

## **The Streams of our Lives**

**Rev. Jane Bennett Smith, Channing Memorial Church, UU, Ellicott City, MD September 7, 2025**

This past March, I spent a blessed month at a Quaker retreat center, immersed in the sacred teachings of this life-giving faith. Throughout this holy and intentional time, I joined other spiritual sojourners. We traveled, together, on a faith journey beyond the secular world. We entered a space that was sacred and divine, imbued with spirit. The retreat was a time away from time, labyrinth walks, nature walks, and a worship space that spanned the generations. We entered the worship space, filled with wooden benches set in a semi-circle encouraging shared worship. We entered a half-hour of intentional silence that offered the opportunity for those in attendance to rise and share what was on their hearts. During my first morning in that space, I sat silently and contemplatively, focusing on the breath and my heart space. While finding myself centered and at greater peace, I was about to learn more. After worship, we were invited into a small group conversation. Here, under the guidance of the retreat leader, I learned the true meaning of worship.

The Quakers hold a profoundly beautiful belief - that of the divine stream flowing beneath the floor where we gathered - intangible yet present, nonetheless. This sacred stream the Quakers call God or spirit. It binds each of us together in the invisible flow of all we hold divine. We then welcomed the spirit into us and between us creating a space of connection and belonging to each other and to the divine. The spirit is heard when a participant stands and offers their musings. That person feels driven to share from a deep place in their hearts as the spirit speaks through them. Quaker author William Taber offers that just as one becomes joyful while immersed in a tangible stream, enjoying the benefits of cool water during a hot summer day, so too, is the metaphorical stream joyful and life-giving. He offers that one centers in the "healing, the peace, the renewal" felt deeply in this space of shared worship.<sup>1</sup> I offer, this stream remains with us when we reenter the secular world. We can access it whenever our spirit needs sustenance. It unites us to one another just as it unites us to divinity, it offers a sense of

---

<sup>1</sup> "Four Doors to Meeting for Worship" by William Taber

serenity and a peace within. It offers spiritual renewal. On all of my subsequent days in that worship space, I felt a much deeper connection to all I hold holy. I heard my sacred whispering wisdom, musings, and truth which I tried to capture in a special notebook. I felt an overflowing of faith and interconnection; whether my companions on this spiritual journey or that of the sacred flowing below us. Let us contemplate the metaphor of groundwater. Always below the surface, hidden beneath and between soil and rocks. It is crucial to the survival of all living beings. This water is always ready to be drawn from in times of need, sustaining each and every being on this blessed realm. Can you see the comparison with streams of love, radical welcome, compassion, and hope?

This month's theme of belonging is apropos to our current societal and cultural situation. We are in the midst of a harrowing loneliness epidemic as relationships weaken and isolation becomes the norm. Young people are immersed in social media, always on devices. Neighbors residing in small communities remain strangers. We see less of our busy friends as texts have replaced intimate in-person conversation, as streaming has replaced shared dinners. So many of us lack trusted confidants with whom we share our deepest secrets and yearnings. All of this promotes isolation and profound loneliness. We are relational beings, we need one another. Our current political situation fuels a distressing disconnect. We may be fearful, frustrated, and angry every time we watch the news, not knowing what is yet to come or even what is happening at this very moment. This breeds anxiety, distrust, and divisiveness. In our isolation, we become hopeless. So, do we just throw our hands up in defeat? What is the antidote to our loneliness? My answer comes not only from research but also from various spiritual traditions. The antidote to loneliness is belonging.

Let us return to the divine stream, flowing below Quakers as they become immersed in all things sacred and holy. What other hidden, intangible streams lie below our feet at this very moment, that which we draw upon in navigating our fleeting life? What else offers belonging, healing, and purpose? I know that when I feel overwhelmed, I need to draw upon sources of calm and tranquility. That when I am impatient, I need to access mindfulness. That when I am

distracted and distraught, I need to connect with intention. We cannot delve deep into an understanding of all of these streams, but we can work to understand agape love and radical welcome.

Agape love. We are familiar with the ideas of love between partners or siblings or cherished companions. And this is so profoundly needed, as an antidote to our loneliness epidemic, and should be sought out and cherished. We need companions to love. Agape love is different from this. Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. brought agape love to the forefront of our culture during the Civil Rights movement, countering hate with love in nonviolent resistance. He said: "Darkness cannot drive out darkness, only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate; only love can do that." He extended agape love to those who could easily be understood as enemies in his fight for justice. And what he offered was profound: agape love is unconditional, offering compassion to all. It is a true desire for peace and wellbeing for every soul on this sacred earth. King offered that, as we extend agape love to those who have caused harm, we can simultaneously oppose their actions and ideologies. This, to me, is key. We can love but oppose their actions. I furthermore think about interpersonal conflict and extending this wish for wellbeing to those who may have harmed us. To those who lied or judged or cheated. I likewise interpret agape love as loving those we will never even meet. The farmer in Costa Rica. The musician Brazil. The orphan in New York City. This love is expansive and all-encompassing. It binds us together in sacred and holy ways.

