

“Finding Deeper Streams”

Rev. David Gregory

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Pentecost 3



Readings

John 4:13-14

from *The Message* by Eugene Peterson

“Everyone who drinks this water will get thirsty again and again. Anyone who drinks the water I give will never thirst—not ever. The water I give will be an artesian spring within, gushing fountains of endless life.”

Breaking Surface

Mark Nepo from *The Book of Awakening*

Let no one keep you from your journey,
no rabbi or priest, no mother
who wants you to dig for treasures
she misplaced, no father
who won't let one life be enough,
no lover who measures their worth
by what you might give up,
no voice that tells you in the night
it can't be done.

Let nothing dissuade you
from seeing what you see
or feeling the winds that make you
want to dance alone
or go where no one
has yet to go.

You are the only explorer.
Your heart, the unreadable compass.
Your soul, the shore of a promise
too great to be ignored.

Several years ago I attended a talk by author Reza Aslan where he described his personal spiritual journey from Islam to Christianity and back again. To many Christians and Muslims, his path might seem difficult to comprehend, so he offered this saying to illustrate the point: “You can dig six holes one foot deep or one hole six feet deep.” Either choice takes the same effort, but by remaining in one spot and digging deeper, you’re far more likely to locate an underground stream of fresh water. Even a hundred shallow holes will never get you there. When Aslan was a young boy, his family fled Iran to escape the revolution. Growing up here in the Bay Area he became an evangelical Christian, but as an adult realized that Islam was his deepest, most meaningful path to Source. He decided to return there and dig deeper, a decision that has brought to all of us an insightful body of religious scholarship around Christianity and Islam, and by association, other traditions as well.

Aslan’s words have always resonated with me, and for good reason. Over the six decades of my life, I have tasted my way through several spiritual paths, religious institutions, and transformational teachings. I have been a Quaker by birthright, a confirmed United Methodist, a Baptist preacher, a Presbyterian elder, and a minister in the United Church of Christ. A casual observer might say that I’ve had trouble “finding myself,” but I can tell you that this is not true. All of my spiritual venturing has happened in the interest of a deeper well. The teaching of a young rabbi known as Jesus of Nazareth represents the place I have stayed the longest and dug the deepest. I have found in these teachings my deepest most meaningful path, but certainly not my only one.

During my first UCC pastorate, a Presbyterian colleague introduced me to Thich Nhat Hanh and the practice of mindfulness. Later on, I trained as a spiritual director with a Marist brother who is a Jungian psychologist. My own husband Tripp is a transformational life coach steeped in Chinese medicine, alchemical healing, and neuroscience. I love the many poets whose creative journeys deepen my own. I feel at home chanting the Daily Office with Benedictine brothers, sitting silently in a Buddhist sangha, or acquainting myself with the spiritual rhythms of some of my family members who are Muslim.

Viewing Divine Source through the metaphor of an underground stream makes it easier to respect and even participate in the spiritual journeys or religious choices of others. As Roman Catholics, Muslims, Jews, Evangelicals, mainline Protestants, and Unitarians (to name just a few), we identify our sacred writings, establish our institutions, rituals, and spiritual practices. For a time we may be tempted to think that our own path is the “right” one because it is the one that has formed us. But once we make our own path normative for the whole of humanity, it’s a sure sign that we haven’t gone deep enough. We’re stuck in a hole that is far too shallow. It is our adolescent spirituality talking, and our failure to grow beyond it is what makes our general culture untenably polarized and our churches intolerant and sectarian. It doesn’t matter whether we are conservative, moderate, or liberal in our perspective; we all need to grow up. When we do, we invariably meet up with our counterparts in other traditions, some very different from our own. At first we may be shocked to find common ground with them, until we start cultivating that ground and begin to see the wonderful bounty it produces. We may notice an unspoken recognition among people who find these deeper streams, sometimes in a knowing glance acknowledging that although we have been digging from different locations, we are all finding our way to the same Living Water.

In the 64 years of its existence our own denomination, the United Church of Christ, has sought to invite these many voices into meaningful dialogue (it was in fact at a UCC gathering that I met Reza Aslan to begin with). The Community Congregational Church of Tiburon, founded when the UCC was just two years old, has sought to do much the same thing. Yes, we are an expression of the Christian church, but no, we have never said that Christianity is the only way to God. There are those within the Christian household who would say that this amounts to heresy, and to them I would say, "I'm going to dig a little deeper, and maybe you can too. And as we grow in Spirit and in Truth, perhaps we can meet one day in that stream of Living Water."

One thing that can be said of CCC is that we have a long history of forward thinking, and we have always been a place of exploration and respect for multiple paths. We have promised each other that this will be so, particularly in the document we call our church Covenant. We have set the expectation that "while praying, studying, working, and celebrating together, we shall experience the moments of our lives in spontaneous response to the call of God."

While there have been many times in the past that we have been called upon to honor multiple paths for multiple reasons, our present moment calls us to up our commitment to such a dialogue. We used to think that it would be a nice thing to promote unity and oneness through ecumenical and interfaith dialogue. We thought it would bring about a peaceful world for the benefit of all; but now it is an existential question. The survival of the earth, including our own survival, quite literally depends upon our ability to dig deeper for that oneness. If we can find ourselves to be in the single flow of humanity, in the single flow of divinity, in a place of oneness with the cosmos, then we'll begin to live and love and work together in brand new ways. We are in the midst of one of those spontaneous responses to the call of God. Religious traditions and spiritual communities all over the world are being called to new ways of being and doing. It is a time of reformation, and though it can give us some trepidation, it is also a very exciting time to be alive.

Where is the place in your life where you have dug the deepest for the Living Water? What are the religious and spiritual paths that have given your life context and meaning? How would you identify them? What have you noticed about the ways others around you find theirs? Can you name the many places this search has taken you? This is a defining moment as we ponder a new creation, or at least our newest green, growing edge. We're about to embark on a whole new chapter in the life of our church, in the life of our community, and in the life of our world. I cannot wait to see who and what we might encounter there, and how we'll grow together!

