

BRIDGES AND DAMS ON THE RIVER OF LIFE

by Rev. Kit Ketcham, May 8, 2005

Langston Hughes, the African American poet, knew rivers. He writes:

I've known rivers:

I've known rivers ancient as the world
and older than the flow of human blood in human veins.

My soul has grown deep like the rivers.

I bathed in the Euphrates when dawns were young.

I built my hut near the Congo and it lulled me to sleep.

I looked upon the Nile and raised the pyramids above it.

I heard the singing of the Mississippi

when Abe Lincoln went down to New Orleans and

I've seen its muddy bosom turn all golden in the sunset.

I've known rivers:

Ancient, dusky rivers.

My soul has grown deep like the rivers.

There's an old folk song entitled "The Rivers of Texas". And the late Woody Guthrie, in his song "Roll On Columbia", names several of the rivers of the Pacific Northwest as he extols the virtues of the Columbia and its power. But what are the rivers of our lives? What are the rivers which have shaped your lives? Let's hear the names of some of our favorite rivers. (call out names of rivers)

A river is meaningful to us in many ways. It's meaningful to us for the joy it has given us--hours of pleasure, fishing, boating, swimming, skipping rocks, playing or just resting on its banks. It's meaningful because of its overwhelming strength--floods, erosion, rapids, tricky currents. It's meaningful to us for its very presence, its influence upon us and upon the land. A river is a powerful entity in our lives.

If you grew up in the Pacific Northwest, as I did, the rivers of this geography are in your bones. The names roll off our tongues easily: the Columbia, the Willamette, the Yakima, the Snake, the Snoqualmie, the Cowlitz, the Dungeness, the Klickitat, the Umatilla, the Walla Walla.

In dry Denver, where the famed Platte River was described by pioneers as "too thick to drink and too thin to plow", I used to enveigle friends into trying to pronounce the wonderful names of our Northwest rivers. "Here, try this one," I'd invite. Puzzled frowns: "Humptulips? Duwamish? Skookumchuck? These are rivers?" I loved it!

Living and playing on the banks of many rivers, I learned to respect and revere these moving bodies of water. They seemed to be living beings, not just useful tools for navigation or fun or one's livelihood, but entire universes in themselves, containing life and lives that I could not share, yet profoundly affecting all that came into contact with them.

One summer, deep in the Grand Canyon with a small party of river runners, observing my dissolving marriage and struggling to find clarity for my life, I watched a piece of driftwood float through a large rapid, seemingly finding its own route, borne up by the current and steered safely into calmer waters by the movement of the river itself.

I recalled the advice given to novice river runners: always keep your life jacket on, tied up tight, and if you fall overboard, keep your head upstream and your feet downstream and out in front of you. That way you can bounce off rocks with your feet, not your head. Paddle with your hands just enough so that you can steer and stay in that feet-downstream position. The river will carry you to calmer water.

At the time, I felt I was overboard without a life jacket, but the image stuck with me, and as my marriage crumbled and I learned to be on my own again, I came back time and again to the image of a river, carrying me to calmer water.

Over time, the river has become for me a metaphor for life's journey. I've learned that many things can be a lifejacket--friends, family, religious faith, one's own character and integrity. All these contribute to our sense of safety as we navigate the river of life. Like experienced riverpeople, we try to steer our way so we can bounce off the rocks with our feet, not our heads, waiting to "eddy up", or reach calmer water.

We can trust the river, even when we're scared and uncertain. But it can be hard to trust something uncontrollable, so human beings have always tinkered with rivers, trying to get control. Many times, the motivation seems admirable--to provide greater safety for people, freedom from floods, cheap power, irrigation of crops, recreational resources. Too often, however, the real motivation is making money, at the expense of the river.

One main way we have tinkered with rivers is by damming them. Dams on the Columbia have been intended to control flooding, to increase navigational access, to provide irrigation water, to run turbines for hydroelectric power. All highly admirable motives, at least at first glance.

But the consequences of dams are serious and undeniable. Here in the PNW, our dams on the Columbia and Snake rivers have threatened the survival of wild salmon. They have inundated Native fishing grounds and displaced the tribes which depended upon them. Silt that has no place to go requires expensive and damaging dredging. And the Columbia, once a wild river, has become a series of stagnant pools.

In Arizona, Glen Canyon dam is a symbol of greed triumphing over good sense. The silt from the dammed up Colorado River is filling Lake Powell slowly and inexorably. Downriver, because there is no natural flooding, the river banks are unable to sustain the demands human beings and wildlife make. Beaches are not replenished by deposited sand, which stays behind Glen Canyon dam. Huge stocked trout do live in the now-icy-cold river, but warmwater native fish are nearly extinct. Tamarisk, a nonnative shrub, sucks water from the weakened stream and lines every streambed in the Grand Canyon.

Let's return to the image of the river as a metaphor for life.

What do we humans do to dam up the river of our lives? What do we do that seems right at the time, but inevitably proves to have damaging consequences, no matter how beneficial the immediate advantages?

We dam up the river of life in a variety of ways. We do it to avoid pain; we deny our grief, pretending that we're fine, when we really want to flood the world with our tears. We avoid expressing our feelings, hoping that they will go away and leave us alone.

We dam up our river of life for convenience's sake; we refuse to follow the call of the pencil in our hand, the hum in our throat, the dancing of our feet because we need to make a buck, we'd rather be secure than creative. We squelch our creativity, doubt ourselves, become bored and restless, and perhaps turn to greedy, materialistic ways of life.

