

THE INTERPLAY OF TRAVELED HEARTS

A sermon preached by Galen Guengerich
All Souls Unitarian Church, New York City
March 24, 2019

The ancient Greeks considered the Oracle of Delphi to be their most authoritative source of knowledge. Established about 1,400, the Oracle was the most important and most revered Greek shrine. It originally belonged to the earth goddess Gaia, but later became the site of a temple dedicated to the god Apollo.

People came from all over Greece to have their questions answered by the Pythia, as the priestess who served as the Oracle was known. As described by Antoine Danchin in his book [*The Delphic Boat: What Genomes Tell Us*](#), the most famous of her pronouncements concerned a boat made of planks. What is it that makes the boat a boat? As time passes, some of the planks rot and must be replaced. Eventually, the time comes when none of the original planks are left. The boat looks the same, but in material terms, it has changed completely. Is it still the same boat?

The owner of the boat would say yes, this is my boat. Even if none of the materials remain from which it was originally built, this is still my boat. Even if the original planks were pine and the replacement planks are oak, this is still my boat. What is important about the planks, according to the Oracle, is not what they are made of, but that they are shaped so that they relate to each other and everything around them in a certain way. The essence of a boat is not the material it is made from, but something much more interesting: it's the relationship among the planks that constitute the boat and between the boat and the people and world around it.

I thought of this ancient insight when I came across a story about the longest personality study of all time, published in the journal *Psychology and Aging*. As reported by the science journalist [*Olivia Goldhill in Quartz*](#), the study found that over the course of your lifetime, your personality becomes transformed beyond recognition, just as your physical appearance also changes and your cells constantly get replaced.

In 1950, teachers in Scotland used questionnaires to rate 1,200 14-year-olds on six personality traits: self-confidence, perseverance, stability of moods, conscientiousness, originality, and desire to learn. The results from these questionnaires were integrated into a rating for an overall personality trait the researchers called dependability.

More than 60 years later, researchers tracked down more than half of the original participants, and 174 of them agreed to repeat testing. Now 77 years old, the participants rated themselves on the same six personality traits, and they also nominated a close friend or relative to do the same.

It turns out that there was very little overlap with the traits from 63 years earlier. As the researchers put it, “Correlations suggested no significant stability of any of the six characteristics or their underlying factor, dependability, over the 63-year interval.” They added, “We hypothesized that we would find evidence of personality stability over an even longer period of 63 years, but our correlations did not support this hypothesis.” As Olivia Goldhill sums up the findings, “You’re a completely different person at 14 and 77.”

The boat may become a completely different boat, but it’s still your boat. The essence of the boat is the relationship among the planks in space and between the boat and the people and world around it over time.

You may become a completely different person, but you are still you. The essence of a person is the relationship among the various elements that make us up in space and between us and the people and world around us over time.

Because we are constituted by relationships, we inevitably change over time. We have no choice about that. We may even change completely. The question is how we change.

The American poet Walt Whitman’s sprawling poem “Song of the Open Road” provides the text for Norman Dello Joio’s choral composition by the same name, which we have just heard splendidly sung as our Offertory. In the poem, Whitman depicts life as a journey. His focus throughout the poem isn’t a destination we may or may not eventually reach, but rather what happens to us along the way — what we see and feel, whom we meet, what we discover. The goal of the journey, according to Whitman, is to learn what he calls “the profound lesson of reception.

Whitman explores this lesson further in his poem “Song of Myself,” which is perhaps his best-known poem. Its opening stanzas include these lines:

For every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you.
My tongue, every atom of my blood, form'd from this soil, this air,
Born here of parents born here from parents the same, and their parents the same,
I, now thirty-seven years old in perfect health begin,
Hoping to cease not till death.

Whitman begins this song of himself by saying that he is made of atoms, which were thought in his day to be the most fundamental units of matter. Certain atoms had been drawn from the soil and the air by previous generations of human beings, who had structured them in a distinctive way to yield up the self of whom Walt now sings. Those atoms are part of the story, but they are not the whole story.

