

“An Ever-Flowing Stream”
Rev. Carol Allman-Morton
UU Meeting of South Berkshire
September 13, 2009

Reading:

From the Tao Te Ching, Chapter 15, Brian Browne Walker translation

A sage is subtle, intuitive
Penetrating, profound.
His depths are mysterious and unfathomable.
The best one can do is describe his appearance.

The sage is as alert as a person crossing
a winter stream;
as circumspect as a person with neighbors on all four sides;
as respectful as a thoughtful guest;
as yielding as melting ice;
as simple as uncarved wood;
as open as a valley;
as chaotic as a muddy torrent.

“Why chaotic as a muddy torrent”?
Because clarity is learned by being
patient in the presence of chaos.
Tolerating disarray, remaining at rest,
gradually one learns to allow muddy water
to settle and proper responses to reveal themselves.

Sermon:

When I was a kid, I would go up to my grandparents’ farm in Vermont for one weekend every month with my parents. I have lots of girl cousins around my age and we were very tight as kids. We would head out as soon as I got there and go play in the woods and fields near the house. Sometimes in the summer we would venture across a cow pasture and through the yard at my uncle’s house to a little brook by the side of a dirt road. Our parents had shown us this brook, but told us, “Don’t get more than your feet wet!” Right, we were 8. Like that was going to happen. So, we would “accidentally fall into the brook” and play in it until our teeth were chattering and the mosquitoes were going to carry us away for their supper. Then we would walk back across to the farm and apologize for being so clumsy. This went on for years with lots of eye rolling from our parents. When I was about 11, my mom told me that when they were kids, they had built a dam in the brook to make a bit of a swimming hole and that they “fell in” all the time. She told me with a wink, and with this new found permission, we set off to resurrect the dam that our moms had made when they were our age.

We did fairly well, but there is only so much kids can do to the path of a brook with sand and small stones. We would get a patch a little deeper, but when we left, the brook would reclaim its desired path. We tried different areas along the brook to see what would work best, and eventually gave up, deciding that it wasn’t meant to be swum in, but sat in on hot summer days when we couldn’t stand *not* being in it any more... especially after haying in August. Years later

my parents moved back to Vermont and bought a house on that dirt road next to the brook we had played in. I went for a walk in the woods with my mom and aunt and they showed me where their swimming hole had been. It was actually on someone else's property (though when our parents were kids it had belonged to a relative) and so my cousins and I had never even looked there. It was a particularly sandy part of the brook, where its path curved and the water went more slowly, although any evidence of a dam had long washed away. This patch of brook was begging to be jumped in and I realized that the places my cousins and I had been trying to build were just not meant to be like this place was.

There is a verse in the Tao Te Ching that states, "Nothing under heaven is as soft and yielding as water. Yet for attacking the hard and strong, nothing can compare with it".¹ We didn't know it at the time, but my cousins and I were experiencing the Tao. We were learning about the Way and about how to understand energy in nature. We learned from nature that she can't always be shaped to our desires and intentions. We let go of our desire to have a swimming hole and enjoyed the brook for what it was. Our parents had found a place in the brook where the energy was right for what they wanted at the time. But even then as the years passed, the brook reclaimed its flow. It moved the boulders placed by young hands and water streamed around the former dam, changing it.

Who here today is familiar with Taoism? Can some one tell me basically what it is about? [The way I would describe it is that Taoism is a religious philosophy founded in about 500 BCE in China. It focuses on the study, understanding, and experience of the Tao or Way in nature. By understanding the way of nature, followers of the Tao can live in harmony, can be in right relationship and govern appropriately.] In our reading this morning, the sage is described as one who is patient in chaos, alert, circumspect, yielding, simple, and open. As we as a congregation move into new relationships and roles, we can learn a lot from Taoist philosophy about a way to be in relationship that manages significant change with patience and openness.

