

Living in the Waters of Change

Theodore Parker Unitarian Universalist Church
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I would love to live
like a river flows,
carried by the surprise
of its own unfolding.
- John O'Donohue

Story The Agreement, by Barry Lopez (adapted)

Once upon a time,
before there were any people walking around this land,
there were bears. They had an agreement with the salmon.
They had worked out with the salmon how things would be between them.
The salmon would swim up the river every fall,
and they had an agreement with the bears
that the bears could eat some of them and take what they needed.

The salmon felt appreciated. They knew the bears needed them.
This is how it was with everything in those days.
Everyone was very polite to each other
and had agreements with everybody else.
They had talked together and worked out how things would be.

Now, the salmon and the bears hadn't made any agreements
with the river. They had never even thought about it.
But the river had thought about it.
And the river started to feel upset
that the bears and salmon just took it for granted.
One day, the river pulled itself back from the shore
and wouldn't let the salmon swim up from the ocean.
Whenever they tried, the river pulled back
and left them stranded on the beach.
That had never happened before!

There was a long argument. Everybody talked a lot.
The salmon complained so much,

finally the river just let them swim up.

But when the salmon got into the country where the bears lived,
the river realized it wasn't satisfied yet.
And the river began to run in two directions at once,
north on one side, south on the other—can you imagine?

It roared and heaved white water
and rolled big boulders up on the banks.
Then, all of a sudden, the river was still.

The salmon were afraid to move.
They just swam in place.
The bears were afraid to move.
They just hunkered down behind the trees and peeked out.

In the middle of all this silence, the river said:
“There has to be an agreement.
You can't just do whatever you want.
You can't just take someone for granted.
You need to respect them.”

So, for a long time, they talked.
The salmon said who they were and where they came from.
They told the river how important it was for them
to come back to the place where they were born
to have their own children.

And the bears talked about who they were
and why they needed the salmon to survive.
They told the river, if we don't have salmon to eat, we will die.

And the river talked about how it had agreements
with the rain and the wind.
Everybody said what they needed from each other
and what they would give away.
Then a very strange thing happened.

The river said to the salmon, “I love you, salmon.”
No one had ever said anything like this before.
No one had ever taken this chance.

Everybody was glad that the river had been so honest.

That day, the salmon and the bears and the river
reached a very deep agreement.
It has never changed.

And today, when you feel the river rushing against your legs,
you can still feel it – all those agreements.
It has ever been so.

SERMON Living in the Waters of Change

The Rev. Anne Bancroft

Good morning, again and welcome, and welcome back! I'm so glad to be here with all of you, looking at a new year for our congregation – this room full of fish and bears and river and other creatures that are always in search of a new and better way of being together and of living in this world, always in search of what we might imagine as a New Jerusalem – a world more just and fair.

I wonder how many of you recognized the Offertory this morning as the theme song to the movie, "Working Girl." It came out in 1988 – anyone? 31 years ago! A classic romantic comedy with Melanie Griffith, Harrison Ford, Joan Cusack, Sigourney Weaver, Alec Baldwin . . . but also a statement of the times. Maybe some of you know the 80's mostly through retro parties: big hair, shoulder pads, way more men in positions of authority. I watched the movie again recently. There were three – count them, three – people of color that I saw in the entire film, including all the extras. We can imagine, can't we, why the river was upset when it was left out of the conversation, and the fish and the bears didn't even realize.

Did you know that Carly Simon drew inspiration from both Walt Whitman's soulful poetry in *Leaves of Grass*, first published in 1855, and from William Blake's classic 1804 poem (215 years ago), "The New Jerusalem," which was written as a protest, of sorts, against the rapid industrialization that was changing England before his eyes? We're not the only ones, it seems, who are living in what feels like the rapid waters of change, though it's hard to imagine the pace of change that seemed fast then, in 1804, relative to what we experience now.

Carly Simon references what she called "the universal river that runs through all our lives," as she invited us to imagine, in her song, the possibility of a new way of being – a new Jerusalem – even in the midst of what she framed as the jungle of then-contemporary cutthroat competition.

I think I was drawn to the song for today because it reminded me that change, even the amazing amount of change we are now experiencing, CAN lead us to a good place. Living in the waters of

change, the omnipresent river of new things, that feels so much faster than it ever has, CAN surprise us in good ways as it unfolds around us.

