

Sermon

Water from a Deeper Well

Rev. Julia Older

I had a thirst that I could not quell
Lookin' for the water from a deeper well
Emmy Lou Harris

What is it to be human? Is this it? Is this all there is? This rather short period of having a body, which feels and thinks before it disappears? Is this all there is to us?

I know that there are some who think this is it . . .and some who have questions. Perhaps we all hope for more. But then perhaps that hope is only our ego, which has a nearly impossible time trying to imagine that someday it won't be here and we won't exist at all.

This is not a question that can be answered with absolute certainty. At least in our religious tradition there are no absolutes.

In Unitarian Universalism, which values so highly our intellectual capacity, we are inclined toward skepticism. And not inclined toward giving up our free will to any teacher no matter how well intentioned or wise.

That's one of my critiques of Hinduism as I understand it, . . .tho' admittedly I am an outsider, . . .and uppity to boot. I can't imagine trusting any teacher completely. And the student-guru relationship seems to require letting go and trusting, accepting the guru as a kind of spiritual parent.

I might be completely wrong. However, I was born in the West and taught within Western schools and raised in Western traditions and IF all of what I have been taught is wrong, there must be some karmic reason why I find myself immersed by context in this worldview.

What I do do, have always done as far back as I can remember, and what I am psychologically compelled to do by my temperament, is to ask questions about meaning and purpose. I am driven to keep asking questions, and sorting, so far as possible, between assumptions about the nature of existence, and reality itself. Trying to get down and down to some deep water that I can believe wholeheartedly. I keep searching for my version of “I think therefore I am.”

I must report that after 65 years of searching and swimming and diving, I don't feel I've gone very deep. I'm not totally sure of anything.

I hope that by living the questions, and not being sucked into “fads,” and making conscious effort, I'm not living at the mere surface of things. I do want depth. I want the experience of going deep, not merely floating about on the surface appearance of things.

One way that floating might look is being consumed with a desire for things...even beautiful things. Acquiring could be a substitute for deep experience. World success as measured by money or possessions, or even by the number of friends one might have, is not living in the depths.

I might say that I'm searching for truth. I apparently need to figure it out for myself. Of course I have many teachers whom I love and trust and admire. And many holy texts . . .many of them books of poetry. But I have not been convinced that giving myself over to any one teacher serves me well. By temperament or by obstinacy, I can't simply accept someone else's answers.

I'm off to India on my sabbatical to be challenged by what I don't even know I don't know. Putting myself outside of what is normal for me is a sure-fire way to notice some new things. I guess travel is one kind of “practice.”

It is important to have a practice: some method for discarding assumptions and seeing past the distractions of life. Otherwise we get sucked off course over and over again.

Your practice may not look anything like meditation. Your practice is whatever you use to step outside of what the world asks of you, so that you can look at your experience and your own choices.

Truthfully, even with a practice, we get sucked away, but the discipline of a practice sometimes gets us out of the current so that we can examine life for ourselves and not let our context define truth for us.

I've been doing this ministry stuff for about 12 years now. Before that, as you know, I wandered around for a while like a forest dweller. No longer a householder, I had a great freedom to figure out what matters most to me. And before that, for 25 years I was a hospice volunteer. I had intimate experiences accompanying people who knew they were going to die (and soon), and their families.

I've had an extraordinary amount of time to observe and think and process and look some more.

One of the things that continue to grab my attention is how we are shaped by our childhoods and compelled to live out of the decisions we made when we were very small. All of us. And all childhoods have deep pain woven in them. Even if your family was generous and gracious and thrilled to have you, you had loss and grief and now you have scars that interfere with your capacity to look with complete neutrality at your experience.

If you make a decision to do only one thing as you engage the meaning of life, I suggest you look as fearlessly as you can at your own early life and figure out how you came to believe what you now accept as true.

What you have not fully examined is still directing your course.

Many of you have therapists or spiritual directors or go to mediation centers or regularly do yoga as a technique rather than merely exercise. All of this is practice and all of it helps us to let go of the stories that run lets and us dive deeper.

Altered states. I missed the years of drug exploration. I know there is learning to be had using enteogens. And, I've been assured that meditation can take you to the same places.

As can Nature mysticism.

I know you will learn a lot from the Sunday minister who will be here in the pulpit most weeks while I'm away, Rev. Laurel Liefert. She ended up in ministry because of a sunrise in Yosemite.

I was called by my love of the creek near my childhood home. These were portals for us. You have your own. Perhaps walking is your discipline. Listening to music.

Meditation is only one method for going beneath your everyday experience. As your thoughts and stories emerge, let them go. Let your thoughts be leaves floating on the river that is your life.

You are the river, not the leaves.

Whether there is life after this life with some kind of continuing sentience or not, who you are is deeper than your thoughts and even more important than your actions, although taken together your actions matter and shape what you will learn or fail to learn.

How do you live? What matters to you? Truth above all else? Generous good works? Service to others? Finding a place of quiet in your own heart?

I just read a quote by Ram Dass in my favorite magazine, "The Sun." This was in Sy Safransky's Notebook for this October: "During the height of the cold war, the spiritual teacher Ram Dass was asked whether the world was facing a nuclear Armageddon or, as some were prophesying a 'new age' of peace and love and deeper awareness. Ram Dass said, "I used to think I should have an opinion on this. But as I examined it, I saw that if it is to be Armageddon and we're going to die, the best thing to do is prepare for it is to quiet my mind, open my heart, and deal with the suffering in front of me. And if it is going to be the new age, the best thing to do is to quiet my mind, open my heart, and deal with the suffering in front of me."

I suppose I am trying to say a similar thing. You may or may not believe that spiritual practice matters in the way of advancing your own soul. You may or may not care about the esoteric, the other world, the purely spiritual, ---- but I'll bet you do want to live life deeply, do all the good you can, and savor the pleasures of this world. To do that, you must have a practice, however you understand it, to excavate your own formation, and make choices from all that you have come to know so far.

Pay attention. That's really all we can do. Notice your experience and do the best you can. Which also means, be openhearted. Act from calm rather than hysteria.

Act from deep gratitude rather than rage . . .even though there are many things that might legitimately cause us to feel rage. Acting from anger alone does not serve life.

Look at the world. See the beauty and the suffering. Experience rage at injustice but act from love. *Act from love.*

This is also true: You have everything you need. Even now. Even as we are aware of how limited our knowledge is, we have what we need.

“What we need is here,” says the poet Wendell Berry.

“Geese appear high over us,
pass, and the sky closes. Abandon,
as in love or sleep, holds
them to their way, clear
in the ancient faith: what we need
is here. And, we pray, not
for new earth or heaven, but to be
quiet in heart, and in eye,
clear. What we need is here.”

This sermon is part one of this particular topic. Or part 200 . . . Every sermon I’ve ever written comes back to these essential questions. The “Why” and “How” of living.

I hope I will learn an extraordinary amount in the next four months. I hope that my sabbatical will give me something more to say than I know to say now. I hope to swim in very deep water. I’ll be by the Ganges, at the burning ghats, and in ancient temples....and at the oldest synagogue in Asia.

I only have two more weeks at church to prepare to leave. I’m a bit scared. I’ll miss you. It is hard to let go. And I am wildly excited.

Blessed be.