

# “Grow With the Flow”

Lynn Harrison

First Unitarian Congregation of Toronto

13 July 2014

N.B. These sermons are made available with a request: that the reader appreciate that, ideally, a sermon is an oral/aural experience that takes place in the context of worship, supported and reinforced by readings, contemplative music, rousing hymns, silence, and prayer and that it is but one part of an extended conversation that occurs over time between a minister and a covenanted congregation.

## Readings:

### Poem of the One World - Mary Oliver

This morning  
the beautiful white heron  
was floating along above the water

and then into the sky of this  
the one world  
we all belong to

where everything  
sooner or later  
is a part of everything else

which thought made me feel  
for a little while  
quite beautiful myself.

## **I Go Down to the Shore – Mary Oliver**

I go down to the shore in the morning  
and depending on the hour the waves  
are rolling in or moving out,  
and I say, oh, I am miserable,  
what shall—  
what should I do? And the sea says  
in its lovely voice:  
Excuse me, I have work to do.

## **Sermon: Grow With the Flow**

Is there any advice more confounding than “Go with the flow?”

It’s usually meant to make things easier, I know... an antidote to whatever struggle we’re going through.

But sometimes, let’s be honest, “Go with the flow” just sounds irritating.

Perhaps that’s because we’re often experiencing resistance when someone says that to us.

When we’re feeling tense and un-flowing, someone telling us to “Go with the flow” is likely to aggravate our un-flowing condition...

Just as “don’t be so anxious” is likely to make us feel more anxious.

It may be well-meaning, but “go with the flow” is advice, after all.

As the Quaker teacher and writer Parker Palmer tells us, in order to create an atmosphere of trust, it's often helpful to observe the practice of "no fixing, no saving, no setting each other straight."

So instead of blithely saying, "Go with the flow," it might be more supportive to say, "It sounds like you're feeling stuck right now."

This is equally true whether we're learning to get along with others or simply trying to make friends with ourselves.

We might simply notice whether we're in a state of "flow"...or not.

It's interesting to notice that by saying, "I'm feeling stuck" instead of, "I've got to learn to go with the flow," we experience less resistance...

Which allows an opening for more flow to occur.

## §

Mary Oliver is a poet who communicates this tension between "flow" and "not-flow" very well.

Many poets do of course, but I highlight Mary Oliver because her writing is quoted so often in Unitarian settings.

Three of her poems are found in our hymnbook, "Singing the Living Tradition." I wanted to know more about her.

I found out that she lives in Provincetown, Massachusetts, and was born in 1935. When she was 17, she became good friends with the sister of the late poet Edna St. Vincent-Millay.

For several years, Mary Oliver immersed herself in the life and papers of that Pulitzer Prize-winning poet. Later, she went on to win the Pulitzer Prize herself.

In addition to being influenced by Millay, Mary Oliver was inspired by Thoreau and Emerson—both of whom deeply influenced Unitarian Universalism in North America.

Her writing also has been compared to that of Emily Dickinson, who's quoted on the top of today's Order of Service.

I couldn't choose between two Mary Oliver poems to read you this morning, so in the spirit of going with the flow, I decided to include them both.

Each of them, in different ways, seems to describe the moment-by-moment challenge...and "not-challenge"...of flowing with life.

Or, one might say, of simply "Being."

In "I Go Down to the Shore" Mary Oliver shares with us her anxious thoughts: "Oh, I am miserable, what shall, what should I do?"

And she relates the lovely, flowing answer of the sea, as it rolls in and out, saying "Excuse me, I have work to do."

In "Poem of the One World," she describes the calm epiphany, that "everything sooner or later is part of everything else."

Then, in the next breath, she admits that the beautiful feeling that arose from that thought lasted "a little while"...which is to say, not forever.

One gets the feeling that the next morning, Mary Oliver might write another poem that notices, again, the difference between her own human judgments and fears...and Nature's simple flow.

Using nature as her guide, she shows us, with delightful self-awareness and humour, that "being" is both difficult and easy.

Impossible...and/or effortless.

§

When I was writing this sermon, I spent the next hour trying to find a Zen Buddhist story, about a teacher who arrives in the zendo to greet a large group of students waiting in anticipation...

He looks out to the group, calmly says, “Life is essentially impossible,” turns and walks out.

It was a good story, I thought, to illustrate this idea that “flow” is not a thing that can ever be captured or understood or mastered...

...and that resistance is both futile and ever-present.

Then I couldn't find the story. That is, I couldn't find it anywhere except in my own imperfect memory.

No matter how many Google searches I tried, by rephrasing the story, attributing it to different sources, I came up short.

I thought...well, then, I can't use it in my sermon...which caused me some consternation.

As did the thought that I have quoted this story several times and that perhaps I have misled myself and others by doing so, because apparently the story doesn't exist.

What's more, I've gone and wasted an hour...making me late for an appointment...and now I'll have to go and find some other story for my sermon.

Or not.

§

How interesting that by making space for imperfection...

For not knowing for sure...

For not forcing an answer...

I could breathe a little more easily.

And simply complete my task.

As the sea says, rolling in and out, "Excuse me, I have work to do."

§

It seems to me that "growing" with the flow has to do with noticing that space which opens up from time to time...

When our usual techniques of trying to flow faster or better or more swimmingly don't work out as well as we had hoped.

