

Holy Spirit Flood—UU Style  
September 5<sup>th</sup>, 2021  
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North Universalist Chapel Society

Even if our efforts of attention seem for years to be producing no result, one day a light that is in exact proportion to them will flood the soul.

— name withheld

Good morning and good Sunday. I hope that this new day finds you well. Next week, as Americans across the country will recognize, it's almost twenty years, almost twenty years since the tragedy that has shaped us—9/11. Last year, on the anniversary...and in recognition of this, I led a service about falling into this beautiful life, about surrendering to that which is lovely. You may remember...because I went to Silver Lake, fully clothed. I saluted the flag with the Sunday morning flowers in my hands. I walked out into the water and, without hesitation, I fell right in. If I do it again, will you come with me? Wouldn't that be so awesome? ...if a group of us go and take the plunge after next week's Sunday service. I can just imagine... Let me know if you're interested. Call me up or text me and we'll make a plan...or maybe, we'll just post something on the website. So, stay tuned.

Today is Sunday, September 5<sup>th</sup> and the title of this morning's reflection is The Holy Spirit Flood. It is a Unitarian Universalist spin on the Christian idea as it appears in the Book of Isaiah...and as it appears in folk music and country blues...which are, currently, my favorite genres of music...precisely because of moments like this...when I can call upon them to help me frame a response to what is happening at this particular moment of the world. Now, the Book of Isaiah reads as follows:

“...when the enemy shall come in like a flood, the Spirit of the Lord will lift up a standard against him AND PUT HIM TO FLIGHT-FOR [THE LORD] WILL COME LIKE A RUSHING STREAM WHICH THE BREATH OF THE LORD DRIVES.”

When the enemy comes in like a flood and the Lord responds as a rushing stream. Waters for waters... In the old gangster movies, the bad guys used to talk about trading “blood for blood” or “sangre por sangre” when the movie was about the drug money and the cartels. We're talking about flood for flood, in this case. Not blood for blood but deluge for deluge. Wave for good ocean wave.

'Cuz it feels like that these days. Wave after wave of such hard news, from Texas to Afghanistan, the hell and high water in New Orleans, the flash floods in New York City and in Philadelphia...and the storms, of course—Irene ten years ago and Hurricane Ida makes landfall on the fifteenth anniversary of Katrina...all in the context of the new Coronavirus variants... The hits keep on coming. Wave after wave. Deluge after deluge. Flood after holy spirit flood. Enough already. I don't mean to be glib but it's important to resist, important to exercise that energy inside

of ourselves ...that energy that says “no,” however quietly, “no” as a means of finding a deeper “yes” in life.

It is easy, obvious, logical, comfortable...seemingly wise, even, to recoil in times like these...to withdraw, to turtle inward. I’m irritable these days. Almost yelled at a crab apple the other day just for falling on my head like a raindrop. It’s a real deal. We are in some difficult times. This is for sure but everyday offers up resistance—the sunrise rooster with its bold, insistent cock-a-doodle-doo, the light of day, each other’s company, the crab apple itself... To all souls, I say, “Good morning. It is good to be together.”

I posted a cartoon the other day on my Facebook page...a cartoon of a person with their head down on table at which they were sitting, right shoulder raised protectively for reasons that become obvious. In front of this person is a hand-press juicer and to the left, seemingly endless containers of fresh-squeezed and freshly made lemonade. And on the right, on the far side of this person’s protectively raised shoulder was the open end of a massive shoot that was pelting the person with many, many lemons. We’ve got the right attitude—most of us do...most of the time—but we can’t keep up with all of the lemons, with all of the waves, the deluge, the floods that keep on coming.

“When life gives you lemons, make lemonade,” they say. We are outgrowing this poetry now. We seem to need a different kind of response. On a practical level, we’re running low on sugar...running low on sweetness. And on a spiritual level, we seem to need a different kind of flood—a holy spirit flood, perhaps, that gets us free of this.

My fuse is shorter these days. I’m becoming a bit quick-tempered and I don’t like this in myself. I’m also growing quite a bit. I discovered this recently in a conversation that I was having a friend. I was talking about the shame I carry because I am terrible at email. It is not a new issue. It’s trauma-related and something that I have struggled with years. I’m working on it. I won’t go into it here but I’m learning a lot about myself. I’m learning about how harsh a judge I can be—not of others but of myself. I am learning about both the usefulness and the uselessness of that. Most deeply, I’m learning about the relationship between pride and shame.

I grew up in a proud, African American family...a West Indian family with distant and diverse roots that trace back to Jamaica and to Scotland. There is also Cherokee in me, if that makes any sense. And I’m sure that I am more complicated than that genealogically. Everyone is. We like stories that make good sense but life isn’t like that sometimes.

