

## **The Theology of Lost**

*Sermon for April 29, 2007. By Lone Jensen*

Let me begin with a confession. I had actually never watched **Lost**, the immensely popular TV series, until my son got ill and as he was released from the hospital and at home recovering, we had lots of time on our hands. But none of us had either the mental or spiritual energy for anything other than escape. So my daughter-in-law brought home the first two seasons of **Lost**. And over several days we watched the whole thing! I won't say that I was hooked, but it was oddly intriguing, this alternate universe of human survival, dysfunction and tropical island paradise turned menacing. It seemed rather dark, disquieting and really confusing, as in what is going on here, which of course is what hooks your curiosity. One thing that struck me was the distrust, the fear and the way relationships, with all their messy conflicts, took center stage in a clearly survival situation. So much for Maslow's hierarchy of needs, are you going for coconuts and your basic hunger or have a big emotional quarrel with your fellow survivor? What would you do if you were actually shipwrecked? The show made me wonder what any of us would do if we were thrown into a situation where our entire daily universe, our small comforts, our distractions and relationships were all gone and we were left with ourselves and a bunch of strangers. We do experience some of this disorientation and abandonment in smaller

ways, as when a dear friend seems to betray us or we discover that what we thought we could rely on, like a job, is outsourced or if we have to be hospitalized. No matter how nice some hospitals are, we lose some of our identity the moment we put on that hospital gown that seems designed to make the patient feel vulnerable and exposed. We can't even protect our own backside! **Lost** could also be seen as a reflection of our daily reality in popular imagination, a lost place where few things are fully understood, few people are to be trusted, and "the others" are a demonic force to be constantly watched out for and feared? Has every year since 2001 become increasingly a world where we must fear the stranger?

What we need are enough spiritual life preservers to keep us from drowning in a sea of negative messages and theologies. I am not saying that **Lost** has a negative message but I am saying that the world we live in is full of them. And the fictional Island universe certainly does not espouse deep Universalist loving and accepting values or a positive Unitarian message that we can by our own efforts make this a better world. Though the characters individually show considerable caring and love, this is anything but an ideal society or community. It would not be so entertaining if it was.

For those of you who are avid fans disregard the next remarks. This is a primer on the show for the uninitiated. (*This synopsis is from several internet sites including Wikipedia.*) *A plane crash strands the surviving*

*passengers of Oceanic Flight 815 on a seemingly deserted tropical island, forcing the group of strangers to work together to stay alive. However, their survival is threatened by mysterious entities including polar bears, an unseen creature that roams the jungle, and the island's malevolent inhabitants known as the "Others." They find a Frenchwoman who shipwrecked on the island sixteen years earlier and a mysterious metal hatch buried in the ground. Most of the story focuses on the growing conflict between the survivors and the "Others". There are several episodes with a continual clash between faith and science. The hatch is explored and the existence of The DHARMA Initiative revealed. The series continues and according to executive producer Carlton Cuse there are going to be five deaths and one showdown during the month of May.*

What keeps us interested, other than the plot, are the many characters which are diverse, mysterious, already lost in some ways in their own lives and all interesting

The initial season had fourteen major roles among them a former Iraqi Republican guard, a pregnant Australian, a troubled surgeon, an unlucky and overweight lotto winner, a former dance teacher, a con man, the daughter of a powerful Korean mobster, a fugitive, an ex-rock star drug addict and the mysterious John Locke. It is perhaps not your average planeload of passengers and I kind of wish they had included a teacher from Des Moines, Iowa or a salesman from Duluth.

There is, if not a full theology, then certainly an overt mythology. The creators of the series refer to it. *Among the show's mythological elements is a "monster" which appears to roam the island; a mysterious group of inhabitants whom the survivors refer to as "The Others"; an organization called the "DHARMA Initiative" which has placed several research stations on the island; a sequence of numbers which have made frequent appearances in the lives of the characters, in both the past and present; and personal connections between the characters, of which they are often unaware.* (Wikipedia) So one could say, nothing new under the sun, monsters even technological ones, on a deep level stand in for our own demons, “the others”, the enemy, when ill defined are perfect foils for our own shadow side and even some rational Unitarian Universalist probably have lucky numbers, mine happen to be 13! Dysfunctional family situations are portrayed in the lives of nearly all the main characters, reflecting our culture’s obsession with salvation by personal confessions. But one reason perhaps for the shows popularity is that our modern world has become increasingly disenchanted. As Bruno Bettelheim wrote we have lost our belief in magic and banished fairy tales to the children’s room. Gods and goddesses on nearby mountains have mostly left us to be replaced with us, the thinking ape person, the lonely lost primate looking up in awe at the immense Universe. Do not misunderstand me I believe in science, my son is still alive because of medical progress, and I do not want a return to a new

Dark Age of unreason. But a society needs mythology, a system of beliefs by which to live and stories to find meaning in our lives. The thinking ape is also a meaning maker. *Lost* is a popular mythology, substituting for the real thing. Its fans come up with all kinds of interpretations as if the show was scripture. Here are some of the theories: aliens influence the events on the island. Everything seen is a fictional reality taking place in someone's mind. The whole thing is one giant reality show with the castaways as unwitting participants. The most common theory is that the survivors of Oceanic Flight 815 are dead, in hell or in purgatory.

