

Turbidity in thinking and believing



Highland Views

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Guest columnist

Many of us who experienced Tropical Storm Helene have come to know one word very well: “turbidity.” The main reservoir to our city water system was too murky to be potable drinking water. The water department was closely watching turbidity levels. Weeks passed before the water was clear enough. The word “turbid” comes from a Latin word for a “disturbance” — dis-turbid. It can describe “cloudy, opaque, or thick with suspended matter.” The term can also be a description of being “confused or obscure in meaning or effect.” Let’s see if we can get a clearer view here.

When it comes to suspended matters of faith, maybe turbidity is a word we should consider. The sense of something being very muddy and unclear applies well to many theological notions. In deep studies of religion and theology in college and seminary, we students were often swimming around in muddy waters — we couldn’t swallow it all. Turbid theology can be a thick disturbance in the brain. After explaining some un-

explainable concept, a professor would joke: “clear as mud?” Of course. We were ready for the exam, maybe not for the pulpit.

There is no “clear and clean” definition of God, spirit or even religion itself. Some of these things are like water — fluid, constantly flowing and changing, impossible to pin down, at least to the satisfaction of a reasonable person. The mind clouds over and confusion settles in. I’m reminded of a verse from the ancient Tao: “Nothing in the world is as soft and yielding as water, yet for dissolving the hard and inflexible, nothing can surpass it” (78, Stephen Mitchell translation). There’s a power in water that could be compared to other forces in Nature or, if you choose, with a supernatural force. Either way, water helps dissolve everything in its path, which may include hardened beliefs. As in a waterfall, or an ocean wave, the boulders of belief are worn down by disturbance, drop by drop.

Is this what Jesus meant by “living water” (John 7)?: “On the last day of [Sukkot, the feast of booths], the great day, Jesus stood up and cried out, “If anyone thirsts, let him come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said, ‘Out of his heart will flow rivers of living water.’” In John 4, Jesus tells the woman at the well: “If you

knew the gift of God, and who it is that is saying to you, ‘Give me a drink,’ you would have asked him, and he would have given you living water.” He goes on to say: “Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, but whoever drinks of the water that I will give him will never be thirsty again.” Lots of turbidity there. No wonder the Samaritan woman was confused. They’re standing at a well, a Samaritan and a Jew, and this stranger claims he has his own personal well, a water source so abundant and pure she never has to draw water or be thirsty again. Obviously this analogy is one of many intentionally muddy passages crystal clear only to willing “swallowers.” Yes, water gives life, and like the Tao — the Way or Path of knowledge — each analogy is meant to cause a disturbance. Turbidity is stirred into the stream we are supposed to drink from. Yet, no one can assure us cloudy water is pure enough to drink. Sensible, scientific testing is necessary.

During our disastrous wind and rain storm, we learned just how much we appreciate fresh, clean, clear water. When the water was turned off and we had no power, cell or internet connections, it was a rapid reminder how much we depend on basics such as light, communication and good water (let alone flushing). Another line from the Tao seems

appropriate for those of us who had to wait for potable water: “Do you have the patience to wait till your mud settles and the water is clear?” (15) This verse appears in the context of learning from ancient teachers; they claim to reach depths “that cannot be known...because they are unknowable.” Clear as mud? When it comes to spiritual teachers, the Tao says we should be “open like a valley, obscure like muddy water.” The way through this disturbance is to ask ourselves: “Who can be muddled, and use clarity to gradually become lucid?” (Charles Muller translation). As I see it, this teaches that it’s crucial to wait for clear water (meaningful explanations) while actively seeking clarity. The mud will settle; the muddledness will pass.

Carrying jugs of water for weeks, I’ve had water on my mind every day. I reflect on the women in African villages carrying water on their heads. Something to think about, through the turbidity.

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