

The Face of the Deep

A Sermon Delivered on November 4, 2018
by
The Reverend Axel H. Gehrmann

*“It's only a drop in the ocean –
but the ocean wouldn't be the same without that drop.”*

-- Mother Teresa

Unitarian Universalist Church
of the Monterey Peninsula
490 Aguajito Road
Carmel, CA 93923
(831) 624-7404
www.uucmp.org

Call to Worship

Let us gather for worship mindful of the spirit of life
that moves within each and all of us,
and which the great Indian poet Rabindranath Tagore described so well:

The same stream of life that runs through my veins night and day
runs through the world and dances in rhythmic measures.
It is the same life that shoots in joy through the dust of the earth
in numberless blades of grass
and breaks into tumultuous waves of leaves and flowers.
It is the same life that is rocked in the ocean-cradle of birth and death,
in ebb and flow.
I feel my limbs are made glorious by the touch of this world of life.
And my pride is from the life-throb of ages dancing in my blood this moment.

In this spirit let us join in worship.

Meditation: Our meditation this morning is by Lyn Cox.

Creative spirit, source of life and love:

We give thanks for the beauty of this day and for the company of those assembled here.

Thank you for the breezes of change, clearing our heads and bringing fresh ideas. May they cleanse our minds of the oppressions and isms that divide us.

Thank you for the flame of hope, the heat of righteous anger, the warmth of compassion, and the fire of commitment. May they bubble the cauldrons of transformation.

Thank you for oceans of love, rivers of connection, tears of relief, and pools of serenity. May healing waters flow over us and through us and among us, wearing down the sharp rocks of despair to bring joy in the morning.

Thank you for the good earth beneath us, around us, and within us. May we take this clay and co-create a new realm of justice and beauty.

Thank you for all these and more. We accept our gifts and commit to building, sculpting, painting, singing, and dancing them to life; to abundant life.

So be it. Blessed be. Amen.

First Reading: by the American poet and scholar Christine Valters Paintner, from her book *Water, Wind, Earth & Fire: The Christian Practice of Praying with the Elements* (p. 81)

There is something about the sea that draws me to it. When I am able to spend several days by the water, something always shifts in me. I am able to hear the Holy One more clearly through the rhythm of waves and tides and the vast mystery of the ocean. A couple of years ago I rented a tiny cottage over the winter season along the Hood Canal, which is a channel of water that runs between the Kitsap and Olympic peninsulas in the state of Washington. I would spend part of my week at the hermitage, as I called it, and part back home in Seattle. There were many gifts to that time: the space to listen, the beauty of the beach, time to simply be. Perhaps the greatest gift of all was becoming aware of the rise and fall of the tides each day. The cottage was on a beach that was accessible only at low tide. So the tide table became my constant companion. I would have to plan my walk each day by its schedule, making sure to leave enough hours to amble along the shores and return before the water rose and covered the sand once more.

One of the things I discovered there was the importance of following my own rhythms. Listening to my internal rising and falling was sheer gift – I ate when I was hungry, slept when I was tired, and wrote when I was moved to work. I entered into the sacred flow of my soul’s longing and in the process connected to the sacred flow that runs through the heart of everything.

Second Reading: by the American author Barbara Kingsolver from an essay entitled “High Tide in Tuscon”

Years ago when I was a graduate student of animal behavior, I passed my days reading about the likes of animals' internal clocks. Temperature, photoperiod, the rise and fall of hormones—all these influences have been teased apart like so many threads from the rope that pulls every creature to its regulated destiny. But one story takes the cake. F. A. Brown, a researcher who is more or less the grandfather of the biological clock, set about in 1954 to track the cycles of intertidal oysters. He scooped his subjects from the clammy coast of Connecticut and moved them into the basement of a laboratory in landlocked Illinois. For the first fifteen days in their new aquariums, the oysters kept right up with their normal intertidal behavior: they spent time shut away in their shells, and time with their mouths wide open, siphoning their briny bath for the plankton that sustained them, as the tides ebbed and flowed on the distant Connecticut shore. In the next two weeks, they made a mystifying shift. They still carried out their cycles in unison, and were regular as the tides, but their high-tide behavior didn't coincide with high tide in Connecticut, or for that matter California, or any other tidal charts known to science. It dawned on the researchers after some calculations that the oysters were responding to high tide in Chicago. Never mind that the gentle mollusks lived in glass boxes in the basement of a steel-and-cement building. Nor that Chicago has no ocean. In the circumstances, the oysters were doing their best.

