

“Slough and Haiku”
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Today we join other Unitarian Universalists in celebrating a change in the rhythm of congregational life. This early fall tradition is called “Homecoming,” “Ingathering,” “The Water Ceremony,” “Blending of the Waters,” and by other names. By whatever name the service is called, above all, the service reminds us to connect with new people and to reconnect with familiar people. Through connections with new people and connections with familiar people, we shape the congregation. Through these connections, the congregation shapes us. Through these connections, we support each other to help make the world outside these doors into a new shape, shrinking the size of fear and greed, and helping love and justice to grow.

For the past two years, I lived north of here, near a beautiful and very deep bay of water called the Monterey Bay. The sea otter on the cover of the Order of Service lives in that bay. Sea otters and other animals and fish and plants live in Monterey Bay, but the bay was not my favorite body of water. My favorite body of water was right outside my apartment building. I could walk outside, down a driveway, across a road, down a path, and I was there. The water was called a slough. A slough is a wide and shallow and lazy river. Calling a person “lazy” might be an insult, but calling a river “lazy” is a compliment! When lazy rivers reach the ocean, they let the ocean get a taste of fresh water, and the sloughs get a taste of salt water. Sloughs can get really full and really empty. During my two years of living near a slough, one time the slough got so full of rainwater that a road near the apartment building was under water for months. The ducks did not know it, but that winter they were swimming back and forth *above* an underwater road. Then the season changed, and it became hot and dry. Then the ducks had to walk on the road instead of swimming over it. When it became even hotter and drier, cars could drive on the road once again.

One day, I saw something more amazing than a duck. It was late afternoon, and there was no wind. The water in the slough was flat as a mirror. Then the water started shaping itself into two ripples. The ripples were made by the small head of *something* that was swimming toward the sunset, swimming straight as an arrow, swimming like it had someplace to be, and it could not be late. What was making the ripples? A snake? A bug? A turtle? Just then, from around a bend in the path came a man wearing dark green pants and a lighter green shirt. He was wearing work clothes, I could tell by the official patch on his shirt, and he had binoculars around his neck. I did not waste any time. “Excuse me . . . do you know what that is, swimming straight toward the sunset, making the ripples in the water?” “Yes,” he said. “It is a muskrat. They live here.”

Sometimes when I am out walking, and I see something as amazing as a muskrat on a mission, I feel part of all that I see. I feel like the muskrat and like what the muskrat eats and like what eats the muskrat, and I feel like the slough and like the sky and like the seasons and like all people. That feeling is hard to put into words. That feeling of being part of everything -- including things that are hard or ugly or scary, as well as things that are beautiful or happy or peaceful -- that feeling is a religious feeling. It is not the only kind of religious feeling, but it is a religious feeling. It is often easier to talk about big feelings like this in just a few words instead of in lots and lots of words. A man named Elder Olson described it this way:

“Nothing is lost; be still; the universe is honest,
 Time, like the sea, gives all back in the end,
 But only in its own way, on its own conditions:
 Empires as grains of sand, forests as coal,
 Mountains as pebbles. Be still, be still, I say;
 You were never the water, only a wave;
 Not substance, but a form substance assumed.”¹

Some poems are even shorter than that. There is a kind of Japanese poem called a haiku. It has only 17 syllables and three lines. The first line has five syllables. The second line has seven syllables, and the third line has five syllables. In the most recent issue of the *UU World* magazine, Tom Stites writes of his love of writing haiku. “Haiku reveal the eternal harmony of nature, of which our lives are mere blips,” he writes. “However disharmonious our lives may seem to us from our ego-centered point of view, from the eternal perspective of nature we fit its cycles neatly . . . Haiku helps me understand that . . . [there] is an ideal where the ego is present but not in charge, where one respects others by giving up all posturing and striving in favor of the uncontrived, where authenticity is not obscured by cleverness.”² That is also the way we could describe ministry and congregational life – there is an ideal where the ego is present but not in charge, where one respects others by giving up all posturing and striving in favor of the uncontrived, where authenticity is not obscured by cleverness. Here is how I express that in a haiku:

Muskrat swims westward,
 its wake a wedge of water.
 Slough fills and empties.

¹ From *The Exegesis* by Elder Olson, quoted in *Great Occasions*, edited by Carl Seaburg, Skinner House Books, Boston, 1998, p. 388.

² See <http://www.uuworld.org/spirit/articles/35891.shtml>.

In just a minute, after I finish and the choir sings, we will hear the recorded guitar music of Bob Rafkin for about four minutes. During the guitar music, please talk with your family members, if they are here, and write a short poem together – a 17-syllable haiku -- about water or about a place that was important to you this summer. When the music ends, you are invited to come forward and pour the water from your summer travels into the bowl. Please say your name and share your haiku. Families may want to write a single haiku, or each person may want to write his or her own haiku. This is a chance to speak like a poet and to listen like a poet. This is a chance for the ego to be present but not in charge. Through the ritual of the blending of the waters, may we connect with new people and reconnect with familiar people. May it be so!