

FLOAT, SWIM, OR SAIL

A Sermon by the Rev. Dr. Arthur M. Suggs
Preached on Sunday, August 2, 2015

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Letters of Note Catch My Attention

The sermon is a bit unusual this morning. I was reading a book review on *Letters of Note: Correspondence Deserving of a Wider Audience*. The compiler had assembled letters of advice from a number of noteworthy people across the ages.

One of the letters caught my attention, and I had to follow it through a little more closely. The letter was written by Hunter Thompson, of all people. You might remember him as the godfather of gonzo journalism, a sort of dark philosopher-type person. I knew him mostly as the character behind Duke in the Doonesbury cartoons.

Pointing a Finger Is a Fool's Mission

And so Thompson was asked to write a letter to a friend of his, a man named Hugh Logan. This was in 1958, and I was reading a portion of the letter. Thompson wrote:

“To give advice to a man who asks what to do with his life implies something very close to egomania. To presume to point a man in the right and ultimate goal, to point with a trembling finger in the right direction is something only a fool would take upon himself.”

At which point he proceeded to do just that. But now here's the bit of advice. He starts

off by quoting Shakespeare. Really. Here's a portion of the quote:

“To be, or not to be: that is the question:
| Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer
| The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune,
| Or to take arms against a sea of troubles ...|

A Choice: Floating or Swimming

And he writes:

“That is indeed the question. Whether to float with the tide or to swim for a goal. It is a choice we must all make, consciously or unconsciously, at one time in our lives.”

He goes on:

“Few people think to understand this. Think of any decision you've ever made which had a bearing on your future. I may be wrong, but I don't see how it could have been anything but a choice, however indirect, between those two things: Floating or swimming.”

Hamlet, Act III, Scene 1. It's called the scene in the nunnery. Here's a slightly fuller version. I've been practicing.

“To be, or not to be: that is the question:
| Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer
| The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune,
| Or to take arms

against a sea of troubles, | And by
opposing end them. To die: to sleep; |
No more; and by a sleep to say we end |
The heartache, and the thousand natural
shocks | That flesh is heir to. 'Tis a
consummation | Devoutly to be wish'd.
To die, to sleep; | To sleep? Perchance
to dream! Aye, there's the rub |”

Do You Float Along with the Tide?

In a sense, Hamlet seems to be saying that that's one of these poor choices we have in life. Do you float along with the tide? Do you suffer the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune, whatever they might be, that come your way? Or do you take up arms and oppose these forces and conquer them? And so in a sense it's floating along or swimming.

I've been a swimmer. I have set goals in my life; I've achieved them, and I set new goals. I have four degrees, two in physics, two in theology. Went after them, achieved them, set new goals. I've been a swimmer for most of my life. But I have a bit of an unnatural affinity, an unnatural fascination with the floaters – something I'm not happy to admit.

40 Years too Late for Hippie Culture

The notion of the hippie culture is fascinating to me. When I was working on degree number four, I happened to be in San Francisco, and so I went out to, of all places, Haight-Ashbury, the epicenter of hippie culture. This would be in the early 2000's, so I was 40 years late.

But there were still about a hundred or so genuine hippies there. I mingled with them

and talked with them. There's a fascination with the notion of hanging out on the beach and smoking a joint and hey, let's go surfing! It's like okay, and no ambition beyond that. You just live the day.

This was fascinating to me, but it's also a touch repulsive to me. Seriously, can you go through life and not have a goal? And not want to do something, not try to achieve something that takes more than an act of will to do? And so part of me understands it; part of me doesn't.

This fascination goes way back. Not everybody can claim this, but I actually have a theme song for my life. Otis Redding, “Sitting on the Dock of the Bay.”

“Sittin' in the morning sun. I'll be
sittin' in the evening sun.”

Finding a Third Option

I could do the whole thing for you. That was my favorite song when Tracy and I were dating. Forty years ago, and she nevertheless married me. Can you imagine choosing your mate, and retirement is his theme song? That's faith. So I was thinking about “To be, or not to be,” floating or swimming, when another thought entered my mind.

Is there a third option on this? First, let me articulate the problem a little more definitively. The problem is not just what you do, what you choose. The problem is a bit deeper than that.

