

Channeling a River
Rev. DC Fortune
UU Congregation of the Susquehanna Valley
May 7, 2023

I would speak to you today of physics.

Of mass and matter and velocity and energy.

And I would speak to you of poetry and sunshine.

Of love and the power of the mind and heart to work in union to great effect.

On its own, water weighs approximately eight pounds per gallon.

A gallon of water, at rest in a container, does not accomplish much. It can act as a door stop, it can hold the lid on a container to keep the cats from reaching their treats.

A hundred gallons of water will fill two large barrels and thus become difficult to move, but unless it is moved by some outside force, the water is content to stay in the barrels without bothering anyone. That which is at rest will stay at rest unless acted upon by some outside force, Newton taught us, and he was correct.

Water in a living system supports life of all kinds – all species of living thing on our planet rely upon water to live. Trees send roots deep into the earth to draw up the water therein, allowing wood and bark and leaves and fruit and seeds to grow, each supporting a multitude of other life forms in turn.

Water forms the earth that we walk upon. Great frozen glaciers carved up continents, creating valleys and gorges. Rivers in motion wear away the earth, and over millennia created the Grand Canyon, and the Mississippi River delta. They bayous are the great filters of the ocean and our rivers, drawing out silt and nutrients to support the species that thrive in that habitat.

For our planet to survive, water must be in motion in all its forms, liquid, solid, and gas. Unmoving, water becomes stale, stagnant, and useless.

The human heart and mind move us through our days, running the electrical and mechanical systems of our bodies without much in the way of direction or input from outside.

The brain is a complex electrical system that runs all the other systems in the human body. It is also the place where data is stored – memories, feelings, lessons about Sir Isaac Newton and physics and Bob Dylan lyrics, and macroeconomics and art and music and creativity. The mind is where creativity exists, where rational thought happens, where ethics and desire and curiosity are. The expansive mind is what makes us something other than meat-based robots that simply respond to an array of stimuli with a similar array of behaviors, utterly predictable and identical in our function.

When I speak of the heart, I am not referring to the muscle that beats within our chests, but of the spirit that dwells within us. The collection of electrical impulses and experiences that presents itself to us as feelings of love, attraction, fear, joy, and all the others. At rest, our hearts may offer us feelings of contentment, of stillness, of peace. This heart is located in the 3-pound lump of electrified fat and gelatin that is our brain.

Our hearts may also provide us with feelings of boredom, lethargy, and loneliness.

Both versions of the heart – the physiological one and the spiritual one – require energy and movement to keep us alive.

The 10-ounce piece of muscle and meat that we call our heart is run by impulses from the brain and must continue to work for the rest of the body to function. There must be force and resistance, in constant motion, to make the cardio system work: contraction and relaxation in turn, perpetually in motion; squeeze, rest, squeeze, rest, squeeze, rest.

The human body contains approximately 5 liters of blood.

Without the effort of the heart, the blood would remain motionless, and our bodies would die. The blood must keep moving for it to be useful.

This congregation is a relatively self-contained, yet permeable system that functions like any organism we know. When there are good relationships among the members, the system functions pretty well. When there is stress

or anxiety in the system, whether conflict or loss or some other disruption, we each respond in our own ways and that causes ripples of energy in our system. People get tense, relationships struggle, sometimes parts of system break down. That is the normal function of a system.

As a shared system, a covenanted community, we have some resources. Everybody in this room, and those who are online, plus those who weren't able to make it this morning, each of us has something to share with the community. Some of us have time and skills we can share. Some have financial resources they can offer. Some lift their voices in song each week, and some are a presence that witnesses to the power of spiritual hope and growth. Each of us gives in some way.

I like to think of this pool of resources as, well, a pool. Let's imagine that our resources are represented by water. At present, our energy is spent engaged in a lot of internal work, recovering from the long-term trauma of a global pandemic, living in a country with fascism on the rise. All that stuff is tough, and we need to take care of ourselves.

The mission of the UUCSV is: To awaken love and justice in our lives, in our communities, and in our world.

Our focus must be both internal and external. We must learn and grow and develop ourselves, and we must work for love and justice in the world around us. Water must come in, and water must go out.