The Face of the Deep
A Sermon Delivered on November 4, 2018
By
The Reverend Axel H. Gehrmann

Since Elaine and I moved here three years ago, hardly a day has gone by that I haven't caught at least a glimpse of the ocean, when driving around town, or up and down these hills. And hardly a week has gone by that I haven't at some point walked along the shore – often at Asilomar when we lived in Pacific Grove, and now more often at Monterey or Sand City Beach.

Like many people, I too am drawn to the sea. I am not sure why. Tourists and travelers come from across the country and around the world to catch the spectacular views along the coast. They crowd the side of the road at Bixby Bridge, and wait in long lines to gain entry to Point Lobos Natural Reserve and to enjoy the amazing views and remarkable beauty of the sea.

But I think it is more than beauty that draws us to the ocean. Maybe, as Christine Paintner puts it, we can sense something holy when we are in the presence of the sea. Maybe there is something healing in the sight and sound of vast waters.

I do feel a distinct need for healing these days.

* * *

Yesterday evening Elaine and I both sat down and opened up the envelopes we received from the Monterey County Elections office a few weeks ago, and filled out our official ballots for the statewide elections coming up. The ballots, which we plan to cast Tuesday morning, are a reminder of how we are linked to the political battles that are taking place across the country, and that have been filling the news.

Sitting at my desk, dutifully filling in little red circles with black ink, I felt awfully far removed from the heated debates taking place at political rallies and on the editorial pages of newspapers, as well as in the world of Twitter and Facebook. I felt far removed from the issues of justice and equality that are being decided in halls of power, crucial issues affecting our environment, our citizenship, and our most basic democratic values and political ideals.

It was hard to imagine that my single vote will make much of a difference in our polarized political climate that every day seems to grow more intense.

The New York Times columnist David Brooks, this week, writes about the divisions across this country, that seem to be growing more and more pronounced in the days leading up to the midterm elections.

Saying there is a political divide hardly does justice to our current situation. It's more like grand canyons that now separate different sectors of American society, canyons that are harder and harder to cross. And everyone's political positions are becoming more and more entrenched: "College-educated suburban women *really* don't like Republicans. White men without college degrees *really* don't like Democrats. Urban America is *really* blue. Rural America is *really* red," Brooks writes.

One thing the two sides have in common is a sense of "unraveling." "Of course, the two electorates tell entirely different unraveling stories," Brooks writes.

"In rural America, the sources of unraveling are the immigrants (symbolized by the caravan) and the radicalized mobs of educated elites (symbolized by the media). In rural America basic values like hard work, clear gender roles and the social fabric are dissolving before people's eyes.

Urban Americans see the unraveling coming from the rising tide of nativism, the way [the President] eviscerates social norms, the underground army of alt-right extremists with guns. If anything, the blue sense of unraveling is more comprehensive." ("The Retrenchment Election," NYT, Nov. 1, 2018)

Another thing both sides share, is that they are both hardening in their positions. Each side is becoming ever more adamant that their cause is just. Increasingly we don't see our opponents as simply mistaken, but hopelessly ignorant and almost evil.

And I confess, in the current climate, I feel myself hardening. But what I really long for, is healing.

* * *

The Irish poet and philosopher John O'Donohue finds a sense of hope and healing in the ocean. "The presence of an ocean is so huge that it resembles the divine," he says. Like Christine Paintner, he finds comfort in the rhythm of the waves and tides. It's surprising that something as huge as the ocean has such a perfect sense of rhythm, he says.

"The ebb and flow of the tide resembles in a strange way the ebb and flow of the human breath. This is not surprising, given that each of us came here from the waters of the womb and that primally we have all come out of the ocean at the beginning of evolution. Consequently, it is immensely healing to walk by the ocean in a meditative way. There is something profound happening between the ocean and the shore." (*Four Elements: Reflections on Nature*, p. 58)

Life itself arose from the ocean. So perhaps it's no surprise that the ocean can teach us something about life's deepest existential truths, especially in times of hurt and confusion. O'Donohue writes:

"When depression takes you over, it is as if the tide of your joy, your sense of life has withdrawn and will never return. At such a time you are marooned on a vacant shore; even the most simple gesture has to be deliberately achieved. The natural flow of spontaneity has ceased. In such times it is important to remember that the

tide has merely gone out and with the certitude of the ocean rhythm, it will definitely return...”

