

## **To Oz and Back: A Spiritual Journey**

**By Rev. Jane Bennett Smith, Channing Memorial Church, UU, Ellicott City, MD, January 12, 2025**

Together, they traversed a field of beautiful, endless poppies in full bloom only to realize the scent was poisonous – and they survived. Together, they journeyed through a dense forest, soon to discover the trees around them were alive in an astounding sense, poised to violently attack the small group of new friends – and they triumphed. Together, they prevailed, accompanying one another through dangers that none could survive without the unique gifts of one another – a journey none could travel alone. And it was this journey – this treacherous, arduous, and mistaken journey – undertaken to magically receive that of which they believed they were missing, only to find they had held it within all along.

These are the insights from L. Frank Baum's classic novel *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* that guide us today - this understanding that we hold within all that it is we feel we lack. This lesson that we need one another on the onerous journeys undertaken in each finite life.

It is the story we heard earlier in a very condensed form, to be briefly elaborated upon in this moment. Note, the story we heard earlier varies slightly from the original story book we will be reflecting upon today. As the original tale tells it, there is a journey of four new friends – a Tin Woodman who believes he has no heart, a Lion who believes he is a coward, a Scarecrow thought to have no brain, and Dorothy who felt lost and trapped in a place far from her home in Kansas. Together, they traveled to find the great Wizard of Oz to receive that which they believe to be lost, only to find they had had it all along, traversing a host of taxing experiences along the way.

Just as we must know the journey, so, too, do we need to know the characters. Dorothy – whose powers of compassion and empathy are held deep within. The freshly created scarecrow, lacking experience in all of his newness, lamenting his head is full of straw and not

brains, yet filled with a wisdom that ultimately saves the group over and over again. The Tin Woodman, at a loss of a heart, who nonetheless takes great care not to be cruel or unkind precisely because he thinks he doesn't have the guidance that comes with having a heart of compassion and kindness and love. The lion who, despite believing himself to be cowardly, repeatedly faces his fears when his newfound friends require it. His fear is repeatedly overcome with love.

I offer that very thing we think we lack – compassion, peace, insight, strength, perseverance, love, this may be the very thing that, to the outside world, is so fundamentally apparent. People see in us what we cannot see in ourselves. Quote, “Once, indeed, the Tin Woodman stepped upon a beetle that was crawling on the road and killed the poor little thing. This made the Tin Woodman very unhappy, for he was always careful not to hurt any living creature, and as he walked along, he wept several tears of sorrow and regret.”<sup>1</sup> He was guided by all of that of which he believed he was deprived of as he understood himself to lack a heart. Even in these two brief lines we note his strengths. His compassion and sympathy prevailed. That very thing we think we lack is that which can be most apparent in how we engage with the world. He believed “he had no heart, and therefore he took great care never to be cruel or unkind to anything.”<sup>2</sup> And yet, is this not what a heart does? Why do we believe we don't have these gifts? Are we oblivious due to our own insecurity? To our own frustration? Due to a pervasive self-doubt or self-criticism? That seems to be the tale of this lamenting character. We already hold it within and offer it beyond. All we need to do is recognize it for just what it is.

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I note, too, an act of the lion who believed himself to lack courage. “I am terribly afraid of falling, myself,” said the Cowardly Lion, “but I suppose there is nothing to do but try it. So, get on my back and we will make the attempt.”<sup>3</sup> Standing between the travelers and their destination was a deep ravine that would swallow up anyone who fell into it. The Lion saw no

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<sup>1</sup> *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* by L. Frank Baum pg. 49

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid* pg. 50

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid* 54

way between this imminent danger and his friends' safety other than to utilize that which he believed he didn't have, carrying them on his back one at a time to leap across a plummeting canyon - courageously. His love overcame his fear as he acted with that courage that he was convinced he lived without. I wonder if that of which we feel we lack may in fact be our greatest strength. He saved his friends because the power of love prevailed, lifting the shroud that covered that which he believed was missing. All he needed to do in those moments – those sacred moments – was to see and name that power he acted with.

Sitting in my office, gazing out a window that serves as a gateway to this season of which my lawn is draped in a cloak of pure, untouched, strikingly white snow, I reflect upon that of which I always believed myself to be without, and offer that it was that sense that I inherently lacked a true peace and calm held inside, without a conduit for which to hear that still, small voice within. Enveloped with pervasive anxiety, I thought I lacked that of which I would travel to Oz to find – to be blessed with. And yet I learned I already held this deep within me – that still, small voice was whispering to me all along, all I needed to do was listen. That calm and peace were there, all I needed to do was to welcome it. Joy, happiness, confidence, peace, strength, wisdom, insight, we have it. We each have it. We need simply to have that profound realization that that of which we feel we live without may in fact be our greatest gift.

Let us enter the Land of Oz, a city draped in a veil of green. Green marble serving as pavement, and shining emeralds lining the streets, sunrays tinted green as a wealth of inhabitants dressed in this prevailing color with greenish skin while they traversed these unique roads.<sup>4</sup> It is in this miraculous and distinctive land of Oz where the new friends met the wizard who served to heal them of their maladies. There is a great journey of which the friends are instructed to kill a witch, a voyage filled with danger and bravery and fear and compassion that we need not elaborate on at this moment. What matters to us is what the great Wizard of Oz offered these dejected, exhausted, hopeful travelers.

