

Standing Knee Deep in Life?
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Beacon UU Congregation
September 11, 2022

Are you a wader or a plunger? When you venture into the ocean anywhere in the Northern half of the US, how wet do you get? When it comes to a spring-fed Maine Lake, Oregon's Cannon Beach, the Jersey Shore, or a Montana pond, are you typically a toe-dabbler or a super hero? Do you even *need* a towel when you emerge from the water or will a few quick shakes of stray droplets from your ankles do the trick?

On many occasions I've ventured near and even slightly *into* the water, mostly during my many years in New England. Here's what I've noticed, and it's hardly a scientific sample – we're primarily waders who yearn to be plungers. We cajole one another playfully to dive in, to venture deeper, to submerge our heads, or minimally, our shoulders. We inch farther and farther into the brisk depths, wincing as we go, while trying to look nonchalant. "My that's cold," we sputter, although what we're secretly thinking is: "Oh my God! Is this freezing or what? How can anyone swim in *this*???" Get me outta here!"

This morning, I'd like us to take the plunge into a metaphorical pool; one where the water is so typically frigid, that we're more inclined to wade and wait and waver and shrivel, and perhaps, wish we were braver or tougher or more spontaneous.

I can clearly see how my own experiences have presented the challenge to resist wading and commit myself to pursuing a full immersion life; to get off my towel on the sand and take a dip, even though it would be so easy to stay on the beach. This realization inspired me to frame my sermon title as a question to myself and to all of you: "Standing Knee Deep in Life?"

The country singer, Kathy Mattea has a song aptly titled, "Standing Knee Deep in a river, Dying of Thirst." The song laments friends taken for granted and lovers lost, a world full of strangers craving connection while we turn our eyes away, and a life being lived out half-lived, half-wet, superficially. Can you identify with that, especially after the experiences of the COVID pandemic?

My kids and I went to Florida and the Bahamas one summer. On the first day, we sashayed down to the beach with smug self-congratulation that we had been smart enough to vacation where the water is as warm as a toddler tub. Sure— it was great for snorkeling, and a nice reprieve from our local arctic chill, but other than that, it was just kind of boring; not to mention those dang sea lice! There was

no challenge, no sense of accomplishment, no drama in it! We just barreled right in to the surf, and *ho-hum*, there we were.

Usually, we seldom barreled (except for the Polar Bear swimmers at Ferry Beach camp in Maine and my quirky friend Joseph, who loved diving off the rocks in Gloucester with swaggering braggadocio). When most of us waded into the chilly waters, “God” or Nature usually troubles us with prickly goose-bumps as we harbor the pathetic but optimistic delusion that if we just hold our breaths we can *will* the water to be warmer and only then, we’ll be able to relax.

But that never actually works, does it? We can no more *will* the waters to be warmer or calmer than we can *will* our lives to be free of slick river rocks or sea lice. What gets us farther from shore is finding the resolve to push beyond those knee-deep moments of indecision and discomfort, fear and pain, inertia, denial and wishful thinking by plunging down, letting go over the falls into the unnerving, but oh-so-real *goose-bumpiness* of life.

Don’t get me wrong – this isn’t easy and it can be quite humbling. Back in July of 2001, I experienced some spiritual and physical goose-bumpiness, as my then-11-year-old daughter, Michaela, and I arrived at Surfside Beach on Nantucket Island with our trusty boogie boards in tow. We had planned on a day of riding the waves, splashing in the surf, picnicking on the beach, crafting something creative from the sand and seaweed and driftwood and shells.

Yet, one look at the roiling water was all it took to tell me that the sea was not going to be hospitable that day. I ventured forth anyway gamely (only up to my knees, mind you!) and within moments, a stinging wave had sucker-punched me. I tensed up -- the wave knocked me flat, pulled me under, tossed me around, and deposited me on the shore -- sand in my bathing suit, saltwater gurgling in my throat, and seaweed clinging unfashionably to my hair. I staggered towards my daughter, forcing a smile, but feeling shaken and feeling oh-so-humbled by my own limits and by the power of forces beyond my will or my control. We built a lot of sand sculptures that day...and it was fine.

The writer Annie Lamott asks us to imagine the hopelessness of trying to live a spiritual life when we’re secretly looking up at the sky, not for illumination or direction, but to gauge miserably, the odds of a downpour. (August in Flagstaff was a bit like that, isn’t it?) She quotes Scripture, “Everyone that thirsteth, come ye to the waters,” and adds that life should be something like a baptism -- “full immersion; like falling into something elemental and wet.” “Most of what we do in a worldly life,” Lamott tells us, “is geared towards staying dry, looking good, not going under. But in baptism, in lakes and rain and tanks and fonts, you agree to do something that’s a little sloppy because at the same time its holy, and absurd.

