

“In Charge and Totally Out Of Control”

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By Kerrel Ard, Pulpit Guest

I – Intro:

When I was asked to share with you today it was suggested that my personal spiritual journey might be a good topic. I mentioned this with my partner Clinton who laughed and said “that would take days.” I think he is correct. In the words of the late John Lennon, it has been “a long and winding road.” Instead, I will try and pull together a central theme or core experience out and share that with you. I hope it will be something that might be meaningful to you.

2- Personal background:

It occurred to me that a little of my personal background might be helpful and give us a place to begin. I was born in northeast MS the son of 2 farming families. Both were and are deeply Southern Baptist. I was in church every Sunday morning and night and Wednesday nights as well.

That was who I was and it was never, even as a small child, all of who I was. I spent many long hours alone in the woods and pastures around my home. I had no friends because there were no children near me “in the country.” At school the town kids thought I was – odd, a sissy perhaps.

When I was 12 I (in the language of Southern Baptist) “surounded to the ministry”. That meant I felt a call to serve God as a church leader; preacher or minister of music and had acknowledged it in front

of the church. At the age of 20 the First Baptist Church of Pontotoc licensed me to “the Gospel Ministry”. All that means is that the church affirmed that my calling was true and real.

Coming out as a gay man at age 21 changed much of that, but not all.

3 – Central Theme/Tie-in:

When I was a sophomore in college I began studying martial arts. I was never very consistent in my study; I did not seem to have the physical or mental discipline. Yet I was totally fascinated by the philosophy of it. I changed styles several times over the years mostly based on the availability of teachers. My last teacher was of the Northern Shaolin Kung-Fu school. Trust me that is not a style one wants to begin in ones mid-thirties. I don’t know what I was thinking. My body would just not do what I asked it to much of the time. Yet the ideas and philosophy behind that form of martial art fit me better than any I had yet studied.

One idea and image that sticks with me from those classes more than any other is something my sifu/teacher said to us in almost every class; “Be like the leaf floating on a raging river, out of control and always going the right direction”.

– Body:

Over the last 30 yrs or so, as I struggled with life often truly enjoying the ride, one thing seems to be true over and over again. I am not in control. Even though we often forget or wish it were not true, we all know we can not control anyone or thing other than ourselves. It also seems true that I have minimal control even in my own life. This

realization frightened me deeply and left me in a constant struggle to gain control.

I remember talking to Ralph Chumbley some 25 years ago expressing this fear and just how depleted the struggle left me. My friend is several years older than me and the friendship was rather new at the time so I did not say that I thought his reply was the dumbest thing I had ever heard. His response was, “just because you are not in control does not mean that someone else is in control.” Now I understand what he was saying with such compassion. I have come to believe that “control”, at least for me, is not a goal that I want to be working toward.

One of my Native American teachers suggested simply this, “Be a hollow bone.” What he meant was this. A bone is strong in and of its self. It has a job and does it each day to the best of its ability. Yet a bone is hollow. When it is part of the whole body it is a conduit of one of the necessities of life. If we become a hollow bone then we are strong. We know our function and do it accepting support of the rest of the whole and we allow even offer – ourselves as a conduit of nourishment for the rest of the whole.

There is a very old African teaching story. It is most often used when teaching the boys who have been taken from their Mothers, as all boys much be before then can become men, and are living outside the village community learning all that must be learned to take their places as men in the tribal world.

As the young teen boys gather around a fire in the dark of night an elder warrior begins the story by reminding the boys that lions hunt cooperatively. The older lions of the pride lie in wait hidden in the brush

of the savanna while the younger stronger yet less experience hunters of the pride drive the prey with great earth shaking roar after roar. The gazelle or other prey run head-long into the waiting experienced hunters who may no longer be fast or strong but they still know how to kill their dinner and feed their family.

There is a long pause, the story sounds unfinished, so one brave boy always asks, “Elder what lesson would you have us take from this story, we already know how to hunt as team to feed the whole village.” The Elder Warrior would smile and say, “This is not a lesson of hunting. It is a lesson of living. If the gazelle had only faced their fear and turned to run toward the roar their chance of living a long happy life would have been far greater.”

In so many ways this is in contradiction to the examples we see in world around us. We are taught to be independent at all cost. Look out for yourself because you can not really trust anyone else.

Or, as I was, we are taught to depend totally on God that is bigger than us, all powerful – both to be loved and feared. Either way we are isolated from others and even worse our true selves.

Today’s world seems bent on focusing only on those things that divide human beings; politics, religion, race, gender, sexual orientation, nationality. The list can go on and on.

I often wonder how and why this evolved as it has. I offer one possibility; it is all about power and control. This separation offers the illusion of control while in fact it feeds control to the few who manipulate the masses.

It has been my personal experience that real “control” comes from running toward the roar, surrendering to the process – the flow of life that connects us to each other as humans and to the natural and spiritual world that is beyond our understanding or immigration. The paradox is that only by giving up control will we ever be a real influence in our own journey toward becoming whatever it is we want to be.

So the challenge before all of is this; do the best you can do with what you have each day. Remember your gifts are unique to you and that is as it should be. Remember too that you are only a part of a whole, no one can stand alone.

