

## **Crazy Love**

A sermon by Rev. Steven Epperson

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Sermon writing can be a kind of risky business. Starting in August, I look down the calendar of months stretching from September through June and begin a reckoning. Part of that process takes into account the variety of calendars and customary festivities that we feel obliged to observe; from our own Water Ceremony, Candlelight Service and Volunteer Recognition Sunday, to Remembrance Day, Christmas and Easter, Flower Communion, solstices and equinoxes and more. Sometimes there are things I just want to talk about: like growing economic inequality, the awe inspiring world disclosed by the sciences, to the uneasy tension between spirituality and religion. Each year, it's quite a journey!

As well, by the fourteenth of each month, I have to come up with titles and descriptions of sermons and worship services for the month *to come* so they can be printed in our *UCV Bulletin*. And did I tell you, I haven't planned out those services, and I haven't written the sermons? For example, on January 14<sup>th</sup>, I had only a vague idea about what I want to say in February; maybe not even a clue. *And on top of all that*, I have a wandering mind—I can propose and describe a sermon weeks in advance, but as the Sunday approaches: off goes my head down alleys of thought, feeling and lateral connections with other subjects, and I end up standing in front of you with something written in my hands bearing only a fig leaf over quite another body that's sprung up in the meantime—a different sermon took over in the writing of the one I had meant to give. And so it goes with “Crazy Love.”

Let me tell you what I thought I was going to do. (So I'm getting away with it after all!) I recently shared with you my deep pleasure with the operas *The Magic Flute* and *Ariadne auf Naxos*. Now months ago, reckoning that this was the Sunday before Valentine's Day, I thought I'd do something similar—this time sharing with you my affection for the beautiful ballad “Cucurrucucu Paloma” written sixty years ago by the Mexican composer Tomas Mendez that was performed wonderfully today by Damon and Allison. I first heard it sung by Caetano Veloso in the 2002 Pedro Almodovar movie, “Talk to Her”—an unforgettable few minutes in a movie wherein, among other things, two men discover and experience what William James called “the gift of tears.”

From there, I imagined segueing somehow to the momentous cultural shift that took place in the 4<sup>th</sup> century in Western civilization in the language and understanding of sensual love. The great classical scholar Peter Brown described it like this:

In the Christian legends of conversion [stories that came down from the first several centuries of Christianity] we are faced with daring explorations of the power of the will. These are bodies that have become all will.... They belonged only to themselves and to God. They no longer belonged to society or to nature. These were bodies freed from the cosmos itself.

Nothing could be more different from the worldview” [of pagan antiquity] where sensual love is all “about the great chain of being that linked humans to the gods...and the embrace of the universe into which their own bodies had been ingeniously woven.” That kind of love and expressing it sexually “filled the body with an ‘immanent divine force, and the wash of its warm energy was experienced as a communion’ with the divine.... Never again, in Europe, would the person in love be seen as so open to a vast and half-tamed world.

“When loved returned” in the courtly poems and customs of the 14<sup>th</sup> century right down to today’s romantic comedies, we find “bodies without the gods.” We imagine and find ourselves with little sense that sensual love is “derived from the refulgent energy of cosmic powers.” (Peter Brown, “Rome: Sex and Freedom,” *New York Review of Books*, December 19, 2013)

And Valentine’s Day?—how do we travel from the fact that there were at least 30 Valentinus’s in the late Roman world who achieved sainthood through martyrdom, none of whom had even the remotest connection with stories of romantic love, to celebrating it around the world on February 14<sup>th</sup> in the name of a 3<sup>rd</sup> century host of Catholic martyrs with the name Valentine? It is a winding story of creative myth-making, beginning in the early middle ages, picked up and fictively recast in 1382 by Geoffrey Chaucer, author of the *Canterbury Tales*, that then continued down through Shakespeare, John Donne and others, enabled thereafter by wishful thinking scholarship in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, and from thence it was transformed into a world-wide, mass-cultural phenomenon by the marketing genius of 19<sup>th</sup> century British and American publishers and sellers of stationary.

But then two things happened on the way to this sermon—first, I could feel a cold, wet blanket coming on—one I was about to throw over the fevered body of crazy love. Ironically, it would have made an OK-enough “Unitarian” sermon—one that would be consistent with the

high minded sentiment of the Fifth Source of Our Living Tradition which counsels us to “heed the guidance of reason...and warn us against idolatries of the mind and spirit”—but that would have been completely at odds with the feelings evoked by “Cucurrucucu Paloma”—that mourning, yearning song—which was what gave me the crazy idea to talk about “crazy love” in the first place.

And then, something else happened: Pete Seeger died on January 27<sup>th</sup>. I felt that before we just kept moving along through the days and weeks, there was a story here I wanted to tell about Pete Seeger. It’s a real life example of just about the craziest of loves—and the good that can arise from being intoxicated in that old-time pagan sort of way: a love open to a vast and half-tamed world.

