

A Confluence of Grace

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As tranquil streams that meet and merge,
and flow as one to meet the sea
Our kindred hearts and minds unite
To build a church that shall be free.

These words, from the hymn we will sing in a few minutes, describe a confluence. The word confluence means a flowing together.

The confluence of two streams of water is a special place. Often a great city is built there. Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, where my wife Jacqueline grew up, has a particularly grand confluence of the Monongahela and Allegheny Rivers, New York has the Hudson and East rivers, Boston has the Charles and the Mystic. There is a saying in Charleston that that city is located at the sacred spot where the Ashley and the Cooper Rivers meet to form the Atlantic Ocean.

Let's imagine ourselves for a moment standing on the point where two great rivers meet. As we look back up the river on our left, we can see it flowing out of the mountains, where it has been composed of countless streams and creeks. Perhaps it is muddy, perhaps it bubbles around the rocks. On the right side, another river stretches back. It may have a different look and feel and sound. Then when we look ahead of us, we see the combined flows of two rivers which are merged as one. The waters move away from us down towards the sea, however distant that might be.

Well why am I talking about this today? There are no rivers present in this church. That is true; there are no rivers present. But there has just been a confluence. There has been a flowing together of waters from many rivers, lakes, ponds and seas, not to mention a few taps, bathtubs and swimming pools. And this confluence is a powerful metaphor.

Some of the youngsters among us may be thinking, what did he say? What is this word metaphor? A metaphor is a figure of speech in which something stands for something else; usually it is something we can see and touch and feel which we talk about to stand for something we can't see or touch or feel. You see, it's a problem with language that some of the biggest ideas, the ones that are most worth talking about, are hard to talk about because they don't fit very well in words. Things like the love that we have for each other, things like spirit, things like God. So we use something we can see, like water, to stand for something we can't like spirit. We say water is a metaphor for spirit. Metaphors are all around us and we use them a lot. You may remember Obi-Wan Kenobe's prayer from Star Wars: metaphors be with you.

Now the English majors among you will know that the confluence expressed in our hymn, as tranquil streams that meet and merge, is not technically a metaphor but a simile, because it starts with the word "as," but we won't get too technical here on opening Sunday. If I called it a simile, I couldn't have made that atrocious pun.

The metaphor, then, is something visible that stands for something invisible. More orthodox Christian faiths use special kinds of metaphors which they call sacraments, holy metaphors, if you will. In my Episcopal catechism, I was taught that the definition of a sacrament was an outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace.

The Roman Catholic church recognizes seven sacraments, but the principal two, which

are common to all orthodox Christian traditions, are baptism and holy communion. Holy Communion is a sacrament in which the bread and wine are consumed in memory of Jesus' last supper, and the bread represents Jesus' body and the wine represents his blood.

From the earliest Christian Church, baptism and the taking of communion marked the difference between who was Christian and who was not, and for most of Christianity that meant who was going to heaven and who was not. Our Puritan ancestors defined the members of the church as those who passed the religious test to be allowed to take communion. The Unitarians of the Nineteenth Century rebelled against this restriction: the most famous example was Ralph Waldo Emerson, who quit the Unitarian ministry in 1828 because he didn't want to administer communion. Most UU churches today offer a Christian bread and wine communion rarely if at all. This church is very new in relation to our movement, so it doesn't have an old communion set lurking in the attic. But I bet a lot of you came from churches which had old communion sets.

So today we celebrate a water communion, and while we wouldn't call it a sacrament, it is a metaphor. It's a metaphor because what we are when we come together is more than the sum of what we are when we are apart. We come together to form the church as droplets of water come together to form a stream. And in the coming together there appears something extra.

None of us individually could have built this building or bought it. Together, the pioneers of this church, many of whom are among us here today, made it possible. No individual drop of water is going to fill the riverbed, but together the drops of water make a force so powerful it can sweep up everything in its path.

