

Everything is Washed Away

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The stories speak of it. How everything is washed away, destroyed or irrevocably changed. Even the landscape, the ground itself, becomes different. All the recognizable landmarks are gone, and the world as we knew it, as we counted on it to be for most or even all of our lives, for generations perhaps before that, is swept away.

The old ways are no good anymore. Human will, once so reliable, fails to make sense of it. Dreams begin to, but are heavy with currents of confusion and layers of silt mixed with massive rocks of impasse. At such times even those among us who do not believe in epic stories, in the depth and mystery of myth, live our days and nights as if time and truth were no longer real.

In these experiences the paths, the markers, even the maps are gone. New maps are needed, made by new mapmakers who must emerge, borne into this altered landscape, able to wander the wildness there with the courage and language to chart what they find. And in all these stories, one fact:

Not everyone will survive. And those who do will never, ever forget.

Flood stories, tales of entire worlds destroyed by water and wind and power, exist in every culture, in every age. In all these stories, it goes like this:.

We wake one day, or maybe it is the middle of what seems a perfectly normal afternoon, and it is the end of the world as we know it. Nothing has prepared us for it – nothing could have prepared us for it, except perhaps for the few, who in these myths and legends, are taken into god’s confidence, or held in the safety net of the prophets. But in every case, the waters have risen and are rising all around.

One of the first flood legends is the Epic of Gilgamesh. From Ancient Mesopotamia, this is among the earliest known flood stories, originating perhaps in the 27th century B.C.E. It originally had the title “He Who Saw the Deep”. If you know the story of Genesis, you know much of the story of Gilgamesh, for many of the same elements are shared as they are by the thousands of flood legends from around the world. Always, there is a lesson for humanity to learn from the vast destruction, from the often violent and irreversible cleansing of the land. Some of you know that even here, we have not been exempt, for in this valley, not so long ago (when compared to the story of Gilgamesh or even the story of Noah and his ark) we saw such a time. Among the headlines of local papers were these: **"Great Wall of Water Sweeps Sleeping Victims Into Eternity" and "Death Flood comes In Darkness"**.

It was March 12, 1928, near midnight, in Saugus. The great St. Francis Dam failed and the dam's reservoir of 12.5 billion gallons of water poured down the

narrow canyon, in a 140-foot-high wall of water, right through this valley, taking nearly 500 men, women and children to their deaths. And in a less known piece of the story which is so relevant today, the actual number was probably much higher, “since San Francisquito Canyon was home to hundreds of transients and illegal immigrants who were never accounted for...”

(http://seis.natsci.csulb.edu/VIRTUAL_FIELD/Francisquito_Dam/franmain.html). In the history of our state, only the 1906 San Francisco earthquake killed more people.

It was a flood of epic proportions, like many. As the waters made their way to the sea, they lay waste to Castaic Junction, to Piru, Fillmore, to Santa Paula and Saticoy. Relations and friends of those here today were there. Some lived, like Logan Hardison’s grandmother and aunts. But even now, the story is told again here and in all the effected areas, each spring – last year some of you, along with me, visited the Oil Museum here on Main Street to view the photos, to read the accounts, and to remember.

We remember because we never want to forget. These stories symbolize change, not small change but transitions so immense that they mark everyone in their path. Many of the legends involve water, but as we know, vast, sweeping change comes in many forms– and some are integral to successful human development:

In the riddle of the sphinx, for example, as part of Oedipus' own epic story, he is presented with the question: *What animal walks on four feet in the morning, two feet at noon, and three feet in the evening, yet has only one voice?* The answer – *the human being*. As William Bridges, author of one of the best books on change that I know, puts it, in his book “Transitions”:

The riddle represents a scheme in which there are two pivotal transition point (in human life). The first... is the transition from dependence to separateness and independence. The second ... coming somewhere in the afternoon of life, is symbolized by the acquisition of the cane or staff – a transition that in the context of the mythic story of Oedipus is not simply the coming of physical decrepitude but is connected with a whole cluster of changes that includes suffering and deepened insight and disengagement from an outlived way of living.”

In that early flood myth of Gilgamesh, which, remember, in its original form was entitled ‘He Who Saw the Deep’, we learn of one who saw *below* the surface, who saw into the depths themselves, and once having seen, could never live the same again. That is why we tell the legends, the myths, and the real stories of the deep, so we can learn from them. Many of the real stories that come somewhere in the afternoon of our lives –beyond childhood and the early stage of adulthood – come well before we die; though a few of us will die in the learning. Or it will be the death of those we love most which yields for us this seeing into the deep. It can be no other way.

And just because we have seen the depths once does not mean we are excused from being thrust into those dark swirling waters again. “Suffering,

deepened insight and disengagement from an outlived way of living” come to us all, some earlier than others, some more often and perhaps more deeply, but none of us – not one – is exempt.

