

"Ash Breeze"

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First Unitarian Church of Wilmington

Opening Words: (by? Rockville UU Church)

Here we are.

Like raindrops forming streams, like streams coming into rivers,
And like rivers flowing to the sea . . .

We come together from many separate places, form many separate lives;
We come to join our voices, our spirits, and our lives.

Here we are . . .

Young and old and in-between;

We meet and merge in this ever-flowing, ever-growing community of memory and hope.

We bring ourselves, our longings, and our visions

To dream, to share.

Oh, how good it is to be together.

Reading: by Rev. Marni Harmony

I say that it touches us that our blood is
sea water and our tears are salt, that the seed of our bodies is scarcely
different

from the same cells in a seaweed,
and that the stuff of our bones is like the coral.

I say that the tide rolls in on us, whether we like it or no, and the sands of time keep running their intended course.
I say we have to go down into the wave's trough to find ourselves, and then ride her swell until we can see beyond
ourselves into our neighbor's eye.

I say that we shall never leave the harbor if we do not hoist the sail.

I say that we have got to walk the waves as well as solid ground.

I say that anyone who goes without consciousness of this will remain chained to a rusty anchor.

May the journey find us worthy.

READING: by Richard Bode, from *First You Have to Row a Little Boat*

His name was Harrison Watts, and in the beginning I knew him only by reputation. He was a legendary sailor who had skippered racing sloops and iceboats as far back as the turn of the century... I approached him with apprehension, for he was still part myth to me and I thought he might rise like a sea god and bite off my head. I settled on a huge wooden block beside his boat, and when he finally turned and spoke to me I realized that my fears were unfounded. He was only a man, and an amiable one at that.

"I'm looking for a boat," I said. It wasn't the exact truth, but it wasn't a total fabrication, either.

"What sort of boat?"

"A sailboat."

"Can you sail?"

It was a question I dreaded... I could deceive my friends ... At the age of twelve, it's extremely difficult to resist the adulation of one's peers. But the captain was a different matter. ...

"No, I can't."

He rolled out from under the *Nimrod* and pulled himself up straight. I honestly expected at that moment he was going to conjure up a tidy sloop in which he and I would sail away. ... Instead, he reached into the cockpit of his

boat, pulled out a couple of oars, and walked down to the snub-nosed dinghy he had tied up against the dock. He handed me the oars.

"Get in!" he said. "The first thing you have to do is learn how to row a little boat."

...For three consecutive days I rowed that dinghy back and forth across the creek, about two hundred yards from bulkhead to bulkhead, dodging clam boats, ferries, and pleasure craft. Occasionally, the captain would walk out to the end of the dock, wave me ashore, and offer a few helpful hints, but most of the time he stood there quietly, watching me pull at the [ashwood] oars. Was he pleased with my progress? I like to think he was. But I know this: I was pleased with myself, for I was mastering a milieu entirely different from any I had ever known before.

Hour by hour, under the captain's silent tutelage, I acquired a skill which, as much as walking or talking, remains fundamental to my view of the world. First, I learned to pull both oars together, then I learned I could also propel the boat forward at a different pace by alternating my strokes. I gained a new perspective on inertia, for the boat was hard to start, since it didn't have an engine, and harder to stop, since it didn't have a brake. It had but one source of power, and that was me. ...

I sat in the center of the dinghy, facing the stern, my destination somewhere behind me, a landfall I couldn't see. I had to judge where I was headed from where I had been, an acquired perception which has served me well - for the goals of my life, and especially my work, haven't always been visible points of light on a shore that looms in front of me. They are fixed in my imagination, shrouded and indistinct, and I detect them best when my eyes are closed. All too often I am forced to move toward them backward, like a boy in a rowboat, guiding myself by a cultivated inner sense of direction which tells me I'm on course, tending toward the place I want to be.

SERMON: "Ash Breeze" - Rev. Alison Hyder

I'll tell you what - I think the heathens got it right. The monotheistic god that most of us were raised with is omnipotent, right? All-knowing and all-powerful. Runs the whole show. Our fate is sealed. In fact, some Calvinist Christians believe that God has selected a few people to save, and the rest of us can go to hell. That's the kind of thinking that our Universalist forebears countered. They told people that everyone is redeemed, that God chooses us all. God is the decider.

