

Ten Thousand Flowers In Spring

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The Rev. Craig M. Nowak

April 21st of this year marks the tenth anniversary of the death of my mentor Joseph. I don't think it's an exaggeration to say that were it not for Joseph, I would not be here today. That is, in this pulpit.

I first met Joseph in a professional capacity through my work as an art and antiques appraiser. Joseph was an independent consultant for Asian art at the auction house I worked for. A role, incidentally, I now serve for that auction house. I knew from his CV (curriculum vitae) that in addition to being an expert in Asian art, Joseph also held degrees in religious studies and was trained in spiritual direction.

I turned to Joseph for spiritual direction after my UU (Unitarian Universalist) minister at the time had advised me to "sit and listen" to what I felt, but didn't necessarily welcome, was a call to ministry. Indeed, I tried really hard to ignore it. It was hard to imagine a more disruptive, arduous, and expensive thing to pursue, not mention something for which I felt entirely unsuited for. Why would I choose such a path?

Part of me was hopeful Joseph would concur and after two or three sessions of spiritual direction this whole call to ministry thing would be behind me.

But it didn't work out that way.

It's not that Joseph insisted I must absolutely pursue this calling. Rather he kept pointing to my resistance to it. The poor man must have imagined he'd made great progress with me when I finally said, "Okay, okay, I will do this, I will go down this path." But then promptly added the condition, "Only if I know what it will look like on the other end." An expression of exasperation would have been understandable, but instead Joseph, a Buddhist, laughed and quoted the Danish author Isak Dinesen, "God made the world round so we would never be able to see too far down the road."

Now, what in retrospect turned out to be a well timed offering was not without risk. For it does not follow that one's response to Dinesen's insight will be what the author, or my mentor, may have imagined.

Indeed in response to Dinesen's basic assertion, that uncertainty is one of the inherent, defining features of our lives, one might, and arguably most people do, adopt what William Houff calls, "the jet boater" approach to life. The jet boater, as Houff suggests in our reading this morning, is all about wresting power and control away from life. For the jet boater, life or "the river" as Houff writes, "seems to be an enemy ever ready to consume us." A force to meet, defy, and subdue.

We live in a culture that celebrates, indeed idolizes, extreme jet boating: Taking life head on, setting the terms, forging a path, pursuing, and more importantly, reaching the goal. At first glance this approach to life seems powerful, courageous, even heroic. It is no wonder we gravitate toward it and the people or stories that seem to best embody it.

Of course, looks can be deceiving. The jet boater seems to be living life to the fullest, yet as Houff observes, The jet boater "roars THROUGH life, seldom

touching the nature of things.” Indeed, the jet boater for all the power and determination they seem to possess may in fact be going nowhere fast.

Life, it seems, has a way of pushing back against those who would resist it. And that’s what a lot of the jet boating approach is about. Resisting rather than affirming life. Whether I chose to pursue or ignore my call to ministry, when I conditioned it on knowing the ultimate outcome, I was resisting life.

Human resistance to life is often manifest as a desire or attempt to exert control over ourselves and others as well as situations and events past, present, and future. But what often looks like taking charge, is actually a retreat.

The fact is we struggle with living on a round planet, an interdependent existence fraught with uncertainty and vulnerability that cannot and will not be controlled by us evolutionary newbies, however advanced we fancy ourselves to be.

Religions have often been looked to to ease the struggle of living on a round planet, even as some insisted the earth itself was flat. While our theology may differ, but we can imagine the appeal of deities to worship, pray to, and otherwise appease in exchange for a good harvest, recovery from illness, and that one’s enemies are well and truly smote. Likewise the “set it and forget it” god of Deism, in whom many of the founders of this country believed, offers the comfort of a reliable order without all the trappings of revealed religion that so often offended the intelligence of Enlightenment thinkers.

The solace these offer is an assertion that even if we’re not in charge, someone is, someone to whom we can turn or who can guide us as we venture around the bend of life on earth.

Of course, it wasn't always a god or gods, per se, to whom people looked for help in ages past.

