

2007 Water Ceremony

Opening Words

We are here
with the whole of our community,
every one, every age,
to worship, to flow with our singular lives
into the great common stream of history and time
shaped by currents of ceremony and song.

With hearts come home to this place, we pray:
“ East, south, west and north, encircle us as we say

Mindful that a growing vision of a just world calls us together, that a community of commitment, courage and care sustains us, and that a life transformed by depth of spirit may illumine our way, we kindle this light as the sign of our circle of life and love.

Sequence for the Water Ceremony

Water falling off a cliff, white as clouds.
Water looking green as a leaf in still pond.
Water in a rolling river, grey and tan.
Water in a lagoon, turquoise and powder blue.
Water in the deep ocean, black as night.
Water in a lake, blue and silver, sunlit.
Water from a faucet, clear as fine crystal.
Water in human bodies unseen, but sometimes flashing like ancient seas on the surface of the wondering eye.
Water in the eyes of New Orleans children, flowing two years later, salty.
Water deep in the earth, hidden, yet used.
Water at the poles, melting into rising seas.
Water in pitchers, water from north, south, east and west, water from round the world, flowing with dreams and memories, transitions and hopes, beauty and tears, a staggering awe, and a deep, deep silence.

silence

Water in tears flowing both from laughter and sorrow. The ancient water that connects us all no matter how different we are. The water of remembrance and hope. Speaking the names, or quietly imagining the faces of those whom we love, or who love us; those whom we miss, those who know hard times or fear, let us join in a communion of heart and hope which binds each of us into the embrace of the water-sheathed circle of our common world.

naming

Water of story and ancient tales, water of ceremony and poetry, water of history flowing past the shore of this moment...come, and sing in our hearts.

Readings

The First Reading is an amazing poem by the great San Antonio poet, Naomi Shihab Nye, written 9 years ago.

OUR SON SWEARS HE HAS 102 GALLONS OF WATER IN HIS BODY

Somewhere a mistaken word distorts the sum:
divide becomes *multiply* so he'd wrestle his parents who defy what he insists. *I did the problem*
and my teacher said I was right!
Light strokes the dashboard.
We are years away from its source.
Remember that jug of milk?
No way you're carrying one hundred of those!
But he knows. He always knows. We're idiots without worksheets to back us up. His mother
never remembers what a megabyte means and his dad fainted on an airplane once and smashed
his head on the drinks cart. We're nice but we're not always smart. It's the fact you live with,
having parents.

Later in a calmer moment his dad recalculates the sum and it comes out true. Instead of carrying
giant waterfalls inside, we're streams, sweet pools, something to dip into with an old metal cup,
like the one we took camping, that nobody could break.

The Second Reading comes from Seattle poet David Whyte, who in 1984 wrote the poem
All My Body Calls:

All my body calls
for something in this sleeping earth
we call the spirit.
But how
from lifted arms
where stars run through fingers
and the night is like sand
do I breathe a fragrance of its wisdom
do I call its name
or listen to the drops
that trickle down to earth
and hear
life being given
not only through the moving hands of the forest but through the hand that reaches in
the dark unmoving regions of the chest
and uncovers slowly
the enormous
indistinct shape of the ocean.

Homily

Last Spring, the Unitarian Universalists who live in Europe invited me to the second of their two
annual weekend retreats. It was, as many of you will remember, held in Berlin, and it turned out
to be the single most satisfying and wonderful trip overseas I have ever been lucky enough to
enjoy.

I was asked to do several things: to lead worship on Sunday, and visit with the children in their Religious Education sessions, and be available for counseling. But on Saturday, I was to offer a substantial lecture to the end of prompting satisfying discussion. This I did.

They wanted me to imagine the future history of our movement, say, seventy-five years from now, toward the end of the present century. I accepted this theme with a sense of both its fun and its futility. After all imagining tomorrow is delightful, but most such imaginings miss the mark. Some of you will remember that, in the 60s, many of our brightest minds imagined a world of space travel, gleaming, safe cities, and growing peace on earth in the glowing year 2001.

Instead, we got falling towers, horrific wars, and hurricanes for which no one was prepared.

Nifty vision back in the sixties. But all wrong.

In any case, I really had a ball writing the lecture. As I began, I realized that there is no way of actually imagining the future unless you have a good grasp of the past and present, for time is a single flowing stream, not separate ponds strung out across a desert. And so, in order to imagine how, for example, our worship life might change in 75 years, I decided to look at how it has changed in the last 75 years.

