

Love is the Water that Wears Down the Rock

Sermon delivered Sunday, February 11, 2018
to the Unitarian Universalist Community of the Mountains

by Rev. Kevin Tarsa

Opening Words attributed to Chinese philosopher Lao Tzu

“Water is fluid, soft, and yielding. But water will wear away rock, which is rigid and cannot yield. As a rule, whatever is fluid, soft, and yielding will overcome whatever is rigid and hard. This is another paradox: what is soft is strong.”

Lighting of the Chalice UUCM’s new mission covenant statement

*With courageous love and a sense of wonder,
we cultivate our spiritual, emotional, and intellectual strength
to create a world more compassionate, sustainable, and just.*

Sermon *Love is the Water that Wears Down the Rock*
by Rev. Kevin Tarsa

As I think about perseverance and what it means to be a people of perseverance, I’m aware that there is a muscular/head-strong kind of perseverance: we plow through, come what may, no one stopping us now, we persevere.

And there is a softer kind of perseverance: we keep at it, quietly, steadily, faithfully no matter what.

I have long been drawn to the metaphor of water slowly, gradually, steadily wearing down seemingly impenetrable and immutable rock.

“Be like water,” Kendra Ford invites, “eat boulders quietly.”

Drip. Drip. Drip. Drip...

In the early 80s my sister and my feminist and lesbian friends came back from the Michigan Womyn’s Music Festival each year with recordings of songs that became touchstones for them and for me – including Meg Christian’s warm, rich voice singing Holy Near’s words:

[sing] “...Can we be like drops of water, falling on the stone, splashing, breaking, dispersing in air, weaker than the stone, by far, but be aware that as time goes by the rock will wear away...And the water comes again...”

Drip. Drip. Drip. Drip...

In those days, as I was trying to find my “self” as a young gay man, I found in Meg’s voice and in Holly’s lyrics hope and encouragement to continue the difficult, important and seemingly endless work of seeking...not even equality and rights, at first, but seeking simply tolerance and maybe eventually acceptance of lesbian and gay persons. We were making a good faith effort to change awareness and attitudes, one conversation, one workshop, one church service at a time, with occasional stabs at city ordinances, but there was little sign that things would change much anytime soon.

I have reflected many times since on that encouraging, hopeful idea that water can wear away rock, slowly but steadily, though we likely won’t see it at the time, (Someday...) and even though again and again we ourselves splash and break and disperse in the air as we keep launching ourselves at the hard surfaces that seem to block the way.

My first week in Grass Valley, I went to Purdon Crossing and was taken with the boulders clearly shaped by the movement of water. [photo] I found scooped out bowls, [photo] and intriguing shapes. [photo]

“...the river wears near and near, flow outlasting the standing firm.”
(Wendell Berry)

Little did I know that four months later the river would look like this: [Photo of Yuba River at it’s height, January 2017]

Okay, sometimes it’s not a slow drip that wears the rock. Sometimes it’s a torrent of water, and everything the water carries – in this case all the rock and sand from the hydraulic mining. No wonder those boulders had scooped out hollows!

This afternoon, in one of our religious exploration sessions, Keith Johnson and I will introduce Rev. William Barber’s ideas around coalition building for the sake of those who most need support and protection in our country.

The Moral Monday movement Barber initiated has some of this feel, of many drops of water coming together to form larger and larger tributaries into something that might have adequate power to make a difference - non-violent but passionate power grounded in united moral dissent. For the sake of people of color, poor people, LGBTQ people, women ...joining energies and focuses to garner collective strength. It is an example of shared perseverance, even though here, too, Barber says it’s not about force, but about perseverance and being willing to suffer.

No matter whether swiftly or slowly, dramatically or quietly accomplished, the ability of water to shape stone rings miraculous and awesome and inspiring and beautiful. [photos]

One of my favorite experiences of this phenomenon is not about water but about feet. On an Island in Lake Chiemsee in southern Germany, there is a Benedictine convent founded in 782 and rebuilt most recently in 1836. The doorway to the chapel has a stone threshold, and that stone has a very deep dip in it right in the middle, worn over the years by all the footsteps of the nuns and other people moving in and out.

Drip, Drip, Drip, Drip...

This message of water, soft and flexible, wearing down rock, rigid and unyielding, is a message that appeals to oppressed people who are facing entrenched powers, or to any of us, I suppose, when we are feeling powerless. It made sense to me that the oppressed circles I knew best when I was young, women and LGBTQI persons, would be drawn to this metaphor – in Roman poet Ovid's take:

"Dripping water hollows out stone, not through force but through persistence."

When you don't have power and don't have force to wield, then persistence/perseverance becomes your power, especially when united with the perseverance of others. It is, for some, the available slow route to change, to a world or life that is better, no matter how long it might take. It's about outlasting the rigid obstacle. It's an underdog's message and metaphor of hope that justice and right and love will prevail, eventually, if we just keep at it. Someday....