It's about surrender; giving into all those things we can't control; it's a willingness to let go of balance and decorum and get *drenched*, [even when you're still secretly worried about your bangs shrinking up like fern fronds.]”

Novelist Doris Grumbach also likens water to grace. She recalls that as a child she forgot her anger at herself or her parents or camp counselors or teachers, if she went to a swimming pool or to the lake. “Water was freedom,” she recalls, “an element in which I believed I had perfect control. Lake and pool waters were cold, but calm enough to provide that illusion. I moved through the water in a kind of ecstasy, cut away from the rules of the land, social requirements, limitations, disapproval. Water was action, more effective than prayer.” “When I swam” writes Grumbach, “I believed in God.”

Not knowing Grumbach's theology, I couldn't say whether she avows a belief in “God” in the classic sense. I automatically translated her statement into humanistic terms; for instance, that when she swam (a “full immersion” activity for her), she felt connected to something greater than herself, or that she perceived possibilities for herself, or that she felt embodied and authentic and plugged into the Universe as her hands sliced through the cold wetness; that she experienced the power of being drenched by grace.

The Universe *will* get our attention one way or another. Life can be, and often is, as startling, as challenging as a plunge into cold water. And that may be okay, after all. The distraught protagonist in the Langston Hughes poem Andy read earlier flings himself into the river, yet rather than succumbing to the current, he is brought back to himself by the bracing chill; “If that water hadn't a-been so cold,” he tells us, “I might've sunk and died. But it was. Cold in that water. It was cold!”

It was cold, but life is fine- there's a grounded optimist for you. And life isn't always fine – we know that, too. We've spent, and continue to spend, our share of time in relentlessly deep water. In some cases, more time than is fair or character-building on any scale (consider the date today – September 11th). I am so often touched by the courage demonstrated by so many human souls in the face of loss, chronic illness, turmoil, and change. (present company included)

No wonder we often find ourselves gravitating towards warmer waters (like this caring community.) Why not? Warm water can be a soothing relief that allows us to rest between challenges. We need that -- so bravo for warm water; and blessed be for people who will wade with you into the surf.

Yes. There are times when the waters are so hostile that knee-deep is the very best we can muster. No shame in that. We must start from where we are. Then, when (or if) we decide to start, it can take many attempts over many months or years, to progress beyond knee-deep into something deeper; to risk the journey from wade to splash to full immersion. Are you standing knee deep in life? Are we

standing knee deep in congregational life? How wet would you like to get? A little or a lot – it's up to you.

This question takes on an extra, timely dimension as we embark on this last year of Interim Ministry and Beacon takes up its Search for your next Minister. Over the summer, my collegial Facebook pages and other chat lines were filled with conversations about change, about post-pandemic challenges, and about ways our congregations can get beyond knee deep and back to a full immersion church life.

The two ideas intrigued me most are concepts we can utilize here at Beacon to grow while embracing change. The first is called **YES**, an acronym for *A Year of Experimental Space*. The intention is to build new things, come together in new ways, be willing to fail at experiments, allow vulnerability to be normative, and venture into unknown spaces. This colleague intends to blend the work of Brenè Brown (who focuses on vulnerability) with that of Adrienne Maree Brown (no relation), the creator of an approach called *Emergent Strategy*.

This quote about Emergent Strategy caught my attention – “What we pay attention to grows.” And that we “grow at the speed of trust.” The kind of trust it takes to get beyond Knee Deep. Emergent Strategy is non-linear and takes its inspiration from the organic mechanism of Nature in order to inspire others to think expansively about what the future might look like – from the microcosm of this congregation to the entire planet.

Here are three major take aways from Brown's theory:

1. **Collaboration is the Cornerstone.** She uses birds and the art of flocking as a natural example for this – they are cohesive enough to move together but remain separate enough not to crowd or collide.
2. **Embracing Change is a Non-Negotiable.** Consider the river, ever flowing and ever changing. We will step in or not, it will flow by regardless.
3. **We Must Let Go of the Status Quo.** From my experience, this is the hardest one for congregations. Brown likes science fiction because it offers glimpses of what might be and how we may need to fight for the future.

What can we learn from these ideas to emerge as a bright and resilient congregation now and in the future? What are the possibilities? How might you contribute to that mission? If we encourage one another and accept one another, as the deepening waters stretch our mouths into either smiles of joy or grimaces of terror, I believe that, together, we can wade further from shore into the goose-

bumpy authenticity of life. Consider whether swimming in the deep end might offer you something that is “ more effective than prayer.”

Plunge in...get wet! Bring a towel.

Blessed be. Blessed we. And Amen.

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