

Growing Up and In, The Rev. Dr. Matthew Johnson-Doyle

I see that sparkling river,  
I hear its rushing stream,  
through years, through nature, through my veins,  
through work, through love, through dreams

It is my sister, not me, who is the real river enthusiast.  
She rafts, she kayaks, she intertubes, she canoes.  
Pretty much every weekend, she's out on the river,  
and has all kinds of certifications for river safety skills and such.  
She's been on rivers not just in Washington State and British Columbia,  
where she lives, but also in South American jungles,  
and she's kayaked on the open Pacific ocean.  
She's pretty amazing, so says her brother.

Me, I've been whitewater rafting just four times,  
though I loved it every time.  
Twice on the Wenatchee, once on the Cascade River, and once on the  
Colorado.

The Wenatchee was the first –  
I was 12 or so and went with my Dad  
as part of the trip by the Church's men's group and their kids.

The Wenatchee is a gentle river, mostly,  
and there is a lot of it that is very flat and calm.  
You paddle a little, but mostly you just drift along.  
Watch the apple orchards on the bank go by,  
feel the fresh river breeze on your face,  
chat with the other folks on the boat.

There is a peace in these places,  
but when I was 12, I wanted to get to the rapids.  
The flat part seemed like prelude to something,  
like we were waiting.  
I didn't know what I know now, that this is important,  
you get to feel comfortable in the boat,  
get to get used to the paddle and your fellow passengers.

It is something like the Mountain and the Bird in the first few years.  
The bird gets to rest, the mountain has company.  
There is a getting-to-know you stage here.  
You feel like there could be something more,  
and sometimes, when the Bird visits, you feel that sense of hope and joy  
that life, you heard once, was supposed to be about.

This is not to say that the flat place in the river  
is without its power and majesty.  
It is not say, in other words, that religious education for children and youth,

that spiritual formation at this stage,  
is only about getting used to the water,  
getting to know your paddle and how to use it,  
getting to know the others on the boat.

There are also moments of awe and wonder,  
you see the eagle soar above you,  
watch the dragonfly dart in the shallows.

The spiritual life of children is rich and vibrant –  
they have questions, they inhabit stories and myths,  
they are creative and they dream up great ideas about how it all works.

They start to figure out who they are.

Sometimes they start to think like I did, at 12 in the boat,  
if I was in charge we'd go faster,  
I'd like my own boat to go my own way.

Spiritual formation in the early years isn't just about getting used to the water,  
but that's a big part of it.

No teenager ever wants to hear from an adult  
these words:

“I thought I knew it all when I was your age, but I was wrong” –  
I surely bristled hearing them twenty years ago –  
but, alas, the adults are mostly right. (Not always. But mostly.)

Getting used to the water is important.

The mountain would love the bird to stay,  
but the mountain isn't ready for that.

There is no earth, no food, no water on the mountain,  
and the bird, were it to stay in these days, would quickly die.

We have to learn how to live, how to trust, how to love, and how to grow.

O flowing river, flood of life,  
whose source we cannot see,  
for one fleet season,  
pour your stream  
unbounded into me.

On the Colorado, you go through these amazing canyons.

You are hundreds of feet down from the top,  
and it feels like another world,  
another time.

The boat falls silent, as we look up and look around.

You are sure you are going to see a dinosaur bone sticking out of the clay,  
if not an actual dinosaur – it feels so prehistoric and ancient.

There's even an old fashioned train that runs along every once in a while,  
to make you think you're still in the old west.

And the water you float on is both ancient and new all at once.

It has freshly melted from the snowpack,  
and has that crystalline feel and look and smell of a mountain river,  
and yet you know that all water exists in a never ending cycle,  
from ocean to cloud to the rain of ages, to snow, to stream and pond,  
to river tumbling back to the ocean.

These majesties and mysteries,  
and ones like them –  
to stare up at the night sky, to witness birth or death,  
to be transformed by the love, or the hate, of another –  
these majesties and mysteries  
are the wellspring of the religious quest.

