

Peace Like a River?
A sermon by Rev. Steven Epperson
September 30, 2018
UCV

I'm pleased to say that every once in a while, something comes out of British Columbia that has a significant, positive impact on the world. No, not Lululemon,, Nk'Mip wine, or sightings of Ogopogo in Okanagan Lake; maybe the former NBA star player Steve Nash, but I'll save that, perhaps, for another time.

Instead, we're talking about BC Rivers Day, which Mark Angelo, the renowned river steward from Burnaby, founded and led in western Canada since 1980 which, over the past nearly forty years, has morphed into World Rivers Day—acknowledged and taken up by the United Nations and celebrated on this, the fourth Sunday in September. Today, millions of people in over sixty countries are going down to rivers, streams and brooks to paddle around and clean up the channels and banks of the world's arterial waterways. They—and we—do this in recognition of our profound interdependence on the health of our flowing water resources—their role in the earth's astounding water cycle, the role of rivers in sculpting and beautifying the surface of our planet; water—clean and running free—sustains the very ground, our health and moments of pleasure in our lives.

Near the beginning of our meeting, we sang: "I've got peace like a river in my soul." And who hasn't felt a sense of peace and gratitude for the flowing beauty of a river or brook? Normal workaday life and time slips away, the places made hard in our hearts dissolve in the play of the music of water flowing quietly through a desert expanse, the hushed shadows of a wooded hillside, or the still, mighty movement of a great river as it courses toward, meets and embraces the sea.

Deep, inarticulate thoughts and feelings rise within us as we imagine from whence these waters began and whither they go and come to rest and from thence rise again into the skies. And so, too, we wonder about our lives.

No wonder then that at the heart of religions and spiritual cultures, rivers rise and flow through myth, metaphor, landscape and ritual. Here in BC, First Nations treasure their ties to the arterial waters of this Province. As Stephen Hume wrote some years ago: “entire nations take their name from water: the Sto:lo of the Fraser Valley are the river people. The Dakelh of the central Interior are people who go around by boat. Examine the map of First Nations in BC,” he writes, “and [we see that] all 203 communities are located on fish-bearing waterways....Water in all its forms...makes a powerful metaphor for first Nations’ imagining of the their relationship to the land.” It’s deeply embedded because the elements of nature, and not lines on a map, are “what genuinely endure, however much we seek to commodify and own them as economic abstractions” or neglect them, dam them and cover them up with roadways and city asphalt.

According to Tim Kulchyski of the Cowichan Tribes, “water...it’s the centre of so many things...[it’s] essential to our spiritual integrity...and at the centre of everything.” Traditional Nuxalk believe each person is born with a *nuskelutsa*—a spiritual washbasin—filled with sacred, clear water whose spiritual power determines one’s fate and fortune. So, children bathe in the river at dawn while praying to increase the power of the *nuskelutsa* in their lives. (see Stephen Hume, “First Nations treasure historic ties to water, *Vancouver Sun*, 9.16.2015)

After today’s meditation, our choir sang the traditional Christian folk hymn “Down in the River”—“oh sisters...brothers...fathers...and mothers,” they sang, “let’s go down in the river to pray.” I asked the choir to sing this after having witnessed back in May a dozen or so Canadian Unitarian young adults who, after the formal Sunday worship service at last year’s annual

Council meeting in Hamilton, gathered together and then broke into full-throated singing of this hymn of longing; and believe me, they knew the words:

As I went down in the river to pray
Studying about that good ol' way
And who shall wear the robe and crown?
Good Lord show me the way.

I've been thinking a fair amount about rivers ever since...they flow and stream and yet abide; myriad and unique of visage and voice with every clime and season, every stone around which they flow, every channel and bank narrow and broad through which they course...and as we approach and linger beside or dive into them...who are we? what do we bring to them and what do we find ourselves, from the depths, longing for....?

In Surah 15 in the Quran we read: “and Allah has set up on the earth mountains standing firm, lest it should shake with you; and rivers...that ye may guide yourselves.” “Oh purifiers,” reads the Bhagavad Gita, “...I am Rama; I am the wind and of flowing rivers I am the River Ganges...whose waters can save one from the punishment of Yamaraja.” From Genesis chapter two, these words: “a river flowed out of Eden to water the garden, and there it divided and became four rivers...which flow around the whole land.” “He who hears the rippling of rivers in these degenerate days,” wrote Henry David Thoreau, “will not utterly despair.” “I’ve got peace like a river...”? All this is well enough, and alive to myth and wonder and solace; and so it has been down through the ages and across cultures.

