

RIPPLES, STREAMS, RIVERS, THE SUSTAINING SEA A THOUGHT FOR THE DAY BY MARIANNA MICHELL

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A 'Thought for the Day' given by Marianna Michell to Cambridge Unitarians on Sunday 14 January 2024

I have a picture in my mind: it's an image of rivers, streams and tributaries, seen panoramically. I see rivers running to a great sea, quietly subsumed into that sea. Other streamlets enter dry land and vanish, the water seeping into the earth -apparently lost, but not so - simply changed.

Looking at the history of ideas - the imagination and truth-seeking of humanity, it feels the same: it's a flow of human thought, understanding, the beginnings and sometimes the endings of ideas and religious sects.

Like rivers, some of them flow together to form mighty movements of religious conviction, sometimes affecting almost all humanity in one way or another. Almost always, such ideas meet other rivulets of thought, and in time they grow, or diminish. Like the water flowing into dry land, the ideas are not lost -but have become less visible. And the search goes on.

These currents of thought correspond to the strands of our hymn this morning, yet as I explored the hymn, I had to recognize that my bird's-eye view of streams and rivers was incomplete. The scope of the hymn is too large to encompass all in a picture, for the words strive poetically to cover immeasurable history of human ideas - ideas which vary according to geography, cultural inheritance, and individual experience.

So at this point I'm going to do what I like to do with hymns, as we do sometimes on zoom through Uni-Sing! We separate the hymn from the music which affects it, and we read it as a poem. Here goes:

In quickening streams and warming earth, in buds and rootlets groping blind,

the world awakes and brings to birth eternal hopes to humankind.

The aeons pass in cadence slow, ideas through the centuries roam,

but all life forces blend and flow - we harvest thoughts by others sown.

*Each generation tries anew, and people venture to explore old wisdom clad in
raiment new, fresh insight found in ancient lore.*

A beacon from a far-off star may touch a light-year distant soul.

A deed unmarked can travel far and work to make a stranger whole.

*Great good was wrought in ages past when love and faith at wrongs were
hurled: so dare to change while life shall last, take hold and shake a
dormant world.*

(Janet H. Bowering)

I'm seeing all sorts of parallels between these verses, and our liturgy - the responses we are invited to make each week - quotations which have been carefully selected to represent values and markers for human community.

I didn't mind that the first verse implies we are about to break into spring - which clearly we are not. And that's because the recurring affirmation by the writer is that no thought nor idea is new. If it feels new, that is because it is a re-creation for each age; it builds upon, or moulds previous thought, for a new society.

The famous phrase, 'We stand on the shoulders of giants', is variously attributed but certainly a very old statement and may refer to Greek classical thought. We can understand it as 'discovering truth by building on previous discoveries'. And this was re-worded by Isaac Newton (if we can believe the attribution), as 'If I see further, it is because I stand on the shoulders of giants.'

And yet I wonder if that is true. Not all thoughts can be put into words and passed on to another generation. Not all ideas can be spoken. We cannot move society by concepts and instincts of which we cannot speak. Therefore, a concept can be sensed and not acted upon. Yet it extends that person's ability to sense *how to be, how to be with others, how to affirm and not criticize ourselves.* Such learning is not read in a book, nor online or learnt at uni. Those moments arise from beauty, from human love, from suffering.

Any brief notion or sense of wonder excites our intellect and our finer feelings, and changes us. We fleetingly grasp a new understanding - we can't always express it in words - but from that point, we carry the understanding within us.

And such moments alter our work, our relationships, lives.

From a sermon given by Andrew Brown years ago, I recall a comment which felt like a throw-away remark, yet it altered my understanding. During a dismal and hopeless period of my life, Andrew once told us something like: 'because if you think something is impossible, then it becomes impossible. You close it off.' I had been so used to feeling squashed by circumstances that I really needed that glimpse of hope; trust, that a new window might open if I allowed it to open.

And so, we may feel that ideas, beliefs, religious traditions, are being recycled constantly, joining and separating like streams in Spring, or running to earth in dry periods - yet to each of us, when they happen, they are newly born. They revitalize us.

We may not *see an idea*, nor feel able to *capture* an understanding. They are our fragments of holiness, glimpses of eternity, brief moments of insight.'

But when these glimpses occur to an *individual*, they occur also universally, touching and

enabling everything around us. There is a spectrum of life from the base and coarse, to the most fine and pure – it's invisible, and untouchable, yet is always available to us. These most fine elements of the universe are connected to everything, and I have a sense that we grow as we connect with them.

In the hymn, we sang:

‘A beacon from a far-off star may touch a light-year distant soul.

A deed unmarked can travel far and work to make a stranger whole.’

There's a poem by James Elroy Flecker, *To a Poet a Thousand Years Hence*, and in the poem, which I'm not going to read – but find it at <https://allpoetry.com/To-a-Poet-a-Thousand-Years-Hence> - Flecker expresses the same understanding.

But now I invite you to reopen hymn 75 [in our purple hymnbook *Sing Your Faith*]. What lines touch you most deeply? If you wish to do so, just spend a moment glancing through it.