



Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Athens

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“On Being the Rivers and the Tributaries”

© by The Reverend Dr. Don Randall

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Centering Thoughts

*We may be floating on Tao, but there is nothing wrong with steering.
If Tao is like a river, it is certainly good to know where the rocks are.*
Deng Ming-Dao, EVERYDAY TAO: LIVING WITH BALANCE AND HARMONY

Love is like a river flowing through your heart. I'll bring the boat, if you bring the bridge.
Jarod Kintz, LOVE QUOTES FOR THE AGES, AND THE AGELESS SAGES

Sermon

In 1916, James Henry Breasted coined the term “Fertile Crescent” to describe the arc of geography that encompasses the Mideast area of the rivers Tigris and Euphrates on the East and the Nile on the West. The eastern basin comprised of the Tigris and Euphrates rivers is widely held to be the source of the mythical Garden of Eden. The history of the area dates back to around 10,000 BCE. The combination of drinkable water, fertile land, water for crops and animals, and later for ease of transportation, led to the earliest development of agriculture and domestication of livestock, as well as trade. Among this abundance developed the first organization of governments and religions. All three of the major theistic religions, Judaism, Christianity and Islam claim the Fertile Crescent as their birthplace. Ironically, in 2001, the National Geographic News reported that extensive damming of rivers and other modern changes to the flow of water had turned the area from lush and fertile to dry and barren. As we might imagine, pleas of warning to the nations now occupying the area, Syria, Iraq, and Turkey, among others, have gone unheeded. Lest we feel too smug, I should mention that since the middle of the twentieth century the Colorado river has often failed to flow all the way to the sea because of dams and irrigation.

So, we too are faced with learning to balance our need for hydroelectric power and irrigation with the loss of access to salmon spawning beds and other overlooked aspects of nature’s genius. It would be easy to rant on about the ecological crisis of water access and use, but I simply want to set the background for something else. In a metaphorical and sometimes very real sense, we, ourselves, are the rivers, the streams, the wetlands, the lakes and backwaters of life.

The idea of our lives as rivers came to me as I was sitting right about there one Sunday morning. As I look back at the journey of my life, I see a flow of becoming who I am now. I believe this is true for each one of us if we care to look. An awareness of that flow gives us the opportunity to understand ourselves, and it is crucial as we make decisions about our lives going forward. We see this on a small scale when we celebrate water communion at the end of the summer. Many of us bring water samples from places we have vacationed as symbols of our journey and experiences.

Rivers have their origins far from where we tend to think of them as rivers. They start out as underground springs, snowmelt, rain, marshy areas, or glacial melt. I have never done it myself, but I have talked to people who have stood among the headwater rivulets of the Mississippi River in Minnesota and heard the wonder in their voices.

Rivers tend to have varied characteristics. They may be slow and meandering; they may be calm on the surface but hiding treacherous currents in their depths. They may have stretches of exhilarating white water or impassable rapids. They may have waterfalls that are beautiful but deadly. They may have beaches for wading and swimming or drop-offs that steal us away.

What does it mean for rivers to have all of these characteristics? Have you ever watched two rivers become a bigger one? Or, even seen a large creek feed into a river? Often times there is turbulence, as the rushing waters flow together; as two separate bodies fill a single space. Whirlpools may be created and, standing nearby one feels the power and hears the energy go by. Another observation often made is that the different bodies of water are different colors. One river may bring silt from rich black bottomland while the other has picked up white chalky clay from elsewhere. If one goes down river not very far, the two soils have blended to look like fudge ripple ice cream. However, further downstream, the two are so fully blended, it is hard to know there was ever a difference. By the time a river like the Mississippi has blended with the waters of the Missouri, each has been fed by countless other water sources. Then the massive flow of water and silt continues on to the Gulf of Mexico where the rich soil deposited in the delta at the mouth of the river nourishes countless birds, marsh life, fish, shellfish, and a multitude of plants.

As a religious group, Unitarian Universalists are often referred to as a collection of refugees, but if we stick with the river metaphor, we are more like silt. There are very few life-long Unitarian Universalists (and I guess we could count them as headwaters), so most of us truly are refugees from some other religious tradition. Some of us even have found Unitarian Universalism without any previous religious background. Some of us just wandered in one day and have no idea what is going on here, but we like it! Therefore, we stay. The meaning of such a fellowship is significant for how we view ourselves and for how we interact with the greater community. I am suggesting we use the image of the river to understand whom we are and what we have.

