

“Rising Tide”
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Unity Church-Unitarian

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READING: A Brook in the City – Robert Frost

The farmhouse lingers, though averse to square
With the new city street it has to wear
A number in. But what about the brook
That held the house as in an elbow-crook?
I ask as one who knew the brook, its strength
And impulse, having dipped a finger length
And made it leap my knuckle, having tossed
A flower to try its currents where they crossed.
The meadow grass could be cemented down
From growing under pavements of a town;
The apple trees be sent to hearthstone flame.
Is water wood to serve a brook the same?
How else dispose of an immortal force
No longer needed? Staunch it at its source
With cinder loads dumped down? The brook was thrown
Deep in a sewer dungeon under stone
In fetid darkness still to live and run-
And all for nothing it had ever done
Except forget to go in fear perhaps.
No one would know except for ancient maps
That such a brook ran water. But I wonder
If from its being kept forever under,
The thoughts may not have risen that so keep
This new-built city from both work and sleep.

READING: *from* Their Eyes Were Watching God – Zora Neale Hurston

Sometime that night the winds came back. Everything in the world had a strong rattle, sharp and short like Beef Stew vibrating the drum head near the edge with his fingers. By morning Gabriel was playing the deep tones in the center of the drum. So when Janie looked out of her door she saw the drifting mists gathered in the west-that cloud field of the sky-to arms themselves with thunders and march forth against the world. Louder and higher and lower and wider the sound and motion spread, mounting, sinking, darking.

It woke up old Okechobee and the monster began to roll in his bed. Began to roll and complain like a peevish world on a grumble. The folks in the quarters and the people in the big houses further around the shore heard the big lake and wondered. The people felt uncomfortable but safe because there were the seawalls to chain the senseless monster in his bed. The folks let the people do the thinking. If the castles thought themselves secure the cabins needn't worry. Their decision was already made as always. Chink up your cracks, shiver in your wet beds and wait on the mercy of the Lord...

The wind came back with triple fury, and put out the light for the last time. They sat in company with the others in other shanties, their eyes straining against crude walls and their souls asking if He meant to measure their puny might against His. They seemed to be staring at the dark, but their eyes were watching God.

SERMON: "Rising Tide"

On August 29, 2005, Hurricane Katrina came ashore. It was a category 5 storm, intense wind and rain, inevitable flooding. It wasn't the first time and though it is no understatement to call what happened a disaster it was by no means exclusively a natural disaster. In 1938 the best documentary prize at the Venice Festival was awarded to a half hour film written and directed by critic Pare Lorentz entitled The River. President Roosevelt, through the Works Progress Administration or the WPA funded not only The River but all manner of artistic and community work as part of the effort to repair an American dream shattered by economic and ecological hardship.

The score of The River is by the great American composer Virgil Thompson. The script was nominated for the Pulitzer Prize in poetry. As the film depicts the path the Mississippi travels down from Lake Itasca, growing wider, deeper as its tributaries merge in from both east and west the narrator voice accompanies the rushing water.

*The water comes downhill, spring and fall;
Down from the cut-over mountains,
Down from the plowed-off slopes
Down every brook and rill rivulet and creek
Carrying every drop of water the flows down two-thirds of the continent.
1903 and 1907,
1913 and 1922,
1927,
1936,
1937...
A thousand miles down the levee the long vigil starts.
Thirty-eight feet at Baton Rouge
River rising.
Helena: river rising.
Memphis: river rising.
Cairo: river rising.
A thousand miles to go...
A thousand miles of levee to hold
A hundred thousand men to fight the old river.
We sent armies down the river to help the engineers fight a battle
On a two thousand mile front.
They fought night and day to hold the old river off the valley.
Food and water needed at Louisville: 500 dead, 5000 ill;
Food and water needed at Cincinnati;
Food and water and shelter and clothing needed for 750,000 flood victims.
Food and medicine needed at Lawrenceburg;
35,000 homeless in Evansville
Food and medicine needed in Aurora,
Food and medicine and shelter and clothing for 750,000 down in the valley.
1903 and 1907,
1913 and 1922,
1927,
1936,
1937!...*

*We built a hundred cities and a thousand towns..
But at what a cost.
Spring and fall the water comes down...*

To call this recent storm unprecedented is at best to forget what we have to remember and at worst to be deceived by those we rely on to tell us the truth . To call Katrina a natural disaster is to deny that the loss of life and property reflects a willful ignorance of the evidence gathered since we first attempted to control the Mississippi immediately following the Civil War.

Who is this “we” that has spent 150 years trying to subdue the river? We are the Federal government. We are big lumber, iron ore, corn and wheat and cotton all headed down river to the deep water port at New Orleans. We are the Army Corps of Engineers and the business community of St. Louis. We are the shipping firms and the railroads.

And who is not included in this “we.” All the folks who live close by the riverbanks or in the flood plains. “Folks who let the people do the thinking.” Farmers trying to survive on land whose topsoil has long ago been washed away on down the river; sharecroppers down in the Delta – wage slaves working cotton, rice, and even sugar still living little better than their grandparents who were literally enslaved; all the folks still counting on the castle; all the ones who have yet to raise their voices are excluded from the great conspiracy of folly at the center of this story.

