



Douglas C. B. Kraft

Unitarian Universalist Society • 2425 Sierra Blvd. • Sacramento, CA 95825
(916) 483-9283 • doug@uuss.org

Swimming in the Deep End: Merging with the River

Meditation

Now we are ready to look at something pretty special.
It is a duck riding the ocean a hundred feet beyond the surf.
No, it isn't a gull.
A gull always has a raucous touch about him.
This is some sort of duck, and he cuddles in the swells.
He isn't cold, and he is thinking things over.
There is a big heaving in the Atlantic,
And he is part of it.
He looks a bit like a mandarin, or the Lord Buddha meditating under the Bo tree,
But he has hardly enough above the eyes to be a philosopher.
He has poise, however, which is what philosophers must have.
He can rest while the Atlantic heaves, because he rests in the Atlantic.
Probably he doesn't know how large the ocean is.
And neither do you.
But he realizes it.
And what does he do, I ask you? He sits down in it.
He reposes in the immediate as if it were infinity – which it is.
That is religion, and the duck has it.
He has made himself part of the boundless,
by easing himself into it just where it touches him.
I like the little duck.
He doesn't know much.
But he has religion.

– Donald C. Babcock (The New Yorker Magazine, October 4, 1947)

*I invite you to close your eyes or let them
rest.*

*Like the duck, let's sit down in the waves
rather than try to stop them.*

*Whatever is going on,
may we just be as we are
and be with what is*

*May we be less agitated about being agitated
less worried about being worried
less angry about being angry
less distressed about feeling stressed
less upset with being upset
less sad with being sad*

*less controlling of being controlling
less frightened of being scared
more patient with our impatience
strive less to strive less*

May we sit down in the waves

Sermon

Walking along the American River I came upon a tiny cove. I sat down on some boulders in the place where the cove and the river met.

In front of me the main body of the river rushed by at thousands of gallons

a minute. It formed standing waves and white caps.

But in the cove, the water stood still. Two ducks – a male and a female – drifted gently, picking bugs and other morsels of food off the smooth surface.

As I watched them, I noticed the water in the cove was not completely still. It drifted upstream. The river current flowed into the downstream side of the cove and pushed up-river. Leaves and twigs moved slowly toward me, then out into the main current.

The downstream rush rubbed against the upstream meandering spawning dozens of whirlpools formed. Some were as narrow as pencils. Others were as broad as watermelons. Some funneled down a hand span below the surface. Some were gentle depressions. Some were wide enough to hold three or four little ones inside. Some winked out in a moment. Others lingered.

The effect was magical. I pictured river spirits dancing across the water leaving whirls in their footsteps. I imagined, “What if the whirlpools and the river were conscious?”

If they were, the whirlpools would probably have little awareness of the river. Their attention focused inward on their frenetic turning. Occasionally they might glimpse the larger river-universe beyond. Occasionally they might slow enough to notice the flows in which they exist. But mostly they would be preoccupied with their own dance.

The river, on the other hand, would be aware of the whirlpools. There was so much going on in the river and the whirlpools were so ephemeral that the river would not think the little swirls important. But it would have no problem seeing them.

As I watched, sooner or later each whirlpool drifted away, ran out of

energy, spun itself out and dissipated back into the river.

As it vanished, nothing was lost. The water of the whirls remained right there in the river. Even the energy that caused the spinning remained in the river though it was more dispersed.

Merging With The River

This morning I’d like to talk about a shift of mind and heart that could be called “merging with the river – a little bit.”

In its big form, merging might be called a shift from whirlpool consciousness to river consciousness, from wave consciousness to ocean consciousness. But like the duck becoming part of the boundless, even this profound merge begins by sitting down in the waves. Like the whirlpool merging with the river, it begins when its energy relaxes and spreads out. For us, it begins when our identity shifts a little bit from the whirling inside to the currents that flow around us.

This shift of mind and heart is important not only for our own happiness but for our effectiveness in the world.

UU Spirituality

This sermon is part of an ongoing series on deepening Unitarian Universalist spirituality. This morning I am less concerned with what UU spirituality has been in the past or is today than I am in what it could be in the near future.

However, it might be helpful to put it into a historical context.

Historical Context

Several weeks ago I spoke briefly about the mythic-ethnocentric consciousness that dominated Medieval Europe. It placed little stock in the

individual. It valued rigid social hierarchy in which everyone stayed in their God-given place.

