

We've Known Rivers
On the Constancy of Change
Rev. Robin Landerman Zucker
Beacon UU Congregation
October 11, 2020

"When everything else has gone from my brain," writes Annie Dillard in the preface to her memoir, An American Childhood, "When everything else has gone from my brain, what will be left, I believe is topography: the dreaming memory of land as it lay this way or that."

Dillard is talking about Pittsburgh, a hometown she and I share, and in her memories of topography, Dillard especially recalls the three wide rivers that "divide and cool the mountains." The Allegheny brawling in from the North; the Monongahela flowing in shallow and slow from the South; and then the two, merging into the great, westward-wending Ohio."

It surprises me not one bit that Dillard would choose to begin her memoir with a tribute to Pittsburgh's three rivers, because, like her, those rivers symbolize for me a deep sense of place, and a personal source from which flows my own adolescence, friends found, love lost, college, my parent's divorce, and the tragic loss of loved ones.

Until my return to Pittsburgh in 2011, I had never stepped foot in any of those polluted but majestic three rivers, yet they've run through me with a force of gravity and love and joy and sorrow for decades. I am from Pittsburgh, and I've known rivers.

As karma or dumb luck would have it, I resided for nearly 20 years in a town where two rivers (the Assabet and the Sudbury) merge into a third, the Concord. It is Thoreau country –a gentler place than Pittsburgh, though never was it as deeply embedded into my heart or soul as my girlhood "home." Even so, these three New England rivers, unpolluted and pastoral, ran under and through my life, carrying their own burgeoning memories and potent forces- marriage, motherhood, ministry. I lived once in Concord, MA and I've known rivers.

We were reminded earlier, in our reading, how the writer Norman Maclean "wades into the swift silver of the Big Blackfoot River, casting for memories with the same reverence that he reserves for trout." And how Norman begins to hear the long story of his life cascading past gentle banks, through dark eddies and roaring rapids, and then finally concluding that, "eventually all things merge into One, and a River runs through it." Norman MacLean has known rivers.

To be sure, each of us has known rivers of one sort or another. The Hudson, the Pinette, the Danube, the Verde, the mighty Mississippi, the Charles, the Rum,

the Saco, the Colorado, the St. Croix, the Sudbury, the McKenzie, the wild Youghigheny.

We each wade thigh-deep into the swift silver of memories, and we've each known changes and challenges. Some are sudden and abrupt, others planned, some welcome, and others truly dreaded. There have been changes that have carried us around river bends to uncharted tributaries, and some current have mostly floated us safely along, while others have swamped the very craft we had trusted to be buoyant and sturdy.

A sage once remarked that "you can never step into the same river twice," meaning that life, like a river, is ever-changing and forever flowing downstream from its Source. Let us pause silently and consider for a moment: Since March when we went virtual, what have been the changes and challenges in each of your lives? (pause)

From my vantage point, I'm looking out from this riverbank virtual pulpit at a beloved congregation of people navigating the currents of change, and stepping into a new river each and every day: marriage and divorce, good health and illness, birth and death, employment shifts, I see newer friends whom we welcomed here this year, and those moving off to college, to retirement communities, to nursing homes, to some other shore. There are those grappling with the challenges of adolescence and old age, those getting their drivers licenses and those giving them up. We are all grappling with COVID and what it has wrought.

Yes, here at Beacon, we are a community that has known its share of rivers and together we face, and will continue to face, the changes and challenges that inevitably run through us and under us on this great river called Life.

As I see it, we are not meant to go it alone on the river as a random assembly of single skullers. The congregation is, if nothing else, a place where we pledge to paddle together through the flats, the dark eddies, and the sudden white water. What I've observed since March is that the pandemic, this sudden and abrupt curve in the river, has recommitted us to building a big boat and rowing it together.

The truth is some of us are better at challenge and change than others, more comfortable with the unpredictable ways of the river. There are those amongst us who might even embrace change and look forward to it with relish. And that's okay and truly admirable. In the past, I would have strenuously resisted facing any uneasy leave-taking or transition. But, after several decades of dark eddies and gentle flats, triumphs and reversals, entries and exits, I've made an important discovery, and this is it...just like a river, the only *true* constant in our lives is change.

