

STREAMS AND STARS
(c) Rev. Dr. Gary Blaine
University Congregational Church
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Reading: “Rag-Tag Army”

“I think God must be very old and very tired. Maybe he used to look splendid and fine in his general’s uniform, but no more. He’s been on the march a long time, you know. And look at his rag-tag little army. All he has for soldiers are you and me. Dumb little army. Listen! The drum beat isn’t even regular. Everyone is out of step. And there! You see? God keeps stopping along the way to pick up one of his tinier soldiers who decided to wander off and play with a frog, or run in a field, or whose foot got tangled in the underbrush. He’ll never get anywhere that way. And yet, the march goes on.”¹

I do not know how it is with you and your life, but my life has not exactly followed a neat pattern or plan. Perhaps part of the problem is the fact that I am not the kind of personality who is likely to sign up for a guided tour. I like to plan my own way, visit the places that really interest me, and spend some time with the people, their foods and culture. Part of the problem is that I am easily bored with the monotone of tour guides who have lost passion for the subject. I am the kind of person who likes to linger and do not much care for schedules. If I see something on the road or path that interests me I will leave the tour to explore it.

This is not a really big problem if all we are talking about is a guided tour to historic Williamsburg or a visit to the art museum. But I am talking

¹ Martin Bell, “Rag-tag Army,” *The Way of the Wolf* (New York: Seabury Press, 1968), p. 91.

about my whole life. I have a very curious mind. I want to know about people, nature, and those journeys into the spirit that are without charter or course. I want to experience as much as I can on this short journey of seventy years or so. Mimi will tell you that it is not likely that I will live to be seventy. And it won't be because I die from heart failure or cancer. Rather, she thinks I will die in an automobile accident because I am bird watching as I drive, or stopping to photograph a sunset, or slowing down on the interstate to observe a fine herd of horses. I also scout streams and rivers and wonder about their potential for fishing or canoeing.

I have come to embrace my nature but it took many years of my life to appreciate the fact that I am not likely to fit exactly into a predetermined pattern. Since I was a child I heard that "God has a plan" for my life. The problem is that God has not bothered to tell me what that plan is. I was taught that the Bible is a road map for life, but as I grew older I learned that the Bible is a highly unreliable map. It is a better indicator of where other people have traveled and the many detours they took to a destination that was not quite what they imagined either. I also grew up with cultural plans for my life that followed a pattern of childhood, college, marriage, children, career, grandchildren, retirement, and death. There have been theories by psychologists such as Eric Erikson that speak of the stages of life that

include infancy, early childhood, middle childhood, late childhood, adolescence, young adulthood, middle adulthood, and maturity. Dr. James Fowler capitalized on Erikson's work to define the stages of faith. Hinduism has an ancient understanding of the religious stages of life that carry many of the same themes. Or perhaps you remember the life's passages books that came out in a more popular style that included such themes as mid-life crises, menopause, and yes, male menopause.

Now I certainly identify with many of these themes, stages, and passages. I have been through many of them. I have been through some of them a couple of times. But like Kubler-Ross' stages of dying, I have learned that these are not set benchmarks that one clearly and distinctly graduates to. They are not absolutely formed or contingent on a particular age. What is more, my whole person does not necessarily move gracefully to the next stage. For example, Erikson declares that the developmental task of infancy is trust. He argues that the person who develops trust will grow up with a sense that others will be there to help. An infant who does not master trust will grow up with a sense of mistrust, the feeling that one is alone in the world. Likewise, in early childhood the developmental task is autonomy and a rooted sense of confidence in one's ability to perform tasks. Failure to do this results in shame, self-doubt, and a lack of confidence. I

have not met a person who reaches adulthood with total trust and confidence. Parts of it are there, maybe even substantial parts. But there are issues of loneliness and confidence that all of us encounter.

So I have come to the conclusion that life, at least my life, is not set on some neat and well defined trajectory. No one has given me a Global Positioning System that tells me where I am and how to get to my destination. There is no computer chip in my brain with a sexy voice that tells me, “turn right one quarter mile,” or “sell your stocks, buy bonds,” or “to avoid this mid-life crises change careers.” No, I am more like one of those soldiers in Martin Bell’s *Rag Tag Army*, who wanders off the road despite the developmental-parental-vocational task I ought to be completing. I tend to take detours, stop to pick flowers, get lost, and lose my shoes. One moment it seems as if my life is shot out of a canon, and the next moment it drifts slowly down gentle streams.

Now please allow me to stop for a moment to address anyone who is disappointed with the above paragraph. If you thought that a minister is someone without flaws; without limits; or without fears you forget that God has always called such characters to ministry. I dare you to name one major figure of the Bible without human frailty. If you thought that a minister is someone who is a tower of faith and moral purity may I suggest that your

reading list is too confined to the fantasy section of the human library. From the very first moment I met with you I have never hidden my humanity as a minister of the gospel. Yes, I sometimes doubt God, argue with God, fight with God, ignore God, bargain and plead with God. I learned those techniques from Father Abraham. I have also followed the voice of God calling me out of the Ur of Chaldees to lands unknown, believed in the promise, and been fired and shaped on the anvil of God's justice.

My life and my ministry sometimes fling out like a ride on Space Mountain or wander down maple trees like sap. My life bursts forth like the explosion of gas and fire through the ages of space, creating a universe, shaping a world. At other times my life is like a stream coursing its way back to the ocean, seeking the primal source of its being.