We have already faced the rapids of our own joining of streams. The Unitarian Universalist river started out as two rivers, each with at least two branches. The Unitarian river and the Universalist river each had to assimilate their theistic and humanist branches. Moreover, those branches are fed by the streams of liberal Christianity, Judaism, Humanism, Hinduism, and Buddhism, among others. Much of what has come from these tributaries is good. It has become a part of our heritage and a source of our depth and inspiration.

There is the inflowing of religious refugees. I, myself come from a United Methodist heritage, while others are former Catholics, Presbyterians, Baptists, Later Day Saints, Jews and so on. Others of us are new to a religious community, having been raised in a totally secular home. Each group may be thought of as a tributary that has flowed into the river of Unitarian Universalism. Tributaries can be big or little, but generally, they flow from small to bigger. Nevertheless, let's be honest. Our inflow of Baptists, Methodists, Catholics, Jews, and heathens is not the main body of the rivers they come from. They are side branches. There are plenty of happy people in the main stream of all of those groups. What seems to happen is that sometimes the flow of a river becomes clogged. Maybe beavers build a dam. Maybe the river becomes polluted. Maybe an earthquake changes the course of the river, as actually happened to the Mississippi river in 1812 when the upheaval caused the mighty Mississippi to flow backward. We need only remember the figurative earthquake that shook the Southern Baptist Convention a few years ago. Their river changed course and many moderate and liberal Baptists had to find another waterway. The fundamentalists coopted control of churches, colleges, universities and seminaries; they said if you want to be a member here, to teach here, or go to school here, you have to sign their statement of belief. They flowed backward indeed!

Other religious rivers have been polluted or diverted. The United Methodist Church has had the slogan, "Open Hearts, Open Minds and Open Doors," yet they are having a terrible time making up their minds about accepting actively gay clergy and allowing their clergy to perform same sex marriages. Interestingly, it was not a Unitarian who said, "we need not think alike to love alike." It was a quote lifted from a sermon by John Wesley, the founder of Methodism, when he was talking about relations between Methodists and Catholics. What has happened to divert the flow of that open spirit of love? Many of the Methodist ministers I know are struggling with the foundering indecision of their church. On a more positive note, The Presbyterian Church, USA recently voted its affirmation to allow clergy to perform same sex marriages in states where it is legal. Over the next year the church will conduct a nationwide poll of its presbyteries on the issue and will likely move in the progressive direction as church policy. People will leave both denominations because they find change or no change to be unacceptable. A few people who happen to feel like they are drowning in a stagnant backwater, but who are still looking for a religious community, may wind up in our stream.

A recent Facebook post by a UU minister asked the interesting question: if other churches begin taking our position on marriage and other progressive issues, will we still get our flow of their refugees? I thought about that for a while and concluded that it will not make any difference to us. This is true mainly because we define ourselves not by individual issues, but by our willingness to parse all issues based on our principles rather than adhering to what is contained in an ancient scripture.

So, here we are: a confluence of people brought together often by rejecting something else. Even if you are a life-long UU, I suspect you reject subconsciously the prevailing religious culture. However, our choice to be Unitarian Universalists is a choice to rejoice in the social and cultural confluence of our varied backgrounds, and to utilize our shared richness to support one another in the face of a troubled world. Just as rivers have hidden origins, we too have hidden pasts. Whether it is genetics, family traditions, supportive nurturing or dysfunctional nurturing, blessings or

curses, we bring them on the flow of our lives. We intermingle all of what we are in a great confluence of turbulence and hope. We bump up against each other's bruises and share our strengths. Hopefully, after sixty years of working at it, this Fellowship offers not just turbulence, but also a tranquil pool for rest and renewal. Each one of us may then venture out on our continued river of life, facing new rapids, new dams, new vistas and new fellow travelers. We have all come from diverse backgrounds and have traveled over uncertain terrain. In our winding up here together, we find healing, regeneration and a place of safety from which to return to the world.

Benediction:

A final word: our UU river, while beautiful and grand, is not eternal. It may get dammed up, become polluted, or fail to reach the sea. We will need, in that case, to find a new waterway that pursues truth in its many forms. However, for now, enjoy the next sixty years! Amen

Questions for Reflection or Discussion

1. Can you see a flow in your life's history?
2. Is there meaning in the negative as well as the positive experiences?
3. In what way does your reflection influence future decisions?
4. Does this meaning alter your relationships with one another?