(sing: *There is more love, somewhere...I'm gonna keep on, til I find it...*)

Drip. Drip. Drip. Drip...

In the early 90s my progressive womyn friends introduced me to feminist thinkers and writers who challenged the model of slow, steady progress toward change and equality, and I read black writers' critiques of slow progress toward justice and equity. They pointed out that messages like "it's going to take time" and "you can't move too fast" and "change must be gradual" arise as pushback from those with power whenever real social change starts to look possible.

So, while I am still very much fed by the call to steady, gentle perseverance and the metaphor of drops of water slowly wearing away the stone (it fits my personality) I approach it as one possibility among others, and, in Buddhist parlance, I want to learn to apply it skillfully, when it's truly a healthy and helpful metaphor, and not when it's merely a variation on Sisyphus's plight. Sisyphus is the king in Greek mythology who is condemned to roll a huge stone up a hill, only to have it roll all the way back down as soon as he reaches the summit. It was a punishment for his outwitting death.

These days, when it comes to the world we inhabit, and what might make a useful difference toward justice and right, I find myself torn between faith in the

muscular kind of perseverance or resistance, and faith in the watery kind of perseverance and resistance. Of course it's not necessarily either/or.

I'm curious, have any of you, in your life, found hope and encouragement in that metaphor of water's capacity to wear away stone over time?

If you are willing to share it, to what aspect of your life have you applied that metaphor? What rigid surface are/were you hoping to carve away or change through your steady perseverance?

At first glance, this notion appears to be about changing the rock, about achieving eventual success, as a person, or perhaps as generations of persons who get in line and keep splashing and who eventually alter the rock.

"...the rock will wear away..."

But the definition of perseverance is not necessarily about success. To persevere is to be more than steadfast in the face of difficulty or delay, it is, in particular, to be steadfast **when there is little chance of success.**

A year ago January, the day after the women's marches around the country, I named my observation that marches and rally's like that rarely change the world outside the march. They don't often change laws or legislators or the public's mind. Marches do, however, at their best, change the marchers, providing support, affirmation, inspiration, and strengthened commitment.

Wendell Berry helps dig a little deeper. He wrote:

Much protest is naive; it expects quick, visible improvements and despairs and gives up when such improvement does not come. Protestors who hold out longer have perhaps understood that success is not the proper goal... Protest that endures, I think, is moved by a hope far more modest than that of public success: namely, the hope of preserving qualities in one's own heart and spirit that would be destroyed by acquiescence.

- Wendell Berry, "On Difficult Hope"

Perhaps the perseverance metaphor we've been talking about is not primarily or at least not always about changing the stone, but rather about preserving the qualities in our own heart and spirit that would be destroyed if we weren't persevering, if we weren't assembling and marching, reminding and supporting, outward success likely or no. Maybe perseverance is primarily about keeping hope alive in us, keeping our inner spiritual/emotional selves intact, rather than changing something outside of us.

Maybe the helpful metaphor is, at times, the drip, drip, drip in a self-administered IV line.

To the extent that is so, what does it mean for this congregation to be a people of perseverance?

Oh, now my thoughts go many different directions.

But this morning, for a start, I suggest that, it will mean living out your newly articulated mission with perseverance - living it first with each other.

To do everything – and I mean everything - with courageous love, from expressing your feeling honestly, to imagining what this community could do if it pooled and channeled its energies. To love courageously, again and again, because of what it will mean for you as well as us. To love courageously here, anchored in the strength that comes with vulnerability as Brené Brown defines it: “uncertainty, risk and emotional exposure, with no guarantees.”

Drip, drip, drip, drip...

It will mean keeping your sense of wonder open at all times, especially when you are doggone sure that you have the right and final answer, and especially when the person across the table is driving you to the edge of your patience...

Drip, drip, drip, drip...

It will mean cultivating your spiritual, emotional and intellectual strength, ... through your persistent willingness to face and find your way through uncertainty and risk with honesty and courage, your persevering willingness to risk emotional exposure, and your commitment to keep your intellectual strength in conversation with your spiritual and emotional strength.

Drip, drip, drip, drip...

It will mean finding, feeling and living your own compassion for others, AND being vulnerable enough to receive others' compassion for you, AND, to be honest, sometimes finding and facing the healthy limits of compassion.

Drip, drip, drip, drip...

It begins, all of it begins, with again and again loving courageously, whatever we together discover that to mean...

Drip, drip, drip, drip...

Drip, drip, drip, drip...

Drip, drip, drip, drip...

Drip, drip, drip, drip...

So may we be.

^ **Closing Hymn** *Love is the Water That Wears Down the Rock* by Pat Wictor

^ **Closing Words** (at the pace of a water drip) “love, love, love, love....”

Kendra Ford