God must get awfully bored. Just think about it. God knows everything that's going to happen, has happened, how it will look and what we will think. Until the end of time, and not just our time but eternity, since God is Time as well as Power. This omniscient God is never surprised, and he's not intrigued. He already knows all the punchlines.

But the pagan gods have fun. The Greek and Roman gods used us as toys, pitting us against one another and watching us go. When they weren't having sex, they'd start a little mischief down here. Cupid would shoot his arrows and make some very strange bedfellows. Helen would captivate some guy, and suddenly Athens and Troy were at war. Narcissus would see his reflection and fall in love with himself. Oedipus married his mother and suffered some God-awful guilt. Anything could happen.

I don't know about you, but I like surprises.

Well, let me qualify that. I appreciate surprises. I don't always enjoy every strange and unexpected thing that happens, but I sure am glad they do. Like fireworks in the rain. Or walking down a street and running into an old friend. A huge orange moon rising over the dunes. The crisis that makes us stronger.

I have met the nicest people through flat tires. Always black men, for some reason. I used to live in Baltimore, and several times when I had flats a passing motorist would stop and change my tire for me. And not just in the city, either. Also in more suburban Columbia, which is perfectly safe. People are just kind. Or sympathetic. But it's not the same on highways. No one stopped the two times I had flats on highways. Maybe it's too anonymous. Fortunately, I rather like changing tires. It makes me feel self-sufficient and competent and that makes me happy. So either way, flat tires can make my day - as long as I can get the darn lug nuts off.

Usually, life carries us along on its momentum. We go from day to day, following a routine, brushing our teeth and making tea, washing the dishes, doing our jobs. Nothing would ever get done if we just kept doing what we're supposed

to do. Think about it. If we only did what's expected, nothing would ever change. Life would be static. No one would try new techniques or risk an invention. We couldn't chart our own course. But fortunately for us, the Gods are capricious. Whether it's a flat tire or a different boss, we are forced to change, to react and decide how we want to be. We have to live in the moment.

Richard Bode was orphaned as a child. But he was taken in by his aunt and uncle, a wise and caring couple. They lived on the Long Island Sound, and when Richard was twelve he yearned to sail. He fell in love with a small blue sloop with clean and lovely lines and made up stories about his exploits on the water, being carried along on the breeze with the sails full and tight. He saw his future, but he didn't know the ropes. In fact, he didn't know the first thing about currents, how to steer a boat or to move against the tide. He knew about asphalt and pedals, but not the pliable, changing sea.

Bode had to learn to sail by the ash breeze, to use his own strength to row a boat where he wanted it to go. There are several definitions of ash breeze. But it describes the times that are calm and windless when the sails are hanging slack. The ship is at a standstill. That's when you have to break out the oars - the ash wood oars - and put your back into the journey. You've only got yourself. So you've got to make your own breeze.

There's an old Arab saying: "Trust in God, and tie your own camel." In other words, we have to take responsibility for our own needs and actions. We may be able to count on certain basic conditions of life - gravity, the turning earth, beauty, hunger - but we still need to use our initiative and tend to ourselves. Camels have minds of their own.

So Bode learned to row, and it taught him the basic qualities of water and wind. He got his sloop and spent long days sprinting over the water, exploring the Long Island Sound. With each new challenge he learned confidence and self-reliance. Every day was as different as the shifting breeze. It was exhilarating. And Bode was still on that high when he was pulled up short. The wind simply stopped. One moment he was skimming along, feeling the sheets tight in his hand, and then -- nothing. Not a whisper of wind. He was becalmed. He writes,

It was late in the day when I headed home; the autumn sun was dipping below the horizon and the land was rapidly relinquishing its heat. ... I had never known the breeze to die completely; usually there was a trace to push the boat along, but at that moment the trusted thermals disappeared. My sails went limp, the bay went flat, and "we stuck, nor breath nor motion."

Only a short time before, my blue sloop and I had been dipping in the wind, darting through the waves, the salt spray flying over the bow and dousing my hair. I had no destination; I was simply sailing to and fro, halfway between the barrier beach and the mainland, taking the fresh breath out of the ocean for granted. And now the vagrant wind had vanished without the slightest hint of where it had gone.