Here is a quote that I love. I think this is an amazing idea, an amazing approach to how we figure out issues in our lives. It's a quote

from Eckhart Tolle that won't make sense at first; I'm going to read it twice. He said:

Too Much Future; not Enough Presence

“All negativity is caused by an accumulation of psychological time and denial of the present. Unease, anxiety, tension, stress, worry – all forms of fear – are caused by too much future and not enough presence. Guilt, regret, resentment, grievance, sadness, bitterness – all forms of nonforgiveness – are caused by too much past and not enough presence.”

So all negativity – divorces, violence, race relations, the Middle East, Republicans hating Democrats to the core of their being and vice versa – all forms of negativity are caused by an accumulation of psychological time and denial of the present. Unease, anxiety, tension, stress, worry – all forms of fear – are caused by too much worry about the future and not enough presence in the moment. Guilt, regret, resentment, grievance, sadness, bitterness – all forms of nonforgiveness (think Middle East) – are caused by too much past and not enough presence.

Learning a Lesson in Navigation

So, that third way. I had a friend whose dad was very rich. He bought and sold companies the way you and I might sell a car. You know I buy and sell a car every few years, and that's the way he bought and sold companies. He'd buy a company that was struggling; he would make it profitable again, sell it, and make millions each time. He owned a whole peninsula in Chesapeake Bay. Not a lot on the Chesapeake; he owned

the whole peninsula. Had a mansion; had several boats.

And so his son was an avid sailor. He once invited me along with a bunch of his other friends to go sailing for three days. It was a once-in-a-lifetime experience for a middle-class person like me. The boat was a 42-foot Benneteau; I'd never heard of a Benneteau before, but it is a very high-end sailboat. Technically it was a sloop.

So we went sailing for three days, and sure enough, on the second day it was my turn to take the wheel. I learned a lesson in navigation, in tracking your line, and in course corrections and how to keep your line despite the wind and the waves.

The Third Way: Learning How to Correct Your Course

The mistakes I made. You're sailing along, and a wave comes in at an angle to the stern. Say it's at a 45-degree angle. What happens is that that wave hits the stern of the boat before it hits the bow, and so the boat rises up at the stern and the bow follows the trough down. The boat tries to go downhill, but the wave continues on through and suddenly the boat is going up and goes the other way.

And so for each small wave, the boat moves and then moves back. And I'm sitting there exhausting myself trying to keep this thing going straight with every wave that was going through.

We were making 25 knots at the time in waves that were five- or six-feet tall – significant relative to the size of the boat.

And I was correcting our course each time a wave swelled under us.

Try Something Different

Finally my friend said:

“I want you to try something different.
Just hold the wheel straight.”

And suddenly the boat went this way and that-a-way back. And then it went that way and this-a-way back. And then he said:

“Keep your eyes fixed on the horizon.
And then make a slight adjustment based on the horizon, and don’t be affected whatsoever by each little wave that comes along. It will move you, but it will move you back. Every single one of those waves makes a pattern that keeps you on course.”

That experience reminded me of a book I read 30 years ago. You might remember that I was ordained around 30 years ago. So right at the time when I was trying to decide whether or not to be a minister, I read a book by Dr. June K. Singer. She was a Jungian analyst and had written what is now considered, 30 years later, to be one of the definitive books on understanding Jungian psychology. The book is called *Boundaries of the Soul: The Practice of Jung’s Psychology*, published in 1972. Singer died in 2004.

You Think You Have Problems?

I was thinking at that time of being a therapist rather than a minister. But several people told me, “No. Don’t go there.” When people told me their problems, I had two really negative responses. One was

“Will you please stop whining?” The second was “You think *you* have problems?” Both of them weren’t auspicious for a therapist, so they encouraged me not to do that.