There are also allusions to philosophy. The character Locke shares his name with English philosopher John Locke, who believed that in a natural state, all men had equal rights to punish transgressors; He contended that humans are born with a "blank slate", a *tabula rasa*, without any innate knowledge or experience, and their identity is a product of their decisions and choices in life. The many flash backs to the diverse character's past bears out this philosophy. Desmond David Hume is named after David Hume, the Scottish philosopher. Hume pointed out that there is no logical necessity to believe that something should happen in the future based on one's experiences in the past. He also held that without perfect knowledge of the laws of nature, what might seem to be miraculous may in fact be perfectly reasonable and explainable.

Danielle Rousseau shares her surname with Swiss philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau who argued that man is born ignorant and amoral but with the inherent capacity to be virtuous. We as Unitarian Universalist believe in the inherent goodness of every child. Rousseau proposed that a child raised in the wilderness, independent of human society and culture, would behave according to a fully internalized code of universal ethics. That would be great indeed but I think any parent or teacher would disagree. Ethics are learned and conscience developed in a loving connection between parent and child. Rousseau said that "man is born free, but everywhere, he is in chains," and coined the phrase "all men are created equal."

So once "free" on this Island I wonder if the people are going to revert to some noble savage state, shedding all their civilized dysfunctions? There is a common dream within us of a magical island, or a place of perfect escape where one can start over again with a new life and shed the past and its pain. America itself was build upon this dream and people will die in the desert around us trying to find that dream starting with a day labor job in Chandler. For ministers in the beginning of their ministry the temptation is, when the inevitable conflict or misunderstandings arise, to dream of a leaving it all behind for another "perfect congregation" elsewhere. No doubt members also dream of the perfect minister and for a few years can sustain the illusion they have found one. But as in a marriage, a lasting relationship takes

accepting each other as we are and working it out with all the imperfections, flaws and disappointments outweighed by a deep commitment to something bigger than all of us. On the Lost Island survival is certainly the big thing. But where is the commitment to build a civilized community? None for it would make a bad TV show.

Life is not a TV show, reality shows to the contrary. Life is blessed with beauty and grace, with love and laughter and it is a gift to be savored, slowly, like a delicious fruit, or a fine wine. Life is also dealing with losses of all kinds, making mistakes, dealing with messy situations and wishing we could leave for an enchanted island or a cabin in the woods like a latter day Thoreau. But as my grandmother told me when I was a little girl, such escape only works for a little while. She told me about the nisse, a gnome like creature who will play tricks on us, make us lose keys or forget appointments, or I suppose nowadays make computers crash and cars break down. And, she said, looking at me very seriously, as she would do when she wanted me to remember something, you cannot move away from him, he will follow you wherever you go in this world. Everyone has one. She meant that you cannot escape yourself or your past.

There is another part of this Island theology which has mostly been done in a light hearted spirit that is in fact very serious. Stripped of daily comforts and nurture, deprived of our society's distractions if you were left entirely to your own soul's devices, what would you have to

sustain you? Or more likely, as has happened to all of us at times, when life gets rough and stormy do you have a good supply of spiritual life preservers?

I cannot in our free faith give you any ready made answers. Suggestions yes, but this is ultimately the kind of work you have to do on your own. But I can encourage you to find answers, before you need them. Take some time from your busy lives and deliberately weave together a faith that will sustain you in all seasons. My faith, my theology is as always a work in progress. The last few months in my life with my son's illness and other difficult issues have been more like an episode of *Lost* than I like for it to be. Certainly I have wanted rescue and been tempted to send out emergency flares but I also know that ultimately I have to find my own way back. My basic instinct is to trust life and to trust people and I am sticking to it. Call it by whatever name you chose, I believe there is beyond our own lives and narrow concerns something larger that I chose to call God. I find God in the daily graces given to me of beauty and unexpected kindness, in the awe that nature can inspire, in a baby's eyes and an old woman's life worn hands. I know I am not alone, even when my darkest fears and doubts seem to grow ever larger in the shadows at three o'clock in the morning.

At such times I whisper in the dark, as child might, magical words to comfort myself. All is well, all manner of things are well. As I told you before my basic instinct is to trust life and to trust people and I am

sticking to it. May we all be well, may we be free from harm and may we be surrounded by loving kindness. Lost or not may you enjoy the journey!