

Whoever hesitates is lost (an old essay)

Alice was bewildered. After falling down that rabbit hole, nothing she experienced conformed to the norms she knew. Animals talked and were ill-mannered; four times five equaled twelve; London was the capital of Paris. Caterpillars were condescending. She felt lost and wished desperately to find her way back to her familiar world of Victorian absolutes. So when she saw a Cheshire Cat perched in a tree, she asked: "Could you tell me, please, which way I ought to go from here?" The Cat said, "That depends a good deal on where you want to get to?" Alice replied: "I don't care much where!" "Then it doesn't matter which way you go," said the Cat.

Sometimes we feel lost like Alice. We're so dependent on familiar guidelines, things like road maps, catechisms, words that mean this and not that. We like to know precisely where we are and where we're headed. Yet Jesus says in Matthew: "He who loses his life will find it." And in this Jesus was but an echo of the God who said to Abraham, "Leave your country and your kin and your father's house and go to the land I will show you." He didn't say where.

St. Francis reflected that same sense of abandon. You know the story of how, whenever Francis came to a crossroad, he had Brother Masseo whirl round and round until he fell flat on his face! That's the direction Francis took.

Perhaps it was the spirit of St. Francis that induced me to exercise such abandon on a long-ago trip to Umbria. I, too, am a worrier like Alice. I've been taught to follow a map to feel secure. And so, approaching the Italian town of Perugia, I became nervous - because Perugia is a mountain town, its narrow streets ascending to its center by twists and turns that resemble a plate of linguini. Our hotel was at its apex and before ascending, I closely consulted Perugia's map and then ventured up what seemed the right street - and made a wrong turn. Now I had no idea where I was. And when my meandering led me to a tunnel (which looked to me like the mouth of hell), panic struck. Despite the honking of cars behind me, I backed off and returned to the maze behind me. Only when Jane saw a sign saying *Centro* did I yield to its enticement and let the car make its roller coaster way up and down and around - until, by golly, we exited into Perugia's top piazza - right outside our hotel!

For two more days I went through a similar trepidation negotiating Perugia's labyrinth, yet always by *totally different twists and turns* reached our hotel. Then it hit me: God was teaching me to wing it! "Throw the map away," he said. "Go with the flow." And thereafter, approaching Perugia, I'd laughingly say, "I wonder which route the car will take this time?" Instead of a nightmare, driving into Perugia had become fun.

In today's Gospel a scribe, who was possibly confused by all the major and minor do's and don'ts of the Torah, asks Jesus to help him sort them out. And in effect Jesus says, "Lay that map aside! Live with abandon! Simply love God and your neighbor with all your heart and mind and soul and you'll find your way. Indeed, you will become a Way for all the world to follow"

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