I wasn't in imminent danger. My boat was drifting placidly on even keel, and I could plainly see the blinking lights of land in the gathering dusk. Even so, a tremor of fear swept over me, a chill dread that so often rises from within when we lose the motive power that drives us on. I had become addicted to motion, as if the sheer movement of the sloop gave meaning to my life, and now I was forced to face alone the frightening stillness of the sea.

"I have to do something; I have to do something!" I kept saying to myself.

In desperation, I seized the tiller and tried to propel the boat forward by jiggling it forcibly, a tactic that resulted in considerable commotion and precious little headway. I pushed the sail to starboard and then to port, hoping it might puff out magically, but there was no ripple on the water, no stir in the air. ... "Blow! Please blow!" I pleaded. But I was powerless, absolutely powerless; there was nothing I could do.

After a while I stretched flat on my back on the deck, with my hands under my head, and looked beyond the sails, beyond the spars, into the deepening sky. I watched the rim of the earth rise and envelop the sun, and the moon hang its crescent beside the evening star. I watched the beacon from the Fire Island Light, six times each minute, swing across the darkening bay. I saw the dome of heaven turn from purple to black, and I was startled when a night heron from nowhere perched atop my mast. ...

I sat upright and stared at that strange and stately bird, wishing I could ask him what he was looking for and how he could sit so quietly and composed for so long. He possessed the secret of stillness, a quality that was foreign to me, and I wondered if he was born with it - if it was locked in the sinews of his slender legs and the unruffled feathers of his wings - or if he had learned it as an imperative of survival in a world he couldn't control.

Could he read the future below the surface of the tranquil sea? I doubted it. I believed that like me he was waiting for the future to reveal itself in the present, the fleeting present, and then with innate wisdom he would fly off to a distant shore and fish the shoals.

... It was as if he knew that before he could leave his perch he would have to pass through this desperate calm. As I observed him, my dread dissolved and in its place arose an awareness of my surroundings, of myself, that was far more acute than when I was plunging mindlessly through the waves.

I realized that I didn't have to do something; I had to do nothing - that was the unalterable condition imposed upon me by the god of the winds. I had to remain as unhurried as the heron and wait for the breeze to return, as I knew it would...

An hour later I felt a puff from the north. The sails luffed ever so slightly; I quickly trimmed the sheets and a wisp of wind nudged the boat along. I looked up at the tip of my mast and the night heron was gone.

The wind had done a complete about-face, turned 180 degrees. I felt ridiculous for not knowing beforehand what now seemed so obvious. The wind could shift an imperceptible compass point or two without pausing, but it couldn't make a radical change - it couldn't go from southwest to northeast - without first passing through a period of calm.

Bode had to be in the moment, even if that meant doing nothing at all. None of the usual stuff worked; he couldn't follow his normal routines on board. You can't sail without a breeze. So he panicked. That occupied some time, of course, but it didn't move him an inch. And once he finally accepted his condition, he found he was not alone. His companion was calm, alert, assured. The night heron gave Bode insight and the patience to abide. It was a new approach for him, an attitude he had never learned. He discovered how to be.

This can be a painful lesson. I remember when I graduated from Divinity School. I loved being at Howard and had great classes. Internships and mentors effortlessly appeared. I sailed through school on a breeze. I graduated with honors, and that was it. Nothing happened. I sent out resumés and talked to a few search committees with no result. I was completely becalmed and going nowhere at all. And this was not okay. I am a flexible person. I like to go with the flow. But I wanted that flow. Where was the flow to go along with? It was a very difficult time. Of course, I didn't expect my dream ministry, but I did expect something after having those winds at my back, propelling me along for 4 years. If they had been a struggle, I might have questioned my call to the ministry. But I had felt led, directed by my fates till then. I was very perturbed.

Of course, I wasn't completely idle. Along with snapping and stewing I was sending out resumés and going on interviews. I got a part-time job as Religious Education consultant to a new UU Congregation. I saw a lot of my grandmother, which freed my mother up. Got ordained. But I had a lot of time to think.

The Gods were messing with my head, but not with my life. Little did I know the miracle that was opening up for me in Provincetown, Massachusetts. I sailed with the ash breeze, under my own power, until the winds were ready to turn me for home. The same thing happened last spring. I went through two search processes before I was asked to come to Wilmington. I had to remember how to wait.

