

**When the Path Floods**  
**a talk by Rev. Dr. David Breeden**  
**First Unitarian Society of Minneapolis**  
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**INTRODUCTION: Messin' With Our Plans**

Our theme from November is "the path of change." Today I want to consider what happens when the path of change . . . floods out.

Those of you who have spent time in the Midwest know how it works here: There is a cause-and-effect relationship to flooding in the Mississippi watershed: it rains a whole bunch, and then creeks and rivers begin to flood. It makes *sense*: lots of rain equals flooding.

Now think about the desert southwest. The cause and effect of lots of rain equals flooding often doesn't work there.

Sure, lot's of rain *does* lead to flooding. But floods also come when there isn't a cloud in the sky. And that takes some getting used to for a Midwesterner.

In arid terrain, there are a lot of "low water crossings." These are in rural areas, sure, but even in urban areas. The creeks are so shallow, and there is so seldom any water in them, that low water crossings often get installed rather than spending lots of money on a bridge.

These usually have flood gauges so that people can see how deep the water is.

And, a rhyming phrase that you hear in weather reports in the Southwest is an important reminder: Turn Around Don't Drown.

But, it seems like every time the creeks flood, people drown.

Why?

For one thing, flood water can come sweeping in on a perfectly sunny day. There's little to no topsoil in arid climates, so rain simply hits the ground and runs. A rain twenty miles away can send a flood sweeping through the dry creek beds.

Sometimes, people simply don't see the flood waters coming. That's why there are also signs saying "Do not camp in dry creek beds!"

There are lots of anecdotal stories of sudden floods and people grabbing and climbing into trees.

But most people who die in flooding drown in low water crossings. Often people drown because they don't turn around. The threat is clearly present: the flood gauge shows the depth of water. Clearly, there is danger. Yet, many people drive into rushing water.

Why?

Sure, rushing water doesn't *look* as dangerous and powerful as it is. But there is also a human propensity that all of us know very well: We don't want anything messin' with our plans.

"Sure," people say, "I know this is dangerous, but I've got *plans*! Nothing can mess with my *plans*."

It's human nature. And it gets people killed.

That propensity to hold on despite evidence is one thing I want to consider today.

### **ONE: You Are a Mist**

Another is that good old fashioned idea of *momento mori*: remember death.

The phrase "Lord willin' n' the cricks don't rise" has become a cliché even among the people who have traditionally said those words. (Hillbillies like me.) It's kind of like "knock on wood"—a statement tinged with just a hint of superstition.

But "Lord willin' n' the cricks don't rise" is not a joking matter among people who take Christian scriptures literally. The practice arises from two verses in the book of James from Christian scriptures:

Come now, you who say, "Today or tomorrow we will go to such and such a town and spend a year there, doing business and making money."

Yet you do not even know what tomorrow will bring.

What *is* your life? For you are a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes.

Instead you ought to say, "If the Lord wishes, we will live and do this or that."

(James 4:13-15 New Revised Standard Version)

"Lord willin' n' the cricks don't rise" became a cliché, but many people were and still are very serious about saying some version of "If the Lord wishes, we will live and do this or that."

It is a way of expressing absolute dependance upon the will of the god as god's will is understood by many Christians. It is a way of confirming an understanding of the question asked in the biblical verses:

What *is* your life? For you are a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes.

It's a statement of ephemerality. Of trust and dependance upon the will of god. And, at least in an ideal sense, it is an announcement of willingness to turn around rather than choosing to power through a flood by sheer human will.

#Yes, it is human nature to make plans and then breathlessly and often thoughtlessly pursue those plans. But the wisdom of the ages tells us that rushing in despite the flood is a very bad idea for your health: both physical and mental: Turn around, don't drown because . . . you are a mist.

I think a old Zen proverb sums up the idea best of all:

Let go or be dragged.

## **TWO: That Same River**

I can't think about flooding without thinking of the famous line from the philosopher Heraclitus: "You cannot step into the same river twice." Heraclitus continued that

thought with an explanation: "For it is not the same river and you are not the same person."

Now, this is an even more radical statement than the more common phrase, "You can't go home again." Yes, we can follow the logic Heraclitus sets up: "For it is not the same home and you are not the same person."

But it's more radical because Heraclitus is suggesting a step and then an immediately following step. Not much time has passed. It's not like growing up in a house and then going back there as an adult and realizing that everything is smaller than you remember.

No. Heraclitus is talking about constant change from one moment to the next. Change that we ourselves have perhaps not even noticed: a step and another step immediately: That, Heraclitus is saying, is the nature of reality: Constant change.

In sculpture and painting Heraclitus is usually portrayed as The Weeping Philosopher. He can be mistakenly seen as praying because of his usual visual portrayal with a bowed head. He's not praying. He's weeping. Tradition says that he had an extremely melancholic personality. (BTW, Democritus, the philosopher who postulated the existence of atoms, is known as The Laughing Philosopher.)

