



UNIVERSALIST UNITARIAN CHURCH OF HAVERHILL

“Living Waters,”
a sermon given by Julie Lombard
on April 26, 2015

Not long ago I went on a pilgrimage to Gloucester with the Ladies Circle. We were a large group and the weather gave us one of those glorious first tastes of spring with the sun warmly guiding our path from one UU church to another. Afterwards my family gathered at another UU church to attend an evening folk concert featuring Peter Mayer. He is a rather famous musician in UU circles. He wrote “Blue Boat Home”. The concert was an awesome ending to a fantastic day. The music was as spiritually nourishing as it was to hear two young women reading the Bible from John Murray’s pulpit.

There were both humorous and tender moments during the concert as Peter told stories between songs. They could easily make the crowd break out into laughter or tear up. He dedicated his song “Holy Now” to a couple from within the hosting church, Ken and Becky. Ken was up to his eyeballs in the behind the scene arrangements and Becky’s sound system made it possible for Peter’s music fill the sanctuary. Becky’s recent sudden death made the dedication of “Holy Now” all the more sweet. I was brought to tears. I know I was not alone. Our tears were the living water of unexpected loss.

One of my favorite songs from night was the one Joanna read earlier, “God Is a River”. As the lyrics flowed, I exchanged a small smirk with my husband. Being whitewater kayakers, this song had special meaning for us. We’ve traded various reasons to why rivers offer such valuable life lessons. In those waters we found metaphors for our spiritual growth as we paddle the ever changing currents of life. For us, kayaking is a religious experience. Maybe you’ve has a religious experience somewhere in nature?

Once we paddled the snow melt flows in spring, the damn released rivers in summer, and the occasional fall hurricane flood. These adventures have taken us all over this country and even up into Canada where we paddled the appropriately named “Kicking Horse River”. I can attest from personal experience that no matter how hot it is outside, you don’t want to dump out of your boat and swim in a glacial run-off without the proper gear. Kayaking was easier for us to do together before we began a family. There isn’t family-friendly equivalent equipment to whitewater paddling like the baby backpack for hikers. Since the advent of our children, we’ve paddled less.

These days our paddling is condensed into one big annual event, The Hudson River Whitewater Derby. For over fifty years this river race has shared the same weekend as another famous derby in Kentucky. It’s also the same weekend you celebrate your annual Rose Tea. This year will mark

my twentieth year that I have been racing in the whitewater derby. It's a beloved tradition and one my children enjoy as much as my husband and me. Do you have a special place you like to take a pilgrimage to- maybe to the beach, the mountains, or a family tradition and a spot by Alton Bay?

In North Creek, NY paddlers and spectators of all ability levels come, some to cheer on those willing to brave the rapids and the gates while others host riverside tail-gate parties. Each year you can expect someone will fall out of their boat and need rescuing. I fell out of my boat the first years I raced, but I was able to do what is called a self-rescue. I quickly exited the icy water and climbed back into my boat. I keep paddling the race, not very fast, mind you, because now my boat was full of sloshing water as my legs dangled out. I am not saying it was my prettiest race, but as I paddled people seemed to cheer me on a bit louder as I continued along. People pay good money to race whether they finish or not. These participants keep the race going in one of those small, out of the way Adirondack communities that could easily be overlooked. There we gather with friends met through my husband's involvement in his college's Outing Club. We keep going back because of one club member is generously willing to share his family's rustic camp. Some folks pop tents while others slept in the converted barn.

The many meals throughout the weekend are all family-style, people take turns cooking and cleaning while we all eat more than we should. Sometimes there's folk music played by amateurs or a slide show after dinner. Throughout the weekend there are various adventures; a daring group paddles the seventeen miles through the Hudson River Gorge as a mellow group explores gentler waters or goes for a hike to a pristine mountain lake. It is a time to be close with nature and with others who value it.

The Hudson River Derby is a holy gathering for those who find God in nature and return each year. To me it is like the weekly pilgrimage to church or the rare, special trip to Gloucester with the Ladies Circle. It offers a little of everything; snow lurks in dark, shady spots and clumps of daffodils bloom beside the barn. You can warm yourself, if the sun ever comes out or stand beside a bonfire where the children receive communion by breaking open a bag of marshmallows to roast. For the bigger kids sometimes there is wine passed in a cup, but mostly beer.

Every year the weekend seems like more work than it is possibly worth; the packing and planning, the long drive through the Green Mountains of Vermont and by a sleepy Lake George Village. The earth is slowly thawing as farm fields unfold their velvet green blankets over open landscapes. My family is transformed by our going.

Living waters calls us to return each year and we come. We come for the warmth of community, the fire of commitment, and the chance for another spiritual adventure together. I don't cling to winning a race instead I celebrate arriving and the thriving of this community. I am transformed by the holy mystery that comes with each homecoming. I welcome the annual baptism of kinship that restores me. It is holy, holy, holy. It awakens my senses in ways that I rarely find elsewhere in life.

I've found that when I cling tightly to a desired result, like winning the race or get fix on having a sunny weekend, I hold myself back from being open to the possibilities and truly transformed. My

own ability to go with the flow becomes my savior during this pilgrimage. When I go with the flow I find God all around me in a natural cathedral made from water carved mountains. The trees invite me to worship with them in the valleys. It is a place of heavenly beauty and it refreshes my spirit. Have you felt a pull to go on a pilgrimage? Maybe even to a place you've never been before?

As many of you welcome home the travelers that went to Nicaragua while others are busy getting ready for another Rose Tea, I'll don my helmet and spray skirt as I otter into the river that continually offers me something new. Like those who will return from their Central America pilgrimage, I'll come home tired with soar muscles, but it's a good feeling that reminds me I'm alive.

Again and again, we return to be with God in each and every form: God as a river, and as a stone, as a wild, raging rapid and as a slow, meandering flow, as a deep and narrow passage and as a peaceful, sandy shoal, and especially God as the swimmer, the one who has learned the value of letting go. If you find yourself on some sort of pilgrimage after this long, cold winter, may it guide you to discover a spiritual well-spring deep within.

Blessed be, Amen.