We want to know what it means,  
and not just what it means abstractly,  
but what it means for us.

How then shall we live?

What is true?

What does it mean for me?

The bird visits, and the mountain wants to know what it means.

Wants to have more of it,

but doesn't know how to make that happen.

We are a historically individualistic religion in an individualist society,

so sometimes we act like these majesties and mysteries,  
these questions and quests,  
can be answered and understood on one's own.

And, truly, there is a place for the solitary practice –  
to sit in a room by yourself and pray, or write, or just think.

To take a walk in the quiet evening, hear nothing but your own footsteps,  
and wonder what it all means.

There is a place for this.

But when Thoreau was done living deliberately,  
confronting life in the most basic terms on the shore of Walden Pond,  
he hiked over to Emerson's house for Sunday dinner,  
and talked about what he had felt and learned.

Maybe you don't even say anything,  
but floating down the ancient canyon,  
seeing the egret hiding behind the rock,  
you tap the shoulder of the person next to you  
and point.

You catch eyes and nod your head,  
see that?  
how about that?

Kendyl Gibbons, as usual, is right about this:

religious community, whatever its flavor, is here to help us deepen and celebrate and be nourished by our authentic experiences of reverence

These experiences of reverence,  
moments of awe, visits of joy or sorrow,  
they come to us, regardless of our age or station.

The questions they provoke and longings they activate  
are religious – questions and longings about meaning and truth and connection.

And religious questions and longings are answered, partly,  
in religious community.

When the moment is passed, and the canyon is less dramatic,  
it is good to know you shared it with others in the boat.

For one fleet season,  
pour your stream unbounded into me.

Twice I've gone into the river.

When I rafted the Cascade, I was about 14.

It had been raining a lot, and the river was running high and fast.

In retrospect, we probably shouldn't have done it,

but the two adults I was with –

my friend's dad and his buddy –

were game, and I was foolish.

It was exciting and fast.

Me, at all of 140 pounds of rail-thin been-stalk,

sat in front,  
while the grown-ups, 300 pounds each,  
sat in the middle and the back.

And then we hit a little depression in the water,  
went down,  
hit the rise, and went up,  
up and over.

After 99 years of visits, the mountain weeps with sorrow  
that the bird cannot stay.

The mountain cracks open.

Tears flow.

You ever been here?

Thrown overboard into rough waters?

Cracked open and weeping?

Sure you have.

This, too, can happen at any age.

A relationship goes awry.

A unbearable tragedy happens.

A growing sense of malaise grows stronger, and we feel lost at sea.

We ache for more than more of the same.

The place we want to love best seems to move away from our values,  
and we don't understand why the world is like this.

Overboard in rough waters.  
Cracked open and weeping.

You've been there.

O flowing river, sparking river,  
have mercy on us.  
Have mercy.

My friend's dad and his buddy,  
despite their foolishness about getting on the river in the first place,  
were experienced and strong rafters.  
Before I even realized that I was in the water,  
a hand reached down out of the water,  
grabbed me by the scuff of my neck,  
and pulled me atop the up-side-down boat.

I was rescued.

The bird plants a seed,  
the roots weave their way in,  
and things start to grow.

When we went rafting on the Colorado,  
we shared a raft with strangers –  
a couple from Chicago and their three children,  
us two,  
and the guide.

The couple from Chicago weren't really paying attention to the instructions,  
they didn't take advantage of flat part of the journey to get ready,  
and so we went through the rocks,  
and when the guide said,  
“back!” they kept going forward,  
and we went up on the rock –

see, here we are. that's me about the fall in.

up on the rock, and then, plop,  
in the river we go.

Between the rushing waves, you can hear the mom yell,  
my babies!

But, of course, the guide – you see him there in the green shirt,  
he has already grabbed hold of the two smaller children,  
and while the adults bob around the river,  
he and the kids are back in the boat, safe.

O flowing river,  
have mercy.

Growing up and growing in spiritual maturity and depth,  
growing in faith,  
well, sometimes you wind up in the river.  
sometimes you are terrified, for yourself or for the ones you love.  
And sometimes, somebody who knows what they are doing  
pulls you to safety.