I didn’t grow up by the rippling of rivers of New England, or the mighty, ever flowing Fraser; I didn’t bathe in the god-like Ganges nor seen the rivers of Eden or gone down to the river praying so as to “wear the robe and crown.” Mine was a land of small creeks descending from the high desert Wasatch Mountains—snow-melt swollen for a time, then sun parched to a trickle. Life giving to be sure, but moody and fickle—over-bounteous in spring, then

withholding by mid summer. An element to be carefully stewarded into reservoir and thoughtfully apportioned by irrigation. An element at times ominous—unforgettably, when I was child, a toddler in my neighbourhood was lost to us when she fell into an irrigation canal and swept away to her death. I'll never forget the frantic grief etched on the faces of her parents. The one time my family set out in a canoe in Provo canyon, it turned athwart in the current spilling us all desperately out into the perilous water. My one rafting adventure was... *memorable*. Each time we hit a rapid, unlike everyone else in the raft, as though I had a spring under my pants, I catapulted from my seat and soared out and plunged into the churning swift water of the Green River. While it may have looked hilarious to those watching me shoot out like a cork from a champagne bottle, for me it was scary and humiliating.

And some few years ago, during my study sabbatical, I stood under the bone cracking cold cascade of a sacred waterfall at the Grand Tsubaki Shinto Shrine in Japan. Teeth shattering, I tried to say, my whole body quaking with cold, the words of the misogi purification ritual: ***moromono no magagoto tsumi kegare o:*** “ I humbly beseech the kami to cleanse me of all impurities.” Cleansed of impurities? Shivering and shriven? How could I possibly know? I went down to the river to pray at the Tsubaki Shrine in Japan, but I think walking away I'd hardly won the “robe and crown.”

I may be moved to thoughtfulness and gratitude by rivers; I've had tranquil times beside them, but “peace like a river in my soul”? Not always. Not so much. In the book of Psalms, I learned early on the story where ancient Hebrews, exiled and enslaved in Babylon, are being tormented by their captors who demand, in mirth, that their captives entertain them. “Sing us one of your songs of Zion,” they commanded. And then we read, “*By the waters of Babylon, there we sat down and wept, when we remembered Zion. On the willows there we hung up our*

harps. How shall we sing the Lord's song in a foreign land?" I don't remember when I first heard the spiritual "Deep River," but I learned early on as well, that "home" for those enslaved Afro-Americans who created and sang this spiritual, "home" was not here in this life and vale of violence and tears. Rather, it was somewhere altogether other; it was somewhere "over Jordan."

The Jordan River I knew growing up flowed through the valley floor of my high mountain home from Utah Lake into the Great Salt Lake. 19th century pioneers looked upon it both mythically and pragmatically: on the one hand, it was a synecdoche, a miraculous echo of the biblical Jordan, and on the other, a mundane source for watering their fields and gardens. By the mid to late 20th century, my time, it had become a neglected, forlorn, rubbish strewn stream—a telling symbol of what my people once were and had shamefully become: just another car, suburban tract and consumer ridden population, nearly indistinguishable from a wider, omnivorous, soul flattening host culture. I am grateful to say, that my son Gabriel and a host of other good folk, have worked to foreground, remediate and return the Jordan River to something like its rightful place: a humble, liquid flowing jewel set in the desert diadem of what I have come to see as a tragic valley and people.

Beautiful passages about rivers are found in Norman Maclean's novella *A River Runs Through It*. "Eventually all things merge into one, and a river runs through it," Maclean wrote in his seventieth decade looking back to the time of his youth in Montana, written as memoir and elegy of the tragic, early death of his younger brother. "The river was cut by the world's great flood and runs over rocks from the basement of time. On some of the rocks are timeless raindrops. Under the rocks are the words, and some of the words are theirs. I am haunted by waters," Maclean writes in the closing lines of the book. The poignancy of this story has so much to do with the enduring beauty of nature and its rivers, the mastery of fly fishing which his

brother raised, by discipline and intuition, to the realm of matchless art, and on the other hand, the failure of that same brother to master the art of living and the helplessness of those who knew and loved him to save him from what seemed brooding mysteriously as his allotted fate. How do we reconcile, if ever, and live with these and similar contrarities known desperately, intimately by us from the private stories of our own lives?

Rivers of peace, rivers of sadness. They flow, tumble and delight; they sculpt and water the earth and endure. “He who hears the rippling of rivers in these degenerate days,” wrote Thoreau, “will not utterly despair.” And so, we would hope. But even I’m not always so sure.

There’s something else about rivers, and we had no idea months or weeks ago what would happen this past week, and where it would bring us today, and these words.

