

“WATER”

The sermon at the First Parish in Wayland, Massachusetts
On April 17, 2005
By the Rev. Ken Sawyer

“All life comes from the sea.” [words from the Prelude] This is true. There is another chant that says, “We come from the ocean.” And we do. Well, actually, I came from my mother, or (if you prefer) from Overlook Hospital in Summit, New Jersey. That is where I was born. Just so, my grandparents came from Templeton and Nantucket, Mass., and the other two both from Plainfield, New Jersey. But they came from parents who came from ancestors millions of millennia ago who came from the sea (whatever creationists may claim to the contrary).

And sea-stuff we are still. In a fine new collection of short meditations, one for every day of the year, Brian Nelson writes, “Our bodies are about seven-tenths water -- and so is our planet.

“Perhaps, then, we're more physically in touch with the earth than we generally think. Go to the ocean, the lake: even just the creek down the street, and run your hands through the substance that gave birth to all life on the planet and nurtures you still.

“In these ... days when water seems so valuable, consider its fluid ease, its cleanliness, and its simplicity. All you have to do is look inside yourself to go with the flow.” [*Earth Bound* 135]

By the way, I received my copy of the book, titled *Earth Bound*, from Greg and Jean Buesing, whom many here will remember from their years of active involvement in life at First Parish. They moved to California, and Brian Nelson is a member of the UU church they belong to now.

All life comes from the sea, and sea-stuff we are still. One of the most memorable opening lines of any meditation collection was written by my colleague Marni Harmony, now our minister in Orlando, Florida. Her meditation is entitled “I say that it touches us” and appeared in the 1987 UUA meditation manual, *Exaltation*.

“I say that it touches us”

I say that it touches us that our blood is sea water and our tears are salt, that the seed of our bodies is scarcely different from the same cells in a seaweed, and that the stuff of our bones is like the coral.

I say that the tide rolls in on us, whether we like it or no, and the sands of time keep running their intended course.

I say we have to go down into the wave's trough to find ourselves, and then ride her swell until we can see beyond ourselves into our neighbor's eye.

I say that we shall never leave the harbor if we do not hoist the sail.

I say that we have got to walk the waves as well as solid ground.

I say that anyone who goes without consciousness of this will remain chained to a rusty anchor.

May the journey find us worthy.

The subject this morning is water, the appreciation and protection of something on which all life depends, and all lives depend, including our own. But I begin even before appreciation with just the recognition of the all-but-mystical bonds between us and water, from which all life emerged and of which we are composed. “I say that it touches us that our blood is sea water and our tears are salt.”

Brian Nelson makes the connection again when he writes about crying. “Our culture often frowns on crying,” he says, “seeing it as weakness or a loss of control. But tears, like all water, cleanse and purify. When our faces are wet with tears we have been baptized in a way – a natural baptism, sometimes performed for us without our even asking.

“And our tears also contain the salt of the ocean. In a time of sadness, our bodies will not let us forget our ancient origins. Let tears flow when they must – they are the touch of the great mother, from whom we all sprang when the world was young.” [145]

Among UU ministers, I tend to quote less than most. I’m not sure that is a good thing, but it seems to be true. This morning I am bringing my average for the year up nearer the norm, all in one sermon. Because Nelson’s reference to baptism brings this passage to mind:

“Ludwig Feuerbach says a wonderful thing about baptism. I have it marked. He says, ‘Water is the purest, clearest of liquids; in virtue of this its natural character it is the image of the spotless nature of the Divine Spirit. In short, water has a significance in itself, as water; it is on account of its natural quality that it is consecrated and selected as the vehicle of the Holy Spirit.’” [23-24]

As some of you will have recognized, that is a passage from *Gilead*, a wonderful book that just won the Pulitzer Prize for literature. Reading it is part of the assignment for a ministers’ study group I belong to, and small wonder – the narrator is a longtime minister, who along the way reflects on the profession with remarkable insight. The author is Marilynne Robinson, who is not a minister, though as someone who works this job I can tell you, she knows it well and deeply. Furthermore, she is a woman while the narrator is a man. Her skill in finding his voice – that of a male minister -- testifies against the many these days who contend that people are so divided from each other by sex or ethnicity or color or profession or anything else that we have no hope of understanding each other.

Anyway, I want to share one other passage from the book. The narrator observes his son and a friend “hopping around in the sprinkler. The sprinkler is a magnificent invention because it exposes raindrops to sunshine. That does occur in nature, but it is rare. When I was in seminary I used to go sometimes to watch the Baptists down at the river. It was something to see the preacher lifting the one who was being baptized up out of the water and the water pouring off the garments and the hair. It did look like a birth or a resurrection. For us the water just heightens the touch of the pastor's hand on the sweet

bones of the head, sort of like making an electrical connection. I've always loved to baptize people, though I have sometimes wished there were more shimmer and splash involved in the way we go about it. Well, but you two are dancing around in your iridescent little downpour, whooping and stomping as sane people ought to do when they encounter a thing so miraculous as water.” [65]

We are so blessed. I know, if you are in some local towns, including Wayland itself, you may have been feeling less blessed of late by the quality of your water. But still. And there may be times in the spring hereabouts when our abundant precipitation and the flooded cellars and detours it causes feels like a mixed blessing. But still. We are so blessed.

