

# Ingathering Service

September 13, 2015

## Opening Words

"Invocation"

by Angela Herrera (*Reaching for the Sun*, Skinner House Books, 2012)

Don't leave your broken heart at the door;  
bring it to the altar of life.

Don't leave your anger behind;  
it has high standards  
and the world needs vision.

Bring them with you,  
and your joy  
and your passion.

Bring your loving,  
and your courage  
and your conviction.

Bring your need for healing,  
and your power to heal.

There is work to do  
and you have all that you need to do it  
right here in this room.

## Story for All Ages

Once there were a big wave and a little wave in the middle of the ocean. The big wave was crying, and the little wave asked why.

"If you could see what I can see," the big wave said, "you'd know that ahead of us are rocks. We're going to crash on the rocks and be in big trouble!"

The little wave offered to teach the big wave something that would remove his fear, and first the big wave asked if it would cost anything, or if he would be required to chant a bunch of mantras and stand on his head, but the little wave said no, and that in fact it was only a short message.

So the big wave said, "Sure, teach me."

And the little wave said: "You're not a wave, you're water."

## Reading #1

### **In the Storm**

by Mary Oliver

Some black ducks  
were shrugged up  
on the shore.  
It was snowing

hard, from the east,  
and the sea  
was in disorder.  
Then some sanderlings,

five inches long  
with beaks like wire,  
flew in,  
snowflakes on their backs,

and settled  
in a row  
behind the ducks --  
whose backs were also

covered with snow --  
so close  
they were all but touching,  
they were all but under

the roof of the duck's tails,  
so the wind, pretty much,  
blew over them.  
They stayed that way, motionless,

for maybe an hour,  
then the sanderlings,  
each a handful of feathers,  
shifted, and were blown away

out over the water  
which was still raging.  
But, somehow,  
they came back

and again the ducks,  
like a feathered hedge,  
let them  
crouch there, and live.

If someone you didn't know  
told you this,  
as I am telling you this,  
would you believe it?

Belief isn't always easy.  
But this much I have learned --  
if not enough else --  
to live with my eyes open.

I know what everyone wants  
is a miracle.  
This wasn't a miracle.  
Unless, of course, kindness --

as now and again  
some rare person has suggested --  
is a miracle.  
As surely it is.

## **Reading #2**

### **The Real Work**

by Wendell Berry

It may be that when we no longer know what to do  
we have come to our real work,

and that when we no longer know which way to go  
we have come to our real journey.

The mind that is not baffled is not employed.

The impeded stream is the one that sings.

## Sermon

### The Song of the Impeded Stream

Rev. Anne Bancroft

What a gift to be together again -- to be in the company of each other in this beautiful space that holds the memories and energies of all who have crossed its threshold and worshipped in its embrace. As we have gathered the waters of our summer journeys, we also celebrate and honor the journeys of those who have been with us over time -- not least Lilli and Tom, but others who have shared the hours of their lives in the presence of these pews and windows and walls, those people and creatures whose love we have brought with us when we gather, who may still inhabit our hearts if not the earth we walk on.

We come together to make sense of our time, to make meaning of it, to honor it and question it, and in our most hopeful hours, to celebrate it. Life is all such a gift, and also such an enigma. In the opening of his book, *Anam Cara*, former priest and poet John O'Donohue writes, "It is strange to be here. The mystery never leaves you."

Emerson writes, "I would study. I would know. I would admire forever." So we are holding here both mystery and admiration.

Our image for the morning is water. You are not the wave, the little wave reminded the big wave. **You are water**, fluid and powerful, yet full of grace and gentle capacity to "nourish everything and yet override the most hard,"<sup>1</sup> the jagged edges, the impeded streams.

The way a "tree is not made of wood; it is wood. A mountain is not made of rock; it is rock,"<sup>2</sup> we celebrate the metaphor that we are not the wave, **we are water**.

Now, you may be thinking, "she's had a bit too much summer time to ponder life! A bit too much time in the sun," you think! "Get that girl back to her desk! What is she talking about?!"

Way back in June, I bumped into a reading by author, educator, and social change agent Parker Palmer about something he called a corrective to violence. The anniversary of 9/11 just behind us now; the incidence of unrest continues to abound in our world -- images most recently of refugees from Syria foremost in our minds, continuing domestic struggles around racism and immigration, not to mention the daily incidence of conflict, "microaggressions" they are sometimes called, that wear on our hearts and weary us. You can imagine the idea of a corrective to violence has been very alluring. What is faith community if not an effort to be at peace in the world? to make it for others, but to find it first for ourselves.

