



Enter the River and Rise

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Down to the River by Ben Caplan

I went down to the river
flowing out unto the sea
on my way to the ocean
let the spirit swallow me.

I got low down in the water
I let the current guide my bones
I've got nine kinds of trouble
I'm just trying to find my way home.

Over twenty-some years of living
and a thousand wasted days
I have loved a lot of women
Many times I've gone wrong ways

And I came down to the water
For a dip. To cleanse my soul.
They keep telling me that I'm just a babe
But baby, why do I feel so old?
This is the verge of a breakthrough
it's a fine line that cannot be bent
and I felt like I river run dry
but I don't know where all of the rainwater went
And I believed we were all dead or dying
but I see different in the blue light
there is no such thing as a dawn or a dusk

it is daylight until it is night
You've got to fight through the dimming
You've got to run into the west
You've got to rage against the dying of the light
Live for the moment that's left
'Cause there is no such thing as a dying man
We're alive 'till the moment we're dead
and a drowning man is just a living man
Who hasn't run out of his last bit of breath.
I went down to the river
flowing out unto the sea
on my way to the ocean
let the spirit swallow me.
I got low down in the water
I let the current guide my bones
I've got nine kinds of trouble
I'm just trying to find my way home.

Sermon

We truly are "huddled together on this boat, handed down to us - stuck at the last bend of a wide river splintering near the sea." "One River, One Boat" was written this year, 2015, by Marjory Wentworth, Poet Laureate of South Carolina. It is, as you heard, an extraordinary poem, that was not read at the second inauguration of South Carolina's Governor, Nikki Haley, this winter.

The poem was written for the event, but not used during it. Wentworth was told that the poem was not used because there was not enough time. Most people, including Wentworth believe it was not used because it was not as safe as her former inaugural poems. "One River, One Boat" mentions slavery and Gadsden's Wharf, the Confederate flag. It names George Stinney, the youngest person executed in the United States, at age 14, by the State of South Carolina with a two hour trial and circumstantial evidence.

"One River, One Boat," is about being deep in the human river with both its potential for joy and enormous loss, cruelty, and South Carolina was not ready to be deep on its most recent inauguration day. Which does not mean that South Carolina is not deep in the human river. In fact, South Carolina is deep in the river, as is the United States.

The river is wide and deep and we all find ourselves in it, whether we walked in, fell, or were pushed. Maybe you bought a home on a nice dry piece of land, but if you bought that home in Houston or Dallas this week, you might have watched it and your car get swept away.

The river is a remarkable symbol of drought and flood, change, nourishment, of conversion ala John the Baptist, determination as when Julius Caesar crossed the Rubicon, and destruction such as the Johnstown Flood of 1889. Slaves were told to wade in the water to

hide the scent of their escape. The river cleans, washes, comforts, feeds, quenches, transports, drowns, always moving and changing, always the "same water coming round."

South Carolina could not bear to stand in the river on a year when the United States has been wracked with charges of police brutality and the death of black men in their care. It is, however, still the year we are having. America is in a bloody river of awareness about police brutality. It feels and looks bad. It is bad, not impossible, but hard and ugly.

All of us are going to spend some time in the symbolic river, whether as a citizen of this country or a human being trying to find a way home. Finding oneself in the river is a very human story, as is what we do when we arrive.

This week a member contacted me for help for a friend whose wife is struggling with addiction. There was an "incident" and trouble with the police. I think about the river this family finds itself within. Addiction is like a torrential flood and it carries with it every family member, including the ones who don't drink, including the children. This family is all down at the river. And I wonder who will find their way ashore? The addict? Other family? Anyone? The river is wide and deep. Help will be needed. Maybe you have been in this river due to illness, foreclosure, discrimination, divorce, the death of a loved one. These things too are hard. Not impossible, but hard and sometimes they look ugly.

Two Sundays ago, we at First Church found ourselves in the river. At the May 17 congregational meeting we learned that our steady and mostly reliable finances have changed into unsteady and unreliable. Not impossible, but hard and some of the decisions feel ugly.

And here is the thing, no one pushed us, no one made a terrible financial decision, no one member or staff person is at fault. The world changed and so did our members. For years I was the minister among my colleagues who served a congregation that did not struggle with finances. We were outliers. Year after year I watched my colleagues struggle in congregations that could not meet their budgets, especially when the recession hit. Many of our sister congregations took huge cuts in staff and programs during those years, or drained their endowments. Not here, but here have been changes that finally caught up with us.

Our longest term members and oldest members started to die in large numbers, and they were our highest pledgers, sometimes \$4,000 from one member. Two years ago I did 10 memorial services in a year. You can see where the numbers are going. The Boomers started to retire, and with new fixed incomes, they reduced their pledges. It makes sense.

On top of this we have had a long-term leaky bucket of members who pledge, but who do not complete their pledge by the end of the fiscal year on June 30th of the year. When enough members don't complete their pledge, we can be short \$30,000 or \$40,000. Add to this that some members don't pledge, not even \$10 a year, and we have reached the moment of May 17, 2015 at High Noon when the members of this congregation wrestled with the possibility of cutting \$23,000 in dues that we pay (at the rate of \$85 a member) to the UUA and the MidAmerica Region, of which we are a part.

The Board considered this option instead of cutting staff positions and staff benefits. These were the most obvious two options. For the last three years we have been slicing off bits of

the budget here and there, an RE teacher, a separate accompanist, a part time minister, committee budgets, and we are now just bones. I hope you have looked at the budget. This is your congregation. This is your ministry. Your story. Your faith. Your sanctuary. Your religious home. Your religious education. This is it. And this is it.