The moments when life goes "bang" are the moments when creative energy pounds through our minds, our hands, our loins. It can be as simple as learning a math concept and then racing down the page of questions, cranking out correct answers. Do you remember the sense of mastery and freedom that comes the moment you are peddling a bicycle with no adult hands on the seat to steady and guide you? Or the moment you realize that when you gather with your doctoral committee to defend your thesis you are

the greatest expert on your subject. I am reminded of Walt Whitman's words:

“Proud music of the storm,
 Blast that careers so free, whistling across the prairies,
 Strong hum of forest tree-tops – wind of the mountains,
 Personified dim shapes – you hidden orchestras,
 You serenades of phantoms with instruments alert,
 Blending with Nature's rhythmus all the tongues of nations;
 You chords left as by vast composers – you choruses,
 You formless, free, religious dances – you from the Orient,
 You undertone of rivers, roar of pouring cataracts,
 You sounds from distant guns with galloping cavalry,
 Echoes of camps with all the different bugle-calls,
 Trooping tumultuous, filling the midnight late, bending me powerless,
 Entering my lonesome slumber-chamber, why have you seized me?”²

Like the proud music of the storm, creative energy throbs through our being, indifferent to the luxury of sleep, or company, or prior commitments and appointments. It wakes us up, demanding attention and expression. This is the soul force that calls life out of chaos, brings paint to canvas, moves the ink across the page, encourages our hearts toward justice and our hands toward service.

Such power is seldom within our control. Sometimes life just erupts with energy and need and we scramble to shape that power into something useful and life-giving. The energy can be so overwhelming that, like Whitman, we are bent powerless and seized with numbness.

² Walt Whitman, “Proud music of the storm,” *Leaves of Grass* (New York: The Modern Library), p.315.

Let us not be naïve and think that such power is always filled with zest and joy. Life has many powers and our journey requires an appreciation of them all. I think of the power that death brings to us, totally interrupting our plans for the day – our plans for the rest of our lives. Several years ago Bluffton University students were on their way to Florida for a baseball game. It was 5:30 in the morning and they are asleep. Their mothers and fathers were asleep back home, or just arising to begin their normal routines. In a matter of seconds the player's bus made a wrong exit and crashed over the bridge back onto the interstate in Atlanta, Georgia. Five young lives were destroyed; others fought for life and were scarred for life. The tragedy played itself across the nation; the memorial services broadcast to every town and city. Everything was radically changed for the players, their families, and the University. We were forced to think about the power of death to act so swiftly and alter the course of so many. Those young men and their families wrestled with a power they never imagined.

I think of the number of parents who are now taking care of their own parents and/or their grandchildren. I'll bet your guidance counselor at school did not mention that possibility. I'll bet you didn't put that one in you palm pilot. But suddenly you are the primary care giver of wee ones and elders. You are changing diapers at both ends of the age spectrum. You

did not plan for it but suddenly the reality of their needs was thrust into your life – it hit you so hard you did not have time to write down the license plate number. With such powerful forces you must now find the energy to meet their needs, fulfill your obligations to your career, and pray to God that you could have just one night a week all to your self.

The glory and triumph of life, the despair and weariness of it all will destroy us if we are not given some respite. I don't want to suggest that life really is bi-polar. But I do know that life requires balance if we are not going to be crushed by it. I love the vigor of creation's power. I need a break from time to time. I need to rest. I need silence. Jeanne Murray Walker wrote a poem entitled, "Genius:"

"Flying fingers, the final chord,
 and young Mozart, dazed,
 squints beyond the footlights as
 the rhythm of applause
 urges his muscles to more music
 and he looks down at his matching set of hands,
 separated at birth,
 which call to one another
 like lonely birds
 across continents of muscle and bone.

Now his blood swoops and caws
 so he has to bow and walk off
 to find a paper to write on,
 but the conductor leads him back
 where stage lights pin him down
 so the audience can see him:
 jerking, pirouetting before them.

This monstrous gift! He thinks,
 I'm nothing but the earth
 trembling when god dances.
 Love is what he wants, and quiet.
 But his fingers curve to cage the second movement of
 his next opus, springing into his mind so madly –
 when a woman in her blue gown
 hops onto the stage like
 a cadenza
 in his – already! – unfolding third movement
 and what if
 he can't remember it
 to write it down – and now
 he feels her cool hair against his cheek!
 So it's possible, he thinks. A woman.
 He prays to find the doorknob,
 walk out of the music,
 kiss her
 from some part of himself that means it,
 be granted, just, oh God, one day
 with her in silence.”³

As creative and energetic as we want to be our wholeness as a human
 being means that we must also be carried by gentle streams. We must drift
 down subtle rivers to the source of our being. We must enter quiet pools and
 wait awhile. If life is always about level five white-water we shall surely die
 of exhaustion. It's OK to leave the kayak for time and do some tube floating
 on lazy water.

³ Jeanne Murray Walker, “Genius,” *A Deed to the Light* (Chicago: University of Illinois, 2004), pp. 21-22.

Let us be carried by gentle streams. I can't state too clearly the importance of allowing ourselves to be carried. There are times in our lives when we need to be nurtured; when we need to give up control and let someone else lead; when we must simply fall into the arms of a dear friend and sleep. One hundred percent self-sufficiency inevitably leads to the consumption of the body, the scorching of the soul, and the cremation of the mind. We can be whole to the extent that we allow others to bring some chicken soup and read poetry to us.

I watch the wind wave over the wheat fields of Kansas. I imagine resting on their current carried across green blankets of life. That is your homework for the summer. Float down gentle streams or slow rivers and return to the ocean of being. Paddle into her warm waters and be stroked by the currents of life over which you have no control. Learn the lessons of life's ebb and flow. Float on your back listening to the voices of children on the beach and gulls over head. Build sandcastles and watch the tide take them out. Grill some hotdogs and tell stories about your life and family. Listen to the stories emerge from your children. Give thanks for the power of the stars that shot you through time and space. Ponder the impetus of life and never forget who begot whom. Breathe a deep sigh and be restored by fresh air. Have a blessed summer.

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