I can't tell you how many times I've need, and found, a river guide  
just when my spiritual life needed one.  
When a UU minister colleague preached just the word I needed to hear,  
when one of you in a meeting offered up an insight or a suggestion  
that saved me from despair or disaster,  
or when a voice from our tradition—  
Ralph Waldo Emerson praising the soul, for example —  
or when this choir here, or some other, lifted in song,  
has calmed my soul and raised my heart.  
I can't tell you how many times because I lost count long ago.

Sometimes we fall in the water.

Sometimes we are rescued.

Sometimes, we have learned enough that we can rescue ourselves.

Sometimes, too, let us speak with heart and compassion,  
sometimes there is no rescue possible.

This happens too, and no one could have done anything,  
and, when this is so, we mourn together.

We weep together.

We remember together.

O flowing river, flood of life,  
pour your stream unbounded into me.

Our tears of longing and fear and need  
make a river to wet the seed,  
and grow life in new places.

The roots of new life fill the broken places,  
and heal us,  
and something else comes to be.

A place of life that comes after what has come before.

After that flip on the Cascade River,  
my life was different:

every day a gift. Every day bonus.

So what will you do with it?

It was about the same time as that that I decided on ministry as my calling,  
as my way of honoring the gift.

What will you do with the gift of your life?

How might your tears of longing become a river of life?

This is spiritual growth, for all ages:

the recognition that we have something to give,

something to do,

something to make.

That because of all we have learned,

whether we learned it the easy way

or the hard way –

especially if we learned it the hard way –

we have a gift to return to the world, to the spirit,

from whence we came and to which in time we shall return.

O river of life,

who freely drinks your water

shall never thirst again . . .

I don't know about "never thirst again."

I find that I often need to return to the well.

Kendyl says that the spiritual life, the religious life,

takes practice.

We need to come to worship so that we will remember those moments of reverence, those visits from joy, those high canyon walls and sparking waters, and hold these moments strongly enough

to get through all the rest of the nonsense, the distractions, the additions and petty injuries of the rest of life.

You've got to keep showing up.

You stop going, you forget how to paddle.

You forget how to ride it out.

I see people come to church for the first time each week.

Some of you are here for the first time today.

And sometimes they come back.

And they keep coming back.

Maybe they decide to become a member.

A year or two or five go by,

and some of them are still here.

And some are gone.

The ones who left got what they needed for a while, I guess.

They got rescued out of the water.

But then they thought they were fine.

They went back to the flat part of the river,

and thought the whole rest of the journey would be flat like this.

Or if it got rough, maybe they'd get back in the boat.

That works sometimes, but not usually.

You've got to take advantage of the flat parts.

That's when, after the excitement of the rapids,

you get to collect your breath.

That's when you really get to bond with your fellow rafters –  
make your boat into a chalice circle and talk to each other –  
that's when you get to rest your hands  
and have a snack.

The ones who stay, the ones who stay sometimes for decades and decades –  
their whole lives,  
they know.

I should say, you know.

There will be flat parts, and there will be rapids,  
and you stay in the boat together.

We need each other.

Eventually, the tree grows tall enough, and the grass is enough,  
and we are ready to build here our nest –  
ready, maybe I should say, to have a nest of Joy build upon our soul,  
to make this old mountain into a new land,  
a land of life and beauty.

You know, you who have made this church your home,  
that growing up and growing in faith  
is always happening, and you've got to keep working at it.

Maybe you heard that sermon before,  
but that was before you went through the rapids,

and it has a different meaning now.

Maybe you've served on every committee,  
but you know that there are times when you can put your paddle down,  
and there times,  
when the river guide says "paddle left!"  
that everybody better sure as hell paddle left.

O sparking river,  
through nature, through my veins, through work, through love, through dream,  
be with us.

May we inspire and teach and learn from and rescue and be saved by one  
another.

May we grow in wisdom, in love, in faith,  
all the days of our lives.

May that river of life buoy our souls, all the days of our lives.