

YOU FEEL A RIVER MOVING IN YOU

A Sermon Delivered at
First Parish in Needham
Sunday, March 19, 2006
The Rev. John Buehrens

FIRST READING

Moving Water

Rumi, trans. Coleman Barks

When you do things from your soul, you feel a river
moving in you, a joy.

When actions come from another section, the feeling
disappears. Don't let

others lead you. They may be blind or, worse, vultures.
reach for the rope

of God. And what is that. Putting aside self-will.
because of willfulness

people sit in jail, the trapped bird's wings are tied,
fish sizzle in the skillet.

The anger of armies is willfulness. You've seen a judge
impose visible punishment. Now

see the invisible. If you could leave your selfishness, you
would see how you've

been torturing your soul. We are born and live inside
black water in a well.

How could we know what an open field of sunlight is? Don't
insist on going where

you think you want to go. Ask the way to the spring. Your
living pieces will form

a harmony. There is a moving palace that floats in the air
with balconies and clear

water flowing through, infinity everywhere, yet contained
under a single tent.

Joy moves always to new locations, the ease of its flow never freezing.
A long winter's tale is over. Now with each spring day a new story.

There came a woman of Samaria to draw water. Jesus said to her, "Give me a drink." For his disciples had gone away into the city to buy food. The Samaritan woman said to him, "How is it that you, a Jew, as a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?" For Jews have no dealings with Samaritans. Jesus answered her, "If you knew the gift of God, and who it is that is saying to you, 'Give me a drink,' you would have asked him, and he would have given you living water." The woman said to him, "Sir, you have nothing to draw with, and the well is deep; where do you get that living water? Are you greater than our father Jacob, who gave us the well, and drank from it himself, and his sons, and flocks?" Jesus said to her, "Every one who drinks of this water will thirst again, but whoever drinks of the water that I shall give him will never thirst; the water that I shall give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life." The woman said to him, "Sir, give me this water, that I may not thirst, nor come here to draw." Jesus said to her. . "God is spirit, and those who worship God must worship in spirit and truth."

John Buehrens: *And from the poet Gerard Manley Hopkins:*

THE WORLD is charged with the grandeur of God.
 It will flame out, like shining from shook foil,
 It gathers to a greatness like the ooze of oil
 Crushed. Why do men then now not reckon His rod?
 Generations have trod, have trod, have trod; 5
 And all is seared with trade; bleared, smeared with toil;
 And bears man's smudge, and shares man's smell; the soil
 Is bare now, nor can foot feel being shod.
 And for all this, nature is never spent;
 There lives the dearest freshness deep down things; 10
 And though the last lights from the black west went,
 Oh, morning at the brown brink eastwards springs—
 Because the Holy Ghost over the bent
 World broods with warm breast, and with, ah, bright wings.

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An older man wrote to his minister: “I have come to church almost every Sunday for over sixty years now. I calculate that I’ve heard more than three thousand sermons. But it has occurred to me that I really can’t recall anything about any but maybe two or three. Why should I keep on coming?”

The minister wrote back, “I have lived nearly sixty years now, eating three meals nearly every day; over sixty thousand meals, I calculate. And I can’t remember what I ate or drank at more than a few of them. But they seem to have kept me nourished somehow. So I’m not stopping. Perhaps neither should you!”

It’s not really true that we Unitarian Universalists have no spiritual discipline. Your very presence here this morning bears witness to that. A friend once observed that we’re the kind of people who can’t give up going to church. Even after we’ve moved beyond a formulaic or childhood faith, we still value being in a spiritual community -- being thoughtful, helping others, trying to help a hurting world. But the disciplines we practice collectively, including listening, being generous, learning from one another, mutual caring, many meetings, forbearance – these are one thing. More and more of us are realizing the need for a spiritual practice that is also quite individual and personal.

“What kind of spiritual discipline do you practice?” the experienced minister asked the seminarian. She looked at him blankly. “I, uh, don’t have one,” she replied. “I’m not telling you what it should be,” the older man then responded, “but I am telling you from experience: find one that fits and feeds you, or you’ll dry up and blow away!”