Can you stand in this river? Can you stand here instead of dodging the issue like South Carolina? The first woman ordained in the United States, by the Universalists, was the Reverend Olympia Brown. No one would take her seriously, let her into college, or ordain her, but the Universalists did because they stood on the side of love then, and now. When they searched their hearts and their religious values, they could not find a religious reason to say "No" to her, which is not a resounding "Yes," but it was a "Yes" all the same.

Brown went on to successfully serve two congregations, get married, and raise children. Unheard of in her time. And she penned these words

Stand by this faith.

Work for it and sacrifice for it.

There is nothing in all the world so important as to be loyal to this faith

Which has placed before us the loftiest ideals

Which has comforted us in sorrow,

Strengthened us for noble duty

And made the world beautiful.

Do not demand immediate results

But rejoice that we are worthy to be entrusted with this great message.

How many people here today have received something of value at First Church? A friend, music, support group, sermon, haven, education, new idea?

How many of you have been transformed by your time here at First Church, had a change of heart, struggled with an issue, befriended someone you didn't like, felt challenged to change and grow, felt your heart swell, been moved to tears or laughter?

Now my friends, here is your moment. How will you then stand by this faith? Our future is not given. It must be earned.

If you have not yet pledged for the coming year, please do so by June 10. If you have not yet completed your pledge for this year (I have not and I intend to), please do so by June 10. We have a congregational meeting to discuss this all on June 21 and we need you to rise and declare yourself well before then so we know where we stand on June 21.

I stand by this faith. I hope you will too. Perhaps you did not know how much we need you, how much we count on you. Our apologies for not making this clear. We need and count on you. And, if you are under financial duress, we understand if you can do nothing more than pledge \$10 for the coming year. Thank you for whatever you can give.

It is time to enter the river and rise my friends.

I have two favorite parts in the recent film *Selma*. My second favorite is when Martin Luther King, Jr. picks up young SNCC (Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee) protester John Lewis (now Representative John Lewis) up for a night time talk and drive. MLK and Lewis have been on opposite sides of the civil rights movement - SNCC and SCLC (the Southern Christian Leadership Conference). Their respective organizations are at odds over which organization and which approach should be used to break the stalemate at Selma.

For those of you who are not familiar with this movie or the history it entails, after the murder of voting rights protester, Jimmy Lee Jackson, by a state trooper near Selma, a group of civil rights protesters wants to cross the Edmund Pettus Bridge on their way to the state capital of Montgomery, Alabama in order to champion voting rights. The first time they are brutally beaten back. The second time a larger group tries to cross, and the police part ways.

King, leading the second march, is uncertain and bends on his knee to pray. Other protesters, uncertain, follow suit. They pray. They wait. King rises and turns back to walk through the crowd, ending the second march. He is widely scorned for this decision. This is my favorite part of the film. In the face of pressure and disdain from his followers and his critics, King does something that causes his followers dismay and causes his critics to celebrate. To everyone King has failed. But King has not failed. On the contrary, he has done what someone once referred to as a highly subversive act "descending into the black abyss of chaos to find the creative unconscious," and the different solutions it creates.

Of course this is my favorite point in the movie, because King is already deep in the river. So deep he can barely breathe. His marriage is in trouble, the FBI is surveilling him, LBJ resisting him, he appears to have "failed" as a leader on the public stage. And with everyone deriding him, he prays, goes even deeper in the river, and rises again, to turn back and follow his own conscience.

What King saw standing at the front of the march was the real possibility that the police would close ranks behind the marchers, and they would be isolated from cameras and subsequently beaten by the public and the police all the way to Montgomery. King did not go back to the bank of the river when he turned back to walk through the crowd. He did not go under, he went deeper in and rose again.

That night in the car with Lewis, Lewis tells King a story about when he heard King preach and how that inspired him. Lewis is burying the hatchet for the cause. King has no memory of what inspirational words he said and depressed, laughs at the thought that he inspired anyone. He is in deep. And yet as we know, he rose the next day, after murder and heartbreak, and some weeks later took America to Montgomery.

It is not easy to enter the river and rise. It's not impossible, but it's not easy. On May 17 you walked into the river. I am so very proud. You went even deeper and refused to go under. You stood by this faith. You the people refused the "easy" way, to cut dues to the UUA and Region, which would put \$23,000 back into our budget. You turned back through the crowd to find another better way.

Yes, this could be done, but at what cost? Essentially breaking covenant with our faith, and the association that counts on us and other congregations to stand by our faith. We have

been a Fair Share congregation for over 20 years, meaning every year we faithfully pay our dues to the UUA and Region because we are in covenant with them and they give us help and services, support and information. And in the end, it would have been a cut of scarcity that would do nothing to address our long term issues and funding questions. It would also have prevented each and every one of us to reflect on what this congregation and faith means. What would your life be like if we no longer existed?

At our congregational meeting, which deserves a permanent name such as "The Rubicon" or "The Stand by Our Faith Congregational Meeting" or "The Ellen Hall Room Putsch." You waited in a line at times 10 people long at times to speak. You read from the UUA website. You offered to pay dues for yourself and your family after everything you have already pledged. You refused to be the largest UU congregation to default on its UUA and Regional dues and you refused to be the "richest poor church" as one of you put it. I left that meeting so exceptionally proud to be your minister. That is the First Church I was called to serve, the one that stands by this faith. The one that is not afraid to turn around and find a better way.

We have work to do friends. And it can be done if you will stand in the river with me. Finish your pledging, stay engaged, come to the meeting on June 21. We can do this.

Huddled together on this boat
Handed down to us - stuck
at the last bend of a wide river
splintering near the sea

Consider the prophet John, calling us
from the edge of the wilderness to name
the harm that has been done, to make it
plain, and enter the river and rise

Enter and rise my friends. Enter and rise.