

The Way That Cannot Be Named • Week Two

Water Always Wins: The Spiritual Power of Yielding

Rev. Blaine Tinsley • Unity on Maui • Sunday, June 7, 2026

“Nothing in the world is as soft and yielding as water. Yet for dissolving the hard and inflexible, nothing can surpass it. The soft overcomes the hard. The gentle overcomes the rigid.”

— Tao Te Ching — Chapter 78

THE STORY: EMILY, THE WATERFALL, AND THE OPEN HAND

Many of you have stood before a waterfall on this island — at Waimoku Falls, maybe, or along the Hāna coast. You watch water fall over stone: old, hard, immovable stone. And the water just keeps arriving. It doesn't strategize. It doesn't strain. Over years, over centuries, the soft thing shapes the hard thing.

Emily was a watercolor painter. And of all the things she could have chosen to paint, she painted water — waterfalls, the sea breaking on rocks, the exact way a waterfall turns to mist at the bottom. Watercolor is an unforgiving medium. You cannot force it. The pigment goes where the water carries it. You learn to guide, to suggest, to let go. Emily understood that with her hands long before I understood it with my heart.

When Emily was dying, I did what I have always done with a problem. I pushed. I researched. I made calls. I prayed the kind of prayer that is really just negotiation — if I believe hard enough, this will move. I was standing at the cliff's edge, my hands against the stone, trying to push the waterfall back uphill.

But death is the one rock that will not move.

There was no door to keep knocking on. No outcome to force. No amount of my gripping was going to change what was happening. And here is what I slowly, painfully began to learn from a watercolor painter who was running out of time: I could not change the rock. But I could change whether I spent her last months braced against it — or flowing around it. I could yield — not to defeat, but to love. I could stop trying to win, and simply be present. Sit with her. Laugh with her and cry with her. Let the time we had move through my fingers instead of clutching at it until it broke.

The water never argues with the rock. It finds the way around — and in the finding, something is carved that could never have been carved by force. Emily didn't get better. The rock didn't move. But when I stopped trying to push the river uphill, something in me could finally flow again. You don't get over a loss like that. You learn to move around it. And one day you look at the shape your life has taken — the canyon the grief carved — and you realize: the water was always winning.

THE WISDOM OF WATER ACROSS THE TRADITIONS

Twenty-five centuries ago, Lao Tzu wrote that nothing is softer than water, and yet nothing is better at overcoming what is hard. The Tao Te Ching calls this *wu wei* — not passivity, but the intelligent, faithful, unstoppable movement of flowing with rather than against. The Hebrew prophets pictured justice as a river. Jesus offered living water at a well. Charles Fillmore read water through all of scripture as Spirit in motion — consciousness being purified, renewed, made alive.

Notice what none of these traditions say. None of them mistake yielding for weakness. The river that carves the canyon is not giving up. It is the most persistent force on earth. Yielding, in the spiritual sense, is not collapse. It is an intelligent, faithful, unstoppable flow.

WHAT HAPPENS IN THE BRAIN WHEN WE BRACE

When life hands us something we don't want, the amygdala reads it as threat. The body braces: the jaw tightens, shoulders rise, breath goes shallow. And in that braced state, the prefrontal cortex — the seat of perspective, creativity, and wise choice — goes quiet. We lose access to our best thinking at the very moment we most need it. The harder we grip, the less we can see.

But the body has another setting. When we exhale, when we soften, when we let the breath go long and slow, the parasympathetic system comes on. The prefrontal cortex returns. Possibilities that were always there — hidden behind the clenching — become visible again. Yielding is, quite literally, a different operating system for the nervous system. To soften is to come back to your right mind. The water knows something the clenched fist does not.

THREE STEPS TO BECOMING LIKE WATER

Step One: Notice the Bracing in Your Body

When you feel yourself clenching your jaw, tightening your shoulders, holding your breath — let that be your bell of mindfulness. Don't judge it. Just notice it, and take one long, slow exhale. That single breath is you choosing the water over the fist. This is not a small thing. It is the first act of yielding, and it changes your neurological state in real time.

Step Two: Flow Around, Not Through

Find the one situation you've been trying to force — the person who won't change, the outcome you can't control, the door that won't open — and ask a different question. Not "*How do I push harder?*" but "*Where is the way around?*" Water never wastes itself against the immovable. It finds the open path. What is the open path in your situation right now?

Step Three: Trade One Demand for One Open Question

Consider a situation where you've been insisting life go your way, and loosen your grip just enough to ask: *What if there's something here I can't yet see?* That single question is the prefrontal cortex coming back online. It is the soul softening into possibility. It doesn't require you to abandon your hope. It only asks you to hold it the way water holds its course — firmly, faithfully, without forcing.

THE WATER IS ALREADY WINNING

You are not weak when you yield. You are joining the most persistent force in the universe. The same Spirit that flows through every waterfall on this island flows through you — finding the way around every rock you thought would stop you.

The water never argues with the rock. It never strains. It never gives up. It simply keeps arriving — and over the long patience of years, the canyon becomes the proof of its quiet, unstoppable power.

AFFIRMATION

*With every breath, I soften. Where I cannot move the rock, I trust the grace to flow around it.
In my yielding I find my strength.*