Still, I grew up being proud of all of that. I grew up believing that pride and love were more or less synonymous. So, when I did good things, life was as it should be and everything was fine. But when I did bad things...oh, my God. I would feel utterly ruined. I would feel flooded with shame. I was practically inconsolable. Over time, I learned to fake my recovery after the fact. Real recovery took a long time for me but when I was still just a little kid, I learned how to signal that I was more ok than I actually was. I needed to shift the unwanted attention away from me as quickly as possible. I’ve matured a lot since then and I have all of this grey hair to prove it. Well, I’d like to think that I’ve matured, at any rate...but maybe that’s just

folly. “When I was still just a little kid...” That’s really just a code, just a way I joke with myself, just a secret I keep from myself by speaking as if in some kind of foreign language. It translates, of course—when I’m honest with myself, when I’m truly grounded. “When I was still just a little kid...” really means the “just a few years ago,” or “the day before yesterday” or really “just at this very moment.”

The point is that growing out of old patterns takes a whole lot of time—not always but often. It’s important that we be gentle with ourselves...to protect our hearts and tender souls, to protect the little kid within us...the voice still and small deep inside all...who is singing.

Singing is mode of memory. Homer used it, that great bard of antiquity. The Iliad, his most famous work, is best understood as a song. A folk song even...a country blues. Music helps us to remember who we are. For a good friend and a fellow UU minister, I wrote these lines...

Winter into spring, I do my best to sing aloud  
Trying to remember my tale  
Young among the journeymen to cast a look around  
Oceans over myself  
And I work hard to gain an answer, a place to rest the soul  
Trying to remember my tale  
And if I’m easier to anger or harder to console  
I’m trying to remember my tale

I feel like that’s what we’re all in the process of doing in a way—trying to remember our tale...trying to remember who it is we really are...trying to re-member ourselves, trying to call ourselves back into together where we have been estranged. We have been estranged from one another...and estranged from ourselves.

There is that Alvin Ailey story. Alvin Ailey was a famous dancer and choreographer. African American guy. Born in ’31. Died in ’89. He was an innovator, a force to be reckoned with. There was a story about his company. They toured all around the world and a poet named Jonatha Brooke wrote a song about them, about the dancers who successfully auditioned and were lucky enough to work with him. The song that she wrote was called Grace and Gravity.

Coming to the biggest city in the dead of summer  
You were chosen 'cause you would not close your eyes  
You danced among the finest, Black and blue in revelation  
A melancholy nothing could describe  
This is Grace in Gravity

Touring in South Africa  
The mountain roads one day with a friend  
Visions to the ocean off the coast (so blue, so green)  
He was white and you are black  
And this makes some vague difference  
After twisted fire and glass and steel  
You’re silent as they try to explain...  
That this is Grace in Gravity

“Twisted fire and glass and steel...” There had been a car accident...in South Africa...back in the days when pretense and the practice apartheid were in full swing. Brooke wrote,

And what we are and what we were once  
Are now far estranged

Two dancers were in that car. They were treated differently by the paramedics. The difference in their respective treatment was monumental. Insurmountable. The costs were almost too much to bear.

And what we are and what we were once  
Are now far estranged

At times like these, I think about the holy spirit flood. I think about what is written in the Book of Isaiah. I don't read the Bible as closely as my Christian colleagues do but I am often led to its theology by way of the music that touches me. Incidentally, Grace and Gravity, the song that we were just talking about, was inspired by a theologian, by a woman named Simone Weil who wrote this book called Gravity and Grace which I highly recommend. She is the one who said, “Even if our efforts of attention seem for years to be producing no result, one day a light that is in exact proportion to them will flood the soul.” And I think she's write. Gravity and Grace...

In any case, the Book of Isaiah reads as follows—in chapter 59, verse 19, to be precise—that...

...when the enemy shall come in like a flood, the Spirit of the Lord will lift up a standard against him AND PUT HIM TO FLIGHT-FOR [THE LORD] WILL COME LIKE A RUSHING STREAM WHICH THE BREATH OF THE LORD DRIVES.

I don't know if things like the vote in Texas and the war in Afghanistan and the storms in New Orleans rightly qualify, if things like the flash floods in Trenton, New York City and Philadelphia, if the new Coronavirus variants can properly be described as “enemies.” What I do know is that these things surge and drench and flood the streets of our heart and minds. What I do know is that we could use a different kind of flood.

