

First Unitarian Universalist Society of Albany, New York

“Remembering To Be Still And Know”

Rev. Samuel A. Trumbore December 6 ,2020

Opening Words

The “sound of silence” may be more with us this holiday season than it ever has. So many of us are limiting our social contact as the pandemic spreads out around us. No in person holiday parties. Visiting boutiques looking for gifts curtailed if not eliminated. Shopping by catalogues or computer screens just isn’t the same. We are stuck at home while clouds of virus riding on tiny water droplets lurk indoors in public spaces awaiting an unprotected victim.

The theme for the month is stillness. The only way that lamp spoken of in the Channukah story stayed lit for eight days was because it was surrounded by stillness. A slight puff of wind likely would have put it out immediately.

In a sense, many of us may be stuck with stillness this year whether we want it or not. So instead of avoiding it, maybe it’s a time to embrace this rare opportunity to explore and rest in stillness. May we find a stillness, hold a stillness and allow that stillness help us connect to our essence and carry us through these challenging times.

Readings

One way to begin to explore stillness is through a Biblical story. The Gospel of Mark has one of my favorite Biblical stories, the story of Jesus calming the storm. I’ll pair that reading with William Marr’s poem, *After the Storm*.

Mark 4:35-41

That day when evening came, he said to his disciples, “Let us go over to the other side.” Leaving the crowd behind, they took him along, just as he was, in the boat. There were also other boats with him. A furious squall came up, and the waves broke over the boat, so that it was nearly swamped. Jesus was in the stern, sleeping on a cushion. The disciples woke him and said to him, “Teacher, don’t you care if we drown?” He got up, rebuked the wind and said to the waves, “Quiet! Be still!” Then the wind died down and it was completely calm. He said to his disciples, “Why are you so afraid? Do you still have no faith?” They were terrified and asked each other, “Who is this? Even the wind and the waves obey him!”

After the Storm by William Marr

now that it's over
the sea
calm like a kind old grandfather
squints at a little sea gull
flying leisurely in the sun

brushing its white wings
against the blue cheeks of the sky

so blue that no one seems to remember
why all the shouting howling
pounding and beating

Spoken Meditation

Every Riven Thing **Written and read by [Christian Wiman](#)**

God goes, belonging to every riven thing he's made
sing his being simply by being
the thing it is:
stone and tree and sky,
man who sees and sings and wonders why

God goes. Belonging, to every riven thing he's made,
means a storm of peace.
Think of the atoms inside the stone.
Think of the man who sits alone
trying to will himself into a stillness where

God goes belonging. To every riven thing he's made
there is given one shade
shaped exactly to the thing itself:
under the tree a darker tree;
under the man the only man to see

God goes belonging to every riven thing. He's made
the things that bring him near,
made the mind that makes him go.
A part of what man knows,
apart from what man knows,

God goes belonging to every riven thing he's made.

Sermon

My first youthful sailing experiences were delightful. My parents bought a Sunfish when I was a teen. Introduced in 1952, the popular fiberglass Sunfish is a personal-size, beach-launched, almost 14-foot sailing dinghy. It features a very flat, board-like hull carrying a crab claw sail mounted to an un-stayed mast. It has a shallow draft with a removable daggerboard in the center and a detachable rudder in the back. With a little breeze it glides through the water. With a blast of wind, you might easily be *in* the water.

My family took turns sailing on Lums Pond near our home in Newark, Delaware. Rarely did we get enough wind for anything scary to happen. And if a thunderstorm appeared, we'd be out of the water quickly.

That wasn't my experience on my friend Nick's father's 27 foot sailboat one afternoon on the Chesapeake Bay. Several of us were out on a pleasant summer day when a big storm suddenly blew up. This isn't an unusual occurrence on the Chesapeake Bay. The wind started blowing hard and waves began breaking over the bow of the boat. The boat heeled over enough that we had to hold on to the sides fearful of falling into the now angry waters. While we, the timid passengers, grew more frightened and seasick as the rain beat down on us and the lightning flashed in the sky, my friend's father holding the tiller had a big smile on his face, reveling in the speed the boat was cutting through the waves.

The storm passed almost as quickly as it had come. Thankfully, we made it through in one piece without losing anyone overboard. And the sea became tranquil and calm as it had been before. A gentle breeze resumed as we returned to port with the wind at our back.

Uncountable sailors have had this same adventure over as many years as humanity has launched boats into the water. The unexpected movement from tranquil calm to turbulent tempest makes crossing any body of water both dangerous and thrilling. And not everyone gets to their destination.

When Jesus suggested they cross over to the other side, I doubt anyone worried too much about the evening crossing. The boats probably crossed these waters all the time, usually without trouble.

Not this time.

A squall came up with fierce winds. The Greek word for wind in this scripture is: anemos. There is a personification to this word, "a very strong tempestuous wind." The wind almost has hostile intent. That aggressiveness could be the subjective experience of sailors struggling to keep their boat from sinking. In the story the wind is so fierce, it swamps the boat.

The crew is quite disturbed by all this. They turn from their struggle to keep the boat afloat to check on Jesus. Rather than being roused to their aid bailing water or managing the sails and oars, what is he doing? Sleeping on a cushion!

He seems perfectly content, or so it appears, to go down with the boat! Jesus is enjoying stillness and peace in what *seems* completely the wrong moment.

The crew's frantic efforts to deal with the storm might be a metaphor for how we cope with the serial assaults of modern life. Driven by endless to-do lists, deadlines, demands for our attention coming from every direction, be it family, friends, electronic devices beeping and chirping at us, we rush from one thing to the next always fearful of missing out or being missed. One's nervous energy can be depleted by interruption after interruption till we feel disoriented and at sea with a gale blowing up.