The seminarian was named Laurel Hallman. For twenty years now she has been Senior Minister of First Unitarian Church of Dallas, where, let me tell you, it’s easy to “dry up and blow away.” She succeeded me there. She tells this story of this encounter

with her spiritual mentor, the late Dr. Harry Scholefield, in a video that I've shown here: "Living by Heart: Spiritual Practice for Unitarian Universalists." Tomorrow I'm picking Laurel up at the airport, taking her to Cape Cod, where she'll lead a three-day retreat for UU ministers and seminarians, including me.

Laurel's practice, learned from Harry, involves rising early, sitting in meditation, often outdoors, to greet the dawning day with openness. It has a second aspect as well, very close to my own practice: time for what Harry named 'calling the family roll' – when the names and faces of loved ones, friends, colleagues, congregants, simply flow in, when the awareness may come, "Gee, I haven't spoken to him in weeks; I'll call today!" Buddhists, I'm told, call this 'cultivating a heart of kindness.' It resembles what Western tradition called "intercessory prayer."

A wise liberal minister once observed, "Maybe prayer for others does not change things magically for them; maybe change things only in you. But when I prayed only for myself, I found that I was pushing my ego like a rock uphill, like Sisyphus. Only when I allowed my heartfelt concern for others flow into my soul did I begin to grow deeper."

Laurel calls her practice "Living by Heart" because it includes a third aspect. Sometimes in her reading or thoughts a half-remembered passage of poetry or wisdom will surface. In good UU fashion it doesn't have to be from the Bible, but if it seems important for the long haul, she will learn it by heart; and then put a copy in a notebook, which has been for her a kind of personal, loose-leaf notebook of universal wisdom.

The latest entry in my notebook are the lines from Rumi in our first reading: "When you do things from your soul," he writes, "you feel a river moving in you, a joy. When actions come from another section, the feeling disappears."

I've learned to appreciate the utterances of this Sufi mystic from the 13th century, largely from colleagues whose spiritual practice has influenced my own. Colleagues like Mary Harrington, my friend and colleague in Winchester, recently diagnosed with ALS – Lou Gehrig's Disease – who spoke to her congregation just last week about how she intends to fight for every heart-felt bit of life and connection, even while learning from Rumi and others the need to abandon self-will and to practice an ultimate surrender.

Another colleague from whom I have learned, whom I've brought to this pulpit, the Rev. Barbara Merritt of Worcester, last year had to tell her people that her husband,

Jeff, has multiple myeloma. When she did so toward the end of a column full of spiritual wisdom, a friend said, “Barbara, that was like being told by your hostess toward the end of a lovely dinner, ‘By the way, I’m on fire!’”

Barbara is currently in India. For almost thirty years now, her practice has been one she learned from a teacher whose ashram lies along the Beas River, in the Punjab. Last month she wrote about worshipping with a slightly larger congregation than usual: some 90,000 of the teacher’s 2 million initiates, quietly singing Indian hymns (*shabds*), “all filled with the same longing, to move closer to what is real, true, and eternal.”

The ashram is a small but nearly perfect city maintained entirely by volunteers, full of gorgeous flowers – bougainvillea on the walls, gardens of dahlias and roses – but if you try to thank a volunteer, she writes, who do even small tasks with great love, they are likely to explain quietly that they seek no one’s approval, but are only trying to serve the divine reality. And when they greet one another, Hindus and Muslims, wealthy Westerners and poor hill people from Kashmir, they fold their hands in front of their foreheads and say (in Hindi), “I see shining in your soul, the light of God.”

Barbara writes: “In the hellish existence that I have sometimes embraced, human beings are afraid of one another. Selfishness and suspicion rule our interactions. We withdraw. We calculate. We posture. We manipulate. Worst of all we believe that we are separate from one another and from the divine reality that embraces us all. Here everyone is seen and treated as a child of God.” And we are reminded.

This is what we try to do here in this room as well. Though even our best intentions to create that atmosphere collectively may be only as good as the quality of our personal spiritual lives individually. I think many of you know that.