Recently I reread a novel I first found over 15 yrs ago. During my first reading of The Man Who Fell in Love with the Moon I found it funny and very entertaining. As is often the case, as I read the same book again I had a totally different reaction. The story was still one of the most lyrical stories I have ever read and dealt with many different social issues in a very accessible way but I did not laugh this time. I found it very sad.

The story is set in the early 1900s in a gold mining town in Idaho. The two main characters are the owner of the only hotel in the town which is also a brothel (Ida) and a moon eyed cowboy philosopher (Dellwood). The supporting characters fall into one of two groups; the rather seedy and less acceptable folks of the town and the other group in town are the Mormons.

The narrator is a man who is just boy at the beginning of the story. Now Ida, also know as Madam-Full-in-charge, was just as much a

philosopher as our cowboy Dellwood. But they were at total opposite ends of the ideological spectrum.

Ida believed and told everyone who would listen that “the deck is stacked against you so all you can do ... is keep your promises, keep clean, and keep going.” She was also fond of saying “I am what I am so don’t ask me to change.” Dellwood on the other hand believes that life and the world is only what you create it to be in your mind, nothing is truly real except you story, your point of view. As you might guess Ida and Dellwood were great friends and argued all the time. Their favorite argument was weather a tree falling made any sound if there was no one there to hear it.

On my most recent reading I realized that the real story was the young man’s journey to find out just who he is and how that might change what he believed about himself. The boy, Ida and Dellwood were a family, “good as any Mormon family” even though there was no blood relationship. The boy’s name (rather one of his names) is Shed. Ida and Dellwood were the two people he loved the most and who loved him the most. By the end of the book Shed had lived through many adventures and losses, including being shot dead and brought back to life by an old Medicine Man who gave his life to save Shed’s. Through this journey he learned that no matter how much he loved them both Dellwood and Ida were very selfish. Their views of the world separated them from really living, from really being all of who they were.

They both recognized that their control of the world around them was very limited but Ida fought against that idea, she railed to and against the whole world and was angry because she had no control. Dellwood held his anger hidden behind a spiritual ideology that left him

disconnected from the world around him, that left him longing for death so he could be released from the world he could not control. After the death of both Dellwood and Ida, Shed found out who he really was. It was not even close to the stories he had been told through his life. That self knowledge freed him to be in charge of his life. His present and future even his past where his story to tell. That freedom brought the realization that he could not make the world around him be the way he wanted but he could participate in that story rather than only listen to others tell his story.

5 – Conclusion

Let's look again at today's readings. The words of my Hopi brothers is a contemporary prophecy telling of what that believe is the quickly coming of the next age, an end to the world as we know it. Like many prophecies it also offers hope, a way to survive the coming storm. These Elders counsel us to let go, to give up clinging to what we know and embrace the unknown change. They even suggest that if we do so we will find joy and true companionship on the journey.

Returning to the Old Testament reading we hear a promise from Jehovah of renewed strength in the face of struggle. If we were to read this from the King James Version rather than the New International Version we would see that this promise is prefaced with the words "those who wait upon the Lord". Again the promise of strength comes with the admonition to give up our timetable and control.

I was reminded as I prepared for this that most often when I am asked to speak I end up sharing the thoughts I most need to hear at that moment in my life. This was no exception to that experience.

As I look back on the last 30 or so years it is clear that I am most happy, perhaps even most useful, when I trust myself to make decisions and plans and trust the process of life (or God or the Powers or fate or what ever name works for you) equally, I move forward with less fear toward the roar.

So the challenge before me right now in my life is to return to what I know: trust myself (be in charge of my life) and give it over to faith (being totally out of control.)

I invite you to join me in moving toward the roar, giving up control be in charge.

**Reading that accompanied the sermon
“In Charge and Totally Out of Control”
from 7/17/11 Neshoba Unitarian Universalist Church
by Kerrel Ard**

Hebrew scriptures – Isaiah 40:30 &31 NIV– “Even youths grow tired and weary, and young men stumble and fall; but those who hope in the Lord will renew their strength. They will soar on wings like eagles; they will run and not grow weary, they will walk and not faint.”

and a portion of

Reading from Hopi Nation

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**There is a river flowing now very fast.
It is so great and swift that there are those who will be afraid.
They will try to hold on to the shore.
They will feel they are being torn apart, and they will suffer greatly.
Know the river has its destination.
The elders say we must let go of the shore, push off into the middle of
the river, keep our eyes open, and our heads above the water.
See who is in there with you and celebrate.**

- The Elders, Oraibi, Arizona Hopi Nation"

also the benediction used

Quiet Power

Morning sunshine – evening rain
Powder snow on the sacred mountain
Hot caressing sand by the sea
Smile – enjoy

Sleep in the cool green grass of spring
Awake to the crisp crunch of dry autumn leaves

Dream in the gold sprinkled black velvet of summer's night
Seek the vision as it reflects off the driven snow with a blinding flash
Enjoy – Relax

The world around us is the One Soul
It is our soul
It lives
It feels
It speaks
It hurts
You are the creation and the creator
Feel the flow of quiet power
Relax - become

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