

Shall We Gather at the River?

A Sermon for the Unitarian Universalist Society of Amherst

The Rev. Alison Wohler

September 7, 2008

Yes! We'll gather at the river, the beautiful, the beautiful river; Gather with the saints at the river that flows by the throne of God.

Sometimes even ministers have moments of revelation.

I knew a very wonderful woman some years back, in fact the woman who not so subtly whispered the call to ministry in my ear, who loved this hymn, *Shall We Gather at the River?* Her son had a rock band and had managed to turn the words of this hymn into a great piece they would sing at jammed weekend performances at a local bar. I was there, in the smoke and otherwise hazy beer infused atmosphere, and never failed to wonder what the attraction was to this song. It sounded great, but too religious to me, at least too traditionally religious. By the throne of God? What did that mean?

Here is what has come to me:

Coming here today, we have gathered at the river, and we have brought little pieces of it with us to put into this bowl. It is the river of history and of saints, our own personal saints. It is the river by which good things have happened, and difficult sad things have happened. I see the faces of influential people from my past in the river, and my children when they were small, and friends I miss. The saints and the not so saintly. (I just can't bring myself to call any of them sinners.)

It is the never-the-same-ever river of Heraclitus of Ephesus, that Greek philosopher of fifth century BCE. "You could not step twice into the same rivers, for other waters are ever flowing on to you." This is the river of the present, here today, for a moment only, then gone, the just wait a minute and the weather will change river. Other waters are ever flowing on to you. May we "Look well, therefore, to *this* day!" (Attributed to Kalidasa, reading #419, Singing the Living Tradition)

We have gathered in the river of the future: There, around the bend, we can't see it yet but there are changes ahead. Rocks and riffles, rapids and calm areas of contemplation and regrouping.

This is a river that holds us, floats us, heals us, tells us things as we listen to its voices. We're all there, in this river. Can you hear us? Feel someone bumping your elbow as they float by in the seat next to yours. This is the river of cleansing, of new beginnings, of ceremony. Even in the seeming silence of inanimate water, there are messages and wisdom and revelation. Listen....and hear.

Here we are, in the river we might tend to think is The River, but really it is merely a part of a larger river we could call The River of Life. Part of what calls us to gather at this

river within a river of our Society is our desire to understand that larger moving stream that holds the whole world! The smaller river imitates the larger.

We have gathered at the river that is our lives, that is the whole world, that is existence itself. God, the divine, the mysterious and awesome energy that forms our world, is sitting with us on and in it all. The throne of creative and nourishing energy is atop each and every molecule of the universe.

Yes! [We've gathered] at the river, the beautiful, the beautiful river; [Gathered] with the saints at the river that flows by the throne of God.

It is a beautiful river, and I am glad we are all here in it together. Welcome to a new year.

It is time to gather our waters together...

Perhaps next year we will find a more expedient way to do this, but for one more time, at least, we will come individually to the bowl and share (briefly, please!) our journeys that have brought us here, again, into spiritual community.