

Navigating the Ever Changing River

Lawrence D. Hart

During the first years of my life our house was full –full of people with all their doings and conversations. But by the time I was thirteen my two sisters were married with children and in homes of their own. My brother had joined the navy and was sailing the Atlantic, and visiting exotic places far from our home in California's Central Valley; but for all that life as I had always known it still seemed intact. When I came home from school my mother was still there to greet me, as were the familiar and delicious fragrances of whatever she was cooking for our evening meal – a pot of stew, or maybe cornbread and red beans. The house we lived in was more than modest, yet to me it was always a real home with a reassuring and welcoming warmth that made it seem almost like a living friend.

So even with the changes in our family-life everything seemed to retain a certain constancy – until the April night my father was killed in a car accident. That night my world disintegrated. My mother went to work in the kitchen of a local hospital, and when I came home the house was dark and empty. The universe in which I personally and emotionally lived had collapsed. The whole world, as I then saw it, was characterized by a ruthless unpredictability and cruel contingency. There was nothing permanent, nothing stable, and death and decay were everywhere triumphant.

For nearly two decades after that night I thought, without realizing I was thinking it, that happiness must lie along the line of preventing change, that if I could arrange my life and the people in it just so and freeze it all right there I could live happily ever after.

That of course is not reality; and, therefore, cannot possibly succeed. Life is more like a moving picture than a still photograph.

The denomination of my earliest experience supported me in my passion for the unchangeable. It asserted that matters of religious practice, whether of the individual or the church, were nearly as unvarying as God was. The life and work of the church were firmly fixed and carefully delineated in the New Testament; consequently, there were no ambiguities, never any uncertainties concerning any subject, and no place for growth or development. Church history was seen as the recorded movement of the church away from its ideal state, not as moving upward to something higher or forward toward something more perfect. It was a long time before I could see that neither the church nor Scripture are synonymous with God. God is immutable and in that respect my quest was not in vain, but life and the church are not unchanging and in that regard my search was futile.

A large part of my healing was in discovering God as the only dependable constant of my existence, and Christ as the one in whom all things hold together. After all these decades that realization remains one of the fundamental insights of my own life. And the hymn *O Abide With Me* still resonates in the deep recesses of my heart:

Swift to its close ebbs out life's little day;
Earth's joys grow dim, its glories pass away;
Change and decay in all around I see;
O Thou who changest not, abide with me.

What I found comfort in is that quality of God that never varies. It is no wonder that even today one of my favorite Biblical stories is the story of Moses' encounter with God at the burning bush where God reveals to Moses the divine name *Yahweh*. Which can be

understood as saying, “I will be there with you,” and so emphasizes God’s continuing and dependable presence.

This was, however, only one half of the truth I needed to discover. I needed to know that God is always there, always present, always constant; but, I also needed to know that life is always changing, that we are involved in a mysterious process of becoming. What I did not see then, what I could not see, was that we are on a great adventure where the new and unexpected wait for us just over every rise. Life is a constant becoming -- becoming more human, more alive, and more Christian. Indeed, the immutable God is also the God who “makes all things new”. Whether we find it exciting or are uncomfortable with it, everything changes, appears, subsides, expands and evolves but nothing remains quite the same. Robert Raines introduced me to these immensely helpful lines from William Blake:

He who binds to himself a joy
Does the winged life destroy;
But he who kisses the joy as it flies
Lives in eternity’s sunrise.

You, of course, know all this from your own lived experience. It is a discovery that has been made many times by those who see with a deep seeing and who hear with a deep hearing. It is an insight that brings a practical understanding of the physical, emotional, and spiritual nature of the universe we inhabit, and can release us from the sorrow of nostalgia -- and what is nostalgia but the belief that the future can never be as good as the past.

Although we may be oblivious to them, like we may be oblivious to the wonder and the beauty of the world around us, the signs of change, of the working of an

evolutionary process, are everywhere – a reality that is woven into the very fabric of the universe, and therefore into our own personal lives: Everything we know from Holy Scripture, and our own personal experience declares the creative love of God – the power to bring something new and beautiful and glorious out of nothing. The nature of human beings, both scientifically and spiritually, indicates some lively principle of progressive development. Scripture itself points to a developmental process of becoming, of our being shaped over time by the patient workings of the Spirit. Even quite conservative scholars have argued for the developmental, or progressive, nature of Biblical revelation. What is at first obscure and indiscernible in Scripture gradually unfolds and is finally revealed in its fullness. The nature of nature is evolutionary. Evolution is “more than a hypothesis” – although, there is more to creation than the hypothesis explains. The human relationships that form the texture of our lives follow an evolutionary pattern. What is inherited from generation to generation is a good deal more than our genes alone. We see evolution, developmental change, manifested in so many ways that it has to be accepted as a fundamental element of reality as we human beings experience it. Welcome or unwelcome we are always moving into the future. We are always moving through time and space, but we are moving like a child carried in the arms of its mother. Not all changes, of course, are healthy; nor, do they necessarily lead to a higher level of development or more intense communion or awareness of the presence of God; consequently, we need to be highly conscious of our choices – of the sort of changes we embrace, adopt and own, because those choices help determine who and what we become as individuals and as a people, they are themselves part of the evolutionary process and realities to which others will have to adapt. The criteria for moving in a new direction, for

accepting a change that runs across the grain of conventional thought, is whether the Trinity is in it, whether love is in it, whether compassion and goodness are in it – not merely whether its origins are steeped in antiquity.

Fear is the strongest inhibitor of growth, of progress, of development, of moving to the next level, of evolution in a positive direction. The only way to keep our sanity or to find a sense of tranquility and equilibrium in a world of accelerating change is through a deepening of the spirit in which trust, and confidence, and courage replace fear, anger and the need to control. What is required is faith that the evolutionary process of the universe and of our souls is in God's loving hands. It is as Robert Raines said in his book

To Kiss the Joy:

There is a flow and a movement of the Spirit, the natural unfolding of the initiatives of people, and the constellation of events. We discover again and again that no matter how hard we try to cover for every possible contingency, the plans of mice and men – and ours – can go astray, can go awry. The coming future with its novelty and spontaneity outwits us always with its strange newness and unpredictable happenings, so that we need a deep confidence and flexibility of spirit enabling us to trust the process. We need in a few words, *to go with the flow and use a light touch.*