

“The Water of Life”

A Reflection by Rev. Dr. Jan Carlsson-Bull
Unitarian Universalist Congregation of the Catskills
Kingston, N.Y.
Intergenerational Water Communion
September 18, 2011

What do I most love about our Water Communion? The stories — absolutely, the stories that you bring. And now the stories swim. They swim together in the blended portion of water that you have poured into our common bowl. They swim together over the stones of your joys and sorrows. We are reminded once again that we are connected — not just in a web, but in the water of life.

None of us, not one of us, would be here were it not for water. None of us could survive without water. Sometimes water comes in quantities that make survival difficult if not impossible. We know that personally and recently from the devastation of Hurricane Irene. All too many trees know that from the power of water to uproot.

Yet water is ultimately life giving and life sustaining. We each take form in amniotic fluid. When “water breaks,” a birth is imminent. As newborns and lifelong, we’re nourished by water. We are mostly water. Without it we would die. What do astrophysicists look for when speculating on life on another planet? Water! Even a trace of water suggests that life is possible.

Water is the most primal of earth’s elements. Water is the most plentiful of earth’s elements. Close to three-quarters of our planet is water.

The Vietnamese poet Thich Nhat Hanh writes:

Water flows from high in the mountains.
Water runs deep in the Earth.
Miraculously, water comes to us,
and sustains all life.

We drink it, bathe in it, cook in it, swim in it, float on it, nurture with it, marvel at it. This morning it has been the medium of our stories and our community, so we call it a “water communion.” Ours is a community of stories gathered into a life-giving substance. Each of you is a treasured story of stories. Each of you is a previous drop of water, no less essential to this earth’s life than the sea around us. Each of you is gifted with the water of life.

Yet all aren’t. Just last Thursday, Catarina de Albuquerque, the United Nations’ independent expert for water and sanitation, reported that while most of us in the United States enjoy “safe drinking water and sanitation,” there are folks who are excluded. They don’t have what so many of us take for granted. The same individuals and families who don’t have access to “safe drinking water and sanitation” generally lack access to other benefits of this society, all rooted in beliefs and policies and practices that discriminate.

Testifying at a congressional hearing before the Lantos Human Rights Commission after the visit of the U.N. independent expert, Unitarian Universalist Service Committee President William F. Schulz proclaimed: “There is nothing more fundamental to our nation’s values than equal access to drinking water for everyone.” Bill spoke of the urgency for government at all levels to address this matter.

As we worship this morning, along with so many of our Unitarian Universalist congregations observing the annual ingathering that is the water communion, know that in California there are Unitarian Universalists committed to a legislative campaign for the human right to water.

To extend our water communion, I add this offering. [Pour from empty vase into the bowl.] I echo the words of so many in our congregations inspired by our Unitarian Universalist Service Committee as I pour from this vase.

[Pour from vase nothing into the common bowl.]

This container, empty of water, reminds us of all who lack access to safe and affordable water. We stand in solidarity with Unitarian Universalists in California who are calling for the human right to water. Their goal is a bill that would “make California the first state in the nation to establish in law the human right to water!”

What an exciting prospect. Might we do all that we can to support water as a human right where we live and beyond.

This morning we have poured our stories and our hearts into one small pond. May we summon our stories and our hearts to grow in caring community and affirm that we are all thirsty for love and justice as they are satisfied through the water of life for all.

Amen.

Sources

Dick Campbell, “UN expert’s report says far too many Americans lack access to safe, affordable water and sanitation,” September 12, 2011, http://www.uusc.org/content/un_expert_report_says_far_too_many_americans_lack_access_to_safe_affordable_water.

Kara Smith, “Got Water? What Is Water Communion Without Access to Water?” http://www.uusc.org/blog/entry/2769/what_is_water_communion_without_access_to_water%3F

Thich Nhat Hanh, “Cultivating Peace, Joy and Happiness,” in *Thich Nhat Hanh Dharma Talks*, November 25, 2009, <http://tnhaudio.org/2009/11/25/cultivating-peace-joy-and-happiness/>.