

You might be familiar with the doldrums as a state of being. The doldrums can describe a feeling of deflated sadness or depleted energy. Not too much happens in the doldrums, it can be stagnant, we can feel like we're stuck, not really able to do anything effective, get anywhere purposeful. And, if we feel stranded in the doldrums, we can get anxious about when and how we're going to get out.

I found out this week, there's an actual place called the doldrums - it's a region close to the equator, in the Pacific Ocean. It's a "convergence zone" where the massive weather systems of the northern and southern hemispheres collide. For all kinds of meteorological reasons I won't pretend to understand, this convergence zone can often mean little in the way of usable surface wind to catch a sail, and there tends to be super thick cloud cover here all the time making navigation using the sun, stars, and moon impossible. It's a bit of a nightmare for sailors, who, back in the day, could have found themselves stuck in the doldrums, sometimes for weeks on end.¹

Back in 1980, Nainoa Thompson, a native Hawaiian, did exactly that. Now it was 1980, not 1580, so Nainoa could have used all kinds of tech to duck out of the doldrums with little effort, but he was attempting to navigate the Pacific using 'the old ways.' He knew his ancestors possessed great navigational skills in the open ocean, having moved for millennia between the distant islands of the central Pacific, an area of more than 6 million square miles. Using a complex system of cues from the environment, Hawaiian and Polynesian navigators paid close attention to the sun, moon, and stars, as well as the waves and wind, and the marine animals around them. From all this, from their ability to be acutely attentive to the constellation of signs,

¹ <https://oceanservice.noaa.gov/facts/doldrums.html>

they could deduce their course, and were able to undertake incredible voyages over huge distances. Their culture thrived and they populated the islands right across the pacific.

Nainoa Thompson was curious about the old ways, ways of living and being that were essentially unknown to 20th century Islanders, who had become utterly dependent on technology, and so he set off from Hawaii to Tahiti, the first navigator to attempt this voyage, in this way, for centuries. As he got close to the equator, Nainoa started to get super anxious about the doldrums. Soon his canoe was being blown about by a wind that had lost its steady direction, instead whipping around and frequently changing its course, he was moving quickly but had no idea which was the right way to go. Nainoa's anxiety shot up, as he grappled with where he found himself, beating back panic at not knowing what to do next. Counterintuitively, he forced himself to stop, to rest, to allow his mind and body to quit fighting to figure it all out.

"Then" he says "something strange happened." Nainoa says that when he stopped fighting to figure out what he should do next, struggling to figure out how to respond to these bizarre and challenging conditions ... once he settled down, and rested, he says that, all of a sudden a warmth came over him. "All of a sudden," he says, "I knew where the moon was. But I couldn't see the moon, it was so black. ... [but] the feeling of warmth and the image of the moon gave me a strong sense of confidence. I knew where to go. I directed the canoe on a new course. ... I can't explain it, but ... I realized there was a deep connection between something in my abilities and in my senses that goes beyond the analytical, beyond seeing with my eyes. ... Before that happened," he says, "I tended to rely totally on math and science because it was so much easier to explain things that way. I didn't know how to trust my instincts. My instincts were not trained enough to be trusted.

Now I know that there are certain levels of navigation that are realms of the spirit.”²

Nainoa Thomspon has gone on to reintroduce new generations to *wayfinding*, the ancient Polynesian way of navigation that once was a central part of his culture’s life and history, he has restored this knowing as a part of their present and their future.³

Navigation, both literal and metaphorical, plays a central role in our Christian culture too. Journey is a deep theme in our Biblical texts. From the time Adam and Eve are cast out of Eden, the journey/our journey is really an ongoing one of home-coming, of finding our way to a place of promised safety, especially when we’re stuck somewhere hostile and dangerous. There’ll be many times in each of our lives, and together as a society, when the conditions are particularly hard and our ability to navigate out, individually and as a society, seems all but impossible. Today, many of us might feel stuck, with the blast of massive differing opinion coming at us from all sides, we can easily lose our bearing in a landscape that looks the same in every direction, with its heavy cloud-cover of uncertainty, anger, fear, hatred all schmeared together and leaving little to no space for any light to get through.

We can all get caught here, bouncing around between opinions and forces that come at us from all sides. And we can burn a lot of energy responding, in anxiety or panic, trying really hard “to do” something, to get back on track. Stuck here, we risk burning out, and then, depleted, being forced to give up.

Today, tech gives us, too, an easy temporary out, we can boost our dopamine by grabbing our phones or jumping online.

² <https://www.communitymindfulnessproject.org/blogposts/2018/10/19/the-doldrums>

³ <https://www.pbs.org/wayfinders/wayfinding3.html>

We can get bumped along by brief bursts of energy from news headlines, or new content, temporarily orienting ourselves to the hubbub of like-minded folks in our own echo-chambers, and sometimes this can give us the boost we need, for a little bit.

But we, too, have the old ways, we have intuition and instinct, deep, ancient ways of navigating through this life by drawing on the depths of our spiritual wisdoms, ways that will be forgotten unless we embrace them, become practitioners, use them, develop our competencies, begin to trust in them, and then teach them to the next generation.

Every Sunday we gather in this sanctuary, this holy place of refuge and safety, and we are invited take our rest here. In this place and in the liturgy, is the offer of familiarity, part of what makes this a spiritual home. We gather here to worship and to pray, yes, and we also gather to practice. This is a place to practice letting go of our efforts and our exertions, loosening our grip of response to the noise of conflict and opinion; here, we can practice taking our rest from these challenging conditions so that we might begin to sense, develop our own way of sensing the light of Christ that will guide us, always, to safety, to freedom, to fullness of life.

At our baptism we're given a candle "as a symbol of the light of Christ that burns brightly within us," here candles burn in our sanctuary to remind us of that deep and ancient truth. As you light your candles at home, let the burning flame remind you to rest, and in your rest begin to develop and deepen your own navigational skills for times such as these, in a world such as this, trusting deep in your being that Christ is the way, and the truth, and the life. Amen.