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<sup>4</sup> *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* by L. Frank Baum pg. 88

The Wizard informed the Scarecrow, "You don't need [a brain]. You are learning something every day... Experience is the only thing that brings knowledge, and the longer you are on earth the more experiences you are going to get."<sup>5</sup> He receives his brains simply by living, by experiencing the joys and sorrows of mortal life, growing more and more insights and knowledge and wisdom each day simply by being alive. Just by living he cultivates that of which he fears he is without.

"But how about my courage?" asked the Lion anxiously. "You have plenty of courage, I am sure," answered Oz. "All you need is confidence in yourself. There is no living thing that is not afraid when it faces danger. The True courage is in facing danger when you are afraid, and that kind of courage you have in plenty."<sup>6</sup> Did we not see this when he leapt over a deep ravine, saving his friends while being overcome with true love? All he needed to do was understand what true courage was and intuit that he had indeed carried this with him all along.

Dorothy held her powers in her magical, silver shoes. All along the journey she had the capability to fulfill her dream and return home to Kansas. If she had known her power she could have easily returned home well before this taxing, burdensome journey.<sup>7</sup> And yet she did not know the power she carried with her. Do we?

I end this reflection with one simple comment made by Dorothy. In addressing the Tin Woodman, who was gloating about his newfound brain, she offered, while not dismissing the new confidence he obtained, "I always liked you as you were."<sup>8</sup> This unassuming inquiry begs: Is there anything inherently wrong with who we already are? Are we not full, whole, blessed beings before our journey to receive that which we think will make us complete? I wonder.

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<sup>5</sup> *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* by L. Frank Baum pg. 138

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid* pg. 138

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid* pg. 188

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid* pg 141

“We need one another.” Writes George E. Odell. “We need one another when we mourn and would be comforted... when we are in trouble and afraid... when we are in despair, in temptation, and need to be recalled to our best selves again.”<sup>9</sup>

We need one another, learn the Scarecrow, the Tin Woodman, the Lion, and Dorothy. We need all of us in order to accomplish that which we could never achieve on our own. Let us elaborate with a telling account.

The newfound friends found themselves attacked by a vicious group of mythical creatures called Kalidahs. Steeped in an immediate and profound danger, the lion, the very one who called himself cowardly, offered, “Stand close behind me, and I will fight them as long as I am alive.” “Wait a minute!” called the Scarecrow, the very one who believed he did not have a brain. For the Scarecrow “had been thinking what was best to be done.” The newfound friends had just fled over a ravine using a makeshift bridge the Tin Woodman had made. Chop down the bridge! Cried the Scarecrow to the Tin Woodman, for then the Kalidahs can no longer pursue us. So, the Tin Woodman used his axe, just as two Kalidahs were about to cross. The creatures went crashing down into the ravine, and the friends emerged terrified, yet safe.<sup>10</sup> The travelers would not have survived had it not been for the lion’s roar, the scarecrows' ideas, the tin woodman’s axe, and Dorothy’s compassion. They did together what none could do alone. They survived by depending on their power within, and their power between.

We need one another’s strengths on these journeys inherent to life in this mortal realm. Not literal journeys of fleeing ferocious beasts, but those of traversing the pain of a tale of love or of persisting and surviving amidst oppression, or of utilizing the inner strength needed to overcome great hardship. We cannot navigate these arduous voyages on our own, but surrounded by those we love and cherish. May we cultivate these life-saving relationships

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<sup>9</sup> “We Need One Another” by George E. Odell

<sup>10</sup> *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* by L. Frank Baum pgs. 157-158

throughout our journeys, just as did these four new friends, inviting strangers made companions to travel with us.

On journeys of illness, of cancer or dementia or addiction, we cannot do it alone. On journeys of death, whether facing our own mortality or that of another, we cannot do it alone. On journeys of divorce or parenting or caretaking or migrating or fleeing abuse, we cannot do it alone. We need one another. I think of my stepfather on hospice, with his minister to tend to his soul, his music therapist to tend to his creativity, his nurse to tend to his body, his wife to tend to his spirit and his bodily needs, and his children simply to travel with him. Ushering a beloved through death is not a journey one can traverse alone.

On his own, the Scarecrow lamented over his head stuffed with straw while stuck on a wooden pole in the middle of a field. The tin woodman remained immovable, his joints welded together through the strength of rain and the elements. The lion lived alone in great fear in a large forest filled with the wild unknown, and Dorothy wandered in a strange land far from home. Together, they overcame poisonous poppies, fighting trees, and vicious kalidahs. Together, they fulfilled their greatest dreams, learning that the courage, intelligence, and compassion they sought after with great vigor was within them all along. As Odell writes, “We need one another when we would accomplish some great purpose and cannot do it alone.”<sup>11</sup>

So may we each go forth on our journeys with the prowess of the Lion, the love of the Tin Woodman, the wisdom of the Scarecrow, and the compassion of Dorothy. May we each find our true gift by discovering we were never without it; that we have been whole all along. Whether we fear we lack compassion, peace, insight, strength, perseverance, or love, may we tap into the spirit within, lifting the veils of doubt or insecurity, and find that this very thing we fear we lack may indeed be our greatest strength. And as we journey may we lean upon our companions, for we need one another, we cannot do this alone. On our undertakings of

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<sup>11</sup> “We Need One Another” by George E. Odell

traversing illness, death, forgiveness, or change, may we be enveloped in the love and support of our companions who will never leave our side. May we, together, find that strength fueled through our powers within, and our power between. May we go forth, blessed, beloved, and beautiful, and may our light shine.

May it be so, and Amen.