Maybe you are here for a visit, seeking people you can like and trust. Or you want to find meaning for, your job, your life. Even in the midst of chaos we can still find that calmness, the eye in the storm, that gives us the hope to grow. Somewhere, within each of us, is truth. That is my faith. We each nurture a divine spark of life. And you don't have to suppress yourself at all.

Richard Bode grew up and became a Manhattan executive. He was caught up in the success mill, moving too fast to think. Until one day, dodging traffic, his leg gave out beneath him and he dropped. The spasms recurred, until eventually Bode was on crutches. The doctor recommended surgery. Bode says, "He understood the osteoarthritic symptoms, but only I knew the underlying cause. I had been forcing my body in a direction it didn't want to go, and now, no longer able to bear the awesome burden, my right hip joint had rebelled."

Richard Bode spent six months in a plaster cast from chest to toe. The hospital was sunless and dry. But every morning his nurse would pop in and say, "Well there you are, safe and sound inside your cocoon. Who do you think you'll be when you emerge?" After a while, he began to ask himself the same thing. Bode recalls,

Nights were the worst, and it was during one of my sleepless spells - I didn't even have the luxury of tossing and turning - that the night heron returned. ...No, the bird wasn't sitting on my bed, he was perched exactly as I first saw him atop my mast, motionless, watching the still waters, waiting in the dead calm for the rise of a new wind. I remembered how I waited with him and how I was rewarded for my patience with a gentle, nudging breeze that filled my sails and carried me home.

Day after day, as I lay in my enforced idleness, I thought deeply about who I was, where I came from, and where I wanted to be. ... From the time I was old enough to read, and possibly before, I had heard the music of language singing in my head. ... It is a strange and sad commentary that a man enters adult life wanting to be a poet and ends up in public relations. But I have to be careful for where I place the blame for veering so far off course. It wasn't what others had done to me; it was what I had done to myself. Instead of pursuing my dream, I was ghostwriting articles and speeches for businessmen who had neither time nor inclination to speak for themselves. I had lived close to the sources of corporate power, a seductive and flattering place to be, and I was highly compensated for what I did.

But it was vanity of vanities - and I paid a terrible price. I woke up each morning exhausted ... pushing myself against my will. ... I performed a function that aggrandized others, and demeaned me. I was caught in a punishing wind and scared to death it might stop.

I pressed on until one day my hip caved in, my body collapsed, and I wound up immobilized, sunk in despair, not yet knowing I had brought this immobility upon myself because what I craved, more than security, more than success, was a dread calm that brings a new wind from a different shore. As I lay perfectly still, grappling with the nightmare death-in-life, which is a death worse than death itself, which was the death I had been living, I found the desire, the will that goes beyond mere acts of courage, to do what I had to do so that I might become the man I was meant to be.

As Bode mused,

I sat in the center of the dinghy, facing the stern, my destination somewhere behind me, a landfall I couldn't see. I had to judge where I was headed from where I had been, an acquired perception which has served me well - for the goals of my life, and especially my work, haven't always been visible points of light on a shore that looms in front of me. They are fixed in my imagination, shrouded and indistinct, and I detect them best when my eyes are closed. All too often I am forced to move toward them backward, like a boy in a rowboat, guiding myself by a cultivated inner sense of direction which tells me I'm on course, tending toward the place I want to be.

Somewhere in each of us is a fuller potential, a truer self to find and become. Bode's conflict was serving the wrong gods, and spending his energies in a demeaning and worthless job. He was cut off from himself. Some of us are boxed into anger or shame or abusive relationships that stunt our growth. Others need to break through a bad pattern, or become more assertive and responsible. It is not easy to change and make that radical shift. Sometimes it requires a period of calm and contemplation. It took the Israelites 40 years of wandering in the desert to transform themselves from slaves to pioneers. We do not need to hurry through our lives. We all live with surprise. But it's all worth the trip. Life would be boring without it.

We just need to row our little boats, seeing where we've been as we haul ourselves into the harbor and can ship our oars at last. Have an interesting journey.

CLOSING WORDS: by Lucille Clifton "blessing the boats" (at St Mary's, MD)

may the tide
that is entering even
now the lip of our understanding
carry you out
beyond the face of fear
may you kiss
the wind then turn from it
certain that it will
love your back may you
open your eyes to water

water waving forever
and may you in your innocence
sail through this to that