“Let judgment run down as waters, and righteousness as a mighty stream,” implored the prophet Amos—words echoed by Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. in his “I Have a Dream Speech.” There is a phenomenon of weather for which desert people have a healthy respect—people like the Hebrew prophet Amos, and those who backpack and travel in dry places. Skies may be utterly blue above your head and the red sand stone, sagebrush and pinyon pine landscape. Nevertheless, you scan the distant horizon for signs of clouds, knowing that though tranquil, dry and untroubled may be the earth around you, from those clouds, perhaps even out of sight, rain may be falling, and from them, as a result, gathered into narrow channels and canyons, torrents of flash floodwaters may be headed directly toward you. And my god, you better get out of the way—for those flood-tide, rain-swelled waters can uproot trees, scour and churn up canyon floors into a sand and mud choked cataract—a charging wall of water that will sweep you heedlessly away.

Amos and Martin Luther King Jr. were not invoking some tinkling, rippling rivulet. They were calling down from the heavens flash floods of judgment and righteousness to sweep the earth—knowing that it would take something as mighty as that to uproot and cleanse away the systemic, cankering, soul destroying evils of their (and our) times.

I thought of this last week, while watching and reading the US Senate Judiciary hearing: the sincere, wrenching and powerful testimony of Dr. Christine Blasey Ford and then the subsequent tirades verging on hysteria, the spectacular presumption of entitlement coming out of the mouths of Brett Kavanaugh and US Senate Republicans.

Born, schooled and accustomed to awesome privilege and power, men like Orrin Hatch and Charles Grassley may have thought the scene before them—to which they've grown comfortable after decades in Washington DC—the wood panelled chambers, the raised semi-circle of high backed chairs from which they look down—perhaps, they may have thought, given their knowledge of arcane Senate rules, procedures and well-rehearsed scripts, that they were masters of the moment, and the fix was in. Questions and arguments from minority party colleagues—the women and men arrayed to their left?—mere background noise to be endured; it wouldn't last long in any case.

And then Christine Blasey Ford spoke. I had hoped, fool that I am, that the truth, so guilelessly spoken, would have been listened to and truly heard; that it would work some measure of transformation on the old white men raised above her.

Then it was Brett Kavanaugh's turn; "and it was," in the words of Suzanne Moore, "***it was if she had never existed.***" What followed—what can I say?—it was an unfettered, naked display of patriarchy, of sordid, dangerous white male privilege. Someone I know and love said to me the next day, "I'm afraid men hate women, but I think women love men."

Though I was ashamed, stricken and angry seeing and hearing what followed after Dr. Blasey Ford's testimony, I think it's important that the whole world was watching. And may we never forget. I hope that she will feel and know some consolation, some sense of release in being able to discharge her civic duty and speak her truth in that Senate chamber. I hope as well, that she will come to know, that we will come to know, she made history last Thursday.

It may be that a casual liar and bully, who also revealed himself as a vile partisan party hack will yet assume a place in the US Supreme Court. Such are the times, such is the state of my home country for which I grieve.

Let's go back to the desert. The sun brilliant. The sky deepest blue. Not a gust of air. All seems still and unchanging, time out of mind. And then, at the very edge of the horizon, an anvil shaped thundercloud gathers and blooms. Rain like a silvery veil sweeps down from the heavens in the distance. We can't hear it, but our bodies register an electric change in the air. And then quickly, with a rush of wind, the skies darken aloft. And though as yet unseen, we feel it approaching...

As it has been said, so too may it be said today: "*Let judgment run down as waters, and righteousness as a mighty stream.*" For People!—this is going to be hard; its going to take *not peace like a river*, but a cataract of will and work; compassion (yes) *and* strength of purpose to uproot patriarchy and privilege that sets men over and against women.

It took the two women in my life to pull me away from a religion rife with patriarchy that was blight upon them. No easy task. And I don't know if the roots have all been wrenched out of me. But I know this: I don't want my spouse, my daughter and my granddaughters—I don't want anyone's—to live in a world made alien, unsafe and unequal due merely to the sex of their

birth. I long for a day when a loved one will no longer feel compelled to say: “I’m afraid men hate women.”

May we be allies in this work of love, justice and righteousness—that is, making right a wrong that still blights, erases, threatens, demeans, makes lesser our moms, spouses, women friends and kin, our daughters, and granddaughters whoever they are, wherever they may be, however they may be. Love, justice and *righteousness*. (Unitarians, Canadians: it’s OK to say that word.)

And I hope that November 6th will be a day of reckoning in the States; that women, with men as their allies, will flood the voting booths and throw the rascals out.