic beginning to rise within me. Yet I also remembered this particular poem by David Wagoner as well. I knew I had to gather myself to myself, and listen inside. Then I had to orient to the woods around me.

I took off my backpack and sat on a felled tree; I sat until I became very still. Everything about my world had suddenly changed. I was 'here', and nowhere else. I could become quiet and listen deeply. I could hear the wind moving through the trees. There was a busy little chipmunk scurrying about, apparently not lost at all. As I listened, I felt into what I knew. I knew to walk in the same direction as much as possible, and I knew to find water, and I knew to follow it, as water always leads to a larger opening somewhere.

I became acutely aware of my vulnerability. Being alone with no first aid kit, I could not afford to injure myself this deep in the wild. I walked as mindfully as I could, while paying attention to whatever small orientation the land would give me. I kept on looking for an opening, hoping to find the sun in the sky. I kept looking for water. I found neither of those things.

I was in a foreboding landscape. Time passed. As I made my way through dense brush with no path, nothing was opening up. I could feel my fear nearby, wanting to rise up. Each time fear arose, I kept coming back to 'here'. I worked, again and again, to get settled inside. I did this by continuing to slow down, by not rushing forward, and by speaking kindly to myself.

At times, I soulfully sang some songs that came to me. I kept checking with my internal sense of things. I was both purposefully walking and cluelessly wandering; I could not afford the luxury of panic in this unsteady terrain.

I walked in this manner for what felt like a very long time. With hindsight, it couldn't have been more than three or four hours. But with no horizon, like inside a cave, time is eternal, and now is forever. I kept up my purposeful walking in one direction. I would occasionally sit, rest, and breathe.

I still had absolutely no idea where I was, where I was headed, or which way would lead me out. Over and over again, I just kept taking stock: I was alive, I was well, and for sure, I was on an adventure. I was not encumbered with any physical trouble. I had a tent, warm clothes and a sleeping bag. And I had inner resources.



*No two trees are the same to a raven,
no two branches the same to a wren.
If what a tree or a branch does
is lost on you,
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Stand still,
the forest knows where you are,
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SLOW DOWN

Slowing down; continuing to accept being with 'lostness'; becoming grounded enough in a 'not knowing' in order to orient to one's present environment and circumstance. Keep taking stock of conditions, keep listening inside, and keep sensing into the environment around us. Keep feeling intuitively into which way we are to head next. As the poem states, if what is happening before us and around us is lost on us, we are truly lost.

Practicing 'mindfulness' is a key feature for awareness to grow, born from the adventures and ordeals we experience along the journey. To keep orienting to the living world with our senses and not getting lost in our heads, especially in times of deep uncertainty or not knowing.

BEAR THE NECESSARY BODILY TENSION

Bearing the tension necessary to keep focused and grounded whenever the path before us is not yet clear - this is another essential skill to learn. The grounded-ness of embodiment, and

having access to a non-reactive mind, helps us to not make things worse than they actually are, when the going gets difficult.

Then at some point along the way and outside of the ego's control, something larger and beyond our reach can take over. But not on your terms, nor on your time schedule.

The 'forest' is a metaphor for the future that awaits, and for the universe itself, for awaiting presence, a divine presence, for that intangible presence that connects you and me, and all of life. This presence ever surrounds us and communicates with us - if we can just embody ourselves and quiet our minds enough to deeply listen.

It is said that the consciousness of our deepest self, our 'psyche' or soul – is always traveling along with us, tracking us, whispering to us. It knows where we are. We must let it come to us, find its way to get through to us, and make itself known to us.

I'll close with a poem by Juan Ramon Jimenez, that personalizes that companioning presence of a living universe:

*I am not I.
I am this one
walking beside me whom I do not see,
whom at times I manage to visit,
and at other times I forget.
The one who remains silent when I speak,
the one who forgives, sweet, when I hate,
the one who takes a walk
when I am indoors,
the one who will remain standing
when I die.*