Pete Seeger lived to the ripe age of ninety-four, and like just about anyone who’s lived that long, he went through a lot of changes and personas. There’s the young collector of folk songs and itinerant lefty troubadour. The Pete who stood up courageously against McCarthyite witch hunters and paid the price by being black-listed and reduced to barely scraping by to support a family; the Pete Seeger who took an axe to the cable powering Bob Dylan’s band at the 1965 Newport Folk Festival because he couldn’t hear the lyrics through the amplified squall; the Pete I met sixteen years ago who showed up to play his banjo and sing at a bar mitzvah; the grand old man of the sing-along celebrated by Rick Salutin in the *Toronto Star* for the subversive way it turned the audience into performers and thus broke down the cash nexus; Pete Seeger—mentor to Bruce Springsteen, Billy Bragg and countless other musicians; and the Pete Seeger who late in life, joined the Unitarian Universalist Church of New York City, mentored a choir there, and gave benefit concerts to help the church raise funds to make it accessible to people with disabilities. (see Billy Bragg, “Pete Seeger: folk activist...”, *The Guardian*, January 28, 2014; Rick Salutin, “Medium for Pete Seeger’s message...”, *Toronto Star*, January 30, 2014; Warren Ross, “Singing for Humanity...”, *UU World*, July/August 1996; and Allan M. Winkler, *To Everything There is a Season: Pete Seeger and the Power of Song*, Oxford University Press, 2009)

Seeger was important to the Epperson family for two reasons. Back in the mid 90s, we traveled through British Columbia and the American Northwest listening to a CD simply called *Pete*. Parents and kids, we all loved that album that included songs like “My Rainbow Race,” “The Water is Wide,” “Garbage,” and “Sailing Down My Golden River.” And we played it over and over, never tiring to its sweet, deep beauty.

Now that last song I mentioned: “Sailing Down My Golden River” was composed by Seeger, and unknown to us then, it connected our family to him and still does to this day. The song’s lyric doesn’t mention any river by name, and we took it as song musing about journeying through life. Turns out Pete wrote that song inspired by his experience with a very particular place, while sailing on a very particular river—the Hudson River in New York State.

That river’s full of meaning to our family. My spouse Diana was born in New York City; growing up, she visited her grandmother who lived not far from the Hudson and had known and appreciated that river as a young girl. Later, our whole family came on to the picture. We’ve crossed the Hudson many times on bridges spanning its beautiful blue broad width and we’ve hiked on miles of nearby woodland trails. What we didn’t know until not too long ago, was how much of the river’s beauty and vitality today is due to none other than Pete Seeger.

And here’s the story. Back in 1949, Pete and his wife Toshi built a log cabin overlooking the Hudson River near Beacon, New York. Though he was on the road a great deal, that cabin was his home. In 1962, Rachel Carson’s book *Silent Spring* was published. Carson’s book carefully documented the dangers of pesticide poisoning, environmental pollution and the effects that ran through the entire food chain; its publication helped kick into gear the modern environmental movement. Seeger read *Silent Spring* and called it “a turning point” in his life. “It made him revise his political and social priorities.” Here’s how he put it: “I’d [always] been a nature nut. But come age 15 and 16, I put all that behind me, figuring the main job to do was to help the meek inherit the earth, assuming that when they did, the foolishness of the private profit system would be put to an end....But in the early 60s I realized that the world was being turned into a poisonous garbage dump. [So] by the time the meek inherited it, it might not be worth inheriting.” And so Seeger became what he called an “econik.” (Winkler, 141)

At the same time, he was beginning to spend more time at his cabin, walking the trails in the woods, and along the Hudson River—and it was there he found himself intrigued with the idea of sailing on it. So he bought a “little plastic bathtub of a boat” and taught himself to sail. There’s “something almost magical about it,” he wrote, “the wind and the waves.... Such Poetry!”

But then one awful day soon after he started sailing, he saw vast lumps of toilet waste—raw sewage—floating all around him. And hardly an expert sailor, he capsized the boat more than once and so got an up-close-and-personal, first hand view of the sludge, and with it the

realization that the Hudson had become an open sewer—a vast, flowing liquid dump for industries that grew up along its banks, PCBs from the electrical industry, raw sewage discharges, pesticides and other contaminants clogged the river. Its main traffic had become polluting cement and oil barges. Local lore has it that the chemical stew of the river was so potent and toxic it was seen as a cure for bore worms and other parasites feeding off of the wooden hulls of boats. Sailors from the Caribbean would reportedly chug up the Hudson, scoop up its water and apply it as a pesticide on the hulls of their ships to wipe out parasites and worms. (see Suzanne Goldenberg, “Pete Seeger’s Greatest Legacy?....”, *The Guardian*, January 29, 2014) Near Albany in the summer of 1970, one study found so little dissolved oxygen in the river that the few fish seen were "swimming slowly at the surface, gulping air, and disturbing an oil film which covered the water surface."

It wasn't always so. The Hudson River is a 315-mile (507 km) river that flows from north to south through eastern New York. It begins at a lake on the slopes of the Adirondack Mountains, flows past Albany, and finally forms the border between New York City and New Jersey at its mouth before emptying into Upper New York City Bay. Its natural beauty was such that people referred to it as America's scenic Rhine River; and the first internationally recognized art movement in the States—the Hudson River School, that included Thomas Cole, Asher Durand and Frederick Church—created a marvelous, Romantic body of paintings and drawings to convey the beauty of the River and the surrounding countryside.