The appearance of a new property or set of properties when elements combine in a system is what the scientists call emergence. Think about an automobile engine taken apart and laid out on the floor of a garage. It is just a collection of odd-shaped pieces of metal and rubber. But when you put it together in the right way, it can make the car go. The hum of the engine and the power to make the car go is an emergent property of putting the parts together.

Remember the definition of a sacrament I gave a moment ago – an outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace. I think grace is the theological equivalent of the scientific concept of emergence. Grace in classical theology is the quality bestowed by God which saves us in spite of the fact that we don't deserve it. It's a sort of reprieve, like getting an A on the test even when you didn't study.

When tranquil streams meet and merge, a new body of water is created. There are some confluences at which you can still detect the separate streams a mile or two down from the juncture, but by and large once streams joined their waters intermingle. Once we come together as a church, our lives and our separate personalities intermingle.

The minister is in a special position here, because I get to talk more on Sunday morning, and to listen more during the rest of the week. I've only been here three weeks but already I can feel that you are changing me and that I am changing you. Our streams are meeting and merging, and we will not be able to separate whose ideas and words are whose.

Now, many of you have brought up to me the interpersonal conflicts that have happened here in your recent history. Those who were here during times of turmoil have vivid memories of which side you were on, who was on your side and who was on the other. That history is part of who you are, but it need not determine who you are going to be from now on. If we let the river flow, it has a way of ironing out those kinks. This is a new day.

At a deeper level, I think grace is the quality of realizing and appreciating the holy in the world and in each other. It happens to us individually, but it happens more profoundly in community.

Our Unitarian Universalist churches are covenanted communities. The glue that holds us together is not a creed or a common set of beliefs or a hierarchy. The glue is an agreement to walk together. Holiness, I maintain, is in the everyday transactions among us that make us a church, from the cooperation at the thrift shop to the planning of grounds improvement to the conduct of the worship service, even to the disagreements that arise in the course of making policy or implementing it.

Water in its liquid form has no color or shape of its own. It takes the color and the shape of the vessel it is poured into. Holiness or grace does not have one shape or color, but takes the shape or color of the person and the life in which it is carried.

Water is generally beneficial, and is essential to the life of humans. Holiness also is essential; though we may ignore it, we cannot live without it.

How essential water is to humans was brought home to me a few summers ago on Star Island, where the meeting of my science and religion group was devoted entirely to water in its scientific and religious aspects. The most memorable presentation was by a man named Les Roberts, who is a public health specialist working mostly in the third world. He showed convincingly how lack of access to clean drinking water is probably responsible for more deaths every year on this planet than any other preventable cause. When drinking water in a village is cleaned up, rates of diseases such as cholera and dysentery go way down. Perhaps this is why First Parish in Bedford spent \$9,000 improving the water supply of the village of its partner church in Abasfalva, Transylvania.

It is harder to explain why holiness is essential, but I have the strong conviction that it is. I don't like supernatural, top-down explanations for things, but I take it as a spiritual discipline to keep myself open to the vertical dimension of life. A world that is completely devoid of enchantment is one which I have no interest in inhabiting.

Grace, holiness, is the medium in which we live and move and have our being. Day by day, we are no more aware of it than the fish is aware of the water in which it moves. But some times are threshold moments, when we move from one state of being into another. When we come together in the fall as a church, we can see what the whole means to each of us. We can know what it is to be together as a body and to build this church into what it can be.

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As our waters have flowed together into this common vessel, we are metaphorically coming together to build a church that shall be free. Your vision statement here at the meetinghouse expresses his idea this way: To nurture a safe community that encourages intellectual, spiritual, and religious freedom and celebrates all the passages of life. Life is a stream. Heraklitos said you never enter the same river twice, but good Buddhists know it is not even the same you entering the second time. Everything moves on.

Out of our individual life histories we intertwine with one another to build this church that shall be free.

Amen.