Heraclitus was born in Ephesus, now part of Turkey. He died in the late 400s before the common era. The reading we did earlier is a collection of fragments, not a poem in the traditional sense. We only have fragments of the writing of Heraclitus because the early Christians did not like his way of thinking and did not preserve his writings.

Yet the fragments that we do have have stood the test of time. Some of what we read earlier:

Whosoever wishes to know about the world must learn about it in its particular details.

In searching for the truth, be ready for the unexpected. Change alone is unchanging.

The same road goes both up and down. The beginning of a circle is also its end.

Not I, but the world says it: all is one. And yet everything comes in season.

And

No one can step into the same river twice. It is not the same river; it is not the same person.

Heraclitus was onto something being explored by philosophers in other regions of the world, but not so much in the Mediterranean world of his time that would later become "Christendom."

### **THREE: Putting It Together**

So, let's look at the elements we have here:

Firstly, we have the very human propensity to grasp and hold onto things, whether that be the itinerary of a trip despite flooding or holding onto the people and things we love.

Secondly, we have the ephemerality of human life: We are here today, gone tomorrow, like a mist.

Traditional Christianity teaches that, despite all appearances, there *is* a god in charge. And, not only that, but this changeable reality we live in is only half the story. There is an *unchangeable*, indeed eternal reality beyond what we can see.

Heraclitus believed that this reality that we see is the only one. And he believed that the material cosmos is eternal, the implication being that no gods made this world. It has always been here.

Whether or not he was correct on that point of an eternal cosmos, Heraclitus' thinking was unlike the mythologies in which particular gods create the earth.

In an uncreated cosmos, no gods are required to make it, and it does not require any gods to keep an eye on its operation: the cosmos is merely here.

In which case, yes, the creeks will rise and water will flow and flood, and, yes, we are ephemeral creatures—our lives could even be described as a mist—but in this vision of

reality, there is no will of any god to be appeased or appealed to. Rather, we human beings are on our own.

Heraclitus saw a different reality from that of his Mediterranean contemporaries:  
 Yes, the creeks rise and water flows;  
 yes, we are a temporary mist in terms of our lives;  
 and, yes, we are on our own.

Therefore, we have a lot of work to do: We must know about the world in its particular details because the details are all that exist.

Also, therefore, we must *search* for truth in the natural world itself—truth isn't written in any books inspired by the gods. And, change alone is unchanging.

Therefore, we find apparent contradictions: Roads go both ways; circles begin where they end. In the thinking of Heraclitus, there is no material world versus spiritual world: all is one.

And we can see and even sometimes predict change by watching this particular thing we learn to call time: Everything comes in season. Time is *duration*. In order to discuss and potentially understand this concept of change, we have to have a concept of time: One thing happens before another thing. Duration and change is why "No one can step into the same river twice."

The water continues to flow. The very temporary biological entity we call a person keeps changing.

Now, let's forget about questions of degree and consider two options. One option: Heraclitus is wrong: there *is* another world—an eternal and non-chaotic one, though we can't see it.

Or: Heraclitus is right: All we have is this world of often chaotic change. A world we can navigate more safely by watching the details.

Heraclitus, born four hundred years before, Christ and James, writing sometime in the Common Era, agree on two points:

You do not even know what tomorrow will bring.

and,

What *is* your life? For you are a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes.

What each of us *does* about those facts contrasts two ways of living in our world:

One, trust that there is an unseen reality and order to the cosmos and do what you can to appeal to and appease that unseen reality;

or,

two, trust what we observe of our reality and adapt to those observations.

Traditional Christianity says: there is an unseen reality.

Unitarian Universalism, being creedless, says: "You work out which is true for you."

#Humanism says: You see it: this is what there is; love the details.

As for me, that's why I'm a Humanist.

### **CONCLUSION: Turn Around Don't Drown**

By way of concluding, let's go back to that old Zen saying: "Let go or be dragged."

That good advice works for driving into flood water: "Let go or be dragged." Turn around, don't drown!

That good advice also works for any plans we might be making: "Let go or be dragged." Let go of those plans if need be. #Sunk costs already sank—let's get on with it without trying to claw back the past.

That good advice also applies to wishes we might have for life to be otherwise: Why wasn't I born rich 'n' good lookin'?" "Let go or be dragged."

That good advice also works for all of life's regrets: "Let go or be dragged."

And what happens when we *do* let go and love this world of change?

Look around you here in this congregation: You see the faces of a lot of people who have let go of old theories and assumptions.

Sure, goals are important for adequate and informed exploration. The ability to let go is equally important. Again, Heraclitus was onto something: Roads go both ways; circles begin where they end. There is no material world versus spiritual world: all is one.

What *is* your life? For you are a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes. (James 4:13-15 NRSV)

So, come on, mist—or mists—grasp for the good; let go when it's time; and enjoy the change.

Let go. And run free. . .

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