With all this chronic overstimulation, the one thing that gets sacrificed again and again is stillness. Unplugging, withdrawing from 24-7 availability, marking out sabbath time, doesn't feel like an option when so much needs to get done.

But can anything important get done when we've lost our connection to our center?

The spoken meditation this morning came from Christian Wiman. He is a respected poet and former editor of *Poetry* magazine. He's also a professor of religion and literature at the Yale Institute of Sacred Music. Not long after he found the love of his life and married her, he was diagnosed with an incurable cancer. The treatments that put it into remission also temporarily robbed his mind of the ability to write poetry.

He was interviewed by Krista Tippitt for [an episode](#) of her On Being podcast. Here is what he said about writing that poem:

So the title is "Every Riven Thing." And "riven" is kind of an Old Testament word meaning "broken, sundered, torn apart." This was actually the first poem that I wrote after years of silence, all those years I mentioned. I had gone — I think it was three years without having written a poem. And in the middle of all those dramatic things happening to me, this was one of them. I sat down one day and found myself writing again, and this poem came to me all of a sudden. And it was quite a shock to write a poem, and quite a shock to write a poem, especially, like this one.

Crucial to this poem is the word riven. Other definitions include, shattered, wrenched apart. The feeling of being riven might be like the battering one experiences on a boat in a storm. In the poem this tormented word is surrounded by grace: God goes, belonging to every riven thing he's made. God goes *with* every riven thing. God *belongs* to every riven thing. God's name *is on* every riven thing God has made. There is *no distance, no separation* between the broken, the sundered, the torn apart, the shattered, the wrenched apart ... and God. It all belongs.

When Jesus awakens, he acts. He rebukes the winds. The Greek word is epi-tim-a-o, to chide, reprove, admonish, to do the opposite of honor and value. This is a strong, confrontational word. Jesus commands the winds, "Quiet! Peace! Be still!" The Greek word here is phi-mo-o, literally, shut the mouth of the winds.

And the winds obey. The sea becomes completely calm.

My use of this Christian scripture today is not to argue for divine intervention but rather to suggest a metaphor to contemplate. How often are we caught up in a storm, get worked up into a lather about something that — isn't important? The fierce wind we face might be the hot air coming from another's mouth that only has power because our insecurities make it so. Storms can arise out of little more than a slip of the tongue, or a thoughtless remark. How many of the king's men die on both sides fighting a war that begins with an insult or a slight. Perhaps the squall can become calm just by someone shutting their mouth.

The challenge in finding calm, finding stillness, could be in one's preconceptions. The crew could only see the storm *not the way out* of the storm. They accepted the terms of the storm *without* questioning it. Jesus challenged the apparent reality before him and by doing so transformed it into calm. How did he do it? He didn't *believe* in the squall. His faith was in *something greater* than the squall. Was that faith in a divinely ordained supernatural power or faith in his penetrating perception of the malleability of reality? Or maybe he saw signs that the storm was breaking and used it as a teachable moment. We don't know.

We only have a story to *challenge our own perceptions* of what is and what can be.

There is a temptation to deify Jesus and stand in awe of his magical powers to command the wind to be still. And there may be a desire *to imitate* Jesus and learn the craft of “storm control” through special words or actions. Neither are the path to calm, stillness and peace we seek.

In Wiman’s poem, he also has wise words about the use of the will to command stillness. He writes:

Think of the man who sits alone
trying to will himself into a stillness where / God goes belonging.

These words express the human urge to strive for self-improvement, to will ourselves into what we imagine is the desirable way of being, to belong to the movement of all that is holy.

This speaks to the paradox of meditation practice. Sitting still for hours at a time can be one willful struggle after the next. I know this well from personal experience. Coming back again and again to the breath, striving to will myself into stillness ... when the puppy just will not stay on the paper to do his business. Yet without that persistence, the mind will not become one-pointed and still. And in that stillness, the mind’s eye of insight opens and witnesses the flow of moment by moment experience more clearly. It witnesses the truth of being human unmediated by any teacher or teaching. That witnessing process develops a strong confidence, faith, if you will, in the validity of what is known and the path of practice that reveals the knowing.

Jesus challenges his disciples, ““Why are you so afraid? Do you still have no faith?” I feel for these disciples. They are just breathing a sigh of relief that they are not going to drown as the sea becomes calm. They are grateful they’ve got a Messiah in the boat to save their bacon. But Jesus doesn’t want to be their miracle worker. Immediately, Jesus pushes them out of their comfort zone. “You rebuke the winds next time, not me,” I imagine him saying. “Let me get my rest!”

As I read this story, I don’t recognize a savior Jesus. He isn’t looking for people to bow down to him and worship him. That is clear in the disciples’ confusion. “Who is this? Even the wind and the waves obey him!” He sure doesn’t *behave* like any Messiah they’ve anticipated or imagined.

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In the stillness it is hard to remember the terror of the squall. In the squall it is hard to remember the peace of calm waters. To remember the possibility of either when the opposite is present makes a positive difference. To know the ebb and flow of existence while experiencing the flow and ebb of existence can bring inner peace – *even* when the storm rages around us.

And no matter what, we ***don't*** stop belonging.

God goes belonging to every riven thing.
He's made / the things that bring him near,
made the mind that makes him go.
A part of what man knows,
apart from what man knows,

God goes belonging to every riven thing he's made.

So be it.