I believe this is what Norman MacLean is getting at when he writes, "eventually all things merge into One and a river runs through it." The One is the Eternal, the Tao; and the river is constant change running through our lives.

I'm reminded here of the words of the great Hindu poet Rabindranath Tagore, who writes, "The same stream of life that runs through my veins night and day runs through the world and dances its rhythmic measures . Is it beyond thee to be glad with the gladness of this rhythm? To be tossed and lost and broken in the whirl of this fearful joy? All things rush on, they stop not, they look not behind, no power can hold them back; they rush on."

Underneath all the apparent surface differences in our lives rushes on this steady-as-she-goes, utterly dependable state of being called change. We can count on it. Yet, it is helpful, even reassuring, to recognize that although things can change for the better or change for the worse, *change*, in and of itself, is neither good nor bad. It's how we *face and endure* change that determines whether it becomes a crisis or an opportunity.

My colleague Kenn Hurto likes to quip that "Nobody likes change but a wet baby." All of us have probably experienced a time when we've been swamped, or even immobilized, by some unexpected or devastating or terrifying challenge or change in our lives.

Some folks stubbornly deny change, clinging to the side of their boats even after they've flipped over or run aground. Others simply don't (or won't) see it coming ; this brings to mind the scene from countless buddy movies in which the hapless heroes finding themselves adrift on some unfamiliar river. As a rumbling sound grows louder in the background, one turns the other and asks, "Do you hear that?" And you know what comes next...the camera zooms out to show them approaching a waterfall the size of Niagara! Yes, change can feel like that at times, although this is probably not the best strategy for dealing with it.

For some of us, floating peacefully on our backs through change is the preferred course, face to the sky, letting go, letting things be, remaining immersed in the moment, "glad with the gladness of the rhythm" of it all. With something like this in mind, Mary Oliver writes these words in her piece, *In Blackwater Woods*,

"Every year, everything
I have ever learned in my lifetime
leads back to this: the fires
and the black river of loss
whose other side is salvation,
whose meaning none of us will ever know. "
"To live in this world," Oliver continues,
you must be able to do three things:
to love what is mortal,

to hold it against your bones
knowing your own life depends on it;
and when the time comes to let it go,
to let it go."

There is a real serenity and deep faith to Oliver's approach but it's difficult. "Letting go" can free us, but it can also trigger intense feelings of loss, while thrusting us into what one writer calls, "the confusing nowhere of in-between-ness." Even so, we can benefit from this "letting go" approach, dropping our full weight into the seat of the present moment and paddling from there. It's worth it.

Faced with change, still others prefer to launch themselves full throttle into the headwaters and take control (or at least, the illusion of control) as they *put the ash to 'er* like mad to stay the course. Picture management guru Stephen Covey in a neon orange life vest!

In one of his sermons, the Rev. Scott Alexander suggests that the key to surviving life's river of constant changes, regardless of one's technique, is mostly a matter of "resilience." This begins, Alexander tells us [with his typical directness], when we first make room for the notion that bad things *can* and *do* happen to good people, that life events can, indeed, be cruel and unfair. "I take it as a matter of faith," he writes, "that when life sends us reeling [and it will], all of us are free to make certain choices that can help us avoid falling into those permanently brittle places of the mind, body, and heart that trap us in those rigid, angry places of isolation, fear, and despair." "If we are saved by degrees in our living -- and I believe we are -- then it matters one whole lot whether we strive to bring (by our spiritual attitudes and emotional choices) the greatest possible measure of resilience, [grace, vitality, and flexibility] into our lives."

I think our Burghgal Annie Dillard would concur, and would likely add these thoughts, "It is madness," she has written, "to wear ladies' straw hats and velvet fedoras to church; we should all be wearing crash helmets. Ushers should issue life preservers and signal flares; they should lash us to our pews."

I love her words. They remind me of my first bracing white water excursion in my early 20s down the teeming Colorado River. (My colleague Tom Rosiello recalls a similar experience in a sermon from 2010) On the rafting trip, the advice was a bit puzzling. After the life preservers and helmets were strapped on, the tanned, muscular guide answered some questions – my favorite being – "will I get wet?"

