

What kind of trust do you need to follow someone into a river to pray? And let's stipulate that we're not talking about a river in Syracuse in February. That would involve a deep belief in miracles.

I really like today's anthem. This version is slightly different from the ones I've heard before. I can't remember if I ever heard this song prior to three years ago. I know that it was in the movie, "Oh, Brother, Where art Thou" but I've only seen a handful of movies in the past twenty years that didn't involve Hobbits or wizards, so I didn't hear it there. I found it when I started using Pandora. Everyone here may not be familiar with Pandora, so my brief explanation of it is that it is a smart phone app with music, but the interesting thing about it is that you first search for a type of music, let's say polka music. The app will offer you one or more polka "radio" stations – that's what they call them. You choose one and start listening to it and then comes the part that makes it different from traditional radio. You can press a thumbs-up or thumbs-down icon based on whether you like the song. Thumbs up – you'll hear the song regularly and others like it. So, you get a customized play list. Thumbs down – you won't hear the song again – or at least not for a long time. The first station I listened to that first year was Country Hymns radio. It took a little while to get used to that station. There is a lot of theology in some of the songs I do not agree with. But they also sounded a lot like home and when you're living 1400 miles away from home for the first time in your life, sometimes you just need to hear stuff that sounds like home.

I made good use of the thumbs-up and thumbs-down function, getting rid of the most egregious examples of penal substitutionary atonement – which *is* as scary as it sounds – the belief that a gruesome death by crucifixion was necessary payment for a penalty we all deserve because of original sin. And I got rid of songs I just don't like – "Jesus Take the Wheel" being the first one that comes to mind, which isn't really a hymn anyway. And that yea or nay function of the app was crucial to my interest in this song – Down to the River.

I could never remember which songs I had hit thumbs-up on in the beginning, so I always looked at the screen when I heard something I liked. And every time this song played, I

would look at the screen and think there was something a little off. I finally realized what it was. If you look for this song on the internet you will find that almost every version is titled Down to the River. But in almost every version the *lyrics* say As I went down *in* the river to pray. That is a much wetter experience.

I did a little research on the song. It's from the 1800's. The author is unknown, and the lyrics have changed over time. Some people think it was originally about baptism. In which case, in the tradition of some Christian churches, going down *in* the river would make a lot more sense. In addition to making more sense in that context, that is also when this becomes a song about trust.

I don't know how many people here this morning have experienced baptism by full immersion, statistically it's likely a minority, but I grew up Southern Baptist in a town *full* of Southern Baptist churches, so I've known hundreds of people who have experienced it, and I've seen lots of those kinds of baptisms. Regardless of whether one believes anything supernatural happens *during* baptism, it is a unique experience which can be very affirming. When it's done inside a church with a built-in baptistry, people commonly change out of their normal clothing into white robes or other loose-fitting garments. They walk into relatively deep water and allow someone, most often a minister, to lower them backwards into and under the water, hoping the baptizer will hold on to them securely and bring them safely back to the surface. Theology aside, there is a very real sense of surrender involved. The interaction can be an intimate and intense physical manifestation of trust.

The only *river* baptism I've ever seen was in the Jordan River in Israel, which is about as calm and slow as a river can be and still be called a river. I expect some of you thought of some rivers this morning during time for all ages that would be challenging to be dipped into.

While water plays a role in rituals in many religions, river currents, ocean currents, any large movement of water, can be intimidating. Yet rivers have been used as a metaphor for life for millennia, maybe since we first started telling stories. Many creation stories begin with a vast expanse of water. Rivers represent life because they move incessantly from their origin to a destination where they cease to exist, at least as a river. They are also like life because they constantly change, never the same from one moment to the next.

Rivers and life can both be daunting. Surrendering to a flowing current, like trusting other people to keep you safe, can be frightening. Especially if one has ever suffered at the hands of people they trusted, if one has felt battered and bruised by social currents which seem beyond their control or even beyond their influence, if one has never or rarely known the saving power of unconditional acceptance. There *are* dangerous things out there – rapids, slippery spots, unexpected holes one can step in.

But there is also vibrant bountiful life out there in the middle of the river of life.

It is the site of a process of creativity, and this constant flow and interaction and change of a river is an image also found in one of my two main theological lenses, process theology. I am particularly interested in the writings of Henry Nelson Wieman. He seems well suited to Unitarian Universalism for me because, while his concepts can be superimposed on the theological framework and functions of faith traditions which believe in supernaturalism, such as the ones we came from, he clearly communicates that he has no evidence of the supernatural and does find it necessary to believe in it to be religious.