We dam up our river of life because we're afraid of the opinions of others; we'd rather be well-liked than take a stand for justice or appear to be foolish. Approval rather than integrity becomes our goal in life. We sacrifice our sense of justice on the altar of popularity.

And when we dam up the river of life, the consequences are far-reaching, just as they are when we dam up the Columbia or the Colorado.

Our dammed up grief becomes depression, withdrawal, anger toward others; it taints our dearest relationships, makes them weak and unsustainable. We become separated from our best sources of intimacy and love.

Our dammed up creativity becomes frustration and futility; we think we're no good at something. We think we can't do it. Our fear of our own creativity causes us to choose convenience, to choose the easy thing to do, not the most fulfilling. We lose faith in ourselves and we weaken our connection with the Holy.

Our dammed up fear becomes cowardice; we think it really matters if people disapprove of us because of a stand we've taken. We think others' opinions are more valuable than our own. We think it will be a terrible thing if we appear foolish or inept, so we are afraid to try something new and challenging.

Bridges, on the other hand, are different. When we bridge a gap, when we move from one side of the river to another, we get a new perspective, we see new possibilities, we encounter new people and ideas. When we build a bridge, we do not harm the river. The river continues to flow freely. It stays wild.

There was a time when there were no bridges across the Willamette River in Portland, only small ferries. I remember my mother quoting a little verse from her mother: "they're going to build, I feel it yet, a bridge across the Willamette." When the Morrison bridge was built across the Willamette in 1887, it changed the nature of the city of Portland.

And when we build bridges on the river of life, we change the nature of our lives. When we bridge the gap of grief, instead of damming the river, we allow the tears to flow, we let ourselves be in pain, understanding that genuinely grieving our loss is more healing than trying to avoid the pain.

We bridge the gap of grief with tears, with regret, with confession of wrongdoing, with acknowledgement of our pain, with communication with those who share our grief. If we use a bridge, not a dam, we will find joy on the other side of our pain. If we mourn our losses well, we will find abundant gain beyond the loss.

When we bridge the gap of creative risk, we find fulfillment on the other side. We experiment, we push ourselves to do something we're scared to try, we begin to believe in ourselves, to see that we are creators, not just consumers, and that our creative impulses are actually safer than our much vaunted security, that our creativity is a link with the Holy.

When we bridge the gap of fear, we find courage on the other side. We discover in ourselves an integrity that carries us beyond the opinions of others, a security of self-hood that doesn't require approval by the crowd. We find freedom that means something. We are answering to a higher call than that of popularity.

When we as young people left high school and began our lives as young adults, whether we went on for further education or found work in a field of our choice, we had the opportunity to dam up our river of life or to build a bridge. Our choices at this point in our lives were critical. The freedom of being away from home offered us many exciting possibilities.

What did we choose? Only we could make that decision. We knew that we had a certain potential, that our parents had given us what they could, and that now it was our job to build our own lives. We each built some dams and some bridges, and gradually, I'm betting, most of us have figured out how important the bridges were. And I'd bet most of us still have a few dams on our river of life.

But remember--and this goes for all of us--we can breach the dams we've built and let the river run free. Even if we have built Grand Coulee dams, Bonneville, we can begin today to make a passageway through. Our own spiritual health depends upon a free flowing river of life.

Breaching the dams may require help from others. We may need to seek therapy, a self-help group, a mentor or other source of support. But whatever we choose, we need to breach the dams we've created, for they hurt us more than they help us.

Building bridges will also require help. There is very little in this life that we can do all by ourselves. We need each other. We need our families, our friends, our religious communities.

What is the purpose, the goal, the mission--if you will--of a river? The mission of the Columbia River, and all the smaller rivers that flow into it, is simply to reach the sea, to let gravity take it from the heights of the Canadian Rockies to the Columbia River Bar, where its waters merge with the waters of all the world and are gradually returned, via the clouds, to the source.

The mission of our lives, too, is to reach the sea, the place where we are complete, where our lives merge with the lives of all the others of the world. And the mission of this congregation, of the UUs of Whidbey Island, is to help us reach the sea, the place where we are all complete.

The dams in our lives slow us down in our journey to completion. Bridges give us new views, new ideas, new opportunities for growth. As we encounter the rapids and floods in our lives, let's not build unnecessary dams to make things easier in the short run. Let's look for ways to build bridges. Let's acknowledge our grief and our frustrations and our fears and let's help each other with the bridgebuilding. For this is the way we become whole and free.

READING (by Bill Staines)

There are bridges, bridges, in the sky, they are shining in the sun,
They are stone and steel and wood and wire,
They can change two things to one.
They are languages and letters, they are poetry and all,
They are love and understanding, and they're better than a wall.
There are canyons, there are canyons, they are yawning in the night,
They are rank and bitter anger, they are all devoid of light.
They are fear and blind suspicion, they are apathy and pride,
They are dark and so foreboding, and they're oh so very wide.
Let us build a bridge of music, let us cross it with a song,
Let us span another canyon, let us right another wrong,
And if someone should ask us where we're off and bound today,
We will tell them, "building bridges", and be off and on our way.

Let's pause for a moment of silent reflection and prayer.

Our closing song is "River" by Bill Staines. We will sing the verses for you and invite you to sing the chorus with us, as you learn the tune.

BENEDICTION: Our worship service, our time of shaping worth together, is ended, but our service to the world begins again as we leave this place. Let us go in peace, remembering that keeping the rivers of our lives pure and free-flowing is essential to our health and the health of the universe. May we breach the dams which constrict us and bridge the gaps which cause us pain. Amen, Shalom, Salaam, and Blessed Be.