“Song of Myself” is a poem of 1,346 lines, and Whitman refers to himself by name only once, when he refers to himself as “Walt Whitman, a cosmos.” The opposite of chaos, a cosmos is an orderly, harmonious self-inclusive system. The term cosmos often refers to the entire universe as an orderly, harmonious whole.

This reference to himself as a cosmos explains Whitman's statement that "every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you." Whitman's central insight is that the self exists in a system where everyone is who they are by virtue of their relationships to everyone and everything else. Whitman writes:

And these tend inward to me, and I tend outward to them,
And such as it is to be of these more or less I am,
And of these one and all I weave the song of myself.

Whitman is substantially correct in describing how we become who we are, but he gets the why wrong. His apparent narcissism continually gets in the way. "I weave the song of myself," he says. "I ask not good-fortune," he says, "I myself am good-fortune."

In my experience, that's not how things happen. Whitman's view that we are self-made as individuals, that we engineer our own development and destiny, doesn't describe the world as I have experienced it.

Over time, we become whoever we become, in large measure at least, because of how we respond to forces and circumstances beyond our control, including the circumstances of our birth. A boat gets bleached by the sun, buffeted by the waves, and damaged by crashing against pylons and rocks. Whether or not it stands up to these challenges depends what it's made of and whether its owner takes care of it.

In the same way, as we confront the challenges we encounter as individuals — difficult circumstances, malicious individuals, enervating situations — we find out what we're made of. We find out whether what gets woven into us will strengthen us or destroy us.

Make no mistake: we will each change substantially over time, perhaps completely, as the study suggests. But whether the changes bode good or ill depends, to a large extent, on whether our journey takes us to a place we find support and nurture.

On these terms, it's worth noting that, over a period of 200 years, All Souls has changed completely. The death of the longest-living founder of this congregation is separated by the better part of a century from the birth of our oldest current member. This is a completely different congregation. We are also separated by two intervening buildings and two locations from the stone, wood, and plaster of our original building. This is a completely different sanctuary.

But it's still All Souls — a community of spiritual seekers that we have come to know and cherish. It's a place where we can find ourselves and together we become who we ought to become. In so doing, we transform not only our own lives, but also the world around us. As we become different, so does everything else. Because these experiences have largely been beneficial to us and our predecessors, and because these experiences have persisted over time, we are committed to restoring and renewing this place, thoughtfully and lovingly. This is our spiritual boat.

The poet Georgia Douglas Johnson was one of the earliest African-American female playwrights and an important voice in the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s. In her poem titled “Cosmopolite,” she describes the reciprocity between us and the world around us that, over time, yields our identity. She echoes Whitman’s insight, but without the narcissism. She writes:

Not wholly this or that,
But wrought
Of alien bloods am I,
A product of the interplay
Of traveled hearts.
Estranged, yet not estranged, I stand
All comprehending;
From my estate
I view earth’s frail dilemma;
Scion of fused strength am I,
All understanding,
Nor this nor that
Contains me.

Earth’s frail dilemma, Johnson says, is that everything is the product of interplay — of one thing and another, of this and that. For this reason, she says, I get my strength from being fused to everything else — from being a cutting or a shoot (the meaning of scion) off the tree of life that sustains me. All this, she says, I understand. Because I’m fused to everything else, I also understand that no one thing fully contains me. I am a product of the interplay of traveled hearts.

Once we understand that interplay is the dominant feature of all existence, we also understand that where we travel and with whom we travel will, over time, make us who we are. How we spend our time, and where, and with whom — these aren’t peripheral issues, but essential ones. They will determine whether or not our boat remains seaworthy and our journey turns out to be enlightening.

When we find a group of traveled hearts that nurture us in a place that’s right for us, then we can say, as Whitman does at the end of his “Song of the Open Road” (as adapted by Dello Joio):

Come forth, come forth and travel with me.
I give you my hand. I give you my love.
I give you myself. Will you give me yourself?
Will you travel with me?
The road is before us,
I give you my hand.