



A Flow-Through Faith

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I searched for a metaphor that would carry my Thanksgiving message, a metaphor that would be uplifting and worthy of you. I wanted it to be inspirational, elegant and eloquent. Yet, what kept knocking at the inside of my head, persistently, so that I had to listen, was a rather crude comment I had once heard from a neighborhood cynic. I'm sorry, but here it is: *The human animal, which holds itself in such high regard, is nothing more than a hollow tube, with baffles. What goes in eventually comes out.*

I am not one to disregard insistent inspiration. This is what came to me when I asked, and this is what I bring to you this joyful morning: *The human animal, which holds itself in such high regard, is nothing more than a hollow tube with baffles. What goes in eventually comes out.* Fortunately, I am allowed to expand on the metaphor.

My only criticism of the cynic's definition is the term *nothing more than*. As for the rest, I must agree: the human animal is, in many ways, a hollow tube B a complex, miraculous, often awesome creation B but definably a hollow tube. The baffles within the tube are extremely functional, and quite possibly the most important part of the system, though we do not see them. They slow down the flow of what goes in, and they process it. Whatever goes into this hollow human tube is made usable to the host, and what comes out is something transformed.

This is certainly true of food B the first thing we think of, and the most common, in this regard. Food is utilized as nourishment for our bodies, and transformed into nutrition for us and B if we weren't so overly civilized and didn't eat way too much meat--could be used as nutrition for our soil. Sadly, we waste it. But that is not the topic of this sermon.

Food is not the only thing this hollow tube takes in, uses, transforms and allows to flow through us. Melody, for instance, enters our ears, stays long enough to enrich us, to charm the savage breast, and exits transformed as song, or sigh, or even dance.

Light enters our eyes, illuminates us with symbol and sign, with picture and vision, and is transformed into memory, or art; is transformed into laughter or tears.

Ideas enter our minds, stimulate the consciousness, excite the intellect, energize the imagination, and they leave this hollow tube transformed into new ideas B as poems and stories, as laws and inventions, as philosophy and theology, as theory and advice.

A hollow tube with baffles we may be, but what a marvelous hollow tube; what a divine creation of process and transformation.

Which is not to say that there are no problems.

Every phase of the system--the input, the processing and the output-- have their unique problems. Introduce food with too much fat or sugar and we get insufficient nourishment. Present discordant tunes to the ear and we experience displeasure, unsatisfactory aural sustenance. Impose the ugly and the obscene upon the eye and we perceive the world with vision clouded by cynicism. Proclaim evil opinions or introduce erroneous ideas and we produce flawed thinking. In short, the hollow tube begins to malfunction; the usefulness of a flawed product is not fully realized within; the transformation, in turn--that which is expressed--becomes useless, inharmonious, ugly, even dangerous.

Conversely, we all know what happens when a tube becomes clogged and the input is not allowed to flow through. In the human cylinder the result is blockage, swelling, discomfort, pain, weakness of limbs, a whole series of debilitating symptoms. And these are not just symptoms of the dietary process. Feelings of unworthiness block our songs, bottle them up inside until they are of no use to us, unsingable, unsharable. Images that contain no hope or no inspiration, block our vision, inhibit our dreams or create them stillborn. Words that have no compassion, no justice, no truth or beauty, block our psyches and shrivel our souls.

We are, indeed, a marvelous B but delicate B hollow tube, with incredible B but fallible B baffles. We have inexhaustible and often unwise appetites. We can anticipate outpourings of creativity, but often experience painful and sometimes deadly obstructions. This is the metaphor I ask you to hold on to, then, as I ask the vital question of this week of Thanksgiving: *How do we, mere hollow tubes, experience our faith and our capacity for gratitude?*

It seems to me that this is indeed a question involving the flowing through of some commodity, some entity that enters us, is processed through us, and flows from us back into the community, into the world. This entity has many names. It has been called Spirit, Life, Love, Faith, Grace or simply Gifts from the Universe. Each of us has experienced this in some way, in some personal manner. I need only remind you of the benefits we get when any of these are allowed entry into our being B remind you of the nourishment we experience to both our bodies and our souls. From the gift of life we learn to live. From the gift of love we learn trust and values. From the gifts of faith and grace, we receive enlightenment. All of these we can use to achieve self-actualization, self-gratification and, most importantly, spiritual growth. Not too shabby for a hollow tube.

Without these gifts of Life, Love, Faith, and Grace we would be impoverished, suffering from spiritual malnutrition. You have seen this kind of unsatisfied hunger, this inability to accept what is available, this being unable to receive love, being blind to faith and deaf to grace, being starved of life in the midst of plenty. You have seen this malfunction of the human spirit. Perhaps you have experienced it yourself at some time. We know we can be eternally grateful when we do not suffer from maladies of the spirit. And we know that when we do, we must and can seek spiritual healing.

But the inability to receive the great gifts of life is not the least of the problems that beset us as hollow human beings. What happens when faith and life and love and grace enter us but find the channel blocked from flowing through?

The human system works on these gifts the same way with it will work on our Thanksgiving Day dinner. If we try to keep all of our gifts B life and love, faith and grace, music and beauty, concepts and cranberriesB- keep them for ourselves, and if through some malfunction of the spirit, we cannot transform them into something useful, something that flows from us, we will suffer a kind of spiritual illness. We will be puffed up, swollen with pride. We will find ourselves weak in spiritual understanding. Or we will become stuck and heart-hardened.

If we keep our faith without expressing it, we will find ourselves spiritually and morally constipated. Even in these things we are hollow tubes with baffles. Whatever we are fortunate enough to receive, we must use with gratitude and pass on transformed for the use of others. If we don't, if we can't, the consequences are clear.

If you have bread, the prophet said, then deal thy bread to the hungry. If you have shelter, bring the poor to thy house. If you have love it profits you nothing unless you can return love. If you let the wonders of the universe, the gifts of life and the grace you inherit flow through you, then you will know the transformations: The light will break forth as morning; health shall spring forth in you; righteousness will go before you; and glory will be your reward.

But, if it doesn't flow through you, if it isn't allowed in, if it isn't processed, if it is kept from re-entering the world transformed, your faith cannot nourish you or anyone else. It is useless. We who have something, whether it be little or much, must use it and pass it on. When we are happy, we generate happiness. When we are encouraged, we generate hope. If we have riches of any kind be they talent, or cash, or faith we are morally bound as religious people to let them flow through us. If they don't flow through, knowledge provides no wisdom; and faith becomes pomposity.

We have come together this morning to celebrate the season of thanksgiving. If we have even one small thing to be thankful for this day, let it move into us in a celebration of gratitude that will enrich and nourish our hearts. Let it flow through us in determination and deeds that will transform our worlds.

And allow me to expand further on my metaphor. Notice that these hollow tubes, which we are, have appendages. Let us, once we have digested our own good fortune, use both of our feet to carry our faith throughout the land, to stamp out hate and greed that we find there. Let us use both our hands, one to count our blessings, and the other to count how we can increase the blessings of the world.

Let what you see flow through you to help find a dream for a better world and to see a way that you can be a part of it. Then share the vision. Let knowledge flow through you to help you create a wisdom to be shared with others, and let the wisdom flow out through all the land. Let our faith flow through us to make us effective; let our works, not our words, reflect our glory. Let the music of the stars enter our hearts and create a new song for all the world to sing. Know that people of faith, though their faiths be varied, share a hollowness that can be filled only through love and thanksgiving and shared effort. Let the world be transformed by our flow-through faith.