

The Riddle of Fishing

Community and Spirituality

Chaplain Robert Keim

September 11, 2016

When I was very young, my Granny would take me fishing in the afternoons after school; fishing in 19th century phosphate pits near my home in Mulberry. These adventures were nothing spectacular; just drifting quietly in her little boat beneath the oaks, willows and pines of central Florida. And when her old Chevrolet – Lena – pulled her weight in aluminum and cane, and slept while we drifted quietly across time, my heart heard whispers – dreams of redwings humming summer tunes to the song of the waters in my soul.

I loved to fish more than anything else in the world. All through high school, while my parents had very different ideas, I dreamed of nothing more than being on the water.

But oh, how reality can intrude. You know, those things that are so much a part of all our lives: go to college, find a spouse, start a family, get a job, it's time to grow up, earn a living, stop daydreaming and on and on. For one reason or another, over the half-century since leaving Mulberry, I have gone fishing maybe six times.

One December day some years back, I found myself out on Lake Hancock with Irene's brother and his son. And afterward, I began to understand why they say "you can't go home again." For while much of that old feeling returned, something else came with it; a subtle sensation I'd never known before. It affected me so I wrote a short meditation to guide myself again and again:

Our subtle waves cross the mirrored wintering trees,
Yours rolling with new weather and a spinning earth,
Mine the life from your tannin depths to tease,
Stalking your world in a brief rush of the hunt.
Gray-blue clouds and a cryptic sun,
Bathe the world in a moody, silent, stillness
Broken only by flocks of coots and gallinules,
Who ignore the cool duskiness in noisy dances of mating.
Calmed at last by your blankets of heaven and water,
The riddle of this moment, unhurried, intrudes:
That a place so tranquil, that so touches the heart,
Could bear me to the country of fright and wounds,
And hold my heart in such seductive time.

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The more than fifty years since my time in Granny's little boat has been a time of great change, of much movement in my life and the world. Not the least of these changes could be called a **"loss of innocence"** in many of the things I do - among them the act of fishing. The discord I felt on leaving Lake Hancock was palpable, and troubling.

But, why? So I've grown older; so what? So I'm a little less innocent than I once was. What of it? Where did this discord come from, what is it, and why is it so strong? What is this riddle of fishing I'm living?

Well, I want you to join me in drifting a bit down some other waters for a few moments; I want to show you one path to better understanding.

To me, after addressing the basic needs of survival, one of the key building blocks of becoming human is spiritual grounding: fundamental thoughts about the nature and meaning of life. As I see it, the constructs that emerge begin in wonder: Who are we? Why are we here? What does life and this world mean? What happens when I die?

And then there are those that belong to each of us individually: Why am I troubled by going fishing, when it used to be such a part of life?

Ultimately, the answers we find – or maybe just what we learn by living through our mysteries – help us begin the act of putting flesh and bones onto our world. This body of thought speaks to the very core of who we are, to what moves and sustains us, to what is deepest in our souls. Of all the things that make up life, the spirituality that roots each of us is that to which we return instinctively. In the most silent of nights, it is the very beating of our hearts.

My grounding is the experience of the marvelous, what I call *touching the center of the universe*. In this experience I walk the mystery of life, waking to a world newly made every day, a world where everyone and everything becomes fully who and what they are. A world where grass is green and the sky is blue, where thunderstorms bring rain and the night sky is filled with stars.

It is also acknowledging the incredible scientific profundity and mystery intrinsically embedded in the eternally evolving Earth and bearing witness to the human truths of that which overwhelm us with power and grace. Stepping into this grounding is being who I am, fully able to live that reality and spirit of becoming in the world. So rooted, every morning is the dawn of creation, a wholly new beginning.

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Each day a miracle happens - the sun comes up and a new day, a new opportunity to complete ourselves a bit more begins – and all of us share in this wonder.

From the depths of this vision have emerged four spiritual truths:

First, fragments of the holy are scattered throughout the universe.

Second, everything that exists on this “third rock from the sun” is woven together. Each and every one of us is recycled star-stuff.

