

All the Water is One Water
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Allen Avenue Unitarian Universalist Church

Ingathering Water Ritual

It is a UU tradition in September to gather ourselves together with a water ritual. We bring water from the places we love, the places we may have traveled, to pour into one container. Last summer, I attended a water ritual very similar to our UU ritual, except at the end, each person could take some of the water, and bring it home with us. Here is the bottle of water I brought back.

The leader of that ritual, whose name is Starhawk, began collecting water many years ago. She brought water back from her travels around the world, and asked her friends to bring back water when they went to far off places. They poured all these waters into one big container, just like our tub here. People brought water from the sacred Ganges River in India, and from the great Nile River in Egypt; even from melted ice from Antarctica. After a while, they had waters from every continent.

When you pour it in, all of the water mixes together, and every drop has some of the waters from every place. So if you take a small bottle of water out, you can have the waters from many places in one bottle. Each time you have a water ritual, you add some water from the bottle you saved from the previous ritual. In that way, eventually, one small bottle contains the waters from all over the world.

In a minute, I will invite you to bring the water that you have brought from your travels this summer, or from your own kitchen faucet, to put into our container. And I will add some of this water too, that contains many waters of the world. I will also add some of the water from our water rituals of prior years. And at the end of the ritual, if you want to keep some waters of the world, you will be able to come up and get some to take home. I have small glass bottles for any family or individual that would like to have your own waters of the world bottle.

Why would we want to have a small bottle of waters from everywhere in the world? For me, it is a reminder that water is special--without water there would be no life at all--and we need to take care of the waters of the world. Our mission statement reminds us to walk with care on this earth, and part of how we can walk with care on the earth is to care for the waters of the earth. All water is connected, and the same water recycles itself through the whole earth. All the waters on earth are really one water. So even if we get water from our kitchen tap, that water has been around the world on its journey

At this time, we will take the water we have brought with us, and bring them to the front. You will pour your water in the round tub, and as you do so, you can tell us where that water came from. If you did not bring water with you, please come up anyway, and just touch your finger to the water, to symbolize that you are part of our gathering of the waters. Walk in silence, so we can hear what people say when they name where their water is from. And as you walk, walk slowly and gently, think about walking with care on this earth.

Water Blessing

I now invite the children to come forward to help me create a water blessing... Today we are giving thanks for the gift of water. What are some of the things that water gives, that you are thankful for? (*dialogue/children*) Water belongs to the earth and all species and is sacred to life. We give thanks for its many blessings. We especially give thanks for clean water to drink, and ask a blessing that all beings of the earth might have clean water to drink. Help us to respect and protect the water for all generations. Amen.

Reading *From "Stories of Water" by Linda Hogan*

Earth is a water planet. It is a world of salt oceans, cloud forests, underground springs, and winding rivers. It has built arches and pillars, has burrowed a deepening way into caves... Everywhere water travels, life follows. In a desert, only moments after a cloudburst, the terrain quickens; a plant flowers, an insect drinks moisture from its back and survives. Frogs rise up from beneath parched earth, mate, and return again to the cool underworld...

Between earth and earth's atmosphere, the amount of water remains constant; there is never a drop more, never a drop less. This is a story of circular infinity, of a planet birthing itself. ...[This water] has been around the world. It has lived beneath the lights of fireflies in bayous at night when mist laid itself around cypress trunks. It has held sea turtles in its rocking arms. ...It brings with it the stories of where it's been. It reminds us that we are water people. Our salt bodies, like the great round of ocean, are pulled and held by the moon. We are creatures that belong here. This world is in our blood and bones, and our blood and bones are the earth.¹

Song *All the World Is One* Peter Mayer²

Sermon

Jon Young, director of the Wilderness Awareness School, teaches young people the skills of wildlife tracking and plant identification, fostering an ecological connection to nature. Many skills and techniques are easy to learn, and there is a deepening sense of wonder and gratitude that grows along with their skills. But when the youth reach a certain stage in their learning, they hit what he calls the "wall of grief," an experience of being overwhelmed with sorrow at the loss and degradation of the natural world around us.³ That grief is the most difficult challenge the young people face in all of the school's programs.