Here is *my* basic explanation of his core ideas. Good or God or growth or spiritual ecstasy or whatever term works for you to represent that which is greater than yourself which you can surrender yourself to, exists *in* creativity, *in* creative interaction. Malice or evil or sin or whatever term works for you to express a lack of good or God is the absence of creativity, turning away or holding yourself apart from creative interaction. A lack of interaction may be intentional or based on fear. The interaction doesn't need to be pleasant to be creative, but it does need to be based on right intention, on entering the exchange wanting growth for all parties involved.

Within this framework, the fragmentation, isolation, and siloing which we often find in our society today might be seen as evil. Social and spiritual growth requires relationship. Relationship needs proximity. With today's technology, proximity does not always have to be physical, but it still needs to be consistent and frequent. It is difficult to build a relationship with someone on the opposite riverbank who you only occasionally yell at or never communicate with at all.

I recently listened to an On Being podcast from October of 2018 where Krista Tippett's guests were Sally Kohn, a very liberal columnist, commentator, and community organizer, and Erick Erickson, a very conservative blogger and radio host, who also happens to be in seminary right now. They are both deeply committed to engaging with people who disagree with them. Sally Kohn, who has been targeted by some of the worst trolls – not creatures under a bridge but people who post particularly vicious and inflammatory statements on social media – talked about contacting her trolls and talking with them. She said that the first thing almost every single one of them did at the beginning of their conversation was apologize for what they wrote about her. After accepting their apology, she always asked them why they said what they did. They talked about the circumstances of their lives and the lives of their families and communities and the desperation they sometimes feel AND they said they didn't think anybody was listening to them. They didn't think it mattered what they said if no one was listening.

Erick Erickson talked about how many times some of his very conservative evangelical Christian friends have discouraged him from meeting and interacting with liberals like Sally Kohn because he always ends up liking them and these friends think that dilutes his message. They both talked about how some of their ideas have changed and how they have grown as a result of interactions with people who are not like them. Their conversation was about trust in the basic goodness of people. It was also about the process of being *with* others, interacting with the hope and expectation of growth and benefit for all parties.

As important as these kinds of interactions can be, there *are* times when we might need to rest on the river bank or wade in the shallows. Henry Nelson Wieman thought spiritual growth does require some alone time to reflect and ponder, but he was clear that salvation, by which I mean deliverance from harm, ruin, and loss, lies in active creative interaction with others in the swift and sometimes turbulent current in the middle of the river of life, the site of constant change. That is where God is because the interaction is what creates God.

And we don't need to swim alone. In the song that started this whole thought process, the narrator starts by saying *I* went down in the river but almost instantly invites people to join them. Sisters, brothers, mothers, fathers, preachers, teachers, pretty much everybody they are already in relationship with. They clearly understand the value of being part of a community

within the river. When we engage in healthy covenantal relationships, not in splendid self-righteous isolation like that found in some segregated neighborhoods and congregations or the digital echo chambers created by profit-driven algorithms of some social media, but in the midst of the mishmash that is the wholeness of our geographic community, we infuse the river with love.

We don't *have* to go down *in* the river. We can stand still - but we should not be under the illusion that nothing is changing. Everything always changes. Whatever is not growing is inevitably decaying or degrading, even solid rocks in a placid stream.

Or we can act. We can move. We can trust in the river. We can enter the lives of others with the understanding that we can learn and grow from knowing them, even when we don't like them, but only to the extent that we also allow them to enter *our* lives. Proximity matters. Authentic spiritual interaction means snuggling up close enough to smell the other person's theological odor. Some interactions will be unpleasant. Some will be unsettling. Some will be sad. Others will be exhilarating, some breathtaking, and some transformative. We don't get to pick and choose because they all happen in the same river.

We can trust that the river also contains community, people willing to spiritually hold us and emotionally support us and theologically nourish to prepare us for whatever we encounter.

It is community that creates buoyancy in the river.

And the buoyancy just adds to the motion. And the more we move, the more we jostle one another, the more we stumble and catch each other, the more we talk and pray and sing and dance together, the more we surrender to the current and swim in the creativity that is God, the more we experience salvation in the process of being and growing in community, the more buoyant we become.

I believe our hope is in the river because that is where the mission of our spiritual community lies, offering meaning and salvation to a hurting world.

Look at the people around you. No really, look at them. Trust that you will be fine in the river in their company.

Welcome to the water. Whether you wade in, or dive in, or even fall in, know that you make the river more creative, more wonderful, and more holy by your presence.

May it be so and Amen.