

“S.O.S. (Source of Strength)”

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First Unitarian Congregation of Toronto
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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.

It’s the classic “opening line” for the back-to-school season: “What I did on my summer vacation.”

We’re still in summer mode here at First Unitarian, but I’m glad to be back with you today. And I do want to tell you what I did on my holiday.

Starting at the beginning of July, I’ve been spending a lot of time near the Don River, on the Lower Don trail.

Along with my husband Dave and my children, I’ve lived only minutes from it for almost thirty years.

But despite that, until this summer I’d spent very little time in the Don Valley—other than driving up and down the DVP.

When I finally discovered the trail, I wondered why it had taken me so long...and I’ll return to that in a minute.

This summer I went down there, because I was puzzling over some questions. Wondering how some things might work in my life and life in general.

A friend said casually that “listening to birds” might be a good idea...and it seemed as good a technique as any.

So I went down into the Valley.

After a few weeks of walking regularly on the trail—and marveling at the many songbirds, wildflowers and trees I found there—I figured out why the Don River hadn’t been on my radar.

I sent out an exuberant Facebook post with a picture of the river, and a friend responded with an innocent-sounding question:

“Do you think it’s possible to bring back the Don?”

Suddenly, I felt a wave of surprise and embarrassment, as if someone had just pointed out a close relative’s bad behavior that had been obvious to everyone but me.

“Bring back?” I thought. “What’s wrong with it?”

Had I missed something?
Well, of course I had.

I had unconsciously overlooked the downside of the Don,
the way one does when one falls in love.

Of course I knew that the Don River was polluted...didn’t everyone?

I felt suddenly naïve or Pollyanna-ish—as if I’d been living in some kind of denial.

If there were wilderness paradises nearby, surely the Don River was not one of them. At best it was, perhaps, a cautionary tale.

As the organization Lake Ontario Waterkeeper put it:

“...The river is severely stressed by 150 years of polluted effluent running into its waters from the city’s industries and residents.

So poor is the water quality of the Don that the river, along with only three others in Canada, has earned the distinction of “Poor” by Environment Canada.”¹

When I went down to the River this summer, the pollution was not the first thing I saw...

But, once it was pointed out to me, I couldn’t help but be aware of it.

¹ Gabrielle Parent-Doliner “*Paddling the Upside and the Downside of the Don River*” Lake Ontario Waterkeeper blog, <http://www.waterkeeper.ca/blog/2015/5/15/paddling-the-upside-and-the-downside-of-the-don-river>

Had I put myself at risk by dipping my feet into the water near the rapids, in my favourite sitting spot, where I saw the herons?

And the frequent dark muddy colour. Yes, that must be a result of the recent heavy rains and the run-off from the storm sewers that can be seen all along the banks.

The tangle of branches that I painted, congregating on the far bank...were those the result of dead trees, that could not survive in this damaged forest?

Perhaps this wasn't the right place for contemplation and deep spiritual experience after all.

Perhaps I should leave the city to find some more pristine environment.

Or, perhaps with its combination of beauty and ugliness, the Don River is exactly the right place for contemplation—because it's a living example of contradiction, paradox and Wholeness.

I think that's what many teachers would tell me.

Going back to the 12th Century, St. Francis of Assisi, for example, believed in living a monastic life not set apart from the suffering of the world...but fully immersed in it.

This was also the choice of Gautama Buddha, who chose to leave his life of comfort and privilege to intimately experience ordinary life in all its pain and beauty.

Jesus of Nazareth, also, emphasized not the grand temples of ease and accomplishment—but instead the humble places, the overlooked people, and the most challenging of human experiences.

At the recent General Assembly of the Unitarian Universalist Association, the highly-respected lawyer and social justice activist Bryan Stevenson urged a crowd of four thousand UU's to “get proximate” to the suffering around us...to the anger and the hurt and the brokenness of the world.

To bring our presence right up close to it, so we might learn to love more deeply.

Today I can't help but admire and be grateful for all of the people standing up against hatred, in the streets of Charlottesville yesterday:

People linking arms in prayer, and standing face-to-face against white supremacists holding machine guns...

People directly confronting racist hatred, as we all must do.

As Susan Frederick Gray, President of the Unitarian Universalist Association wrote yesterday:

“We must liberate ourselves from the paradigms of dominance and hierarchy that are destroying lives, communities, and the planet.

Fear and hatred corrupt our humanity and cut us off from the spirit, from the holy, from goodness and beauty, and possibilities of creation.”

It seems to me that in order to not be “cut off” from goodness and beauty...we also cannot be cut off the ugliness, the shadow side, that is part of the holiness that is the Whole...or the Absolute.

Or God, if you wish.

As the Franciscan teacher Richard Rohr has said, “Only the Whole can contain all of the parts.”

And so, back to the river.

It's one thing to say I seek deep connection with the Absolute...with the Oneness of Life.

But of course, it contains much I'd like to avoid.

It includes, for example, the sense of embarrassment and shame.

Eww...my beautiful river is polluted by sewage, because it has all those storm sewer outlets along the banks.

And eww...this person that I am has some selfishness, some dishonesty, some [fill-in-the-blank]...that I don't really want anyone to see.

I'd like to just show you the good stuff.
Just show myself the good stuff, through denial or avoidance.

Another thing I did this summer was to discover that, on my father's side, I'm directly descended from wealthy slave-owners who ran a plantation in Alabama.

