

*Water Is Life*  
Lakehead Unitarian Fellowship, Thunder Bay, Ontario  
Sunday, September 18, 2016

**Reading #1: “Swimming”** from *Coming into the End Zone* by Doris Grumbach

Water to me is a saving grace. As a child I forgot my anger at my parents or camp counselors or teachers if I went to a swimming pool, or to the lake...

Water was freedom, an element in which I believed I had perfect control.

Lake and pool waters were calm enough to provide that illusion.

I moved through the water in a kind of ecstasy, cut away from the rules of the land, social requirements, limitations, disapproval.

Water was action, more effective than prayer.

When I swam I believed in God.

**Reading #2: “I Loved the Rain”** from *The Sacred Journey* by Frederick Buechner

I loved the rain as a child.

I loved the sound of it on the leaves of trees and roofs and window panes and umbrellas and the feel of it on my face and bare legs.

I loved the hiss of rubber tires on rainy streets and the flip-flop of windshield wipers.

I loved the smell of wet grass and raincoats and the shaggy coats of dogs.

A rainy day was a special day for me in a sense that no other kind of day was – a day when the ordinariness of things was suspended with ragged skies drifting to the color of pearl, and dark streets turning to dark rivers of reflected light. and even people transformed somehow as the rain drew them closer by giving them something to think about together, to take common shelter from, to complain of and joke about in ways that made them more like friends than it seemed to me they were on ordinary sunny days.

But more than anything, I think, I loved rain for the power it had to make indoors seem snuggler and safer and a place to find refuge in from everything outdoors that was un-home, unsafe.

I loved rain for making home seem home more deeply.

**Reading #3: Psalm 104: 10-14 [SUZANNE]**

You make springs gush forth in the valleys;  
 they flow between the hills,  
 giving drink to every wild animal;  
 the wild asses quench their thirst.  
 By the streams the birds of the air have their habitation;  
 they sing among the branches.  
 From your lofty abode you water the mountains;  
 the earth is satisfied with the fruit of your work.

**Sermon: “Water Is Life”** The Rev. Suzanne Wasilczuk

*The water that is my blood... my sweat, tears from crying  
 Is the water that is your blood... your sweat, tears from crying  
 And the rising of the tide... Is in our veins... and in the ocean wide  
 We are in the rising steam... Rushing river, running stream.*

[Sara Thomsen]

Tim & I live across the street from Lake Superior so, every day I get to see the lake and its changes. Pale blue today. Bright blue yesterday. Steely gray the day before. Loons arrive in spring. A mama merganser and her brood of nine test the waters.

Lakers & salties move slowly by, carrying their cargoes of taconite and coal, wheat and windmill parts.

Every year, in early summer the Department of Natural Resources comes to the limnology center [limnology is the study of freshwater lakes] and stocks the lake with thousands of trout.

This is the only time of year I see fish jumping & cavorting in this body of water. Most of the bigger fish are deep in the lake. And these fish will soon join them.

Often in November, and again in the spring, we stop to watch the surfers ride the wind & storm-raised waves.

When we lived in southeastern Alaska, our little town received between 90 & 100 inches [225-250 cm] of rain a year [lots more than the 27 or so inches – 68 cm – of precipitation that Thunder Bay receives yearly]. We both still love to hear the rain pattering on the roof.

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I've been blessed by living in places that are blessed with water – the Great Lakes, the Clark Fork River, the Pacific Ocean.

Many of us have a favorite body of water – water to paddle in, or swim in, or fish in, or just to watch.

Two thirds of our remarkable world is covered by water.

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### **Some Statistics**

My husband Tim recently read a couple books about water, a fragile and misused and dwindling blessing. One book was a novel, *The Water Knife* by Paolo Bacigalupi. The novel takes place in the near-future southwestern United States, where drought has devastated the country. [Tim did his graduate work in Tucson, Arizona, and is familiar with the overuse and conservation of water in that part of the US.]

Mentioned in that book was another work, *Cadillac Desert: The American West and Its Disappearing Water* by Marc Reisner. Written back in 1986, *Cadillac Desert* is a prophetic work about the results of having a skewed policy about water, and the devastating effects of greed, mismanagement, political corruption, and a ruthless use of natural resources.