When my phone rang in late November I was not expecting an epic time. But there it was, the voice of my physician calling with test results, saying the words we really never want to hear: *We found something*. It was a Thursday afternoon, and my sermon not quite done for that Sunday, and here she was saying to me “I need you to clear your calendar for the next few days, probably at least a week.” And I... said what any minister would say, of any faith tradition, I can’t do that. I have to be at my church on Sunday. I said it a bunch, I am sorry to say, as this well meaning physician kept repeating herself, *I need you to clear your calendar, completely*, and finally growing exasperated with me, and knowing because of my work and family history I would understand the gravity of these words, she said, “we think you may be having a stroke.”

That got my attention, to be sure. And just to emphasize her point she added, I need you to go to the store, right now, to get aspirin, and take one, and if anything, anything, changes about how you feel I need you to get to the E. R. where we will put you in an ambulance which will take you to Santa Barbara, where their team of neurosurgeons will meet you. She didn’t say these words, but I heard her saying clearly: “if you make it ok through the night,” that the following

day I would meet with a much regarded neurosurgeons, who, she said clearly
“...will no doubt admit you to the hospital on the spot.”

In those deep waters I saw too soon and too clearly the face of death come right up next to mine, as if to touch me, despite my wild, uncontrollable desire to turn away. And in such times, that is part of the experience, whether we want it or not, whether we are ready or not.

At the minister’s winter meeting last week, in worship, each of us was asked to write down something which had been said to us that granted hope and courage. We could have used anytime in our lives, any words. But I – I looked back not so many weeks ago, to my friend who took me to the neurosurgeon that day and who stayed with me into that long night, through a CT scan and a brain angiogram and a lumbar puncture, who said – when I was probably the most afraid, these words, the ones I wrote down that day for my colleagues, words that caused even some of our most seasoned ministers to take in their breath, audibly, and hold it inside: these words...

Whatever happens, I will be there for you and with you, because I love you.

In those depths, if we are lucky, if we survive, we find maps where before there were none, or we become the mapmakers. We discover new ways of living and being in the world where we now know, or remember again, that everything, everything we have ever known or cared about can disappear in an instant and be

gone. In those depths we discern the symbols that matter to us, like the cane in the Sphinx' riddle, we find what we need to surface, to rise up and live again, and to never let go of what learned there.

Much of what I learned in my time seeing into the deep I cannot yet speak of or clearly of – it is too new, too unfamiliar for language to be of real use. But this – this I remember; that through it all the memory of the people and the places in my life that have meant the most to me – that have sustained me and helped me to grow and to flourish– they were all present, even when I was not-conscious they were in my dreams. In the swirl of anesthesia and fear and uncertainty their presence held me steady, much as they have held me steady and made me strong over all these years.

You were there, and the vision of this sanctuary, your faces and your places in this community. You were there, even in the chaos of those dark waters and the all too nearness of death's dominion. I saw you and I felt you. And I knew that, by some amazing fortune of fate, because of a calling so much greater than my own, that I was privileged to be a Unitarian Universalist minister – and beyond that, and more than that, to be *your* minister.

Now, my role as your called professional is sometimes to go with you as you are swept up into the floodwaters, to be by your side as you see into the deep, and if you survive, to be by you still as you tell of what you saw there. My role, my

privilege is to stand with you here, now, this morning, back from my own descent, and to remind us all, out loud, that no matter how smart we are, how accomplished, or even how innocent or trusting, none of us can order our lives so well as to prevent epic change, to be saved from wrenching loss, chaos or despair, and – hopefully, finally – the heroic return that is part of our human condition. My role, my privilege, is to stand with you now, not knowing who or what will be next, only that whatever comes, however it comes, with sorrow, with joy, with fear or hope, with destruction or creation, that some will survive, and that here, in this community, always there will be those who remain, holding out their arms, reaching toward those deep places with comfort and courage, reaching to bring whoever goes there back to belonging, and to hold you when you return, to give you hope and a home.

I know the words they will utter, when that day comes, if it comes for you – those who stand strong in this sacred space while all about the waters rage. Their voices will rise in echo of all the voices which have risen here since 1889, resounding out the truth that is written on the walls of this room and the walls of our hearts, the words which bring us back:

Whatever happens, we will be there for you and with you because we love you. This is our saving message as Unitarian Universalists, and as a gathered religious community. It always has been. We forget sometimes, when life is calm

and ordered, and we don't remember what can happen to us, how the waters can come, and rise up, and sweep us into the currents of the valley of death itself. We forget, which is why we need to tell the legends and the myths, and to recount the true stories of our own times.

And so I say to you now, filled with the joy of returning, of being again among you, being alive and here, now ... the only words I can say, the only words that matter: *whatever happens I will be there for you and with you, because I love you.*