* * *

Something profound happens between the ocean and the shore, something profoundly life-giving. The marine biologist and conservationist Rachel Carson studied and wrote about this phenomenon in her book *The Edge of the Sea*, which was first published in 1955. She writes:

“The edge of the sea is a strange and beautiful place. All through the long history of Earth it has been an area of unrest where waves have broken heavily against the land, where the tides have pressed forward over the continents, receded, and then returned. For no two successive days is the shore line precisely the same...”

Only the most hardy and adaptable can survive in a region so mutable, yet the area between the tide lines is crowded with plants and animals. In this difficult world of the shore, life displays its enormous toughness and vitality by occupying almost every conceivable niche. Visibly, it carpets the intertidal rocks; or half hidden, it descends into fissures and crevices, or hides under boulders, or lurks in the wet gloom of sea caves. Invisibly, where the casual observer would say there is no life, it lies deep in the sand, in burrows and tubes and passageways. It tunnels into solid rock and bores into peat and clay... It exists minutely, as the film of bacteria that spreads over rock surface or wharf piling; as spheres of protozoa, small as pinpricks, sparkling at the surface of the sea...

The shore is an ancient world... Yet it is a world that keeps alive the sense of continuing creation and of the relentless drive of life. Each time that I enter it, I gain some new awareness of its beauty and its deeper meanings... (p.1, 2)

* * *

For Christine Paintner, the shore is the place she comes to hear the Holy One, a place where she can listen and learn to follow her own deeper rhythms. She finds rest and renewal at the ocean, a respite from the rush and stress of her daily duties. She writes:

“So often we try to force ourselves into schedules that don’t fit us, that leave us exhausted. Certainly we need to work and earn money for food and shelter, but what might happen if one day each week you released the hold a schedule has on your life? What if you had a Sabbath whose main purpose was to free you from the external demands of time and allowed you to see the rhythms of time as gift and invitation to a more intentional and less controlled way of being?...”

...The tides teach us to witness our own rising and falling, just like the sun’s rising and setting does, and to make space for the movement of both in our lives. As I discover while watching the tides, both are necessary. Our culture tells us to rise and rise and rise until we collapse in exhaustion. The ocean tells me otherwise...”
(p. 82)

* * *

We don't need to stand at the shore to learn the lessons the ocean would teach us. We don't need to scramble over stones, or poke around in tide pools. We don't need to smell the salty air, or hear the waves, or look out across the wide horizon – all we need to do is to quiet our mind, and listen for what the ancient prophet Elijah called the “still small voice” within. We can find the wisdom of water within us. This is not merely a matter of religious imagination, it is also a scientific fact.

As the philosopher Peter Godfrey-Smith writes in his book about the deep origins of consciousness:

“The mind evolved in the sea. Water made it possible. All the early stages took place in water: the origin of life, the birth of animals, the evolution of nervous systems and brains, and the appearance of the complex bodies that make brains worth having. The first ventures onto land probably took place ... 420 million years ago, perhaps earlier – but the early history of animals is a history of life in the sea. When animals did crawl on land, they took the sea with them. All the basic activities of life occur in water-filled cells bounded by membranes, tiny containers whose insides are remnants of the sea.” (*Other Minds: The Octopus, the Sea, and the Deep Origins of Consciousness*, p. 200)

Like the Connecticut oysters sitting in glass boxes in a basement lab in landlocked Illinois, we can move with the tides no matter where we are. The ocean is within us.

The power and wisdom of water is within our reach. It can transform us, and our world, especially during these difficult days when our hearts feel hardened. As Lao Tzu wrote in the Tao te Ching twenty-five centuries ago:

Nothing in the world is as soft and yielding as water.
Yet for dissolving the hard and inflexible, nothing can surpass it.

The soft overcomes the hard; the gentle overcomes the rigid.
Everyone knows this is true, but few can put it into practice.

Therefore the Master remains serene in the midst of sorrow.
Evil cannot enter her heart. (Ch. 78)

* * *

These are trying times. The human challenges we face – challenges of our own making – seem so entrenched, they seem almost insurmountable. And we may sometimes wonder what difference our single vote can make. But it *does* make a difference. Everything we do makes a difference.

At times like these, let us remember the wisdom of the water, as captured in the words of the Persian poet Rumi, who wrote:

Why do you weep?--
[The] Source is within you,
and this whole world
is springing up from it.

... Let the drop of water that is you
become a hundred mighty seas.

You are not just the drop in the ocean.
You are the mighty ocean in the drop.

* * *

May we remember that the same stream of life that runs through our veins
runs through the world and dances in rhythmic measures.
May we remember the oceans of love, the rivers of connection, the pools of serenity,
within us and among us this day.
And may we do our part to bring healing to all people,
and our earth.

So be it. Amen.