

**“ON THE CALMING OF WAVES . . .
AND OTHER ACTS OF FAITH IN A TURBULENT AGE”**

Delivered by Howell Lind, Interim Senior Minister
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READING

From the Gospel according to Mark, the fourth chapter, verses 35 through 41 comes the reading for this morning – the story of a reported miracle by Jesus. Verse 35 of Mark 4 picks up this tale after Jesus had spent the day relating parables to his listeners.

“As evening fell, Jesus said to his disciples, ‘Let us go across to the other side of the lake.’ And leaving the crowd, the disciples took Jesus with them in the boat. And other boats followed them across the lake. But soon a terrible storm arose. High waves began to break into the boat until it was nearly full of water and about to sink. Jesus was in the stern of the boat, fast asleep on a cushion while this storm was happening. His followers woke him and said to him, ‘Teacher, do you not care if we perish?’ And Jesus awoke and rebuked the wind and said to the sea, ‘Peace! Be still!’ And the wind ceased and there was a great calm over the waves. Jesus said to his disciples, ‘Why were you so afraid? Have you no faith?’ And his followers were filled with awe and said to one another, ‘Who, then, is this man that even the wind and the sea obey him?’”

MESSAGE

“ON THE CALMING OF WAVES . . . AND OTHER ACTS OF FAITH IN A TURBULENT AGE” is the title that I have given my message for this Sunday.

. . . And in all candor – at the onset – I must readily admit to you that today I am speaking to myself – for I, in particular, need to hear what I am going to say about "faith."

In order to properly set the stage for the story I am going to tell on myself, a little background is on order. Before I retired from the active Unitarian Universalist ministry I was the District & Congregational Services Consultant for the Unitarian Universalist District of Metropolitan New York. An important

part of my responsibilities as a UUA Field Staff person for those fourteen years that I served in that position was to provide the resources, services and information to the almost sixty Unitarian Universalist congregations in northern and central New Jersey, lower Connecticut, as well as southeastern New York state, including New York City and Long Island.

It was work that I truly loved and enjoyed . . . the type of work where I eagerly looked forward to each new day and the challenges of the job. Yet, a decade or so into the work there was a span of about two and half weeks that were – well, just terrible days for me. Certainly, one of the most trying and stressful periods that I had been through in my years in the ministry.

There was not one "cataclysmic event" – no single trauma, no solitary definitive experience. It was just that stressful things gnawed at me until I was down to my raw bare bones – both emotionally and physically.

During this period I had been putting in long hours each day at a regular pace: workshops and meetings of one kind or another at the various congregations throughout the Metropolitan New York District. The District organization was working and functioning well, but a number of the District projects were particular time-consuming and emotionally challenging! It also felt as if more congregations were conflicted and in trouble than was usual.

It was a particularly difficult period in my personal life as well.

My eldest daughter, Lisa, who was spending the fall semester of her junior year studying in Nairobi, Kenya had left a cryptic message on my answering machine stating that I shouldn't be alarmed if I heard on the news about an attempted hijacking at the Nairobi airport. She said that other folks needed to use the pay phone so she couldn't talk long but that she was okay.

Laura, my other daughter, then a freshman at Kenyon College had e-mailed me a message stating that when a bill from the college came, I was not to pay the \$3,420 that it asked for, because she had not made those purchases at the college bookstore, but that I was supposed to pay the portion of the bill for the emergency room x-rays.

These concerns and stresses were magnified by a two and a half-hour drive in steady sleet and rain in bumper-to-bumper traffic on the Long Island Expressway to a evening meeting at a congregation where I was to present a program on church growth. Upon arriving at the church I discovered that the

meeting had been canceled due to the weather without anyone thinking to call and tell me. I climbed back into my car, put a cassette into the car's tape deck, expecting to listen to music on the ride back home. However, instead of my favorite country western music coming from the speakers, yards of tape started spewing out of the cassette player in a tangled mess.

By the time I pulled into my condo complex it was very late at night and I had a throbbing headache – I was tired, frustrated, and out of sorts. All of the parking places anywhere in the vicinity of my condo were taken and I had to park farther away than usual and run through deep puddles to my condo door in the torrential downpour. When I opened the door I discovered that the heat hadn't kicked in and it was freezing in my apartment and the door to the deck had blown open in the storm and rain had soaked the carpet in that area. I had had it!

All of a sudden, the events and situations and experiences of the past several days came crashing in on me. I was nervous and anxious, on edge, angry, and feeling martyred. I had raced at full-tilt to do everything to hold up my little world during the preceding days. Yet, by now, frustration and anxiety had gotten to me. After fumbling around to get the furnace to work and mopping up the rain water that had saturated the carpet, I went into my office to check messages on the answering machine and found that the power must have gone off at some point during the rain storm and that my answering machine/fax was working over time spewing out a continuous role of fax paper all over the place. A distinctly digitalized voice kept saying that if I wished to make a call, to please hang up and dial the operator.

Judith Viorst's story, Alexander and the Terrible, Horrible, No Good, Very Bad Day, which Leigh shared this morning, came quickly to mind. I could easily identify with Alexander and his experiences!

