

Water of Life
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Water, like fire, is one of those elemental phenomena of life rich in potential symbolism. And so we return, year after year, to consideration of water – the part it plays directly in our lives, and the lessons it embodies as we consider its characteristics and their applicability to our lives.

Our service this morning has already made reference to many of those symbolic connections. The way water can be tied up in our memories of treasured places and times. The way we can compare our individual selves to single water droplets, which join together to become a larger, collective whole – our religious community. The way we can experience our journey through life as analogous to the flowing of a stream through the countryside.

One thing that gives water so much symbolic power is the wide variety of roles it can play – roles that are often mutually contradictory. For instance, water is absolutely essential for sustaining life. We can't live without it. It makes up 70% of our bodies, and must be regularly replenished to keep us alive and healthy. On the other hand, water can be highly destructive of life. Hurricanes, floods, and tsunamis have accounted for untold destruction, death, and suffering.

We may sometimes think of water as soft and yielding, flowing gently through its environment and taking the shape of what space is available. And yet, when enough water comes together, and moves with sufficient speed and force, over a long enough period of time, the result can be immense canyons carved out of solid rock.

Furthermore, bodies of water, like those we contemplated in our meditation this morning, may serve either to connect or separate people one from another. A river or stream may serve as a means of moving from place to place, allowing greater contact and communication. In other circumstances, a great ocean or sea may act as a barrier, an obstacle to contact with others.

Life-sustaining and life-destroying; weak and powerful; connecting and separating. Water, in its symbolic power, can remind us of many aspects of our existence and our experience of life. But this morning, I'd like to go beyond simply the symbolic nature of our relationship with water, and think a little bit about our real, literal relationship to this precious substance.

Not only is the symbolism surrounding water multi-faceted. Water itself is a multifaceted issue in our modern world. It is a political issue, an environmental issue, a human-rights issue, and ultimately a moral issue.

Water is all around us. Oceans cover more than two-thirds of our planet, and in most places on land you're not far from a lake, river, stream, swamp or glacier.

Water is also in constant motion, carried around the planet by storms, currents, tides and other forces.

Whether water is liquid or frozen, present year-round or arriving in pulses with monsoons or hurricanes, humans and other species have adapted to life in all kinds of wet environments. Even where water is plentiful, we can only ensure a healthy ecosystem by preserving that abundance and by keeping the water clean.

As humans, we have always searched for sources of safe water. Today, with human populations growing and climate changing, that search takes on increased urgency. We have new ways of purifying water—such as disinfection and high-tech filtration—but we have new ways of contaminating it, too. And now we know what our ancestors didn't: Earth has only a limited supply of clean, healthy, fresh water.

How do we make sure there is enough healthy fresh water, not just for ourselves, but for all forms of life? We can start by remembering that what we discard will eventually be in someone—or something—else's water. In the world of water, we're all downstream.

With growing population, and increasing environmental pressures, water is becoming an increasingly scarce resource. In his 2001 book, *Resource Wars*, Michael Klare argued that resources – including not only oil, but also water – will be the main cause of strife in the post-Cold War era. And this problem will intensify as the world population grows and resources become more depleted.

Klare points out that the United States is relatively fortunate in that it is blessed with an abundant supply of fresh water. “Unlike many countries in the Middle East and Asia, we do not depend for our water on rivers that originate in another country, and so we do not have to worry about an unfriendly upstream country cutting off our essential supplies. . . Nevertheless, our supply of fresh water is not limitless, and we are beginning to deplete many key aquifers. . . It is possible, moreover, that the greenhouse effect will result in declining levels of rainfall in many parts of the United States, adding to the pressures on our domestic water supply. [As] this occurs, Americans are likely to become far more sensitive to the natural limits on water consumption.”

And so water is intimately tied up in local, national, and international power politics. But as I mentioned before, it is not just a political issue. It is, perhaps most importantly, a justice issue, a human-rights issue.

Worldwide, up to five million deaths a year are due to water-related diseases. The course of the waterborne disease called cholera is frightening in its speed: intense thirst, acute cramps and diarrhea, then death from dehydration, often by the third day. It is also preventable. With water treatment and sanitation—that is, proper waste disposal—cholera has been virtually eliminated in wealthier

nations. Yet this killer still stalks the developing world, where more than 2.6 billion people lack basic sanitation. Many cholera victims are children.

For them, water is not simply a political bargaining chip. It is a matter of life and death. And so, in its ongoing work on social justice and human rights issues, the Unitarian Universalist Service Committee (UUSC) – which many of us support on a regular basis – has taken up the cause of defending the right to water, “so that everyone has enough.”

The signs of global climate change are everywhere, and climatologists now say the effects of climate change are occurring even sooner than they expected. This has worrying consequences for the availability and quality of water for all.

According to a recent UUSC publication:

In 2004, the United States Geological Survey announced that the U.S. government was “ill prepared” to handle a water crisis. Their prediction came true in 2007, when much of the Southeast suffered the most severe long-term drought since the Dust Bowl, creating an emergency so serious that some cities were just months away from running out of water.

[And] while communities in the United States struggle to deal with the growing water crisis, in other countries, people are literally dying from lack of access to safe, affordable water.

With the unequal distribution of water, the burden of limited water access is falling heaviest on the world’s poor, a phenomenon the UN Development Program labels “water apartheid.”

The UUSC has ongoing programs in South Africa, Ecuador, India, Guatemala, and the United States to address the human right to water. In addition to supporting those efforts through UUSC membership and donations, they offer some additional suggestions for “what we can do.” One is to make the human right to water a part of our own local environmental commitments. Another is to learn about water issues in our own communities. And finally, to educate ourselves and create greater awareness of the issue.

In that regard, one specific recommendation they make is the documentary film, *FLOW: For Love of Water*, which will in fact be shown after the service today at 11:30 as part of our Life Span Learning Hour.

As we go about our lives, may we each seek to do what we can in order to assure that water will become and continue to be, not just a source of symbolic reflection, but an equitably shared resource for the ongoing sustenance of life for people everywhere.

So may it be.