You and I've got trouble, oh, there's trouble everywhere  
I'm calling on the Lord, c'mon  
may a brighter day fall across your way, and soon  
I don't know your trouble and you surely don't know mine  
I'm calling on the Lord, c'mon  
we a gathered here, let's ask in that name so dear  
Oh, my Lord, a sinner I am; asking you to forgive me

These are the opening words of a song called Holy Spirit Flood, a song written by a country blues musician by the name of Phelps. Kelly Joe Phelps—a good friend of a good, old friend of mine. He uses ideas that storm and thunder and cloud the blues skies of my theology, ideas that mess with me and blow me down and wash me

away—ideas like sin, redemption, doubt, forgiveness and salvation. Such storms these are...such hurricanes with flooding waters. Yet, I find myself turning to them more and more these days...these hard-pressed, bright yellow, overly lemony days that are short on the sugar to balance the bitterness. These days that break us down can build us right back up again. Phelps writes,

You know I'm a doubter and I like to think I'm right  
Still, let it be your will and not my own  
shatter all my bones, then build me up a righteous man

Sometimes, we outgrow our own theologies. Even here, I struggle with myself. I'm a lifelong Unitarian Universalist. UU-born and raised...practically. When I was still a little kid (and I mean this genuinely and without translation this time), way back in the day, we used to have this Sunday school class called Building Your Own Theology (BYOT). It was a ten-session course of study. The baseline assumption was that everyone is their own theologian. I agree with this idea, actually. And I agree with much of the course. This course is a classic UU adult education program that...

...invites participants to develop their own personal credos, the fundamental religious beliefs, values, and convictions that inform and direct of their lives.

And all of that is great. The only bummer for me is that building my own theology doesn't help me to surrender. I can't imagine a God, a saving grace, a spirit of life that is loving enough to save me from the shame that floods me down.

Like I said earlier, I'm learning a lot about myself these days. I'm learning a lot about things like pride and shame. I grew up believing that pride and shame were opposites. And they are, in a sense. One energy turns inward and the other, outward. I'm learning now, though, that they can also be strangely veiled—deceptively veiled—expressions of each other...neither expression doing us very much good in any way.

Bruce Burger is teaching this to me. Bruce is the founder of Heartwood Institute, one of the world's leading centers for professional training in massage and somatic psychology. It is a utopian community in Northern California, up Humboldt County way. He identifies pride as the first of five passions, linking it with greed, anger, lust and finally, with attachment. Through the practice of gratitude, these five passions are radically transformed...into detachment, continence, forgiveness, contentment and humility. These are not naïve opposites. They are real transformations.

While it is true that attachment and detachment are grammatical opposites, they are not linked to one another. That's not how this works. Seemingly positive and outwardly focused pride isn't linked to seemingly negative and inwardly focused shame. Both pride and shame attend the needs of identity and ego. When we are rewarded or penalized at this level of experience, we often respond respectively with pride and shame. When we are rewarded for our identity or for our ego, we often respond with pride. Conversely, when we are penalized for our identity or for our ego, we often respond with shame. And even further, when the penalty persists, when it sustains itself over time, we may reject the shame and

replace it with pride, supposedly “taking back the power,” but WITHOUT sufficiently healing from the wound.

This is why naïve opposites (or grammatical opposites) don’t really work. Attachment does not transform into the opposite, detachment. Pride does not transform into shame but, surprisingly, into detachment. Detachment guides us out of the realm of identity and ego and directs us on the path toward grace and peace. We may already know all this somehow. We may recognize its resonance deeply within us, sacredly within us, sounding an echo in soul and singing...in a still voice...and in a small voice. Phelps sings,

You and I know more than we will tell ourselves we do  
about the Holy Spirit flood  
blessing us in kind, leaving not a soul behind  
So let us all together, now, gather in His name  
hold to the truth of the Word  
Thy kingdom come, yea, let Thy will be done

How it is that we pray or surrender or find the means of accepting the deluge-Niagara waters that falling all around us, may we turn our brave awareness into the waves, come what may. May we make the choice to nurture the still, small voice that dwells within.

Fifteen years ago, in September 2006, after flood waters of Katrina had broken the banks of New Orleans, a crazy, young man named Radio walked the halls of the coliseum—Caesar’s Superdome, the great stadium in New Orleans...where the football-playing Saints come marching in. He was singing a song to everybody. He was singing, “This little light of mine, I’m gonna let it shine...” Over and over again. Time after time. He wouldn’t relent. Wave after wave. He drowned them in it, this man and his own holy spirit flood. The plumbing was out. There was no sanitation. The smell was foul and rank. And there was Radio, singing. He just would not shut up. No one was listening. Radio was singing into the wind and nobody seemed to care. They soon got mad at him. Their fuses were short. They were low. They were feeling terrible about themselves. Like me, they were easy to anger and hard to console. Almost in defeat, they were just about ready to give up on themselves, just about ready to give up on that still, small voice within...but Radio reminded them...Radio re-remembered them...and had them share their story. He knew, just like Simone Weil knew before him, that “even if our efforts of attention seem for years to be producing no result, one day a light that is in exact proportion to them will flood the soul.” The holy spirit flood. Don’t give up, my friends. Nurture the light.

May it be so. Blessed be and amen.