Getting closer to that uncomfortable reality helps me engage more deeply in the urgent work of dismantling systemic racism.

Now, growing up in the spiritual life can take place through many paths—through a particular religious tradition, contemplative practice, through depth psychology, study and artistic practice.

Or perhaps some combination of “all of the above,” as may be true for many people in this room.

But if the path is one that leads to the “promised land” of spiritual maturity...it will take us right up to the stuff we don't want to see.

It will also, at the same time, provide access to the strength we need to get close to it.

That's good news, because as many people have discovered, the more we try to run from our “shadow” or the painful aspects of existence, the less prepared we are to meet it and respond to it with love.

When we're able to live in the shadowed-ness of life—when we allow ourselves to be fully present—

We join with a deeper Source of Strength, taking it in as personal nourishment, and responding differently to a world in need of sustenance.

When I say “taking it in” as a source of nourishment, you might hear an allusion to the rituals of many faiths that make a metaphor of the taking and eating of the body of life...

Both whole and broken, and infused with joy and suffering at the same time.

By opening to it and taking it in, we gain spiritual nourishment...and ultimately, strength.

As Unitarian Universalists, one of our foundational sources is the Judeo-Christian tradition.

From the Hebrew Bible we find the somewhat familiar Psalm 23, Verse 4: “Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I fear no evil, for Thou art with me, Thy rod and thy staff, they comfort me...”

This text is heard at many traditional Christian funerals...but of course it comes from the Hebrew Bible, not the New Testament.

The “Thou” in it does not refer to the figure of Jesus, but instead to YHWH, the God of Jewish tradition.

In many interpretations, this source of strength goes only by the name “I Am.”

That is, not a personified hero-figure, but the existential “I Am”-ness of Being Itself.

Or as some modern teachers have put it, “God is more a verb than a noun.”

Seen in this way, the “I Am” of radically inclusive Presence is actively with us, indeed *in* us, as we walk through the very human valley that is shadowed always by suffering.

This participatory Love, that surrounds and includes everything, offers a strength that is always available to us.

It’s something much deeper than the little waves and ripples of our own individual egos...and yet we’re very much part of the Whole Stream.

In our lives that we imagine as separate, we send out our S.O.S’s all the time.

We bob along in our little fragile bottles...so contained...so constricted! At least I do.

On days like today...when we see so much conflict, separation and brokenness...from Toronto to Charlottesville to North Korea...

We are sending out an S.O.S...hoping to save our society...save our sanity...perhaps even save the human soul.

So now, more than ever, is the time to plunge into the wilderness of spiritual growth...to find that Source of Strength...

And know that we're never disconnected from it.

In her poem, the Unitarian minister Kathleen McTigue says "Here we make a circle of the great gifts of breath, attention and purpose."

In order to make that circle, and keep it whole, we can't reject aspects of our selves, or certain other people, or the things we've broken.

We need to stay open and present, in the valley of the shadow of death.

Open and present, in the face of our shame and fear, and all the other icky stuff floating around.

Our S.O.S. right now has an obvious environmental angle.

When we begin to see life as an active and divine Wholeness, it's virtually impossible to not care for our Body—the earth and all beings—to nourish and strengthen it.

A song written and sung for a river...a painting done in reverence...these are gentle and healing actions that strengthen our ability to respond in love to the world as it is.

These strengthen our ability to "stick up for" the Earth...and to raise our voices against all forms of injustice, which are born from a false sense of disconnection from all others and from the Whole, that is holy.

It's true that the Don River may never be "brought back" to what it once was.

It's unlikely to return to what it was before the highway was put in, or before its natural course was changed by industrialization early in Toronto's history.

As a result, grief and regret will be something we face together.

Grief and regret will be something for us to digest...along with hope and gratitude for the parts of the River that are now being restored.

Forgiveness also, may be an important feature of the path we walk now.

Forgiveness for ourselves and for our ancestors...as well as an acknowledgement of responsibility of their past actions and our own ongoing ones, and a willingness to have our lives be transformed, so that no more harm is done.

How we participate in this reconciling love will differ, according to our nature.

Some will sit quietly, offering their presence to others to provide strength and solace...while others will engage in active struggle to overturn oppression.

Some will study. Some will sing.

When we fully engage with life according to our nature, we will contribute to the Whole in a way that nourishes it...and nourishes us.

The reading by Kathleen McTigue—"this place is sanctuary and it is for you"—is often used as a call to worship.

We might think of "this place" as our congregation or the UU religious movement.

But I think, and indeed I hope, that the "sanctuary" may also be thought of as life itself.

The late Reverend Forrest Church (how's that for a name) drew our attention to "the cathedral of the world."

It is here that we venture into the wilderness of Love...as compromised as it so often seems.

As we dare to walk in participatory love with one another, and with life itself, we open ourselves to transformation...

...and we offer ourselves as transformative elements that might serve to nourish the world.

In the journey of spiritual growth, we will not be able to avoid ugliness, pain and brokenness.

And yet, we will also, I am convinced, so often be surprised by joy, be overcome by gratitude, and be nourished by the sheer aliveness of Life itself...every precious day that we walk in the Valley.

And with that, while sitting on a rock by the rapids, I put down my pen and closed my notebook.

I looked up, and at that moment, a deer stepped out of the shadows on the opposite bank.

I watched in amazement as she took a few strong and silent steps, before disappearing again into the wilds of the Don River Valley.