I felt such a wall of grief, earlier this year, watching millions of gallons of oil pouring into the Gulf of Mexico from the broken BP oil well. It seemed as if the earth itself was bleeding from this gaping human-made wound deep below the waters of the sea.

As a Unitarian Universalist, part of my spiritual growth lies in my deepening understanding of what we call the interdependent web of all existence, of which we are a part. The natural world is vital to our faith. You might say that the earth is our Bible, our Quran, our sacred revelation, and our paradise. We echo this principle in our A2U2 mission statement, when we say that we walk with care on this earth.

1 Excerpts from *Dwellings*, pp. 99-108.

2 See UU songwriter Peter Mayer's music at <http://www.petermayer.net/>

3 As reported in Starhawk, *The Earth Path: Grounding Your Spirit in the Rhythms of Nature*, p. 152.

But there are times when that careful walk awakens deep sorrow and anguish. We know so much more than human beings have known before. We know what is happening all over the globe. We see the melting of ancient glaciers, as the climate heats up from greenhouse gases. We know there is a vast soup of plastic refuse twice the size of the continental United States floating in the Pacific Ocean. We know that the topsoil in which our food grows is being depleted, and the rain forests which renew the world's oxygen are being cut down. We know that increasing numbers of species are threatened with extinction. We know that there are nuclear stockpiles that could destroy most life on earth many times over.

We know so much more than human beings have known before, but we don't know the solutions to these problems that threaten our future. And that is a wall of grief that can stop us in our tracks as we seek to walk with care on this earth. How do we live with the painful questions that do not yet have answers?

Many of the problems we face are rooted in a foundational assumption of western culture that human beings are separate from nature. We see ourselves as distinct and superior to nature, and imagine that the earth is like a resource bank to exploit for our own use. Starhawk, author of *The Earth Path*, notes that some environmentalists go the opposite extreme. Because of the devastation that human actions have caused, they see human beings as a “blight on the planet,” and suppose that the earth would be better off without us. But, as she points out, “it's hard to get people enthused about a[n environmental] movement that ...envisions their extinction as a good.”

What we need to understand--emotionally, intellectually, physically--is that we are not separate from nature at all. We are part of nature. She passes on a story from Allan Savory, about land management in Zambia and Zimbabwe in the 1950's.

People had lived in those areas since time immemorial in clusters of huts away from the main rivers because of the mosquitoes and wet season flooding. Near their huts they kept gardens that they protected from elephants and other raiders by beating drums throughout much of the night... The people hunted and trapped animals throughout the year as well.

“The herds remained strong and the river banks lush ...until the government removed the people in order to make national parks.” The parks set up rules to protect all the animals and vegetation from any sort of disturbance. Within a few decades, the vegetation had disappeared from miles of riverbanks. What they discovered was that the fear of human beings kept certain grazing animals on the move, and that prevented over-feeding that damaged soils and vegetation. With the removal of one species—the human farmers and hunters--the ecosystem had lost its balance.⁴

This story illustrates the truth that human beings belong to this earth—we are a part of the ecosystem, for good or ill. We can be a part of the balance as well as a cause of the imbalance. The indigenous people of North America say that we are like a younger sibling on this earth. The other species are more acclimated to their purpose and their relationship to the whole. And so, when we are feeling overwhelmed by these messes we have created, we might turn to our older relatives on the earth to find wisdom for our journey.

⁴ Starhawk, p. 9, quoting Allan Savory, *Holistic Management: a New Framework for Decision Making*, 1999, p. 20-21.

Water is such a teacher. Water teaches us something about the unity of all creation. All life comes from water, and needs water to survive. Water moves through the whole ecosystem, nurturing and transforming life as it moves. It rises from the ocean in evaporation, forming clouds in the sky, and, blown by the winds, it returns to the land in the form of rain. The rain falls into the soil, and gathers in streams and aquifers. In the midst of this journey, it also travels through the bodies of every living thing.