The Western Enlightenment brought forth a very different consciousness that valued reason and scientific objectivity. And it valued individuality and the freedom to improve our lives.

Unitarianism was a child of the Western Enlightenment. If we look in the front of our hymnal, it is no coincidence that our very first principle “affirms and promotes the worth and dignity of every person.” This is where we began.

As the Medieval oppression receded in the modern era, individualism flourished. At times it not only thrived but ran rampant contributing to alienation, individual and corporate greed, environmental havoc and so forth.

So, by the mid-20th century – as we moved from the modern to the post-modern era – another consciousness emerged that was more aware of complexity, ecology, systems and so forth. It saw that we might not be embedded in a mythic medieval hierarchy. But we are embedded in an interdependent web. The river is there surrounds us and flows through us whether we recognize it or not. We ignore it at great peril.

So it is no coincidence that our seventh and last principle “affirms and promotes respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part.”

The first and last are opposite poles: individualism versus the web, independence versus interdependence, dignity of each person versus the reality of interconnection.

Today, most UUs value both. But we don't bring them together in the same thought. After all, they are separated by five other principles. They are like cousins who co-exist but barely speak to one another.

Today, as we move deeper into the so-called “post-post modern” era of the 21st century, the possibilities and perils are greater than ever. Population growth, rise of technology, stress on the environment, strain on democracy, dysfunctional economies and so forth create more risks and opportunities than ever before.

To deal with these, the two cousins must get together. We must ask, “What happens when the dignity of the individual meets the reality of the web?” What happens when the whirlpool merges with the river? When the duck becomes part of the boundless ocean?

Clearly we don't want to go back to the oppressive medieval values or even further back to tribal fusion. The post-modern Romantics tried this until they realized that the life of the noble savage was not as noble as they'd imagined.

We don't want shallowness but depth. We want a consciousness that integrates the worth and dignity of the individual with a realization that separate individuals do not exist. Without the river there are no whirlpools. Without the web of everything there is no single thing. To pretend we can take care of our individual welfare without caring for the collective welfare is suicide – like a whirlpool trying to leave the river.

This shift of mind and heart can be hard to describe. But perhaps it can be illustrated by analogy.

Optical Illusions

There are two images in your order of service. The first is the familiar vase-two portraits illusions. If we see the white part of the image as foreground and the black as background, we'll see a vase. But if we see the white as background and the black as foreground, we'll see two faces nose to nose.



The second image may be less familiar – but it's fun. If we see the white as foreground, we see a woman's face. If we see the black as foreground, we see a cartoon of Bill Clinton playing the saxophone.



Three observations:

First: If we only glance quickly at an image, it is easy to assume we know what it is without seeing alternate possibilities. If, away from the image, I call it a woman's face and you call it Bill Clinton on the sax, we may each think the other is daft.

Second: As the images shift from a vase to two portraits or from a face to Bill Clinton, nothing in the external world changes. The ink on the page doesn't move. The shift is entirely in our minds. We change how we see, not what is actually there to be seen.

Third: It is difficult to hold both the woman's face and Bill Clinton in mind at the same time. As we become familiar with the image, it can flip back and forth quickly. But it's hard to hold them both at once.

However, it is not impossible. If we mentally step back and relax as we look

at the image, we may be able to see them both at once. If our mind is tight, this is difficult. But if we are gently attentive, it is possible.

That is what this shift of mind and heart feels like: not shifting from one construct to another but shifting from one at a time to all at once.

More Than Parlor Tricks

This applies to more than parlor tricks.

For example, is it more important that we save the spotted owl or that we retain jobs for people in the logging industry? It is more important that we save the delta smelt or that we give farmers water?

Depending on our inclinations, it is easy to take one position or the other – black or white – and think the other positions are daft. But the real solution comes out of a relaxed, attentive, wider systemic view. If we cut down too much forest we'll have neither owls nor jobs. If we destroy the delta eco-system, we'll have neither smelt nor useable water. Real solutions require seeing the health of the system as more important than any elements within the system.

When one part acts like it is more important the whole, we call it cancer.

Health care, the economy, terrorism, job creation, legislative gridlock – all of these beg for systemic, broad-view thinking rather than a black or white stance in one part of the system.

Untangling these issues would take more time than we have this morning. My point is that a shift to what's called "flex and flow" systemic thinking is vital to solving many very practical problems as well as to deepening our spirituality.

