

AQUA VITAE

Today we celebrate the Water Ceremony. As many of you know, in 1980, two UU women, Carolyn McDade and Lucille Longview, were asked to create a worship service for the Women and Religion Continental Convocation of UU's. They wrote: "Water is more than simply a metaphor. It is eternal and primary, calling forth feelings of awe and reverence. Acknowledging that the ocean is considered by many to be the place from which all life on our planet comes-it is the womb of life. Amniotic waters surround each of us pre-natally, and we now realize that this worship service was for us a new story of creation. We choose water as our symbol of empowerment."

All water, rain, streams, and rivers travel to the sea, and it is the quintessential symbol of unity. Water, the essence of life, does not change, but it deepens in meaning for us today, just as it deepens in its long and winding journey to the sea. The water that was gathered and brought here today speaks of the unification of individuals, of how symbolically the gift of water unites and sustains us- and that is no small thing.

Universally water is, and always has been, a very powerful symbol. The history of philosophy and the rites of ancient cultures confirm this; in all of them, water is a symbol of life, of purification, of hope, of values that are the common denominator that unite humanity. It is certainly no exaggeration to say that water is life-all of life.

Worldwide we recognize the significance of water and each spiritual culture has its own way of recognizing and symbolizing its value.

In Hinduism, water is a sacred place, believed to have purifying and cleansing powers.

For Buddhists, the path to enlightenment includes diligent cleansing of body, mind, and spirit. Water offerings are performed at Buddhist shrines.

Christians believe that baptism in holy water symbolizes re-birth and purity. Last Sunday, the Colorado Springs First Congregational Church, that my friend Judy attends, celebrated their Gathering of Waters ceremony, an annual tradition. As we have just done, people bring water from their travels. It is then purified and used for baptisms.

In Islam's Quran, water represents wisdom and conscious awareness of self.

For Native Americans, water not only sustains life, but is sacred. The Lakota tribes say "mni wichoni", water is life. Plains and Southwestern tribes understood what it meant to live in dry, arid landscapes, and expressed this through their religious rites and careful stewardship of their land and its water.

The Anishinabe people conduct their ceremonies using The Water Drum, a drum so sacred that it is not to be viewed by the public. Filled with sacred water, The Water Drum signifies the heartbeat of the water, of the Universe, of Creation, and of The People.

In New Zealand, the government has granted the status of personhood to the 180 mile long Whanganui River, stipulating that it has all the powers, rights, duties, and liabilities of a legal person, which the indigenous Maoris have always believed.

Cultures around the world equate water with healing and energy. Many believe that water has the ability to absorb prayers, can cleanse unwanted energy and bestow good energy. Science tells us that the negative ions naturally created by water, air, sunlight, and the Earth's natural radiation, especially in running water like rivers and streams, but most of all by the ocean, help regulate our sleep patterns and moods, reduce stress, and boost immune system function. Negative ions improve overall well being by increasing serotonin release in the brain, help revitalize cell metabolism, neutralize free radicals, and help improve respiratory function. It's easy to see why people are drawn to living by the waters of lakes, rivers, and the ocean-besides

its beauty, being near water gifts us with a source of well being. My heart place is mid-coast Maine, and the instant I am standing by the ocean, I am suffused with a sense of calm, happiness, and connection to all that is-it only takes one breath of negative ion filled sea air.

In the late 1980s, Dr. Masaru Emoto of Japan claimed that our thoughts and intentions could impact the physical realm, including water. He believed that the molecular structure of water changed when it was exposed to human words, sounds, and thoughts, and that this could be seen when the water was frozen and then photographed. Kind words and thoughts resulted in a beautiful new molecular structure, and the opposite resulted in ugly, malformed structures. His work has since been called pseudo science and isn't taken seriously, but it's an interesting concept-water is, after all, a living thing.

In this country, water's existence and availability is rarely, if ever, given a thought by most people. You turn on a faucet and there it is: hot or cold, clean, and potable-it just IS; we take it completely for granted. That, however, needs to change and change now. The Floridian aquifer, for example, the source of 90% of the state's drinking water, is being depleted as water demand from urban areas and unsustainable agricultural chemical use continually increase.

The Colorado River, one of the most important river systems in the US, is drying up at an alarming rate from over usage and a decades long drought.

We are not impacted here, but the shortage of water world wide is increasing exponentially and we need to pay attention.

Like Native Americans, Australian Aboriginals learned to live in complete harmony with what most would consider an inhospitable, even uninhabitable, environment for thousands of years. Their encyclopedic knowledge of water sources has been handed down from their earliest generational memories, primarily by the use of songs, which are actually musical maps that lead to water sources. They inherently knew that adaptation meant survival, that ongoing

survival meant continual adaptation, and that conservation was not optional.