And not just for the miraculous beauties of water, its fluid ease, its simplicity. But we also have water to drink, affordable, readily available, drinkable water. Much of the world is not so lucky.

And so we move from recognition of our ageless connections with water, “the great mother from whom we all sprang when the world was young” – a pagan message, perhaps, for a sermon soon after the spring equinox – on through an appreciation of water’s wondrous beauty and our dependence on its life-sustaining qualities – an Earth Day sermon, if you will – to a sermon for Justice Sunday, the annual occasion for taking note of what the UU Service Committee is up to, and the causes and concerns to which they would have us attend.

Because this year the UUSC’s theme for Justice Sunday is, “Let Justice Flow: Defending the Human Right to Water.” I’ll get back to that in a minute, but I should take that minute to let newcomers here know that the Service Committee has been around since 1940, when it was involved in rescuing Jewish children and others from Nazism. Ever since it has, in its own words, “stood firm against oppression, fighting for dignity and justice for all people.”

It has 32,000 members, including many of you here today. Many of us contribute, too, through Guest at Your Table boxes between Thanksgiving and Christmas. And after the tsunami, for example, at churches across the continent including ours, UUs raised a lot of money for the UUSC to provide help, knowing that through its contacts and personnel in the area, money would be wisely and effectively used. The particular focus the UUSC has taken is to help the economic recovery of fishing villages with assistance in buying new boats and nets.

The Service Committee seems to be in a real good place these days under the strong leadership of a highly-regarded new president, Charlie Clements. All the reports I hear are positive, though for better-informed accounts than I can provide, both Larry Shafer and Bobby Robinson know more about current programs. You can find out a lot from them and from the UUSC website (uusc.org) where you can also join, which will get you regular written reports and is a good thing to do anyway. They do very good work in the world.

Clements writes that “Today the work of the Service Committee is clearly focused in three strategic program areas: civil liberties (ending torture), economic justice (expanding fair trade and promoting labor rights), and environmental justice (defending the human right to water).” [adptd.] Hence, the Justice Day focus this year.

Shamelessly, I will quote again, letting the UUSC describe the cause for upset and action. “In 2005,” they confirm, “Justice Sunday will draw attention to threats to the

human right to water.

“There is a fast growing global water crisis that threatens people's equitable access to water. According to the World Health Organization, a quarter of the world's population, or 1.75 billion people, do not have access to safe drinking water, and 2.5 billion, over a third of the world's population, do not have adequate sanitation. The earth's supply of safe potable water is being used up faster than it can be regenerated, aquifers are being pumped dry, rivers and lakes are polluted, deforestation is interrupting the rain cycle, etc.

“At the same time that water is becoming scarcer, large corporations are purchasing public water systems to run them for profit in both the United States and around the globe. Although the World Bank promotes water privatization as a means to improve services, it has meant that for increasing numbers of people who can least afford it—from South Africa to Detroit—must pay a significant part of their income for water, seek alternative water sources that may be distant and expensive, use contaminated water or live with extreme water scarcity. (For more information about water-related issues, visit www.worldwaterwars.com.)

“As privatization of water increases around the globe, UUSC will work to defend the human right to water. Our goal is to promote and defend people's equitable access to clean, affordable water and support their struggles to achieve that right.”

It is just one part of a troubling picture that is so much larger, I know. The Service Committee knows that, too, as well as our movement at large. Global climate change is the topic that Unitarian Universalism itself through the General Assembly has determined to focus on this year and next. Our own Green Sanctuary Committee and others will continue to remind us how each of us and all of us together could live in more environmentally supportive ways. And of course most of us, without any urging from the pulpit or our bulletin boards, are doing what we can to tend our environment with loving care and help prevent the impending disasters. Preparing this sermon, I was aware of scads of other points I could make, sermon after sermon that I could deliver, all to say, this planet is so precious, our obligation to the generations yet to be born is so pressing, we must learn to treat with reverent attention its plants and animals, its soil and air and sunshine.

But its water, too, and that is the sermon on this day. Water, the writers tell us, that is so miraculous we ought to whoop and stomp, able to cleanse and purify. Water, we know as a fact, that all life needs to survive. Water, the blessing we cherish and delight in. Water, to which every person, as a basic human right, should have affordable access.

Let us treasure the blessing, and work to make sure that this most necessary blessing is available to all.