

**“I Should Make Use of Water”**  
**Unitarian Universalists of the Cumberland Valley**  
**Boiling Springs, PA • September 13, 2009**  
**The Reverend Judy Welles©;**  
**Clara Cozort, Junior Worship Assistant**

**Invitation to Worship**

Clara Cozort

As long as I have been at this church, which is basically all my life, I come to the church mostly every Sunday, so basically I have come to hear every service or go down to the RE. Of course sometimes we stay up to hear the water service, and GUESS WHAT! I ACTUALLY ENJOY THEM! Except after the service I find my self having to go use the bathroom.....

I enjoy hearing every where people have been during the summer, it always interests me. Like if someone went to California, I've never been, but hearing people talk about being there I think “wow, I wish I could be there and maybe see celebrities and travel!”

If you look all on one map, water from across the world, comes to the same place, same ocean, it travels. So you might have water from somewhere like Ocean City, but it could be from some where like South Korea, just ended up at Ocean City. I've had many privileges of going places such as England, where it's an Island, I think. Anyways..., I always asked where we would end up if we crossed the ocean; of course none of my questions had the answer, Carlisle PA. Though it didn't really matter, because no matter where we are, we bring water, we bring not only water from the world, but actually the world's water.

Water is very important for our world I would think, we drink it, bathe in it, use it everywhere basically. But this water brings us together as one, so I thank you waters for bringing us here together, and we celebrate with you, our water service.

We all leave during the summer and we go places and don't see each other every Sunday, then we all come back and it's like a family reunion. We come back together, we bring water, but that means something more doesn't it? We bring water, from all around the world, our world, and we make it our water, and mix the water to make it Unitarian Universalist water.

Come, let us worship together.

**The Litany of the Waters**

Throughout our lives, there have been bodies of water that have been important to us, places we still remember for their powerful association with events or experiences that were significant, or simply places by the water that we loved. For one person it might be the lake where the family went on vacations; for another, the brook that ran through a friend's back yard; for someone else, a particular stretch of beach, or the pond where they learned to swim.

I'd like to ask you now to settle in quietly and think about the bodies of water that have been significant to you. We'll take a moment in silence to gather our thoughts, and when you hear the musical phrase on the piano, please speak aloud the names of the waters that you hold dear. You can name as many as you want. And don't worry if you speak at the same time as someone else. We'll just keep on naming the waters until there is nothing more to say.

*After the naming: Praise for the stream and the storm and the seas, the waters that cleanse our bodies, quench our thirst, and soothe our souls. We give thanks for the renewal of the waters.*



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## Reading

“Water”  
Philip Larkin

If I were called in  
To construct a religion  
I should make use of water.

Going to church  
Would entail a fording  
To dry, different clothes;

My liturgy would employ  
Images of sousing,  
A furious devout drench,

And I should raise in the east  
A glass of water  
Where any-angled light  
Would congregate endlessly.

## Sermon

I Should Make Use of Water

Judy Welles

Nature writer and anthropologist Loren Eiseley has written that “If there is magic in this world, it is contained in water.” I have been musing on this thought for a while now, thinking about water and its attributes, and realizing that with this simple statement, Eiseley has tapped into a kind of deep human intuition about the life-giving, death-bringing, nurturing, destructive, all-powerful substance called water.

We probably don’t think of it as magic, but there is something in the human experience that acknowledges the myriad powers of water, and thus human beings through the ages have imbued water with a mystical potency.

No wonder the poet Philip Larkin said that he would make use of water if he were to invent a new religion — “a furious, devout drench.” Human beings for eons have expressed their respect for water by making it a central element in their religious stories and practices. Our water ceremony, celebrated in hundreds of Unitarian Universalist churches at this time of year, is meaningful but modest compared to some of the ways water has been used throughout the ages to express religious metaphor.

So I thought it would be interesting for us today to take a look at the ways water is used in some of the major world religions, as a reminder that while we may consider ourselves unique, we are actually tapping into a whole world of traditions that we may not even know about, even though we somehow understand them.

