

4/17/11 Sermon

"Water, Water Everywhere, But Not a Safe Drop to Drink"

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"Water is sacred, from the droplets in a baptismal font to the scattered ashes on a holy river; water blesses our lives." – *National Geographic*

Water is both life giving and life taking and is an important symbol of all religious traditions. Unitarian Universalists begin the church year with a water ingathering service; Christians have baptism in the Jordan River; Jews the Mikva purification bath; Hindus bathe in the sacred Ganges River.

Water is the common thread of the web of existence, yet our actions are depleting these precious resources at an unsustainable level. Because fresh water is so fundamental to life, UUs across the country are taking this Earth Day as an opportunity to explore our connections with water. We seek to renew our commitments to the earth by joining the "40/40 for the Earth" challenge – having at least 40 UUMAN families make 40-day commitments to changing a behavior, large or small, to work toward water justice. My hope is that all of us will celebrate water in our lives by rededicating ourselves to environmental justice as part of our faith's Seventh Principle that will help to sustain our planet through awareness and action to conserve water.

Access to fresh, safe water has become a critical problem affecting all nations and peoples without exception. Let's take a partial look at the global impact on various populations.

The Unitarian Universalist Service Committee tells us that above all else access to water is a fundamental human right, yet nearly 1 billion people lack sustainable, affordable access to safe water and 2.5 billion do not have adequate sanitation. More people have access to a cell phone than a toilet. 3.5 million people die each year from water-related diseases. People living in the slums often pay 5 to 10 times more per liter of water than wealthy people living in the same city. An American taking a five-minute shower uses more water than a typical person in a developing country's slum uses in a whole day.

Shockingly, only 62% of the world's population has access to sanitation facilities which that ensures hygienic separation of human excreta from human contact. This is the world's biggest cause of infections, affecting our children disproportionately. Nearly one in five children dies due to diarrhea related illness. It kills more young children than AIDS, malaria and measles

combined. Every 20 seconds, a child dies from a water-related disease.

The impact on women is also enormous. In just one day, more than 200 million hours of women's time is consumed for the most basic of human needs – collecting water for domestic use from most often polluted water from animals and human waste. This lost productivity is, according to Water.org, greater than the combined number of hours worked in a week by employees at Wal-Mart, United Parcel Service, McDonald's, IBM, Target, and Kroger.

Astonishing. I suspect by now you have a clearer idea how massive this problem is. The world is slowly beginning to take notice, although too slowly. Some steps are easy and demand no sacrifice: don't flush after each use, take a shorter shower and don't run the water when brushing our teeth. We can even reduce childhood deaths by two-thirds by teaching proper hand washing.

Other needed steps are more costly but less so than doing nothing. Almost one-tenth of the global disease burden could be prevented by improving water supplies, sanitation, hygiene and management of water resources. Such improvements in drinking water can reduce childhood mortality and improve health and nutritional status in sustainable ways. This would help accelerate economic and social development in countries where sanitation is a major cause of lost work and 272 million school days a year because of illness. The upside in taking action is that investing in safe drinking water and sanitation does contribute to economic growth. For each \$1 invested, the World Health Organization estimates an economic return of \$3 and \$34, depending on the region and technology. To put it crudely, the value of deaths averted, based on discounted future earnings, would amount to \$3.6 billion a year. Why not invest that same money to save children lives?

The United Nations tells us that by 2025, forty-eight nations, with combined population of 2.8 billion, will face freshwater "stress" or "scarcity." The burden of unequal distribution of water however is not surprisingly falling heaviest on the world's poor. The U.N. has labeled this phenomenon "water apartheid." Unitarian Universalists cannot in good conscience be part of that. We need to support the idea that water is a human right; everyone is entitled to sufficient, safe, physically accessible, and affordable water for personal and domestic use. This is a moral, emotional and spiritual issue for us to contend with.

Paul Boothby wrote that, "Even in our dreams, the image of water represents our emotional life. The gentle wave action of the waters of emotion will in time soften the sharp edges of our brokenness. Then we too

might become a living testament of the healing power of life and love, when we allow our pain to be touched by love, when we let it wash over us and flow through us, leaking from our eyes, uniting again with our primordial origins in the sea. Then we might bring forth the fullness of our power, the full resolve of our personhood to give our energy to remake the world so that humans will live in balance with the natural systems that support all life."

It is vital that we bring our full selves to the world at this time. The world needs us. In the words of W.E.B. Dubois, "Now is the accepted time, not tomorrow, not some more convenient time. It is today that our best work can be done and not some future day or future year." We dare not demur or delay for the danger is getting greater; our eco-system is being pushed to the brink of collapse. It is not too dramatic to say, our very lives hang in the balance between inaction and commitment; between, in Boothby's words, "passive despondency which prevents us from even trying and unrealistic ambitions in which we will surely fall short." It will take the world people coming together in common purpose and concerted action to heal the world from the damage that has already been done.

Intellectually, we know the world is interconnected. We cannot continue to make demands of one part of the biosphere without stressing all other parts of the planet. Need proof? How about radiation from the Japanese nuclear accident showing up in our milk supply? Need more proof? Think of the last time you brought home fresh fruit from the produce stand – strawberries or peaches – their smell permeated the car and let the realization that we have the ability to connect to the web of life at any moment in any activity in our daily lives; the sun, the rain, the soil and the farmer who grew the crop.

We are not separate from the earth but a microcosm of a larger whole. When the earth is injured, we are responsible. When, as Sarah Conn writes, we acknowledge that we are "bleeding at the roots," to heal the natural world, we must concurrently heal ourselves of our self-centeredness, materialism, arrogance, pride rooted in the biblical notion of dominion over other species and the earth, our disconnect and isolation from the natural world, our individualism at the expense of the interconnected collective good. We must in short grow an ecological self – that expands our identity beyond human relationships.

The good news, Boothby writes, "is that we have stopped ourselves, on occasion and corrected some of our abuses. We saved the ozone layer from total destruction; we stopped using some of the more lethal inventions like DDT and CFC's. But we have [only] taken only baby steps toward solving the more fundamental issues of our lifestyle. We continue in our collective

illusion that human beings are somehow separate and autonomous from the rest of nature, that our little concerns are somehow of ultimate significance."

People united in churches such as ours and nations can stop the madness and selfishness that is destroying our environment. We can "make the hard choices and strategic investments to change our lives in the interest of preserving all life."

We must choose now; between crass consumerism or conservation, between reducing our carbon footprint and unrestrained, deregulated oil drilling and strip mining, between sustainable local farming and corporate farms that rape the environment. We will be asked to choose, to change, to learn and to passionately engage each other to overcome our old habits, the old ways that got us into this mess. These are the years that will ask us to hold a more courageous love for all life.

Together we can do this, but must heed the words of Walt Whitman, "We are nature, long have we been absent, but now we return."