I began to feel what I felt like inside. I felt as if I were living – not on the edge of chaos – but in chaos! I knew that something was terribly out of balance. I sat down in my desk chair and tried to gain some perspective and control on what was happening to my insides . . . trying to understand why I was all bound up in knots – which is not like me - trying to grasp why I was so out of sorts. I found myself wondering why I was so uncomfortable, so ill-at-ease with myself . . . so unhappy.

As I sat there and reflected over all the little stressful things that had built into my little "horror" story, I began to realize that my problem – at its core – was a spiritual one.

My problem was not emotional . . . or institutional . . . or even logical – all of the surface things that I often like to blame my bad feelings on.

Rather, it was a problem of faith . . . more accurately . . . a lack of faith! – I had lost my faith!

Now, I mean something very specific by this. Traditionally, we tend to think of faith as a set of intellectual propositions for which there is no proof – no objective evidence – that we, nonetheless, profess to believe in.

According to this way of thinking, one's faith becomes a "package of affirmations and ideas" that one intuitively knows to be real and true – above and beyond the laws of reason and rationality. I, myself, often have described my faith as – to use Tillich's terminology – “that which ultimately concerns me,” namely, my own set of religious beliefs, core values, views, and ideals to which I try to give my life.

When I say that I lost my faith, I do not mean "faith" in this way. – I didn't suddenly, under the stress of hours and events, lose my faith in the essential goodness of individuals, or in the oneness and sustaining spirit of the universe, or in the capacity of the human individual to create, care, and heal. My intellectual commitment to these religious ideas did not waver! No, rather, I lost my faith in a different kind of way.

A close friend and colleague opened my mind to viewing faith in a different way from the traditional. Instead of viewing faith as a set of rigid fixed beliefs, faith should be seen as an attitude toward life, toward being, toward being-in-the-world. My friend maintained that, as an attitude, faith is living with basic trust.

– “As an attitude, faith is living with basic trust.” . . . This statement, for me, is religiously profound.

In reviewing the experiences of my little horror story, it became evident to me that I had lost my faith . . . I ceased to live with basic trust . . . I failed to trust – I failed to trust others . . . and me . . . and my world . . . and Life. I could not accept the way things were going. I could not trust the flow of events and of energy. I fought against everything . . . right into misery for myself. By not trusting, I forced myself into attempting to be a petty little "Charles Atlas,"

straining to hold up my little universe – winding myself up so tightly that my body and heart and mind suffered under the pressure.

For some reason, I couldn't trust others and myself and Life. I had not faith that "things" would work out – that everything did not have to be perfect. And that, in the end, life, my daughters and the District I served and the projects and the programs and the churches and the people I work with would all go on – and be sufficient – and good enough. Because I couldn't trust life – as it is – I alienated myself from others and my world as I fought against everything.

Luckily for me, sitting down and attempting to get in touch with what was happening to my insides, I was able to get some perspective on what I was spiritually doing to be able to catch myself and to rekindle an appreciation and to value trusting enough to get myself out of the doldrums.

. . . But, back to my alienation.

Sitting down with myself, I began to think of what a vital spiritual insight it is when we recognize that, as an attitude, faith is living with basic trust. I value this perspective – not as some neat, fixed set of reliable beliefs – but rather, a view of faith as a stance of trust . . . a lifestyle of "letting be" because we know that life will support us.

It is helpful for me to think of faith as an attitude that constantly instructs our hearts and minds with the truth that we need more trust in the flow of people, processes, and concerns around us. If we are able to approach our lives with an attitude of basic trust, then we will find out that this life really will support us – that there really is already enough blessing, mystery, divinity, hope, grace, and light out there – even mixed in with the sadness and the darkness – for us to be fulfilled and whole. There is more than enough. There is abundance in Life.

As I sat in my desk chair reflecting on what was happening to my insides, I recalled the poem by the Maine poet, Philip Booth, that describes teaching his daughter to learn how to swim and that – although it doesn't contain a traditional theological word in it – is a statement about this kind of religious faith. Listen:

"Lie back, my child, let your head be tipped back in the cup of my hand. Gently, and I will hold you. Spread your arms wide, lie out on the stream and look high at the gulls. A

dead-man's float is faced down. You will dive and swim soon enough where this tidewater ebbs to the sea. My child, believe me, when you tire on the long thrash to your island, lie up, and survive. As you float now, where I held you and let go, remember when fear cramps your heart what I told you: Lie gently and wide to the light-year stars, lie back and the sea will hold you."

. . . "The sea will hold you!" Amen! For heaven's sake – and for your own sake, Howell – stop thrashing!

It is true: the sea will hold you! Life will buoy you up.

All that is required is that you trust the sea enough to lie back within its cool support, spreading your arms . . . allowing the sea to hold you as it penetrates – transforms – and blesses you. Put down the world . . . put it down! Let it be. Allow it to support you! – Because it will!