When we are in this space, and in other parts of our lives, we do the work of deepening our spiritual lives. Whether that is achieved through meditation or gardening or prayer, or reading, all those details are up to us as we conduct our free and responsible search for truth and meaning. We bring in the water of knowledge, and with it comes oxygen and nutrients to sustain the pool that is our community.

The body of water that is our congregation has no designated focus for our efforts, so we have become like a pond with no outlet to allow for the water cycle to move with speed enough to bring oxygen and life to its depths.

I worry about what happens when the water in a pond does not move. There are a couple little rivulets that drain off some water, but nothing that seems to be significant. The largest part of our water remains relatively still, in danger of growing stagnant.

Each of us does good stuff in our own way. We give to the Audubon Society, Greenpeace, OxFam, Public Radio, and the March of Dimes. We volunteer, individually, at food pantries and animal shelters, we help out at the library, or the museum. Each of those things is represented by the little rivulets of our energy, each trickling off in its own direction.

What happens to a pond that has no outlet?

It stagnates.

The water loses its oxygen and fish die, and then other creatures that live there. Weeds and bushes grow into the water at the edges, eventually choking out the whole pond, becoming a spot in the forest that is a little mucky, but otherwise unremarkable.

Our efforts do good, but they are not focused, like the way the river goes over the dam just south of here. The dam is wide and flat, and the water goes over it in a steady stream, all the way across. It's strong there, but the volume of water is not focused enough for folks to take notice. It's there, it flows. Meh. The Susquehanna River is not about to carve any deep gorges in the mountains any time soon. It is wide and dispersed.

One of my late-night internet watching weird guilty pleasure is watching videos of people building shelters in the wilderness, or living off the grid, and finding ways to get the things they need to live comfortably.

Far into the forest, there is no electricity, but sometimes people want to use electric lights or listen to the radio, so they must figure out how to make their own electricity. Universally, they choose a waterwheel of some kind.

They construct some kind of wheel with either little buckets or paddles to catch the water to make it turn, and there's a spindle that the wheel is mounted on, and an axle and then a little transformer machine that I don't understand that turns the kinetic energy of the turning wheel into electricity

sufficient to run some lights. Sometimes they even create a strong enough current that they can run power tools. I find it fascinating.

In each of these situations, the people have a relatively wide stream of water that they need to harness. Just sticking a wheel in the middle of a river is not going to generate enough power and flow to turn the shaft fast enough to generate electricity.

They build their structure and create a sluiceway to channel the water through a small space, and then build barriers across the stream to force the water to come down through the sluiceway and turn the paddle wheel. By diverting the water into a narrow path, these engineers can increase the power of a relatively small volume of water by channeling it through a narrow, gravity-fed sluice. The water emerges from that sluice opening with sufficient force to turn the wheel or turbine and thus generate electricity.

Back to the pond of the UUCSV. We currently have a handful of small outlets that receive our energy and resources, but nothing focused enough to power a lightbulb. As part of a covenanted community dedicated to awakening love and justice in our lives and in the world around us, we are not focusing our combined efforts in a way that makes a significant impact ... anywhere.

Some time ago, we talked about Buckminster Fuller and his concept of trim tabs – those little steering flaps on great big ships. We learned how those little butts could make it possible to turn a giant ocean liner, even though they didn't look like much.

We put our ideas down on paper at that time and affixed them to the panels of a large geodesic sphere at the front of the sanctuary. We named the big troubles of the world that felt too large to handle, and we named some of the little, trim tab-sized things we might be able to do to make a difference.

What, then, might happen, if we were to focus all the efforts of the trim tabs in a single direction. Or maybe two specific directions? What do you think might happen if we were to do that? Would channeling our collective energy into a couple small sluiceways make a difference in the impact we want to make on the world?

After the service today, Sara and I will lead an exercise in which we will look at all those paper triangles that we stuck to the geodesic sphere and see what they have to tell us about our priorities. Then we will brainstorm some ideas of things we might be able to do as a congregation that will focus our efforts in a powerful way.

The heart must continue to pump blood if it is to be of any use.

The brain must continue to take in information and learn to be of use.

Water must keep moving if it is to retain its life-giving properties.

My prayer for us is that we be mindful about the nourishment we receive, and the nourishment we offer to others, always grateful for the sources that support us, and may we always offer support with humility and grace.

Amen.