I share the story about my sermon-writing difficulties not to be funny, but to demonstrate how flow can happen even through mistakes or accidental things or "problems."

Little rivulets of new ideas often sneak out in unexpected or even "wrong" directions. They too are part of the creative dance of new life.

Resistance and flow are not mutually exclusive. It's not a matter of one or the other. Life is about both.

This is put beautifully in a poem called “The Real Work” by another poet Unitarians quote frequently, Wendell Berry:

It may be that when we no longer know what to do  
we have come to our real work,

and that when we no longer know which way to go  
we have come to our real journey.

The mind that is not baffled is not employed.

The impeded stream is the one that sings.

§

I would venture to say that all of us are, in some ways, “impeded streams.”

We are all placed within circumstances that limit us, confound us, vex us...and that mold and shape and direct us.

Our divine nature—the essential “I Am” of being—it can never be impeded.

This is our “inherent worth,” that is present no matter what.

Yet the directions our lives will take are the result of so many limiting factors. We exert some control over some of them, and others, we cannot.

It’s often hard to feel grateful for the impeding forces in our lives.

In fact, we might be more likely to complain about those things that limit the flow we seek...that move us in a different direction than the one we thought was best.

But I wonder if right now, you might take a moment to think of a recent time when you noticed your own resistance to a situation or to a person...and then grew out of it.

And by “grew out of it,” I don’t mean simply “got past it”...although that might be an important part of the story.

I mean matured somehow, because of it.

Perhaps you’ve had the experience of thinking, “I have no interest in that,” or, “That’s just ridiculous,” or “I really don’t want to spend time with so-and-so...”

And then, through engagement with the experience—perhaps reluctant engagement—you found that you grew.

Take a moment and see if anything like that comes to mind.

(brief pause)

When I think of those experiences in my own life, sometimes I feel a little embarrassed, because I see that I was so close to rejecting something that was, in fact, a great gift.

Honestly though, I don’t know whether every experience can, or even should, be seen that way.

To say “It’s all good” or “Everything is meant for our growth,” can trivialize suffering.

And certainly, ascribing any benefit to a difficult experience can only take place when it's our experience we're reflecting on...not someone else's.

That said, the world offers us numerous examples of human beings who've responded to extraordinary hardships in ways that reveal not the limits of life...but life's unlimited potential.

People like Holocaust survivor Viktor Frankl whose book "Man's Search for Meaning" was originally titled "Nevertheless, Say Yes to Life."

People like Helen Keller, who was limited by not being able to see or hear.

People like Martin Luther King Jr. whose most influential letter was composed in the margins of a newspaper and on scraps of paper, within the limits of a Birmingham jail.

These are a few famous examples, and of course there are many more that you know personally.

These are people who found themselves in "impossible" situations...

Who resisted that impossibility with the force of love that flowed from deep within them.

With force of love that continues to flow.

§

No story is interesting or meaningful without conflict...without tension.

We're familiar with that phrase "creative tension." It doesn't mean "fun" tension or "nice, pleasant" tension.

It means creative—life-making, transformative, generative—tension.

As the singing stream flows within the boundedness of the river, each person lives within the particularities of a time and place...

Each choir sings within the limits of its singers' abilities.

Each congregation moves within the limits of its space and relationships, and gradually...often imperceptively...

The person may become more compassionate or courageous...

The choir may become more adept at harmony and dynamics...

The congregation may become more cooperative and effective as a group.

As we all work within our limits and "push" them creatively...

Like water wearing away the banks of the riverbed...

Life changes.

## §

I'd like to thank Gillian for pointing me toward Madisyn Taylor's writing, as we were planning the service today.

Madisyn Taylor writes, "The journey of water as it flows upon the earth can be a mirror of our own paths through life...Like a river that flows within the confines of its banks, we are born with certain

defining characteristics that govern our identity...a particular time and place, a specific family, certain gifts and challenges.

Water is a great teacher that shows us how to move through the world with grace, ease, determination...

Eventually, a river will empty into the sea. Water...does not fear a loss of identity or control...{but} tumbles into the vastness....

Each time we move beyond our individual egos to become part of something bigger, we can try our best to follow the lead of the river.”<sup>1</sup>

## §

As Unitarians, we affirm and promote a “free and responsible search for truth and meaning” in our 4<sup>th</sup> Principle.

What better metaphor than a flowing river, to illustrate that free and responsible search?

Our commitment to responsibility calls us to recognize when we impede others in their journey.

When we create obstacles to justice and compassion.

When our resistance to change is blocking the flow of life and it’s up to us to release our grip.

Our call to freedom invites us to celebrate and encourage the creative flow of life...

---

<sup>1</sup> Madisyn Taylor, *DailyOM: Nurturing Body, Mind and Spirit*  
<http://www.dailyom.com/cgi-bin/display/product.cgi?pid=511>

To honour the uniquely vibrant spirit that flows within each of us alone...

The spirit of life within us, that can replenish the world.

When we ask ourselves, as Mary Oliver did, “What shall...what should I do?”

Perhaps we can have faith that, in our co-creative participation in the flowing interchange of all life experience...

Our tiny “stream” of consciousness flows as part of a larger whole.

This summer, many of us will find ourselves communing with rivers and streams, rainfall and tears.

May we flow with grace, whatever direction we may be carried...and may the banks of our resistance be our teachers...

As we let the river run.

Amen.