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<sup>1</sup> Watts, Alan. *TAO: The Watercourse Way*. Pantheon Books, 1975, p. 47

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid*, p. 50

And I was reminded in this reading of an old favorite -- what is called the Watercourse Way of Taoism -- that focuses on the humble and fluid patterns of water. "[This way] invites us to flow quietly but persistently around the obstacles that stand between us and the common good, wearing them down as a river erodes boulders," Palmer offered.<sup>3</sup> It's not to ignore, or to pretend that obstacles to peace do not exist. It is to observe our way of response.

There is, in this ancient Chinese philosophy, written significantly in the Tao Te Ching, a basic humility. "We do not hear nature boasting about being nature, nor water holding a conference on the technique of flowing."<sup>4</sup> I have spent much of the summer revisiting the texts, and offer their wisdom -- or a small portion of it -- as an encouragement to a more gentle way of being in the world, one we might practice together and offer to those around us.

It's not a familiar way to us in the West, is it? This idea of "non-action," of "swimming with the current."<sup>5</sup> It's a bit foreign to us. We are typically more comfortable STRIVING. We are workers. We are often "working" to understand life, if you will, practicing and applying ourselves. We like strength and muscles and capacity to be observable!

But our *striving* invariably complicates the path, doesn't it? I love ecologist Wendell Berry's writing, his focus on nature and the intersection of the natural world and our human impact on it. But it's interesting to note how his reference in this morning's reading to the mind that is not baffled not being employed feels so very Western in construct. "The impeded stream is the one that sings," he reminds us -- "the mind that is not baffled is not employed." And yet, Taoism would suggest that the mind can be PART of the stream's impediment. Our "work," in essence, should not be our work, but only our acceptance. The stream -- life itself -- is always impeded, by definition. It sings with all the joys and sorrows and everything in between that cross our paths. Buddhists think of these stones in the river's path as the reality of suffering, perhaps. In Taoist thinking, it is only suffering if one perceives it that way as a result of imagining that life might somehow be without them. "So long as we desire the experience called pleasure," Watts says, "we imply, and so generate, its opposite."<sup>6</sup>

"He has lived such a good life," the man told me of his father. "He doesn't deserve this kind of ending, this depleting illness." Deserve, I wondered? Who deserves? Does one earn illness? or loss? or discomfort, or tragedy? Any more than one deserves love or joy? It is only what is, like the stone in the stream's path. We can rail against injustice. And, like our opening words, bring our broken hearts and our anger and our passion, our need for healing and our power to heal to the room we all share. These

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<sup>3</sup> <http://www.onbeing.org/blog/to-live-our-lives-like-water/7758>

<sup>4</sup> Watts, p. ?

<sup>5</sup> Watts, p. 76.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid, p. 96.

are real, and worthy. AND, at some point, there may be a moment of understanding that we are of a kind of non-order, not linear, not measurable, but like uncontained water.

Acceptance is such a foreign concept to our Western existence. We are encouraged to understand an ability and capacity to improve, to learn, to do better, as Emerson told us. "I would study. I would know." It is in our DNA to want more. We are encouraged to think of this moving forward, managing change, understanding life, as bold and creative. This construct of good, better, best embraces competition and achievement. It feels energized and alive . . . it is the big wave headed towards the shore! I'm the biggest. I'm the fastest!

But there can feel a desperation in our striving, a hubris that is constantly reaching after some elusive goal that if we only worked harder would be ours to enjoy. If we only exercised more we would feel younger; if we only spent more time at our jobs we would be wealthier; if we only understood pain and loss, we could mitigate it . . . this is the storm we heard in our meditation music this morning, Chopin's own struggling. (Nocturne, No. 62, op. 2)

But then, there are the ducks, sheltering the sanderlings -- "like a feathered hedge, let them crouch there, and live," under their wings, with the kindness of their nature, the miracle of the simple gesture.

How do we come to this place of flow? of kindness in storm and miracle? of not yearning? of not striving? Alan Watts suggests, "Our only way of apprehending it is by watching the processes and patterns of nature, and by the meditative discipline of allowing our minds to become quiet, so as to have vivid awareness of 'what is' without verbal comment."<sup>7</sup> Without verbal comment. I fear I would soon be out of business!

THIS is our time of practice, of being quiet to the world outside, of taking the time to let our joys and sorrows flow together and mingle and wash through us. The way of water offers us an image of effortlessness, "invariably graceful in the wave, the frying spray, or the merest trickle,"<sup>8</sup> what Alan Watts calls *the eloquent metaphor*.

As we move together this year, I hope our common journeys can feel as powerful as the giant wave, as grace-filled as the flowing river, as gentle as the gurgling brook. May our song -- undoubtedly as impeded as a stream filled with stones -- be one of peace, and harmony, accepting the challenges we each, and all, face with the knowledge that this is life -- the beauty and the tragedy of it -- this is our gift. This is our way and we are blessed to share it all.

So may it ever be.

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<sup>7</sup> Watts, p. 55.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid, p. 48.