

Water Communion – homily
The Rev. Paige Getty
Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Columbia
Sunday, September 4, 2005

The annual water communion ceremony usually is a time of celebration, where we talk about the beauty of water, its freshness, its sacredness, its life-sustaining properties. We tell stories of the places we've been and the water we've collected there. We celebrate the richness of our diversity by honoring the unique gifts and experiences that each of us brings into this community. We celebrate our lives' dependence on water – that our bodies are comprised of about 65% water, and we live on a planet of which about 75% is covered in water. The water communion is a holy and joyful occasion, and today we do celebrate.

But we do so in sober humility... Especially this week, we see far fewer joyful images in our newspapers and on our television screens. We see water engulfing people's homes and causing unimaginable destruction. We hear on the radio the stories of people escaping from a hotel in New Orleans by trudging through waters filled with raw sewage. We learn of a 2-year-old who drowned across the street in our own Lake Elkhorn. Also this week, three Unitarian villages in Transylvania were devastated by flash flooding after heavy rains Tuesday night – the Unitarians there are an ethnic minority in their own country, and cannot count on the government to help them rebuild their lives.

And that's just what's most present before us right now. But just as those suffering worst on the Gulf Coast of the United States and in Transylvania are those who are underprivileged because of their class or their race or their ethnicity, there are more than a billion people worldwide who are not facing a recent natural disaster, but who constantly lack access to safe drinking water. I imagine there are very few of *us* who can imagine not having daily access to drinking water (vacations in Mexico don't count – we have the resources and access to bottled water there). And we know that those who do lack such access are not the ones with a wealth of other resources at their disposal.

About one out of every six persons in the world is without access to safe drinking water. And the statistics grow only more staggering... More than *two* out of every six persons lack access to improved sanitation. Eighty (80) countries, home to 40% of the world's population, are encountering serious water shortages. In the 1990's the number of children killed by diarrhea — the result of unsafe water and sanitation — exceeded the number of people killed in armed conflicts since World War II. Eighty percent (80%) of illness and disease worldwide involves contaminated water. And just to put our position of North American privilege in perspective... One toilet flush in the United States uses as much water as the average person in a developing country uses for an entire day's drinking, cooking, washing, and cleaning. (from UU Service Committee (www.uusc.org) and <http://www.churchworldservice.org/worship-resources/worship-water.html>)

Today I am distinctly aware of my privilege, especially when it comes to water. I don't let the water run while I brush my teeth, but I have never worried about how often I flush a toilet, and I don't save the gray water after washing dishes. I have constant access to fresh drinking water – and I drink a lot of it. This week as I have wandered through the halls of the Cradlerock Children's

Center, I've watched the finger-painting children standing in line at the sink to wash up – we do not have to worry whether our children have sanitary living conditions.

I have always loved the water – especially the salty water of the Atlantic Ocean and the Intracoastal Waterway. Until I was an adult, I didn't know there was saltwater clear enough that I could see my feet even when it was deep enough that I barely could stand. As a very young child at Tybee Island, Georgia, I would swim with my cousins far beyond the point that I would today deem safe. Later I learned to water ski in the creeks and rivers of the Intracoastal Waterway, utterly unafraid of what lurked beneath the surface when I was inevitably submersed. I'm a little more leary now in my "old age" and wonder if there isn't a bit of wisdom beneath the trepidation of our four-month old puppy as Graham tries to take her swimming. She swims back to solid ground as rapidly as she can.

For ages, the world's religions have honored the sacred nature and power of water – we might even argue that the most literal and accurate translation of the Jewish and Christian creation story says that the heavens and the earth were created out of the waters:

In the beginning the Gods created the heavens and the earth. The earth was without form and void, and darkness was upon the face of the deep; and the Spirit of the Gods was moving over the face of the waters.

– Rev. Joel Miller, UU Church of Buffalo, NY,
September 7, 2003
<http://www.revjm.com/ingathering03.htm>

Hindus say that the very possibility of life on Earth is due to the release of heavenly water by Indra, the god of rain. Muslims believe that water is the source of all life, and as early as the 7th century their sacred laws articulated the right of every living being to have access to fresh water.

Water is sacred, and it is to be treasured and celebrated, just as it may be feared. One of the primary tasks of the religious community is to look critically and un-self-consciously at our place in the world. To be sufficiently awed by the mystery and magnificence of the world around us – seen and unseen – and sufficiently humbled by it. And to pause long enough to pay attention and answer the call of our faith – the call of God, if you will – about how we as compassionate justice-seeking people might live our faith in that world.

And so today we are going to celebrate our water communion differently than usual. Many of you come with water from your summer travels, and we are going to celebrate the mingling of those varied sacred waters. But we shall do so in silence. We will find other opportunities to share the stories of our sacred waters, but today let's accept the invitation just to listen and to watch in silence. Yes, let's listen to the quiet and the soft music and be brave enough to hear whatever message we may need to hear out of the silence.

In a world where water may become our single most precious commodity, let us with loving compassion consider our place in that world.

Amen.