Because I am your new minister and we are worshipping in a new space things will be different in the congregations' experience of worship and church life. From the time that I have been able to spend with your church leaders this summer, I say with confidence that I believe you are well prepared for this change. I have found this congregation to be flexible and open to engaging with transition. Change itself is not good or bad. How we engage with change is what gives it meaning in our community context. Together we will be looking for where there are bends in the brook appropriate for making swimming holes, and letting go of our attachment to changing the path of parts of the brook which are made for sitting in on hot days. It will be my role as your transitional minister, together with your leaders, to offer a variety of settings where the congregation can work together to discern where your energy lies, and how you want to be together as a community going forward. This is the crux of transitional ministry. Discernment and support through transition.

We have many tools at our disposal for discernment and support. Some of these include worship and ritual, lifespan religious education, leadership training and development, fellowship, doing justice work together, and pastoral care and ministering to one another. Essentially, all aspects of church life that are a part of our community are there for a reason. They are there to help us through transition and to support each other in community, both for our community transition work, and as individuals in the congregation.

Our water communion service today is an important symbol of our transitional process. Water is a traditional symbol for change. In Jewish tradition, before Shabbat dinner, there is a hand washing ceremony that prepares people for prayers before the meal. In Christian traditions, the

¹ Tao Te Ching, Chapter 78, Brian Browne Walker Translation.

sacrament of baptism with water, symbolizes a transition to claiming an intentional relationship with God. In Unitarian Universalism, we have developed a water communion ceremony in many of our congregations, as a way to symbolize our variety of experience joining together as a community of faith. We contribute our individual water and transform it into the water of our community that will bless our children and that will seed our coming together each year in the future. The ministries of our congregation are also transformed from our individual paths to our community blessings. We are individuals on spiritual paths *and* we are in religious community together.

Our principle of the week is “Acceptance of one another and encouragement to spiritual growth in our congregations.” This will be one of our tasks this year: to foster practices that help us to accept one another and encourage each other to spiritual growth. In the affirmation of this principle, we covenant to do this work “in our congregations”. We are not alone and our congregation is not alone. We are part of an association of congregations that offer support and ministers to one another. We have been and will continue to receive support through our district and through the transitions office at the Unitarian Universalist Association. Over the course of this year we will be managing transition, but we will not be doing it in a vacuum.

As Unitarian Universalists, we believe that if we are together in community we are able to grow into more whole people, and be better able to shape the world in our vision of what will make it a better and more just place. How do we discern this vision and how do we do the work of making the world a better place? We must be attentive to the flow of energy, to where there are places where the brook bends and we can make swimming holes and where the current is too fast and we just need to sit down and enjoy the rush. We will need to listen to one another, to be attentive and focus our intentions. There is a force that flows in our world. Some call it nature, some call it the spirit of life, some call it the Tao, and some call it God. Whatever *it* is, this force is beyond our understanding and will continue to flow long after we are gone. It is the intangible stuff of life that we struggle to understand. It is like water around us, and while we may influence it and be influenced by it, we cannot control it. We are part of an interconnected web of life, and we are not the spider.

Water can be gentle and it can wear away stones. We will do our best to work with change. With our attention we can discern as best as we can where the energy is flowing in this time of transition. We want to work with it, not against it. We will make mistakes, and we won't be able to have everything that we may wish for as a congregation together. But by engaging in the process of being together and by being attentive to one another, we will have the opportunity to see more of the brook, so see the possibilities of this community and to understand where to try and shape the brook and where to let it run free. So today we take a first step together in worship. Some elements have changed and some have remained the same. Where we go from here depends on the flow of the congregation and how we understand the spirit of life to be moving in our community.

Let's cherish the gifts that we have brought to share with each other in our water communion today, and imagine we are all taking a deep breath and sitting down in a cool brook on a hot afternoon. There is sunlight shining through the trees, and water flowing slowly by, enriched with our blessings. May we be present in each moment, that we have the tools for moving forward into the next. This is going to be an exciting year. It will be a year of transition, and I think that we are going to be great at it. May we be as the sage, patient in chaos, alert and open. May it be so.

Amen.