In India, every river is sacred, and none more sacred than the Ganges (now called the Ganga). You can count on the Hindu tradition for glorious, complicated stories that span generations and continents, and the story of how the Ganga came to reside on earth from her former home in heaven is one of them. The gist of it is that Indra, king of the gods and the god of war and weather, was threatened by Sagar, the ocean king. Indra stole Sagar's horse, which was eventually recovered, but at the cost of the deaths of Sagar's 60,000 sons. The only way for the sons to reach heaven would be for the Ganga to descend from its location in heaven so its water could cleanse their ashes. After repeated unsuccessful tries to bring this about, the Ganga appeared in human form to the king's great-great-great-grandson and agreed to descend to the earth if someone could break her mighty fall, which would otherwise destroy the earth. Shiva agreed to use his hair to soften the descent of the Ganga, and the sons' purified souls eventually made their way to heaven.<sup>1</sup>

The Ganga is still considered a sacred bridge to the divine. Its role as mediator between this world and heaven is embodied in death rituals among Hindus, where funeral pyres bearing dead bodies are set afloat on the river to burn and release the ashes of the deceased directly into the water.

And at the same time, its waters are used to purify and wash away spiritual and material impurities. In fact, biological and biochemical studies of the water in the Ganga have repeatedly shown that it is saturated with antiseptic minerals that kill bacteria, so that those who bathe in it and drink its waters are unlikely to catch cholera even though many of the dead bodies carried by its waters are victims of cholera and other deadly bacterial infections.<sup>2</sup>

So there's one example, from the Hindu tradition, of a quite literal and biologically verifiable way that water has the power to purify.

*Praise for the stream and the storm and the seas, the waters that cleanse our bodies, quench our thirst, and soothe our souls. We give thanks for the renewal of the waters.*



In the *Tao de Ching* we find many examples where the Tao, the great wisdom, has the attributes of water. “The Tao is like a well, used but never used up.” (#4) “The supreme good is like water, which nourishes all things without trying to. It is content with the low places that people disdain. Thus it is like the Tao.” (#8) “All streams flow to the sea because it is lower than they are. Humility gives it its power.” (66) “Do you have the patience to wait till your mud

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<sup>1</sup> Shiva, Vananda, *Water Wars: Privatization, Pollution, and Profit*, South End Press, Cambridge, MA 2002, pp. 132-133.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid*, p. 133-34

settles and the water is clear? Can you remain unmoving till the right action arises by itself?”  
 (15) “Nothing in the world is as soft and yielding as water, yet for dissolving the hard and inflexible, nothing can surpass it. The soft overcomes the hard; the gentle overcomes the rigid.”  
 (#78)

Of course, here Lao Tsu is using water as a metaphor in his great teachings, called by translator Stephen Levine “the classic manual on the art of living... one of the wonders of the world.”<sup>3</sup> Water is a metaphor for gentle persistence disguised as non-action, for yielding but never giving up. This is a teaching not often followed in this postmodern, frenetic, over-complicated world, but one that we might be wise to heed. Be simple and deep, like water.

*Praise for the stream and the storm and the seas, the waters that cleanse our bodies, quench our thirst, and soothe our souls. We give thanks for the renewal of the waters.*



In the Jewish and Christian traditions which are probably more familiar to us, water has tremendous significance. All you have to do is remember that the people of the Middle East inhabited a desert region, and the significance of water will not be lost on you. In the land of Canaan, water was equated with life, with fertility, fields, flock, community and family. Lack of water literally brought death in a short time, so the metaphors for death were always about drought, dryness, a barren season, and wilderness.

In the early Hebrew Scriptures, in fact the very first verses of the Book of Genesis, God caused a wind to sweep over the face of the waters as the first act of creation; on the second day God separated the waters above from the waters below to create heaven and earth; and on the third day God separated the seas on Earth from the dry land. In this and many other religious traditions, as we shall see, God’s presence is often associated with the presence of water.

