

*A Journey is Like.....*  
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## Part I.

In the wonderful story about a young boy named Forrest Gump, his mother is very good at explaining things about life in a way he can understand. “Life is like a box of chocolates, you never know what you’re going to get,” is one of her most famous explanations.

Yes, we can look at life’s experiences as a box of assorted chocolates and leave it at that, but when I was teaching high school English, I found this particular example very useful when explaining the grammatical concept of analogy, more specifically the concept of simile. Now before grammar anxiety sets in and unpleasant memories of memorizing parts of speech and diagramming sentences begin to flood into your mind, let me assure you a simile is nothing to be afraid of.

“Life is like a box of chocolates” is a simple and sweet simile because one word ‘like’ is full of magic. Life and chocolates are, obviously, two different things, so the word ‘like’ is the bridge that accommodates the two different images: life like chocolates; add a verb, is, and a modifier, assorted, and voila, we have a meaningful unit of communication: life is like assorted chocolates. End of grammar lesson!

To play around a bit and extend this useful metaphor, if a person’s life is like a box of assorted chocolates and you don’t know what you’re going to get,

then living life is like a journey and you don’t know what you will encounter along the way, except the three things which each of us will always encounter: birth, experience, and death. But when we think about living life being like a journey, we should focus on the word *experience* – that span of time which happens between birth and death – the word which is full of magic because it is the one which transports *value* between the events of birth and death.

The last comment I will make on the subject of grammar is this, telling stories is foundational to the brain’s ability to facilitate communication. Grammar is like the bones which make up our body’s skeleton and to which all the other body parts adhere and function. So too are sentences build the foundations of cognitive structures in our brain. Humans have been using sentences to construct stories since the very beginning and as we have evolved, so has the complexity of our sentences and our ability to make and understand meaning. In other words, our brain’s cognitive ability to create and understanding more complex levels meaning is based on a very simple grammatical formula: something is like something else.

One of the most effective and beautiful ways for this simple grammatical construct to convey meaning is a poem, for example, Louis Simpson’s poem entitled

*American Poetry,*

Whatever it is, it must have  
 A stomach that can digest  
 Rubber, coal, uranium, moons, poems

Like the shark, it contains a shoe.  
 It must swim for miles through the desert  
 Uttering cries that are almost human

One of my favorite analogies of *living life* is the image of a river. Water is the universal symbol of life and when it is flowing water, shaped and formed by the contours of a riverbed and everything else on it and in it, the possibilities to see similarities between it and living life are endless, “it must swim for miles.”

When we think about the analogy, *living life is like a journey on a river*, it would be easy to fall into the uncomplicatedness of cliché. For me, a statement that is cliché is when the first response that comes to mind is, ‘well duh, everyone knows that.’ A somewhat clichéd version of *living life is like floating down a wide peaceful river* – a river filled with edible fish, lined with flowers and trees, no serious rapids or waterfalls, no river bandits who want to rob you, clear storm-less weather, and plenty of resting places along the shoreline where fresh drinking water and edible vegetation are plentiful. The analogy is that life is a safe, fruitful, conflict-free experience – maybe a bit boring, but safe, unsurprising, and harmonious.

But if you are someone like for example, Mark Twain, maybe you’ll encounter a twist and soon we are listening to a story about a young white boy and his friend, an older black man, and their journey along an unpredictable, unforgiving river flowing through an unsafe land.

Listening to Mr. Twain’s version of the story, it soon becomes clear all that you have taken for granted is at risk. For a multitude of reasons, the image of these two unlikely traveling partners is like an alluring invitation to think deeper, to not run away from the complicatedness of the inevitable questions and answers. A twist in a story is like an invitation to take a deep breath and trust there is more -- ‘like a shark, it contains a shoe.’

The analogy, *living life is like a river journey*, is useful to help us find meaning in whichever river we are personally traveling – the bountiful, safe river, or the unyielding, rapid-filled river. Each analogy is useful because there are many similarities between living life and a journey. Both, involve a traveler, both involve a sequence of events, the passage of time, and both imply a beginning and an end.

## Part II.

Once upon a time there were several friends who liked attending Sunday morning church services at their respective churches around town. One Monday morning, they were having coffee and the subject of their churches came up. Soon they discovered they each shared a dissatisfaction with what they were expected to believe.

They discovered each of them found reason and science offered a better explanation than the wrath of an angry God or belief in ancient prophecies. For example, none of them believed a woman could still be a virgin after conception; or that the substance of God and the substance of Humanity were the same thing.

The friends also discovered their faith in the power of reason, compassion, and unconditional love made it difficult to believe every human was born a sinner and only those who believed in Jesus's atonement were going to heaven. The friends were amazed to discover they also shared a love of asking questions and talking about religious ideas instead of rote memorization and blind faith.

One of the friends mentioned they had visited a Unitarian church during a recent visit to Boston and had enjoyed participating in a service where no one was expected to conform their beliefs to a doctrine and recite a creed in order to be a member. Soon they all agreed it might be worthwhile to investigate this type of doctrine-free church – and so they did.

