

## **Living from the Inside Out**

Rev. Jennifer Brooks

July 9, 2006

*“There is deep power in which we exist and whose beatitude is accessible to us.”<sup>[1]</sup>*

That’s Emerson, talking about the Over-Soul. Sometimes he says God. Sometimes he says the “true fire” at the center of each heart.

What matters is not the name or the particulars of the theology. Life is not about the intellectual details. Life is perhaps not even about why we are here.

Life is about how we live.

We humans often wonder about our purpose in life. We say, “Why are we here? What is the meaning of life?”

These are good questions—fair questions. Theologians pursue them in one way; scientists in another. And all of us, whatever our gifts or areas of expertise, ask these questions at one time or another.

But the point Emerson makes is that we may miss the answer completely if we make a merely intellectual search for the meaning and purpose of life.

Emerson’s essay entitled “Spiritual Laws”<sup>[2]</sup> sounds as if it might be a 19<sup>th</sup>-century catalogue of biblical commands. Or, because we know Emerson as one of our country’s great thinkers, we might assume that it’s a highly intellectual, perhaps even impenetrable, discussion of the principles of common humanity.

It’s much simpler than that.

The spiritual laws Emerson talks about are readily revealed to us through our ordinary experience, if we will only look and see.

It’s a lengthy essay, but each bend and turn of his prose is merely a different way to look at the same point. He holds up, for our consideration, an idea, turning it this way and that in the light: it’s the simple admonition to find the “true fire” and allow it to shape our lives.

When we find a quiet moment—difficult on Nantucket in the summertime, but if you seek it out you will find time and space for solitude and mindfulness—in those quiet moments, think about someone whose life is filled with actions that speak of a whole and loving spirit.

I do not have to look far today to see the person whose image comes immediately to mind. [Gesture toward Karen Tse, who is serving as the liturgist this Sunday.] When I look at the deeds that emanate from the life of Karen Tse, it is easy to understand Emerson, who said:

“When we see a soul whose acts are all regal, graceful and pleasant as roses, we must thank God that such things can be and are.”

From the time Karen was very young, she found in herself a deep longing for justice. Her soul rebelled against the mistreatment of one human being by another. This was not an intellectual gift, although she brings vivid intelligence to her work.

It is a gift of the spirit, a true fire at her heart’s center.

She has lived from that center, and the path of her life is simply littered with beautiful deeds. In her work in Cambodia, in Vietnam, in China, she has smiled gently at people who opposed her, threatened her, but in their hearts were afraid they were not living the life they should. She has been able to see in each person the connection to that deep power in which we exist, that connection to the beatitude that is accessible to us all.

And she has transformed the world.

I will not tell you more about her work; I will let her tell you that in her lecture tonight. I think you will find it inspirational to hear how her organization, International Bridges to Justice, is creating systematic change in the culture of arrests and detentions in China.<sup>[3]</sup>

There is a Buddhist story about a woman who carried water from the river to her little house, not a long distance. She used two clay jugs, each hung on the end of a long pole so they would balance when she placed the pole across her shoulders. She could carry more water that way. But for a long time one of the jugs had been cracked.

In the story, the jug is very unhappy about being cracked. It finally speaks to her, lamenting its defects. “You don’t get as much water to the house as you should,” it tells her, “because I am in a sorry state. I am not good

enough. You should get rid of me and use a better jug. At least you should have me repaired. I am so inadequate to the task.”

The woman looked at the jug thoughtfully. She had used it for many years. “Yes, you have a crack, you leak water along the path,” she told the jug. Then she carried it outside and held it up.

“Look,” she said. “Do you see the flowers that line the path? Do you see their beauty?”

“Yes,” the jug said, feeling ashamed. “They are beautiful, I am not.”

“Foolish being,” the woman said gently. “Do you not see? Those flowers grew beside the path because you leaked just a little water. Sometimes I carried you on one side, sometimes on the other, so that on both sides the seeds would find water and the beautiful flowers would grow.”

