

Dennis Perkins

Living here in Waterville it's easy to think of the Kennebec as water that flows endlessly north to south. That's the way it was in the childhood of any Waterville natives here this morning and in the childhoods of their forbears who were born, lived and died on these shores. It was so in the lives of the indigenous peoples on these same shores. North to south. Thousands of years.

And yet just a few miles downriver the nature of the Kennebec begins to change. Just south of Augusta, twice per day the Atlantic pushes back a little and raises the level of the Kennebec a couple of feet. By the time the river reaches its mouth at Popham, the battle between the south flow of the river and the north push of the Atlantic causes the level of the river to rise and fall almost 9 feet. And twice per day at the mouth of the river at the very depth of low tide is a phenomenon of which all owners of small boats in the vicinity need to be aware. When the tide turns and the ocean begins its push back upriver, the water at the mouth can go almost immediately from flat calm to standing erratic waves many feet high interspersed with whirlpools and eddies. Let me tell you from personal experience in a 12-foot skiff, that can be one disconcerting experience.

So what does this have to do with the past and the future and where they meet—which is always the present? I think the past has many of the characteristics of the Kennebec as it flows past Waterville. With its religious traditions, its cultural traditions, its moral traditions, the past's world views seem just so right, just so," this is the way things have always been and, therefore, this is the way things were meant to be". There is great comfort in such assurance—at least for some.

Religious traditions nearly all set an anchor in the past and tether themselves to it. The tether is nearly always a religious text, often attached to an historical figure, that is made inviolate by the understanding that the text was delivered directly from God—or at least from the spirit world. Thus the Hebrews had the Torah delivered to Moses and the other prophets by the voice of God, the Koran was spoken to Mohammed by the angel Gabriel over a twenty year period, the Christian New Testament gospels were revealed to four writers who reported the words and deeds of Jesus who, as the embodiment of God, spoke directly to history. The Buddhist have the Dhammapatta delivered to the Buddha in a vision. The Hindus have the Upanishads and the Bagavadgita delivered to Indian sages by vedic deities. All become fixed in time, in place and in personage and all contain the sum of all knowledge and provide the answers to all questions of morality, secure from doubt. "The Book says it. I believe it. That settles it."

And just in case you think this sort of thinking is limited to just religious texts, remember how some people talk about the U.S. Constitution: the framers were inspired by God at the time of its creation in the 18th century and that original work, therefore, contains all the information that will ever be necessary in making future political decisions. The Kennebec only flows south.

UU's, on the other hand, hold no texts sacred. Instead of being tethered to a point in the past, UU's are willing, excited even, to be part of the present, the turbulent present, just like the

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mouth of our wonderful river twice each day, tossed about but not incapacitated by fear, willing to keep heading into the murky future and guided by principles that allow constant acceptance of new information. The future is always a foreign country, its landscape contains vistas we have never seen. That is the meaning of the image on the front of your Order of Service this morning.

UU's are explorers and adventurers, willing always to give up the comfortable known for the uncomfortable unknown, guided by a few principles, directions really for living in new territory:

Let love be our guide. If you want to feel God's love, then be God's love.

Honor every new thing we meet—person, place, idea. Do you worship a different God or no god? Welcome. Are you from a foreign country? Don't speak our language? Welcome. Are you a woman of science about to upend something we thought was clear fact? Welcome.

Trust in each other. The Rev. Parisa Parsa said about UU's 5th Principle: "In our religious lives, the democratic process requires trust in the development of each individual conscience. A belief that such development is possible for each of us, as well as a commitment to cultivate our own conscience."

Do not fear imperfection. Our human work will never be finished. We will each pass away in the middle of the journey, unfinished but satisfied to have done our part. In truth, each generation of mankind is like an old man planting an oak tree, knowing his work is for the those to come and content in that.

And co-operate. Keep extending margins and borders and boundaries, as explorers have always done. Reach out from neighbor to neighbor, from neighborhood to town, town to state, state to nation and nation to world.

Writer Edwin Markham captured the spirit of the UU journey in a famous little poem,

He drew a circle that shut me out—
Heretic, rebel, a thing to flout.
But love and I had the wit to win.
We drew a circle and took him in.

The UU faith is not a faith of the past or for the past. It has no definitive answers to spiritual questions, but it does see a spiritual direction. We accept the challenge of living where the old flow of the river and the new surge of the vast ocean meet. We are not afraid. To use T.S. Eliot's poetic phrase, "Fare forward, traveler. Not farewell, but fare forward."

The present is always a period of anxiety. I remember as a high school student hearing about the "Age of Anxiety". As if there has ever been an age free of wars, or rumors of war, free of

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hunger, free of prejudice, free of the subordination of others, because of their race, their poverty, their sex, their age or any number of other arbitrary determinants. It is always an age of anxiety. This current period is no exception.

What else is not surprising is that in anxious times men yearn for the certainty of the familiar, the assurances of the past. In times of particular disquiet we can expect the rise of fundamentalist religions and autocratic nationalisms, latching onto the clear prescriptions of times past in which those whom God had placed in power ruled and those without power—particularly women, children, those of the wrong skin color, the unfaithful and the infidel knew their place and were resigned to it.

And yet the answers to the problems generated by the past have never lain in that same past. Novelty is always required. New thinking and new imaginings. The words of Paul of Tarsus and of Jesus of Nazareth at the beginning of the first millennium, words designed to bring new ideas into an old religion ring true and appropriate for every age and particularly for our own. Paul, writing to a new church of Christian Jews in Corinth, said, “When I was a child, I spoke like a child. I thought like child. I reasoned like a child. But when I became a man, I put away childish things.” And Jesus, just a little earlier, in talking about his own revolutionary insights, advised his listeners against being held prisoner by old thinking, used this analogy: “Do not put new wine in old wineskins, for the new wine will burst the old containers and both the new and the old will be lost.” In other words, the solution to the problems of the past most likely lie hidden in the future.

The UU faith is a faith for the future with faith in the future. We know that this life in this time is not a destination but a journey. We will question. We will experiment. We will try the untried. Think the unthinkable. Can a Catholic woman become a priest? We can imagine it. Can an American woman become a president? We can hope for it, expect it and embrace it. Can we imagine concepts of God that in earlier times would have been unimaginable? We can and we do. A faith for the future with faith in the future. A journey and not a destination. A wagon train of pioneers. That is Unitarian Universalism.

I am glad I am on this journey with you. And I hope we will feel free to say to any we meet outside of this little church, “We don’t know for sure where we are headed, but we’re on our way. Climb on the wagon. And welcome aboard!”