The story begins with a debate between two men both engineers, both cock-sure; one well connected the other self-made. Andrew Atkinson Humphreys, studied engineering at West Point. As a young Captain of Engineers he became fascinated by the challenge of controlling the Mississippi. He traveled to Europe to study best practices. When he returned in 1858 he wrote a report and proposal and submitted it for consideration. The war intervened. He rose quickly in the ranks and within months made Brigadier General. He saw action at Fredericksburg and then at Gettysburg. He was known as proud, even arrogant officer more than willing to sacrifice large numbers of his men in hope of personal advancement. By war’s end he was a Major General and soon was given command of the Army Corps of Engineers.

His opposite, James Buchanan Eads, arrived in St. Louis at the age of 13 in the winter of 1833. Three years later the rest of his family moved on but Eads wanted to make a life for himself in St. Louis. Soon he started a salvage business whose purpose it was to retrieve wrecked riverboats and their contents from the fast moving current and blindingly muddy waters of the Mississippi. No one had tried it before. A brief story will help you understand the man’s tenacity. My source is Rising Tide, a magnificent book by historian and journalist, John Barry.

Eads began his salvage business by designing a boat he thought could do the job. Then, at the age of 22, he walked into the St. Louis offices of boat builders Calvin Case and William Nelson and “asked them to build a ship and several diving bells for free. In payment he offered to make them partners in the salvage business he intended to start.” Amazingly they agreed to his proposal. But before the boat was ready Eads was offered a contract to salvage several hundred tons of lead. He jury-rigged a crane on another boat and hired an experienced Great Lakes diver. But the diver couldn’t begin to cope with the currents so Eads went into town, bought a 40-gallon whiskey barrel and converted it to his diving bell design. The diver refused to go down in it. So Eads went down himself. He wrote:

The sand was drifting like a dense snowstorm at the bottom... at 65 feet below the surface I found the bed of the river, for at least three feet in depth, a moving mass, and so unstable that, in endeavoring to find a footing on it beneath my bell, my feet penetrated through it until I could feel, although standing erect, the sand rushing past my hands, driven by a current apparently as rapid as that on the surface.

Until that moment no one had known how strong the current might be down close to the river bed. *"The river had unveiled secrets to him alone...he was beginning to formulate theories about the river and the great forces within it."* This new understanding of the dynamics of the current would have a significant impact on Eads' thinking and so play into the debate in powerful ways.

From the Enlightenment on these two approaches have been in tension; on the one hand, we have academic understandings yoked to hierarchical bureaucracy. And on the other ingenious even heroic individuals whose exploits we admire and whom we consider exemplars of exploration and progress, in short, of the American spirit. The story of the decision-making process surrounding our first attempts to subdue and direct the river reflects that tension. Instead of making decisions on the basis of thorough scientific research we all too often see environmental decisions being made in the interest of political compromise reflecting exclusively economic concerns. Over and over again solid science and common sense have been sacrificed to political expediency, a scenario we've seen played out repeatedly in recent years. Humphreys pushed for levees, Eads for dredging, jetties and containment channels. Their vehemence is only matched by the foolishness of the way the Mississippi River Commission, a political animal if ever there was one, settled the matter by balancing the ambitions of the forces at play instead of acknowledging the limits of known science and recommending against further development in the flood plain.

The story is immensely complex. The complexity is part of the reason we so easily allow the "experts" to make the big decisions for us. When I ask what lessons we might learn in the wake of the flood my mind turns first to the question of "we." Will we subdue the great river? Will "the immortal force...be staunched at its source with cinder loads laid down?" I have to say I doubt it. If history is any guide, New Orleans will be rebuilt. The same foolish mistakes will be made — the port is too important, the land too valuable. And we Americans are still too arrogant to bow before the power of anything as insignificant as a river.

Yes, New Orleans will rise again and so will the mighty Mississippi. And the larger portion of the tragic burden will be borne by those too ignorant and poor even to be counted.

The truth is neither Eads nor Humphreys was entirely correct. Neither way is adequate unto itself. What we need is a new bottom line. What's missing in both approaches is a respectful consideration of how any planned development will affect the lives of those who live close by. What is missing is what is almost always missing, a concerted effort to bring communities of color and people who are poor to the table where the key decisions are being made. Yes, we are talking about poor choices being made because of political compromise but we are also talking about environmental racism. Rising Tide lays out an historical pattern of intentional, carefully considered discrimination against poor and black communities. That reality continues to this very day.

Cities all over America including our own City of St. Paul face a daunting challenge. How can we encourage the folks to stop letting the people do the thinking? How can we turn back the tide of prejudice, ignorance and resignation which causes us to abdicate to experts decisions in which we the people need to be involved? It has to do with consciousness. It has to do with education. And it has to do with refusing to allow the same old errors to be made again.

Why not learn from the success of the old WPA. Poor people living in the ruins of Gulf Coast communities as well as in St. Paul's central corridor need work. Why not train them to be organizers? Why not fund and educate a service corps whose purpose would be to engage the folks in self-determination? They could help to plan the new New Orleans. They could help to shape the central corridor of old St. Paul. Why not transform this same old tragedy to some new and more just opportunity? Why not do it differently this time? Why not end the racial nightmare and finally achieve our nation?

May it be so and amen.

