

Draft

**BE THE ROCKS, BE THE WATER: A KOAN FOR OUR TIME**  
**Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Clemson**  
**September 12, 2010**

Thank you to the choir and Elaine for your singing just now. I am probably the one person in this congregation who is terrified of singing. I hope that others of you will join the choir to make its voice even more glorious.

Thank you also to everyone who brought or used rocks and water from your summertime adventures. This is one of my favorite services each year wherever I am. It's wonderful to hear your stories and I thank you for sharing them today and in the future.

Why did I propose rocks and water to use for welcoming us back together?

In 1998 I was living at a Zen Buddhist monastery in Oregon. I'd had a time of difficulties – a failed marriage, a ministry that wasn't successful, and a return for some years to active alcoholism. It was a hard time but the year at the monastery and meditation mindfulness training helped to heal me. I was going to leave in order to work full time and return to ministry. We had weekly interviews with our Zen teacher. I still remember the interview she and I did before I left. We've had many since but that one was particularly meaningful. I'd shared with her some days before a vivid dream. I was preparing to cross a stream that had a row of white stones across to the other side. At one level the dream clearly spoke to my parting from the monastery back into the world.

There was another level and my Zen teacher looked me straight in the eyes as only a Zen teacher or a parent can do. She simply said, **“Be the stepping stones, be the water.”**

Oh great, I thought, just what I need – another koan. I hated koans. Let me stop here and tell you what I mean by koans. It's a Zen Buddhist term from Japan and China and originally refers to a public law case. Here's one good definition: **“A puzzling, often paradoxical statement or story, used in Zen Buddhism as an aid to meditation and a means of gaining spiritual awakening.”** A successful koan will be deeply troubling to the rational mind because it moves us beyond rational thinking. Here's an example you probably have heard. **What is the sound of one hand clapping?**

There's always someone with a sense of humor that will slap one hand against the forehead and say, 'there, that's the answer.' And that's true, that is a logical and funny answer.

But like all koans, there are many layers of meaning. Here's what I have learned so far about the koan of "what is the sound of one hand clapping?" Another layer is 'what is the sound of one hand' and then "what is the one sound?" and so on.

Unitarian Universalists tend to hate koans because they make no sense to the rational mind. And we are proud of being rational people.

So I am going to take a leap of faith this morning and give you a koan for this first year of our work together. I am not a Zen teacher but I believe this puzzle will be a good practice for us all including me.

**"Be the stepping stones, be the water..."**

At a surface level, of course, the image of stepping stones across a stream is a symbol of change. You and I are on a journey together and crossing a boundary. Your former minister Cynthia Prescott has started her interim ministry in Tennessee. What always happens when a long term minister leaves a congregation is that some people leave because the minister is gone. Their feelings of attachment to that person are so strong that they have great grief and so cannot imagine church without that person. And so they leave because the minister was so much a part of their lives. The reverse is true, too. What also happens after a long term minister leaves is that some people return from an absence and new people arrive.

As I said a few weeks ago, this is a normal pattern and partly why the interim time is important. This journey from your past to your future is one where we will together assess what you've done well and what could be improved. Those stepping stones can remind us there's a path ready to use.

Then there's another layer to this koan that is more metaphorical.

We might then see the stepping stones being a solid and stable path as a metaphor for common understandings. Among them might be a determined compassion for those with whom we disagree. Another stepping stone might be the guidelines of the interim work we do: understanding our history, nurturing new leadership, and being good stewards of liberal religion. Still others can be our Seven Principles in action.

The flowing water in this metaphor represents change and the flow from past to future. There's an old adage that says "**You can never step in the same river twice.**" This image of water reminds us that this fellowship has already changed from what it was six months or a year ago. It will change still more as we move through the next two years. Some probably

worry that the amount of change will be like a sudden flood uprooting those stones of stability and putting us in danger.

What I hope is that the changes will be a flowing stream rather than a rushing torrent. Nothing will be so arduous that people feel left out but that water will change the course of how you do things at UUFC. The water represents the new ways of welcoming visitors, the possibility of moving the services slightly to have a unified social hour after this service. The water can have a soothing and delightful sound as our singers and pianist did today – imagine still more people in the choir and other musicians playing for us with different instruments?

**“Be the stepping stones, be the water”** has another deeper meaning as well. It invites us to move beyond dualistic thinking and feeling. That was a part of what my Zen teacher was saying those years ago. Sometimes we have to be steady and firm, determined and standing our ground. Other times we need to adjust to change, flow with its promises and challenges.

Dualistic thinking is rife in our Western religious traditions. Consider the feelings that arise when people consider their belief in a God is the right one and everyone else’s is wrong.

We then have the profound tragedy of 9/11.

We have obscure fundamentalist ministers plan to burn the Qur’an holy text of Islam.

We have religious warriors of all stripes demand that women be modestly attired or birth control and abortion be illegal.

This dualism is deeply etched into our tribal unconscious as a species. It could also destroy us if we are unable to evolve beyond it.

This doesn’t mean that we won’t have feelings about ‘us versus them’ or how we disagree with people’s religious, social or political views.

Going beyond dualistic thinking and feeling doesn’t mean that we don’t get angry or have negative feelings.

Moving beyond dualistic thinking and feeling means that we find ways to not be overly attached to particular thoughts, feelings and ways of living in the world.

We have a choice here and that’s the heart of the koan. We could be the rock that solidly demands one solution and no others. We could be the water that simply flows around obstacles and avoids looking at the hard emotional places of life.

The other alternative is to move beyond our comfort zone of doing church or adjusting ourselves to new and unfamiliar ways.

The koan here is to learn how to be both stepping stones of stability and flowing water of change. We become both-and rather than either-or.

Here's an example of this way of thinking. I have heard in many churches the question of applause during services. I don't know if you have that issue come up here but it's usually whether to applaud or not and when it's appropriate.

One church a few interims ago had this problem. The pianist was a very skilled professional. People would applaud every time she played. Then they felt they had to applaud if anyone sang a solo or the choir played as today. Her issue was that she wasn't doing a performance and it wasn't a recital. She didn't want applause because it was her gift to the sacred space of the service.

We asked people to stop applauding for awhile but everyone got very sullen and there were surreptitious claps here and there.

Finally Bonnie and I met and I told her that people loved her music and there had to be a way beyond the 'either we applaud or we don't' dualism. She thought about it and suggested a remedy.

The next Sunday we told the congregation. Bonnie said that as a former evangelical layperson, she was used to people yelling AMEN in services. So she was going to presume that applause was the Unitarian Universalist version of AMEN and was Ok.

However, she was still uncomfortable with situations where she would be applauded and then less skillful musicians were given hap-hazard applause. We proposed that all applause (aka AMEN) come at the very end of the service when everything could be applauded with gusto.

Everyone immediately burst into applause and from then on every part of the service could be applauded at the end with nothing left out.

**'Be the stepping stones, be the water'**

What is its deepest meaning to you, dear ones of UUFC?

How can we help one another across that stream of change?

How will we show the way for those generations to come?

Please meditate on this koan with kindness and with passion in your hearts.

Thank you.