Agape love is universal and seeks nothing in return – not gratitude or accolades. It offers a profound and meaningful way of living and of engaging with the world. We overcome our own fear and anger and prejudice and animosity that can easily be fostered. In practicing agape love, wishing goodwill becomes a habit. We can love all of humanity intimately and unconditionally, bringing more of what this broken and beautiful world needs: love, acceptance, and compassion.

Radical welcome is deep just as it is intentional; it is not by accident but with purpose. This is for each blessed being, yes, and it is highlighted in particular to those of marginalized identities: spanning race, ability, sexuality, ethnicity, or socioeconomic status, for example. It extends furthermore to anyone who is isolated, who feels broken or alone or that there must be something wrong with them. The unhoused in the streets. The teenager with no friends. The addict who is trying simply to survive. Everyone can feel a strong sense of belonging, offered with genuine care. It is not saying, we will make space for you when or if you join us. It's about seeking out those who need belonging and creating a welcoming space before they even arrive.

Radical welcome is about transformation – for all involved. Every person has something to offer, whether music, artwork, creativity, intellect, joy, compassion, skill, wisdom, strength. My creativity is inspired by your wisdom. My intellect is stimulated by your music. I have personally gathered so much compassion and strength from all of those I served as a chaplain. It is a celebration of each blessed being. Diversity in all forms inspires us towards growth, joy, and abundance. And radical welcome is more than this.

Radical welcome is a spiritual practice, it is theological, woven throughout our own faith tradition. Our forbearers, the founders of our faith, preached that every person holds goodness within, that this goodness is inherent, in humans and in the divine spirit. That everyone is saved; no one is damned. Radical welcome in this realm and into the next. Everyone is included in heaven, which to many theologians is the here and now. Heaven on earth as we care for the least of these. As we pray and worship. As we work for justice and equity. We are here to work to make sure all are cherished and that justice reigns. Each person, no matter their transgressions, has an inner, innate, goodness and wholeness within them. The thief, the adulterer, the liar. No one is exempt, but has the opportunity to transform and reform. And radical welcome is spiritual, as we highlight the tenets of love, compassion, forgiveness, and faith held deeply and reverently in Unitarian Universalism. No matter what, if you join in shared values, you are welcome. It is a stream of spiritual companionship we dip into as we support each other on our theological journeys, whether theistic or atheistic or agnostic.

There is a stream that flows below us, each of us, a reservoir to draw upon in each moment of each day. To those of our faith, perhaps this stream is not God, as the Quakers understand it, because not all of us believe in God. But perhaps an essence or flow of divine spirit, of love and life; something spiritual that brings us joy and purpose and meaning. Below our feet, we have everything we need to change how we interact with this broken and beautiful world. To bring more goodness, love, compassion, and justice to the world. Stripping us of our woes and offering, instead, that which is life-giving. It is agape love. It is a radical welcome. It is peace and joy and safety and compassion. It is groundwater, crucial to the survival of all living beings.

In this building made holy by our presence, in these pews imbued with the sacred, we have created a place where no one needs to feel lonely. We are drawn together and held together in faith, in worship, in hope, in joy, in lament, in universal goodness, in forgiveness, in acceptance, in justice. In agape love and radical welcome. A space where none of us are alone. Just as the Quakers, this stream connects us to the divine just as it connects us to one another. May we offer friendship, may we offer spiritual sojourners, intimate conversation, and in-person companionship. May we offer theological discussions, simple joy and contagious laughter, whether in this sanctuary, in coffee hour, at our church office. May we offer everyone unconditional love and a sincere wish for wellbeing and an opportunity to thrive.

Today we join together to celebrate Water Communion. I wonder if this is a tangible piece of the stream we have been referencing throughout. The water we have here is a vessel from water communions of times past, connecting us to all that was, and ours will be added to all that will be. We are spiritual sojourners bound together by those drops of faith and values held throughout the generations. So may we add this tangible water to that metaphorical stream below us as we return it to the earth. May those who enter our space of worship always have access to acceptance and welcome and faith and joy and purpose that flows ceaselessly in the streams below us, around us, between us, connecting the profane to the divine. May everyone

know love. May everyone know radical welcome. In this space made sacred by our presence,  
may everyone belong.

May it be so, and Amen