“Do not lament who you are,” she told the jug. “See what it is that you may do because of who you are.”

Emerson read widely, and was deeply influenced by Buddhist teachings. We can see this influence in his essay on spiritual laws. He says:

“Why need you choose so painfully your place and occupation and associates and modes of action and of entertainment? Certainly there is a possible right for you.... For you there is a reality, a fit place and congenial duties.”

“Place yourself in the middle of the stream of power and wisdom which animates all whom it floats, and you are without effort impelled to truth, to right and a perfect contentment.”

Whatever attributes we may have—not only our talents but also our flaws—there is a fit place for each of us. We find it not by agonizing and striving and self-flagellation, but by resting in the spirit that flows through life like a river.

The current in a river, like the currents and streams in the ocean tides, sweeps all along with a surety our own lives sometimes seem to lack. But if the universe is like a river; if each life is like a journey along a river; and if the river has a current capable of bringing us from beginning to end, then we might think about how we travel.

Do we stand on the bank and say, “I cannot swim?” Do we wade in part way, clinging to rocks and overhanging branches, making our way cautiously yet choosing the most difficult way to travel downstream?

Or do we place ourselves in the center of the stream of power and wisdom? Do we let it carry us along, so that we discover in ourselves the gifts of the spirit?

Emerson believed that each person has a vocation, an area of work and living that most fully expresses the gifts within. Often events and the expectations of others propel us into tasks and careers that are not our vocation. Emerson’s voice urges every person to find work that is a calling, that expresses our inner gifts. This vocation is the “fit place,” the calling that flows from the center of the stream of power.

A boat on a river “runs against obstructions on every side but one, [and] on that side all obstruction is taken away and [the boat] sweeps serenely over a deepening channel into an infinite sea.”

There are many voices in the world telling us what is expected, what is right, what is best. Sometimes the loudest voice is our own: a voice of childhood, a voice of helplessness, a voice of tragedy, a voice of fear. Each of us must discover our own powers. Within us is a wellspring, a source of wisdom, that will guide us as surely as the rose knows to blossom in the summer. This is the voice of the river—the voice of the spirit that flows through life. It does not matter whether we call this voice the divine spark, or God speaking, or our connection to the universe. What matters is that we allow ourselves to hear it, to live from the center of its wisdom.

A word of caution. There is a need for discernment. There is a need to consult the mind as well as the heart. If someone says, “I am living my life as God told me to live it,” but the path he walks is littered with hurt, oppression, and torment, something is wrong.

In those moments of quiet, of solitude, that we give ourselves out of compassion, it is necessary to consider whether the inner commands we eagerly follow are in fact the voice of a loving heart. We know what our values are: we can list them, speak them. But do we truly live those values from the inside out?

Just as the cracked water jug nourished the flowers *because* of its flaw, so people can bring forth beauty no matter what brokenness is part of their history or their being, *if* they have placed themselves in the stream of

wisdom that animates all it floats. But no matter how perfect a person may seem—no matter how “botoxed” the brow—anyone who snatches at the overhanging branches and clings to the riverbank is not riding the deep channel that leads to the sea, and it will show in their life.

The test of wisdom is in our living. The river’s voice calls to us with yearning and sadness, with joy and blessing, with certainty and power.

Let us join our voices to the river’s.

Let us live serenely, in a way that expresses the deep wisdom of our spirits, so that we make manifest in the world a soul of grace and beauty.

---

<sup>[1]</sup> Emerson, *Essays: First Series*, Essay IX, *The Over-Soul* (1841).

<sup>[2]</sup> Emerson, *Essays: First Series*, Essay IV, *Spiritual Laws* (1841).

<sup>[3]</sup> For more information about Karen Tse and her work, go to [www.ibj.org](http://www.ibj.org), the website for her organization International Bridges to Justice.