Merging Just a Little

But for now, let's return to how we perceive ourselves and the world around us – to how much are we caught up in our own swirling versus how attuned are we to the subtler currents flowing around us.

Let me give a few common examples of what I mean by this.

At the end of a tough week, you come home spinning inside. After a few days rest – maybe hiking in the foothills or just hanging out in the yard – you aren't so wound up. You have a touch of peace. The way you experience yourself and the world has shifted. You've relaxed out your spinning into a state that is not so tightly bound. You've merged a little.

Or imagine your young daughter running up and telling you a joke. From your personal perspective, the joke is dumb. But she laughs with delight and you find yourself smiling easily. The delight did not arise out of your whirlpool. Your sense of self eased and spread out to include some of the river around you – in this case your child. You feel her delight as your own. Your mind and heart merged a little with this other being – your daughter.

Or consider: When I first moved to Sacramento, I lived in an apartment complex down the street from the church. I especially enjoyed the hot tub privileges in the complex.

But one cool evening, the hot tub would not warm up. I was annoyed. It remained broken for several days. Finally one morning, I caught the manager and complained.

I left his office and drove down to the Samaritan Center in Oak Park. It was a street agency that helped people on the edge of homelessness. They were

offering a free, pre-Thanksgiving diner and I had promised to help serve.

A thirty-something woman named Anita and I spent several hours carving up a few dozen turkeys. As we worked, we dropped into casual conversation. I had two sons: at the time one was at Brown University and the other was in a charter high school. She had two sons: at the time one was in jail and the other was drug addicted. I had a wife. She had a husband who had disappeared years ago with a gang – she assumed he was dead. The suffering in her life was palpable though she spoke matter-of-factly with no trace of self-pity.

Later that day, back in the apartment complex, the hot tub still didn't work. I preferred that it work. But it no longer annoyed me. I simply smiled. After conversing with Anita, I was less wound up in this little problem and more aware of all the problems and gifts of life around me. My perspective had shifted. I had merged with the river just a little bit.

Merging a Little More

These shifts of mind and heart may not be profound. But they are movements in a profound direction.

Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote, "learn to detect and watch that gleam of light which flashes across [the] mind from within..." In other words, pay attention to small glimpses of light, the touch of peace, the unbidden smile of delight, the glimpse of the river, the presence of the ocean.

When the worth and dignity of our individuality meets the interdependent web, our sense of who we are as separate entities becomes less demanding and more spacious. And the web of life feels less abstract and impersonal and more intimate.

And if we patiently follow Mr. Emerson's advice, with time we feel less like a whirlpool in the river more like a river with whirlpools. Rather than being a duck sitting in the ocean, we become the ocean with waves and ducks within us. We flip from seeing peace to being peace, from sensing God to being God sensing us, from experiencing illumination to being luminous, from experiencing spaciousness to being space.

Next time I'm in the pulpit, I want to talk about these more profound shifts. The subtitle for that sermon is "the end of self as we know it."

Happiness

But this morning I want to make sure we don't underestimate these smaller shifts of heart and mind, these more common experiences of merging a little bit. Their value can be seen as two different kinds of happiness.

One kind is whirlpool happiness. This arises from the thrill of spinning or the joy of riding the surf. This happiness comes out of excitement, doing, moving, thinking and acting.

The other kind is river happiness. This arises from relaxing into a larger context, sitting down in the ocean, slowing down, easing up, mellowing out and just being.

One is not morally better than the other. Sometimes life takes us for a spin, so it's great to be able to enjoy the

energy. Sometimes life slows down. It's lovely to savor a slower pace.

But the two kinds of happiness are different. Spinning happiness can arise quickly. But it takes energy, so it doesn't last.

River happiness is always available. The life of the river and life of the ocean is always with us whether we notice it or not. When there is a lot going on in our lives, the peacefulness may be harder to see, feel or even believe is possible. This is because there is not as much energy in river happiness. It is mellower. And precisely because it doesn't require much energy, it can last and last and last.

The ocean is always here waiting for us to just sit down in it.

Namasté.

Song The Ocean Refuses No River

The ocean refuses no river, no river (2x)
Alleluia, allelu, Allelu (2x)

Closing words:

May we be less agitated about being agitated
less worried about being worried
less angry about being angry
less distressed about feeling stressed
less upset with being upset
less sad with being sad
less concerned with being concerned
less controlling of being controlling
less frightened of being scared
more patient with our impatience
strive less to strive less
May we sit down in the waves