I used the example of the flaming chalice.

Back before World War II there wasn't a single Unitarian or Universalist congregation which began its services by lighting a flaming chalice like this one. The symbol, although very old, and known in northern Europe, was not known to us in North America. But slowly, and though it faced lots of resistance, the symbol took hold, first as a drawing, then as a three dimensional symbol with real fire.

I am convinced it was first used at the ceremony of consolidation in the early sixties, when the Universalist Church in America fused with the American Unitarian Association in order to make our present Unitarian Universalist Association. Next, it was used in a single California congregation in 1963. Now, only 44 years later, few can imagine Unitarian Universalist worship, or even small group meetings, without its comforting presence.

But not one visionary ever predicted the arrival of such a ritual 75 years ago, so I thought it best for me not to try and predict any new rituals 75 years hence. But I did think it wise to muse about the water ceremony we already do here. What might that look like 75 years hence?

The water ceremony too is not a very old ritual.

Emerson didn't know anything about, nor did the founders of this congregation back in 1940. Musician Carolyn McDade, who composed *Spirit of Life*, and the articulate Lucile Longview invented the original form of this ceremony in 1980 for a women's convocation. Since then, it has slowly developed into a ritual that is common in many of our congregations, with a variety of forms and interpretations.

But I wonder, how might such a ceremony gain spiritual significance in the next 75 years? With global warming, polar bears moving toward extinction while ice shelves melt, and the aquifers

which supply our drinking water running dry from overuse, how sacred and precious might water be for our children's children in 75 years?

Might not such a ceremony take on a whole new meaning by the year 2082? Might not water become, not something common, but a sacred and precious element, something as valuable as all that we treasure most? Might the ritual take on a powerful note of spiritual urgency, so that the water is not just a symbol of our unity around the world, and our connection to far away places, but the true sign of our own lives? After all, we are largely made of water, and with all other life on earth, evolved in ancient waters.

I think of Naomi Shihab Nye's poem, where her son knows something of this inner water: "we're streams, sweet pools," the poet writes, admitting that her son is smarter than she is. "We're nice, but we're not always smart," the poet admits candidly. Might such a ceremony invite us to take ourselves as only part of the environment called planet earth, rather than its masters?

Might it help us to understand that, instead of remembering our own stories and travels, we might imagine the lives of our children and their children to whom we owe everything? Where will they be able to travel? Where will they go on a changed earth with dried up lands on one hand, and cities under water on the other?

Maybe, just maybe, our present bodies, here in this place and this time, can, like the body of the poet David Whyte, use this ceremony to "call for something in this sleeping earth we call spirit."

Maybe our present understandings of this ritual are like, in the poet's words, "drops that trickle." Maybe the spirit can grow from that trickle, in seventy-five years, into creek, and then a mighty stream, the one described 2700 years ago by the prophet Micah: "Let justice roll down like a mighty stream!" A powerful stream. Moreover, a stream, not embarrassed to be powerful, not ashamed to be strong.

A stream that can begin to wash away what our present trickle is not able to do: the stagnant sour ponds of religious people who are no longer moved by compassion, but by corporate interests and manipulative amassed fortunes. I'm talking about a stream that can refill the living lake dried up by the cruel hot winds of war, where the life that once thrived in deep waters thrashes to death in the dry bed of greed, bullying and deception. I am talking about a stream that can grow wider and wider, stronger and stronger, flowing toward what the poet calls "the enormous indistinct shape of the ocean" the ocean of peace, the shape of which is admittedly indistinct. But a stream that knows that all rivers must flow finally into the sea, into the deep enormity of hope and vision and accountability and responsibility and yes, a love that is not necessarily nice, but very, very smart.

Those who claim to imagine the future are often wrong. But sometimes, oh yes, sometimes, they are right. I pray that the vision I have offered this morning moves forward, that our children's children might know a world redeemed by our choices, our worship, and our commitment.

Offering

This is the time in our flow of morning celebration when members and friends offer their pledges and gifts to the circle of our mutual benefit, for the church is the congregation of the people who

agree to make it, not some abstraction far away. If you are a guest this morning, a visitor, let the basket pass you by in peace. You are welcome here, and do not have to pay to be here. Those who have made a commitment to this circle of life and love sometimes use this moment to present an expression of their commitment to the life of this, their spiritual home.

The Water Ceremony