Margy and I have a bird bath outside our back door. Many kinds of birds come to drink the water we keep filled there, but we've also seen squirrels, chipmunks and bees. Every being needs water: insects, birds, mammals, fish, humans. Water rises up into the stems of plants and the trunks of tall trees. Our bodies are 70% water—so it would be accurate to say that we ourselves are one form of water. But none of the water stays isolated from the rest—we drink it in, it moves through our blood, we sweat it out or pee it out. Sometimes we weep with wet salty tears. The water goes back to the earth and continues in streams and rivers on its way to the ocean.

We are part of the cycle of water on this earth. We are not separate. All the water is one water. When we open our hearts to the wonder of this cycle, we can begin to heal from the out-of-balance patterns we all have learned in our society. Weeping is a part of it too. The water of tears moves our grief, heals and cleanses, as water does, moves us on the journey.

The path forward is never a straight line. I find hope in that. A river or stream meanders on its way to the sea. Starhawk explains that because of the friction of the river bed, the water on the bottom of the river moves more slowly than the water on the top. So it creates a spiraling current that wears down one bank and deposits sediment on the other, and then vice versa, as it move around and around in sweeping curves.⁵ Just so, our journey into a new relationship with all life on earth will meander—I imagine in this case, there is more movement at the bottom of our culture, while the top is going much slower. But since we are all connected, movement in any segment has a ripple effect on the whole.

For me, hope also comes with the choice to keeping taking steps, even small steps, in the direction of living in balance with the rest of our interdependent web. To keep meandering in the direction of wholeness. To keep learning from our elder siblings on this planet—learning from the plants, and animals, the soil and the seasons.

This summer, Margy and I chose to get two rain barrels, as one step toward more conscious participation in the great cycle of water. We are starting to collect the rain-water that runs off our garage roof, for use in watering the blueberry bushes I planted in the spring. We are learning about how high off the ground the barrels need to be, in order for gravity to pull the water all the way to the plants. We are learning that water in a rain barrel heats up rather quickly in the hot summer sun. We are learning how quickly a rainstorm can fill two 50 gallon barrels.

It is a very small step, especially here in our comparatively water abundant climate in Maine. No matter. Some people are taking bigger steps, and that gives me hope too.

⁵ Starhawk, p. 131.

Let me take a moment to share just one example. I feel hopeful when I hear about zero-carbon homes that are being designed by ecologically attuned architects.⁶ They don't just use less energy, they use it so efficiently that they can power up the electric car as well. I feel hopeful when I learn that the United Kingdom has a goal of all new constructed homes being zero-carbon homes by 2016.⁷ I wonder if perhaps our delay in building a new sanctuary and other expansions might actually be a blessing, since during the five or so years it may take for us to become financially equipped, the technology may have advanced so that we could build a zero-carbon sanctuary.

All the earth is one earth. All the water is one water. We all belong to this great cycle of life. Each creative step forward will ripple out into a spiral momentum toward greater balance. I feel hopeful that so many human beings are embracing these deep truths and changing the way we imagine our futures.

I also feel hopeful because I belong to a community and a tradition where people are willing to ask hard questions, even when we don't know what the answers might be. I am reminded, in this time of the Jewish season of renewal, that people are casting their failings with bread upon flowing waters, and we too can throw our grief and our guilt upon the waters of life.

Borrowing the words of the poet Rilke,

Be patient toward all that is unsolved in your [world] and try to love the questions themselves, like locked rooms and like books that are now written in a very foreign tongue. Do not now seek the answers, which cannot be given you because you would not be able to live them. And the point is, to live everything. Live the questions now. Perhaps you will then gradually, without noticing it, live along some distant day into the answer.⁸

6 See for example, <http://www.zerocarbonhouse.com/>

7 <http://blogs.mirror.co.uk/science/2009/02/grand-designs-zero-carbon-home.html>

8 In *Letters to a Young Poet*, 1934.