The thing is, as the pace has quickened, or FEELS it has quickened, as we have come to expect ourselves to learn the latest gadget or keep up with every world event, to adjust our emotions and spirits at breakneck pace, I fear we have lost sight of each other – like the salmon and the bear who neglected the river.

And maybe even when we think we're on target – when we fish have made arrangements with the bears, and we're feeling good about what we've worked out (I feel good; you feel good.), we're learning that there ARE creatures or entities we forgot to check with, like . . . the river! There is a part of the bigger equation that we have left out. We are learning more about that every day: how we have left people out – often those of us who are white have excluded people of color; those of us who are citizens have excluded those who are not; those who are older have excluded those who are young. Or, we're beginning to understand that we humans have excluded non-human animals, or insects, or trees or other plants out of our thinking and care. We have, it seems, excluded the very living earth, herself!

It's a new September. Are you starting a new school? Are you starting a new job? Are you traveling someplace you've never been before? Are you struggling with someone or with something you didn't expect to be struggling with?

And who or what is in this river of change with you?

Our culture encourages us to think in terms of "I." What am I learning? How am I doing? Even our beloved faith speaks of the individual journey. We Unitarian Universalists do not have a collective theology – you are each welcome here wherever you are on your path to understanding.

And here's what we might wonder, if we took the time, which it seems we actually should: Who or what are you including in your wondering, and who or what might you have forgotten or neglected?

Because these are new waters of change, my friends. These are waters of change that no longer have room for only you, if indeed they ever did, except that we have become used to that. These waters of change we are living in today are requiring us – despite what we might hear in the everyday news – these changes are needing us to return to "we" thinking, big "we" thinking, beyond person or home, beyond town or country

Our New Jerusalem has to be a WE creation

You know what's ironic? That the pace of change feels so fast these days, and yet OUR ability to change does not feel especially fast at all, does it?

And, I wonder, what is it that we are asking of ourselves, and of each other? Perhaps not enough.

This month's theme is expectation. What does it mean to be a people of expectation? Alice Walker, author of *The Color Purple*, offers us this suggestion, which maybe would help us live more simply and less engaged with our individual needs:

Expect nothing. Live frugally
On surprise.
become a stranger
To need of pity
Or, if compassion be freely
Given out
Take only enough
Stop short of urge to plead
Then purge away the need.

Wish for nothing larger
Than your own small heart
Or greater than a star;
Tame wild disappointment
With caress unmoved and cold
Make of it a parka
For your soul.

Discover the reason why
So tiny human midget
Exists at all
So scared unwise
But expect nothing. Live frugally
On surprise."

And what would that mean for US? As a congregation? To live frugally on surprise TOGETHER? Perhaps, even, as Donohue suggests, as the river flows, carried by the surprise of our own unfolding?

It might mean celebrating – in unknown and evolving ways – our relationship with people halfway around the world in El Salvador, in the small village of Plazuelas, our sister community. We don't know what that relationship looks like yet – how might we be surprised?

It might mean engaging with our children and youth on the weeks that we share Living Our Faith Together – our new LOFT program – bridging the distance between our ages as we become one village.

It might mean being here on Friday mornings, standing outside at the corner to support Fridays For Future – an initiative of youth around the world that are asking us to help them raise notice about our climate crisis.

It might mean speaking from a different place in this sanctuary, because if I were not able-bodied, I would not be in this pulpit, so perhaps WE need to make this place welcome for all.

It might mean art everywhere, in myriad varieties, invitational and celebratory and created together!

It might mean so many different things, BUT MOSTLY it would mean bringing yourselves here on behalf of not just your own needs and desires – and not because you are feeling expected or expecting in return – but because of what you can contribute to the New Jerusalem that WE need to be creating. I think we need to be asking more of ourselves and each other, because this is not a time to go it alone.

WE comes from abundance – from the sense of having not just enough, but enough to share . . . even in these swirling waters of change that leave us unsettled and uncertain.

So come – bring yourselves to this community of joy and re-creation, every week and in between as we are living in these turbulent waters of change. Expect nothing and be totally surprised by what we can be together, what we can offer to each other and to the world that needs to know a new way of being is possible.

Bring yourselves and your signs of life like our mice and duck and our birds and let us create together this year one big WE that strives to see what we have been blind to. Let us build THAT New Jerusalem, yes?

May it be so.

Hymn 100 We've Got Peace Like a River