Third, every act has the potential of a spiritual dimension; every act. In fulfilling this potential, each is imbued with the ability to deepen our humanity.

Fourth, so grounded, I am called to affirm Unitarian Universalism’s 7th Principle: *Respect for the interdependent web of all existence, of which we are a part* – affirming my place in the universe, and encouraging me to extend my life’s work from the primarily human-centered Environmental Justice to wider, more encompassing Ecological Justice.

Having gotten to this point, let us return to the riddle. Why did I feel at cross-purposes on leaving Lake Hancock? To be honest it’s really quite simple: I put my grounding to test. Fishing for enjoyment went against my very first principle - that everything has some degree of the holy. If there is some bit of this truth in every one who stands, walks, flies, swims or channels sunlight on this Earth, then I am not intrinsically superior, and living as if I am is spiritual arrogance.

Simply put, I am called to not impose suffering or death on another living being without deep, just cause. For me, living means preserving as much earthly richness as I can for all who follow me, and celebrating this place and time. By taking both myself and the fish of Lake Hancock to the “*country of fright and wounds*,” I took another for granted. I valued my enjoyment more than his life or the unnecessary fright or trauma he endured.

Coming to this understanding walked me through discord because, for me, spirituality and life are interwoven; you cannot pull them apart. The fabric between the two cannot be divided or bent

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without doing violence to one or the other and does not suffer untruth or dishonesty well. Thus, a substantial part of the meaning of existence is to be found in how we live through challenges, how we turn our spirituality into life (not just a way of thought). For me, this means celebrating and honoring my belief in this world as the starting point of life and meaning.

What I felt on Lake Hancock was something profoundly deep: community beyond human constraints. Underneath a cryptic sun, I came to understand the community to which we extend our belief: the community of life. I touched the eternal in a moment. I met a brother.

This grounding lesson taught me that if why we're here on Sunday does not have a living spiritual foundation – even if it be rough about the edges – then we are sure to be troubled. And if our spirituality has no tangible ethics, we are likely to disappear completely, for the absence of ethics equals the absence of life. One does not exist without the other. Our quandary is that if we wrestle with language too long, we get lost in the words - but if we try to live without them, we may not know where to go.

And if who we are cannot give life to a community, we will always be incomplete. Grounding, ethics and community are the life and reality of this gathering. Otherwise, we will remain a sort of construct we tell ourselves would be good for us, but it won't mean much in our lives.

Even more, our spirituality calls us to bring our lives work towards some kind of harmonious whole. As a group, we demonstrate the vitality of our religion by the breadth and energy of our community. Where we welcome spiritual travellers we meet along the way, where we share our dreams, visions and beliefs and listen to others' with our souls – there we will be a living community, a force to be reckoned with in the larger world, and a rich and varied home to the quest for the greater spiritual dimensions of this life.

And when we live our 7th Principle, and extend community to all creation, fish become a part of the larger world in which we live. What they bring to our spiritual quest, as well as our compendium of knowledge, I do not entirely know - or fully comprehend. I can only say this – their contribution adds subtle but important value to the wisdom we strive to grow and nurture. We do them needless harm at our peril.

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Thus is the riddle of fishing itself transformed. It is no longer just about the difference in feeling that marks the years since boyhood. No, it is a far more compelling mystery now. It asks how I will manage to live in a world where I am sometimes obliged to take another life to survive, and how I will learn to live with deep respect and love for those who help me live on.

Yes, I have lost the innocence of fishing. But in return, I gained a whole world I never really knew before. Spirituality opened the door to the world of water, then left me at the outskirts of ethics. As I began to awaken to this fact, the boundaries of my known universe ran away in front of me. The only peace I know requires grounding - both in understanding and life.

As for fishing, having lived the riddle, I may go again; the lure of water is strong and deep. When I can fish in a way rooted in the wonder and truth in which I am immersed, not disrespectful of those I might stalk, I may once more cross the bar. Learning to live that way will be like listening to the whisper of rainfall on Heaven's Lake, drifting beneath fragrant pines, conversing with the fish.

Amen and blessed be.