Some of you may remember the science fiction book “Dune” by Frank Herbert, that was published in 1965. Herbert’s understanding of climate was well ahead of the times. Dune, or as it’s known by the name “Arrakis”, is a desert planet with no surface water-none. Water was so scarce that the desert dwellers, by the use of highly sophisticated technology, re-claimed water from their own bodies and from the dead. Water was holy in a religious, spiritual, and ecological sense. Something well understood in that culture was that “the highest function of ecology is understanding consequences.” I think it’s safe to say that if that lesson isn’t learned on our planet, and right now, there is no hope of successfully stopping, never mind reversing, the emergency of climate change. If we don’t, water will become the new world currency, literally worth its weight in gold.

Have any of you ever lived without running water? I once did for a year, and the impact of that experience has never lessened, even after 50 years. I still marvel every single time I turn on a faucet. Despite the fact that I have a well that has never run dry, I do what I can to conserve water. I turn the water off while brushing my teeth, I don’t have a dishwasher and can do dishes in about 3 gallons of water, I don’t flush the toilet every time I use it. Living without running water taught me how precious each drop is. Small things don’t make a huge difference, but think what a difference it would make if we all became more consciously aware of water’s value and each of us did something, no matter how small, to conserve it on a daily basis. One drop of water alone isn’t worth much-many drops together can make a world of difference. We may not need to worry here, but ground water levels are declining rapidly in other parts of the country; we are taking water out of the ground faster than nature is replenishing it.

Many, many people in the world still have no access to running water. Imagine having to walk miles to fill a single container of water- I don’t think any of us can relate to that in any way. We have so much water that the phrase an embarrassment of riches comes to mind. Surely a plenitude of clean, running water should be an intrinsic human right-how is it not?

I find it interesting that ancient cultures understood the importance of water cycles without difficulty. Unlike today, water was never taken for granted or wasted, even when it was abundant. The Egyptians, for example, based everything on the annual flooding of the Nile. The Nile god Hapi personified the yearly floods, and Egyptians believed that the flood was the gift of the gods. To them it equaled life, and they organized and lived their daily lives around its high and low levels. Their calendar marked the three seasons of the Nile: the flood, the planting and growing of crops, and the harvest. The river provided food and resources, made agriculture in a dry climate possible, was a means of travel and trade, and was critical in the transport of building materials. Its spiritual significance was not the least important aspect of its water-they believed that the Nile was the river way that took them from life to death to the afterlife, and they revered it. Why do we no longer reverence water?

Throughout this talk, I've used the words sacred, spiritual, and life giving when referring to water. They help emphasize its importance, and the bottom line is quite obvious: no water, no life on this planet. But on a lighter note, there's another aspect of water-fun and joy. Remember when you were little? Splashing in puddles, water balloon fights, slip and slides, water pistol fights, running through the sprinkler on a hot, summer day, opening a fire hydrant to combat city heat waves? And how about dancing in the rain? That was Woodstock 54 years ago. As grownups we may find peace and quiet on rainy days, perhaps snuggled up with a cup of tea and a good book. There is the pleasure of watering our flower beds and vegetable gardens to give life to growing things, of paddling a canoe or kayak on a calm pond or lake. And oh, the pleasure of a soak in a hot tub or a hot bath on a cold winter night. Perhaps a walk in the rain on a warm Spring Day. Simple pleasures that exist and provide joy because of our planet's gift of water.

I recently read "Braiding Sweetgrass" by Robin Wall Kimmerer, perhaps the most beautiful and one of the most timely books I have ever read. Throughout it, she describes Native American beliefs about living in harmony with the natural world.

I know that we all remember saying The Pledge of Allegiance in school. The Onondaga Nation, located near Lafayette, NY, has a different, and dare I say it, far more meaningful ritual, called The Thanksgiving Address-and it has nothing to do with the November holiday. There are long and short versions, and school children say at least part of it every day. It is also spoken as part of the Nation's political process and whenever negotiation is needed. Each part of it focuses on gratitude for all the living world and its creatures. Particularly apropos to this talk is gratitude for water.

“We give thanks to all of the waters of the world for quenching our thirst, for providing strength and nurturing life for all beings. We know its power in many forms-waterfalls and rain, mists and streams, rivers and oceans, snow and ice. We are grateful that the waters are still here and meeting their responsibilities to the rest of Creation. Can we agree that water is important to our lives and bring our minds together as one to send greetings and thanks to the Water? Now our minds are one.”

The lessons taught by The Thanksgiving Address touch every aspect of the living world and our responsibility to care for it, to use it kindly, and to express our gratitude for it. Surely these lessons hold great import, now more than ever, as climate change races on in fast forward-perhaps it holds more value than our Pledge of Allegiance, whose words are not equally true for all, and never have been.

Let us remember, as Jacque Cousteau said, “We forget that the water cycle and the life cycle are one.”

Let us remember that individually we are each one drop, but that together we are an ocean. Let us be an ocean of hope, an ocean of love, and an ocean that works to make imperative change. We must learn to live in amazement and gratitude for the gift of water-we can, and must do better, before it is too late. Aqua Vitae-water is life.