But all the same, I loved this book and was fascinated by the information in it. There was one overriding theme in that book. Chapter after chapter after chapter, this theme would emerge, and that is that one of the best metaphors for guiding your life is sailing. The book is long gone, but I went online and found a transcript of a radio interview with Singer about 20 years ago. She was being interviewed by Dr. Jeffrey Mishlove. Let me read a portion of it:

Reading Jung on Individuation

Mishlove: Hello and welcome. I’m Jeffrey Mishlove. Our topic today is Jungian psychology. With me is Dr. June Singer, a Jungian analyst who was trained at the Carl Gustav Jung Institute in Zurich, Switzerland, and is one of the founders of the Jung Institute in Chicago. Dr. Singer is the author of numerous books, including *Boundaries of the Soul*, *The Unholy Bible*, *Androgyny*, and *Energies of Love*. Welcome.

Singer: It’s good to be here, Jeffrey.

Mishlove: June, in your work at the Jung Institute, you have described in *Boundaries of the Soul* how for your final examination you were asked to describe the process of individuation, which is the goal of Jungian therapy, as if you were talking to a street sweeper while you were waiting for a bus. I wonder if you could repeat that definition for us.

Singer: Yes, and that was a shocker of a question, I might add, because I had studied all the parallels of the individuation process from the alchemist down to the present day.

Suggs: [Editorial comment.] Individuation, by the way, is simply like the goal of getting yourself psychologically healed. Their term for it is being a whole and present person.

Singer: So when this question came to me, to describe this process while you're waiting for the bus and you're talking to a street sweeper ...

Suggs: ... A street sweeper does not represent a dumb person but an uneducated person. And if you're waiting for a bus, there's an implication that you need to supply a short answer before the bus arrives.

Singer: I looked out at the Lake of Zurich, and I thought, well, it's something like being in a sailing boat on the lake and utilizing the wind, understanding that the wind is something that you don't make and you can't control.

But you need to understand how to live your life in the same way that you understand how you would sail a boat, taking the power of the wind and going with it and allowing your own knowledge of it and your understanding of it to help you go in the direction that you need to be headed.

And so in Jungian analysis you learn how to deal with your own power, or rather the power that comes through you, and live your life in such a way that it's harmonious with the power which is above and beyond and all around.

I couldn't believe I was so fortunate as to find that interview on line. It's all this third way. It's not floating. It's not going willy-nilly with the tide. And we don't have to swim all the time either and exhaust ourselves. But this third way was about making course corrections, keeping your eye on the goal, and making smaller corrections as we go along.

So let me conclude with just two thoughts.

1. The Wind Is no Coincidence

It's not a coincidence that the wind is also the same word for the Spirit. The same word for the breath, both in Hebrew and in Greek. Not a coincidence. And so number one is to acknowledge and even venerate that power which is above and beyond and all around. Don't ignore it.

2. The Notion of Course Corrections

Paul wrote this verse in Philippians 3, 13-14:

“But this one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus.”

Keep your eye farther down the horizon, ignoring this way, that way; this breeze, that breeze. But keep your eye farther down toward the goal, whatever it might be for a person's life.

This notion of course corrections can be of tremendous value to a person.

Have you ever caught yourself being unkind? You don't have to raise your hand. I know it's happened to every one

of you. Maybe daily or at least weekly. Do you want to be kind? Of course you do. And so how do you do that? A course correction. You call yourself out when you've been unkind. You name it, and you say,

"I won't do that again. I'm going to steer back. I'm not going to be diverted toward an angry feeling."

Have you ever been unforgiving, holding onto a grudge? Just really, really reluctant to let a person off the hook who has pissed you off in some way? Cut you off? Well of course you have. And so the notion of a course correction comes into play. You catch yourself doing it, and you say,

"No, I've diverted from my path, and I'm going to steer back toward the straight."

Have you ever caught yourself being judgemental? We have a political

season coming up. Republicans and Democrats are judging one another right and left. They're all, according to the other side, ignorant, stupid, and mean. Do you want to be judgemental? I would guess that you don't. And so what you do is you catch yourself and say,

"I'm not going to let my soul, my spirit, my intellect, and my heart be diverted into an angry, mean direction, and I'm going to stop being judgemental and do a course correction."

Being compassionate, being loving, whatever virtue it is, that is your goal. I suggest to you the metaphor of having the wind be your power that is out and about and flowing through you and propelling you. Use course corrections as you keep your eye on the goal.

The prize is the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus.

Amen.