What they discovered was exciting! The Unitarian tradition had been around since the beginning of Christianity – since the 4<sup>th</sup> century! The theological principles which asserted the unity of God and the humanity of Jesus had been espoused through the ages by scholars and theologians such as Athanasius at the Council of Nicaea; Faustus Socinus, Michael Servetus, and Francis David during the middle ages; and Theophilus Lindsey and Joseph Priestly during the Protestant Reformation in England.

By the 18<sup>th</sup> century, independent-minded American clergy such as Johnathan Mayhew were preaching on the unity of God; Hosea Ballou on universal salvation; and the great Theodore Parker on social justice.

In the early years of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the esteemed William Ellery Channing preached a revolutionary sermon in Boston entitled, "Unitarian Christianity." According to historian the Reverend David Bumbaugh, Channing carefully defined the areas in which orthodox and Unitarians disagreed, and (Channing) subjected .. orthodox (theological) positions (to critical examination) ....He urged his listeners;

Do not, brethren, shrink from the duty of searching God's Word for yourselves, through fear of human censure and denunciation. Do not think that you may innocently follow the opinions which prevail around you, without investigation, on the ground, that Christianity is now of purified from errors as it need no laborious research. Much stubble is yet to be burned; much rubbish to be removed; many gaudy decorations, which a false taste has hung around

Christianity, must be swept away, and earth-born fogs, which have shrouded it, must be scattered.....

While Channing was serving the influential Federal Street Church in Boston, a young up-and-coming Unitarian Minister, Jared Sparks, was appointed to serve as the Chaplain to the U.S. House of Representatives; and in 1821 New York City's first Unitarian Church, All Souls was established.

I'd like to share an interesting side story about All Souls Unitarian Universalist Church of New York City,

The founding of All Souls dates from its charter in 1819, the year that Lucy Channing Russel invited about 40 friends and neighbors into her home in lower Manhattan to hear a talk by her brother, William Ellery Channing, minister of the Federal Street Church in Boston.

Soon the friends made the decision to form a Unitarian congregation and they built a church and named it *All Souls*. The dedication ceremony was held on January 21, 1821 and William Ware, the first minister, was installed on December 18, 1821.

Following Reverend Ware, Henry Whitney Bellows was called to All Souls straight from Harvard Divinity School in 1839, and he embarked on a shared journey that would last 43 years.

The match of minister and congregation was a good one. Bellows, a New Englander who was a pragmatist even before the founding of the philosophical movement of that name, became the quintessential 19th-century New Yorker - activist rather than theologian, organizer rather than scholar, more chief executive officer than academician.

But Bellows served not only his congregation, he also served the nation, the city of New York and the Unitarian denomination. He stepped onto the national stage in May 1861, when he founded the United States Sanitary Commission, a volunteer organization modeled after Florence Nightingale's life-saving work in the Crimea. He was integrally involved with the establishment and growth of many cultural and civic institutions within the city.

Bellows spent his entire adult life among this congregation, which included women and men such as William Cullen Bryant, poet and editor of the *Evening Post*; Peter Cooper, businessman and founder of Cooper Union; writer Herman Melville; Louisa Lee Schuyler, Sanitary Commission organizer and founder of the Bellevue School of Nursing; Dorman C. Eaton, civil service reformer and author; Nathaniel Currier, who (with his partner, Ives) created a new standard of pictorial excellence; as well as important bankers and businessmen. Together, these people created a myriad of city institutions, led reform movements, and erected a new church, All Souls' third building, at Fourth Avenue and 20th St.

The year the new church was completed, Franklin Delano Roosevelt was elected president. In 1879, Rev. Bellows had officiated at the wedding of Sara Delano, whose family had been members of All Souls for many years. This nineteenth-century wedding might have passed unnoticed except that Sara Delano and her husband, James Roosevelt, would become the parents of a future president.

The year 1985 may draw the attention of the future historian who examines the church's continuing tradition of support for human dignity. This was the year 10,000 placards were placed in city buses and subways with messages such as "AIDS is a human disease and deserves a humane response." In 1991, All Souls received the Outstanding AIDS Ministry award from the National AIDS Interfaith Network for early and wide-ranging efforts in support of women, men and children with AIDS.

In 1919, when the congregation celebrated its 100th anniversary, the speakers included former President William Howard Taft, the most recent Unitarian to be President of the United States.

The bicentennial of the congregation will be celebrated in November 2019 and I'm sure All Souls' current Associate Minister recently called from her service in Cheyenne Wyoming, the gifted Reverend Audette Fullbright, is already helping make plans for the auspicious occasion!

So ends this story within the story and we return to our band of liberal religionists staking out a place in the community of Casper Wyoming. When we last heard, they were comparing theological notes over their new found religious and intellectual freedom and soon they became committed to establishing a Unitarian church in their own town.

The Unitarian Universalist Church of Casper Wyoming received its charter from the Unitarian Universalist Association in 1957 but by the early 1960s, discussions among its members mirrored the national debate over the Viet Nam War. So the members made the decision to become inactive, a hiatus which lasted until 1982, when another group of free-thinking individuals got to talking over coffee one morning....