In Taoism there is a concept called “wu wei”, which literally means “not doing.” In practice however, it does not mean to do nothing, but means “not forcing or overacting because of one's desire, bias, or preference for something.” (Source: Taooflife.org) Wu wei is rooted in the Taoist understanding of the universe being in constant motion and that “there's progression in the natural flow of life, even if we stop interfering.” (Source: philosophyvault.substack.com) Indeed, the basis for practicing wu wei is that sometimes our actions, when rooted in a desire to control or impose our will or preferences on life, makes things worse.

But again, the idea is not to do nothing. Nor is it simply, as a modern person might say, to “go with the flow”, Wu wei, when taken seriously, means to act in harmony with life, to journey with intelligence and patience, like the whitewater rafter from our reading.

Indeed, “Despite first appearances,” Houff reminds us, “the whitewater rafter isn't powerless. He, she, or they observe the current, studies the rapids, calculates the force of the water as it goes around obstacles, and THEN decides how to use the power of the river to go in a natural direction.

The story of stone soup from our time for all ages makes no mention of wu wei or the whitewater rafter approach to life, but we can see it at work as the story unfolds.

Recall the traveler didn't try to fix, save, or change the people in the village by arguing with them, berating them, giving out unsolicited advice, or moralizing on how to treat a stranger. Instead, he showed remarkable patience and a capacity

for listening that allowed him to respond in harmony with life and sympathy with the villagers.

“Since you are poor like me,” he says, “maybe you’d like to have some of my stone soup. It is delicious and fulfilling!” And before you know it people all over the village are rushing out to add what they have to the soup. The effect was so unexpected the villagers thought the stone in the soup was a magic stone. But it wasn’t the stone that was magic, but the sense of equanimity that emerges when we stop resisting life by trying to control it.

When we do this life shifts from an uncertainty requiring defensive action to a mystery we can engage with and participate in. And “ten thousand flowers in spring” becomes more than the first line of a lovely poem, it becomes a new way of life.

In the end what we’re talking about is living from faith, which is not about naively believing everything will work out in the end, but learning to be more attentive and responsive to life as it unfolds, like the whitewater rafter.

It also means, according to the spiritual teacher and writer Thomas Moore. “Letting go of what no longer has life in it.” For as Moore observes, “Often it is more difficult to let go than to hold on, and we hold on because we think having is more important than losing.” A poem by the Zen nun Chiyono written in celebration of a breakthrough in her mediation practice illustrates his point,

“I did everything to keep the bucket
from breaking
because the bamboo was rotting
and would soon give out.
Finally the bottom gave way.
No water in the bucket.

No moon in the water.”

Chiyono’s simple, insightful poem, Moore notes, invites our reflection. What kinds of things, ideas, beliefs, identities, judgements, fears, relationships, etc. are we carrying around that have run their course, are no longer viable, or no longer worth the effort?

Regular serious reflection on these kinds of questions, the kinds of questions my mentor, Joseph, posed to me, proved instrumental in answering my call to ministry and their continued reflection are an invaluable part my overall approach to life. This is not to say I’m a full fledged whitewater rafter. Alas, I still jet boat around more often than I’d perhaps like to admit. Indeed, the snag so run often run into whenever we encounter and choose to engage such questions is we sometimes forget they are never answered once and for all. They are part of a practice, part of our journey as we navigate a world God made round.

The risk is always accumulation.

As Thomas Moore writes, “We think having is more important than losing.” But we can’t affirm and embrace life if our arms are full and our backs bent carrying “unnecessary things” as the poet Wumen Huikai reminded us in our call to worship.

Perhaps the most challenging lesson life teaches is control is not only an unnecessary thing, it is ultimately an illusion. Every news headline, unexpected diagnosis, rejection letter and the like regularly confirms this. This is why the mystics of every age, clime, and creed teach awareness rather than vigilance and depth over distance. For in this world, the jet boater’s tank, no matter how powerful and full it may seem zipping against the current, running from or trying

to subdue life, will eventually reach empty. Gazing into that emptiness may we finally see not a void to anxiously fill with unnecessary things, but an abundant life patiently awaiting our embrace.

May it be so

Amen and Blessed Be