Yet here, too, water can be a destructive element. Still in Genesis we learn of God’s regret that the world was created, since humankind has turned out to be so violent and cruel. God decides to destroy all life on earth, “all flesh in which is the breath of life” by a great flood, sparing only Noah and his family and two of every living thing. You know how the story goes — Noah lets God down, too, but God keeps the covenant, that no flood shall ever cover the earth and destroy humankind again.

And from that time forth even unto the present day, it has been God’s task to deal with the weaknesses and imperfections of humanity. As just one example, I quote briefly from the Book of Isaiah, chapters 34 and 35.

Once again here God is displeased with humanity — it’s a theme that runs pretty consistently through the whole of the Hebrew Scriptures — (“enraged against all the nations and furious against all their hoards,” Isaiah 34: 2) and this time God’s punishment is that “the skies shall roll up like a scroll. All their host shall wither like a leaf withering on a vine or a fruit

<sup>3</sup> Mitchell, Stephen (translator), *Tao te Ching: A New English Version*, Harper & Row, New York, 1988, p. vii

withering on a fig tree.” (Isaiah 34: 4). The tale goes on to describe in great detail how the soil shall be sulphur and the land burning pitch, lying waste for generations. Then in the next chapter comes the redemption, when “waters shall break forth in the wilderness, and streams in the desert; the burning sand shall become a pool, and the thirsty ground springs of water; the haunt of jackals shall become a swamp, the grass shall become reeds and rushes.” (Isaiah 35: 6-7). God’s repeated grace and forgiveness symbolized by water.

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In the Christian Scriptures as well, water has deep significance. Remember that water is associated with the presence of God, and that will help you to understand the parable of Jesus walking on the water, the story of Jesus healing the man at the pool called Bethsaida, and the story of the woman at the well, whom Jesus met and spoke with, revealing himself to be the Messiah. (Jn 4: 4-30)

Here and elsewhere Jesus speaks of “living water,” a phrase which I’ve always wondered about. It seems that in the Jewish tradition, “living water” is the only kind suitable for purification. This is water connected to a larger source, such as a stream or flowing river. Water of this kind is believed to have energetic properties that stagnant water lacks, which gives some credibility to the modern theory that flowing or moving water, such as waterfalls or waves at the seashore, are more fully charged with negative ions. The theory is that such negatively-charged ions contained in moving water can actually

increase the flow of oxygen to the brain; resulting in higher alertness, decreased drowsiness, and more mental energy, according to Pierce J. Howard, PhD, director of research at the Center for Applied Cognitive Sciences in Charlotte, N.C. [Negative ions] also may protect against germs in the air, resulting in decreased irritation due to inhaling various particles that make you sneeze, cough, or have a throat irritation.<sup>4</sup>

I am not in any position to verify whether this supposedly scientific allegation is true, but I would point out to you that there seems to be a natural human tendency to head for water when one wants to decrease stress, calm oneself, or have a good think. If you imagine yourself having a long walk on the beach or sitting by a beautiful waterfall, isn’t that image accompanied by a feeling of peace and tranquility? When you call to mind a place that is special to you — dare I say a sacred place — is it not likely to be some place where there is moving water? So perhaps intuitively we do understand that there is something to this negative ion theory, and that the living waters can be healing.

Perhaps it was this deep intuition of the healing properties of moving water that caused early earth-based religions to worship bodies of water, including sacred wells and fountains. Spiritual worship of water was wiped out in Europe with the rise of Christianity, but as with so

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<sup>4</sup> [http://www.peakpureair.com/negative\\_ions.htm](http://www.peakpureair.com/negative_ions.htm)

many of those powerful pagan traditions, people’s deep faith in the sacredness of water persisted despite the admonitions of priests and Bishops. And as happened with earth-based holiday practices and so many pagan rituals, eventually the Christians found ways to accommodate the old customs by incorporating them behind a Christian façade. Water maintained its sacredness in rituals of baptism and hand- and foot-washing, and in the British Isles churches were often located at the sites of the sacred wells.