. . . And this – believe it or not – is where Jesus and those waves come in. In this so-called miracle story from the Gospel of Mark – regardless of the meteorological facts of the Dead Sea region on that historic-remembered day – and viewing it as a spiritual allegory, I can find meaning for my life.

Jesus was saying to his disciples the same thing about the nature of faith that I was reminded of when I sat down to try and understand what was happening to me. In the midst of turbulence – and when is human life without its storms? – one must live with basic trust . . . being calm first before a world that will become calm through you.

Listen to Jesus' reputed words again – he could have as well been talking to me about my particular storms: "Peace . . . Quiet now – Be calm. Why are you so frightened? How is it that you have no faith?"

The story tells us that the disciples trusted him, and they found faith. The winds did drop; the sea became calm like their hearts. Jesus knew that we must trust the basic elements of our lives, and be at peace with them if our world is to be calm, thereby allowing us to find wholeness and peace.

The Taoist tradition knows the same spiritual truth, affirming this view of faith through the religious principle of "WEI WU WEI." To live the enlightened life,

one must live the "wei wu wei," which is to "do without doing". . . to allow . . . to get along quietly as nature does.

It is to have life and peace by being still – being passive – being receptive and quiet before the world.

In the Taoist tradition, if one is to know "the way of the Tao" – which is the way of life and wholeness and the spiritual goal of all believers – one must trust life enough to be still before it, so that it can possess you, work through you, bless you. Many Taoist writings talk about life being a sea into which one must passively lie in order to know it – just like Philip Booth's poem.

Another Taoist image suggests that the individual must be like a supple, young tree which is willing to bend and give before the fresh winds of the universe – unlike the rigid old tree which will snap and fall to death before it. It is religiously virtuous in Taoism to be soft, tender, flexible, receptive Listen to this Taoist poem:

"Humankind, when living, is soft and tender;
When dead, they are hard and tough.
The ten thousand creatures and all plants and trees
While they live, are supple and soft.
But when they die: hard and stiff.
So it is said: what is hard and stiff belongs to death;
The soft and tender belong to life.
Therefore, the tree made of the hardest wood will break.
Truly: the hard and mighty are easily overthrown;
The soft and weak endure and rise up."

It is striking to me that Jesus and Taoism see the same spiritual truth – namely, that if one can find a soft, supple, trusting attitude with which to address life, one can find peace, while permitting "highest life" to be with and through one.

What is being said is that we should not "thrash" against the flow of life, but to enter into it . . . give in to it . . . let it be as it sustains us. . . . after so many years, I now know that this is correct.

. . . I confess that I am not really just speaking to myself this morning. If the truth be known, I have not been the only "spiritual thrasher" here this morning. I suspect that most of you – from time to time – are in the same faithless boat that the disciples and I were in.

Almost everyone, as they go through the myriad vicissitudes of their particular lives, periodically lose their basic trust in life. And, as a consequence, struggle in alienation against the "Sea of What Is."

I am not that unusual – I am not an aberation – each one of you is also involved in this faithlessness.

I am convinced that somehow – and this is important – that somehow, without losing ethical rigor and a commitment to the disciplined work necessary to create an order around us which is healthy and sane and decent for every living thing, we must gain, individually, an attitude of calm trust towards our world.

. . . There is, of course, always the danger of extremes. Someone who does nothing other than spiritually lying back in the sea of life is religiously lazy. Religious health requires one's active engagement. To be "religiously responsible" means that one must be actively participating in creating a world of decency, comfort, and health.

– Does my life – and my work – reflect my values? Is my life an example of my vision of what the world could be?

So often our spirits are full of the thrashing, the compulsive, and the neurotic strugglings against what wants "To Be." If we – as Unitarian Universalists – need discipline, it is clearly in the direction of learning how to trust life for what it is; believing that, no matter what, there is goodness there, thereby allowing ourselves to be reunified with our insides . . . and the stars.

It was a Buddhist, I think, who said: "You can not push the river."

I am of the mind that we will be happier and healthier if we try – more and more in our lives – to render ourselves naked before the kind evening stars . . . piling all the clothes of worry and responsibility and self-absorption we heap upon ourselves by the shore . . . and slipping ourselves into the cool waters of the present . . . floating, face to the stars . . . trusting that the waters and the heavens around us are sufficient to nurture and bless us.

So, all of you thrashers and fighters, who think that YOU will drown and the world will sink if you lie back and trust the sea of life . . . relax.

– Yes, there is a lot to be done in this imperfect world.

– Yes, there is injustice and inequity, maleovence and inhumanity out there.

– Yes, we must work constantly at making this the kind of world we see in our loftiest dreams.

– But relax . . . lie back . . . breathe in . . . life is sufficient . . . this creation will bear you . . . we will survive . . . life will be good enough.

For the moment, we need not do or say or create anything.

. . . I would hope that the next time you feel yourself thrashing away from "self," earth, neighbor, and life, you will find enough trust to heed the poet and:

"Lie gently and wide to the light-year stars,
Lie back, for indeed, the sea will hold you."

Indeed!

So May It Be.

Amen.

Howell K. Lind

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