So when we announced a course on mindfulness and meditation in the Buddhist tradition, it was soon fully enrolled. It’s why we have a weekly group on poetry as a resource for spiritual growth. Why we have almost sixty people practicing Small Group Ministry, as a discipline of listening, kindness, mutual support and personal growth.

After all, even the best of us can sometimes be less than spiritually perfect. In the passage we heard from the gospel, Jesus approaches the Samaritan woman at the well rather abruptly. “Give me a drink,” he says. No “please.” No “thank you.”

In one of the few sermons that touch me and so that I've remembered its content, the Rev. Clarke Dewey Wells took off from this story. "Living water," he explained, means flowing water. But at a well in the hills of Samaria, there would have been a shallow, still cistern at the top of the well, where water for the flocks and for washing was on hand. While the living water would be flowing only deeper, where the shaft of the well met the hidden stream below. "Go deeper," he urged us. And when you do, you will find there that the same stream of life that runs through all of existence flows through your soul . . . And that there is the dearest freshness deep down things. Even in dry times.

When we live soulfully, deeply, openly, the spiritual refreshment we need is never far from us. It is not back in the past. It is not ahead in the future. It is here in the present – in the Eternal Now, in which the soul lives and flourishes.

"When you do things from your soul, you feel a river moving in you, a joy." Barbara writes that the ashram reminds her of heaven, but not as pie-in-the-sky by-'n-by, but as the presence of eternal life here in the midst of ordinary, transient, mortal living.

But the soul comes and goes, says the contemporary poet, Wislawa Szymborska, "no one has one all the time, or forever." The soul, said Kierkegaard, is not an essence, but an existential reality, of the self relating to the self so that we are one person, in harmony. With the purity of heart to will one thing. Which, as the Buddhists teach, is the good of all created beings.

The Buddha declined to waste time arguing whether God exists or does not exist, whether the soul exists or does not exist. He taught that until we quench our desires in the cool and living waters of meditation, we are on fire. Until we feel all existence flowing on in and around us, and cease trying to hold back the ceaseless flow of time, we can never practice real compassion, mindfulness, or generosity, here and now.

In Norman MacLean's great novella, *A River Runs Through It*, a Presbyterian minister in Montana, tries to teach both his sons something similar, but in Western terms, and through fly-fishing. "My father," says the narrator, "was very sure about certain matters pertaining to the universe. To him, all good things – trout as well as eternal salvation – came by grace; and grace comes by art; and art does not come easy."

No, it comes by practice. For all art is a form of spiritual practice. Like the music we have heard this morning. The art of preaching, for example, no matter how long or

well I practice it, I know will at times fail to hook the hungriest souls that sit before me, no matter how well I bait and cast.

One Sunday, in MacLean’s story, the minister tells his people, “Each one of us here today will at one time in our lives look upon a loved one who is in need and ask the same question: We are willing to help, but what if anything, is needed? For it’s true we can seldom help those closest to us. Either we don’t know what part of ourselves to give, or, more often than not, the part we have to give is not wanted. And so it’s those we live with and should know who elude us. But we can still love them – we can love completely without complete understanding.”

Here he is clearly thinking of his own son – the one whose rebellion against grace results in self-destructive behavior and finally a tragic death. As the surviving brother says to their father about the circumstances, “I’ve told you all I know. If you push me, all I really know is that he was a fine fisherman.”

“You know more than that,” says the father, the preacher. “He was beautiful.”

“Yes,” says the survivor, “he should have been. You taught him.”

“Eventually,” writes MacLean, “all things merge into one, and a river runs through it.”

No one of us can do the spiritual practice for any other whom we love. Yours, and yours, and yours, and yours – they all are, and should be, rather different. The basis of our fellowship here is to respect that. But if you want to deepen your drawing from the well; if you want some response or tips from a fellow amateur, feel free to call; set up a time to chat. Part of my practice here is to help us let go of easy answers and to live in your deep questions. Knowing that in them, through them, as well, flow the living waters.

Amen.

*Hymn 145

As Tranquil Streams

M.F. Ham

Benediction

Gaelic runes

Deep peace of the running wave to you.

Deep peace of the flowing air to you.

Deep peace of the quiet earth to you.

Deep peace of the shining stars to you.

Deep peace of the infinite peace to you.