In the Christian tradition, baptism is a sacrament, which can represent— if it’s the baptism of a baby — the washing away of original sin and a rebirth of the child into a life of Christian faith. We Unitarian Universalists believe in original blessing rather than original sin — when we proclaim the inherent worth and dignity of every person, we are saying that humans are born into this world pure and sinless, already worthy of God’s unswerving love and deserving of everyone else’s love and acceptance as well.

Adult baptism carries a different message, representing an informed choice. In the Anabaptist tradition — where Unitarianism also has its roots — “believer’s baptism” as it was called symbolized an adult’s profession of faith in Jesus Christ and their admission into a community of faith. Infant baptism usually occurs by sprinkling the baby’s head or pouring holy water over it, whereas adult baptism is more likely to be by immersion in a tank or pool, or submersion in a moving stream. (Whenever I think of this I call to mind the river baptism scene from the film “O Brother, Where Art Thou” and the wonderful song “As I went down to the river to pray, studying’ about that good old way and who should wear the starry crown, oh Lord, show me the way...”

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Although it is currently the fastest-growing religion, and can be found in countries throughout the world, Islam also originated in a desert culture where rain and water were life-giving.

It is said in the Qur’an that rain does not fall — God sends down rain from the heavens, in the same manner that the Qur’anic Revelation was sent down [by God]. It is suggested in the Qur’an that when God bestows rainfall, He in fact presents us with a direct spectacle of the event of Revelation itself.<sup>5</sup>

Indeed, the Qur’an is full of water imagery: water as rain, as rivers, as the sea, as dew, as sap and ice, as freshness, as vapor. Rivers flow beneath the gardens in Paradise, and all things return to God just as water never vanishes nor flows away. Water is linked with the mercy of God, “so that when we bathe, it is as though our face is bathed not with water, but with the

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<sup>5</sup> Karic, Enes, “Words about Water,” in *Parabola*, Summer 2009, p. 36.

innumerable waves of God’s mercy, eternally succoring us.”<sup>6</sup> (These the words of Islamic scholar Enes Karic.)

Muslims believe that no one should approach God in prayer without first asking forgiveness for the sins he has committed, intentionally or unintentionally. Thus one washes before prayer, and while washing, prays for forgiveness. Last year the water that Duane and I brought for the Water ceremony came from a fountain in Ephesus, Turkey, located at a place sacred to Muslims and Christians alike, where hands and faces were washed before engaging in the ritual prayers.

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Here in central Pannsylvania, especially after a rainy summer like this one, we tend to take water for granted. Turn on the tap, turn it off. It’s always there for us. But water is actually a precious gift in our lives, and we could not live long without it.

So I want to encourage you in the days ahead to try not to take water for granted. When you drink a glass of water, wash your hands, bathe your children... take a moment to remember how sacred this water is for so many people of the world, and what a powerful metaphor it can be in your own life. Yielding, forgiveness, renewal, constancy — all these are symbolized by the waters of the world.

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## Closing Words

Adapted from Matthew Fox

Imagine the surface of the Earth, and deep under the Earth the water table, the aquifer of life-giving waters. That buried-deep water is like the spirituality that underlies all of human experience, from which all the great religions sprang. Up on the surface of the Earth are most of the mundane trappings of those religions — the institutions, the doctrines, the rules and traditions that constitute their external forms. Many adherents of the religions never get any deeper than this superficial layer, mired in all the external trappings. But every tradition has within it a wellshaft that plunges deep below the surface, tapping into those waters of Life that gave it birth.

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<sup>6</sup> *Ibid*, p. 39

Plus there have always been certain mystically-minded individuals who have divined and dug their own routes to the waters, outside of any established tradition.

The challenge for all of us, Fox says, is to find our particular well down to the wellsprings — whether within our tradition or of our own devising; but either way, to give up the superficiality and go DEEP. It is only by going deep that we are ever going to be able to find that which will heal us and satisfy our thirst. And when we do, we will be able to heal. And, in our healing, the World will be healed!