Up through the 19<sup>th</sup> century, sail boats sixty-to ninety feet long, with one hundred foot high masts, sailed up and down the Hudson ferrying cargo and passengers. The river teemed with dozens of species of fish, and one source reported how a 250 pound sturgeon leapt into the air, landed on the deck and swamped a small sailing craft.

Pete began to immerse himself in the history and lore of the Hudson. He'd fallen in love with this once proud, beautiful, but now badly abused river. The vision of those grand sailing sloops in particular fired his imagination—and spurred him on to conceive a radical idea and program. He described it in these words:

“The basic idea is to take a beautiful old boat and sail it up and down a still-beautiful river, stopping at every town and city [along its banks]. The waterfront is public property; we'll hold a party, free for everybody, and we mean everybody. Young and old. Black and white. Rich and poor. Male and female. Square and hip. Church-goer and atheist. Country and city....What's

the message? We want people to learn to love their river again.” And “the message will go a lot further than that. Everything in this world is tied together. You try to clean up a river, and soon you have to work on cleaning up the society....Only the most starry-eyed, head in the clouds optimist could assume that...the world can continue on its present course....Perhaps the sewer running past your door is as good place to start on the clean-up job as any.” (Seeger, in Winkler, 152-4)

“Take a beautiful old boat and sail it up and down a still-beautiful river...so people will learn to love their river again,” Pete said. Problem was: no more old sloops sailed on the Hudson, or any rivers on the East Coast. What to do? Build a replica of one of those majestic ships of the past and sail it on the river. “But Pete,” everyone told him, “you can’t do that! You’re broke. You’re a lefty, way out of step with people around here. You may be an international troubadour, but you don’t even know your neighbours. Great idea, but it’s a total pipe dream.”

Now the thing about crazy love is that it doesn’t listen to reason; it doesn’t conform to conventions. It drives you over the bend, out of your mind, and makes you do things you never thought you could do; it can work a mighty transformation.

This is what happened. First, Pete found a ship builder in Portland, Maine, who looked up some plans of the old sailing sloops, and said it could be done, a ship could be built. Next, Pete got down to some real grass roots campaigning: he attended back-yard barbeques, drank beer with working class folk, sang in churches and elementary schools, and went to country club soirees with the yacht boat set, and in each place pitched his vision. And it caught on. Money started coming in from the conservative squires, church group bake sales, and local union halls. And on May 17, 1969, after raising more than \$140,000, the 106 foot long sailing sloop, christened the *Clearwater*, with its 108 foot high mast, sailed out of the Portland docks and began traveling up and down the mighty Hudson with a crack crew of professional sailors and ecologists.

School children all up and down the river, clamored on board. Seeger described it like this: “Fifty kids pile out of a bus, and they’re divided into [four] groups. When the boat is sailing ten...learn to put a net into the water to catch some fish, while ten are sent to put some water under a microscope....Another group took the tiller and still another went below to see the equipment that ran the ship. Every twenty minutes, the groups changed place.”(Winkler, 158-9)

For the next two decades, concerts and river festivals were held in almost every Hudson River town with the *Clearwater* moored at the waterfront. Pete Seeger's dream of a sloop on the Hudson had come true. And his crazy love and sense of responsibility to clean up the river, and perhaps effect a change in the way we locate ourselves in the interdependent web of life, began to take root and blossom. He didn't go to Albany, or Washington, or the courts—he went to the people with a ship, his banjo and his voice, summoning them back to the river: “Someday, though maybe not this year,” he sang, “My Hudson River will once again run clear.” And remarkably, under public pressure from across the spectrum of ideology and class, the effort to save the Hudson worked. PCBs were banned in the 70s. In the early 80s, the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) designated a 200 mile stretch of the Hudson as a clean-up site, and in 2001, it embarked on a monumental project to dredge up contaminated sediment from the river's bottom.

Purity is an elusive thing; the work is on-going, but the Hudson became cleaner and clearer all the time. In 1986, the *New York Times* reported that people were swimming and fishing in it once again. And in 1994, it reported that the river had been “brought back from the brink of disaster.” One of Pete's biographers wrote that building the *Clearwater* and saving the Hudson was the “capstone of Seeger's career.” *The Guardian* newspaper's US environmental correspondent calls it his “greatest legacy.” (Winkler, 165; Suzanne Goldenberg, “Pete Seeger's greatest legacy...” etc.)

The *Clearwater* still travels up and down the Hudson—soaring mast, billowing sails—embodying a vision of hope, possibility, beauty and the power of crazy love and Pete Seeger's life-long belief that music can make a difference for good in the world.

He expressed that vision in the song “My Rainbow Race”—a song the Eppersons sang together those years ago as we travelled through this Province and the American Northwest. Seeger called it “a love song for the earth.” Here's a verse from it, and with it, my sermon ends:

One blue sky above us  
One ocean lapping at our shore  
One earth so green and round  
Who could ask for more?  
And because I love you  
I'll give it one more try  
To show my rainbow race  
It's too soon to die.