Then ran down the rules for riding the rapids, explaining that if/when we encounter rocks and boulders, we should all lean into them...oh, and keep paddling, please. Okay did I hear that right – lean into the rock? The guide emphasized this point several times, knowing that our natural instinct prompts us to lean away from the rock to avoid hitting it. That's what most people do on reflex.

But in whitewater rafting, as in life, you have to learn to override this natural instinct and force yourself to lean INTO the rocks instead. But, if you lean away from the rock, the rushing river water can catch the side of the raft and cause it to get stuck against the rock, or worse flip it over! Yes, you will get wet!

If you lean into the rock, the rushing water hits the bottom of the raft and easily pushes you forward. Leaning into the rock is completely counter-intuitive for most people. Even when you KNOW that you're supposed to do this, it still takes practice to override the instinct and our fear.

Our fears can serve a purpose. We sense a threat. Adrenaline rushes through our body, bringing blood to muscles. We can physically respond with speed and strength. Our primitive instincts protect us by saying, "Be afraid! Be very afraid!" Yet, even with our hearts in our throats, leaning into the rock enables us to lean in to change and challenge; to lean into the reality of COVID and how it has changed our way of life so drastically, to lean in to the truth about the world we inhabit, our place in it, our deepest regrets, the whitewater of relationships and careers and politics and society.

I'm remembering now the words to a Gospel song I sang with Nick Page's Mystic Chorale some years ago – "When everything else fails, we sang, I can go the Rock." (the Rock in this case being Jesus). We don't sing songs like that in most of our UU congregations, but we do have sources of spiritual strength, moral meaning, and sacred refuge. And we should lean into those rocks. Like our principles, which we highlighted and affirmed in last week's service.

Doing this in our UU congregations also empowers us to lean into the truth about simmering or erupting conflicts, lean budgets, longing for broader justice, deeper connection or a sense of the holy. This is where Dillard's seemingly silly advice makes good sense – crash helmets, life preservers, and pew straps for our churches and fellowships. Strapping yourself in to a covenantal community is not a genteel canoe ride on Pleasant Pond. It is a rafting trip on the Colorado, where the hard rocks of the truths we seek and those we find dot the whitewater landscape and beg us, no - **require** us to lean in and experience how truth feels....how suffering and joy feels, how we feel about each other across the pew, the street or the planet and develop grit and grace....Yes, you will get wet!

In the words of UU poet Barbara Rohde:

When I am swept by the cold fury of these waters

I praise the rock

I praise the river.

I must know, with my whole being, how truth feels.

I shall remember how truth feels.

Scott Alexander reminds us that much of our capacity for resilience in facing challenge and change is, "in the end, a matter of attitude and a matter of faith..a decision to affirm (even after the boat capsizes) what of value, joy and holiness still remains with us;" what blessings still bless us even as we struggle through the ebb and flow of darkness into light and back again. To stick together on the river, affirming, in the words of poet David Whyte, that "the great receiving depth, untamed by what we need, needs only what will flow its way."

In all, the challenges we face can be seen to pose a simple and ultimately empowering question: this is your life, this is your river -- what will you do? Nothing you want or can even have is upstream. Because the place upstream, where you once stood, is now a different river. I think the key is to launch our boats on to the river and to live, grateful not just for the moments in the sun, but also with a willingness to "stand still, with an injured and opened heart, letting the River run freely though us."

It is with this sense of gratitude and hope that we might each set off on the next leg of our unique river journeys. And also, perhaps, with a fuller recognition that we've known rivers of change in our lives and in our time together as a community, and that our souls *have* grown ever-deeper like these rivers in facing and grappling with some of life's endless challenges.

As we face transitions and traumas, entries and exits, this virtual community we strive to sustain, let it be with a bittersweet awareness that we've known rivers but that we can never step into a particular river of experience or relationship twice. We must step in where we are.

And yet, may we carry the comforting assurance that one thing is certain...the river flows on, and there will surely be a time, further downstream, where an unexplored fork offers the chance for fresh choices, new awareness, deeper commitments, a change of course, holding hands again in this Sanctuary.

So let the river run, and may the banks of our hearts be wide open with thanks. Blessed be, Blessed we, and Amen.

© 2020 Rev. Robin Landerman Zucker. All rights reserved. Rev. Zucker and cited authors/sources may be quoted with proper attribution.