Now, why bring up a couple of American works, and American problems?

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As far as my Googling expertise can tell, Canada has no national water policy. Plenty of departments and agencies that oversee fresh water issues.

But no legally enforceable drinking water standards

No strict laws against industrial dumping

No enforceable standards for sewage treatment.

Folks at the Council of Canadians – “Acting for Social Justice” – site call for these measures, as well as a slowdown of tar sands projects [which release 4 billion litres of contaminated water in to Alberta’s groundwater and natural ecosystems each year] and a ban on bulk water exports.

<http://canadians.org/waterpolicy-info>; accessed 15 September 2016.

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Bulk water exports.

*Cadillac Desert* is all about the diversion of water – usually by building huge dams – to areas that were meant to be desert, places like Los Angeles and Phoenix.

Far along in the book [p487] Tim noted a paragraph about the rivers in British Columbia, a truly water-rich province. Within its boundaries, the province holds, in whole or in part, the third-, the fourth-, the seventh-, the eighth-, and the 19<sup>th</sup> largest rivers in North America” [The Mackenzie, the Peace, the Yukon, the Columbia, the Fraser]

All that water, just running back into the ocean.

And all that land south of the border, needing more water to maintain or to grow.

Water is vital to people’s health and livelihoods, but in Canada, there is no national strategy to address urgent water issues and no federal leadership to conserve and protect our water. The federal water policy is more than 25 years-old and badly outdated. Highly intensive industrial uses, agribusiness and pollution are having massive impacts on Canada’s water. It is

time for the federal government to implement a comprehensive National Water Policy that recognizes water as part of the commons – a vital resource that is available to all – a public trust and a human right.

<http://canadians.org/waterpolicy>; accessed 15 September 2016. [Council of Canadians: “Acting for Social Justice”]

Canada has around three million lakes [60% of the world’s lakes]. Almost 9% of Canada is covered by freshwater.

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List\\_of\\_lakes\\_of\\_Canada](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_lakes_of_Canada); accessed 29 August 2013.

Ontario has 250,000 lakes; almost 300 of those lakes have their very own entry in Wikipedia.

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List\\_of\\_lakes\\_of\\_Ontario](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_lakes_of_Ontario); accessed 29 August 2013.

Two thirds of our world is covered by water. And about 2/3 of our body – maybe a little more – is made up of water.

### **Problems**

All that water. Yet, almost 900 million people around the world [out of 7 billion] lack access to safe drinking water. [More than 2.6 billion people do not have access to basic sanitation].

In 2010 *Ban Ki-moon, United Nations Secretary General and the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights* wrote:

"The children who have no clean water to drink, the women who fear for their safety... have a right to better; and we have a responsibility to do better. All people have the right to safe drinking water, sanitation, shelter and basic services."

[http://www.un.org/waterforlifedecade/human\\_right\\_to\\_water.shtml](http://www.un.org/waterforlifedecade/human_right_to_water.shtml); accessed 4 September 2013.

In an almost throw-away comment, the author of *Cadillac Desert* talks about how the American West’s dearth of water might be resolved:

A North American Water Power Alliance. This type of project “has long been an obsession to no small number of engineers and hardhat politicians. Its main drawbacks are that it would largely destroy what is left of the natural West, and it might require taking Canada by force.”

Water is life. Water is a necessity and, water has become a hot commodity.

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*The water that is my blood... my sweat, tears from crying  
Is the water that is your blood... your sweat, tears from crying  
And the rising of the tide... Is in our veins... and in the ocean wide  
We are in the rising steam... Rushing river, running stream.*

[Sara Thomsen]

Water is a basic necessity. Access to water is a human right.

Water is a physical necessity.

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Water is also a spiritual support, a vehicle for ritual, a symbol – of internal cleansing, of constant change, and the constancy of the cycle.

In Christian faiths, the waters of baptism are a symbol of liberation from the oppression of sin that separates us from God.

In Hinduism, the waters of the Ganges River also wash away all impurities of body and soul. A dip in the holy Ganga bestows heavenly blessings.

The devout Muslim ritually washes face, hands and feet before *salat*, before the required five-times-a-day prayer.

Worship of the Shinto gods, the *kamis*, always begins with a ritual purification by water.

*Yemaya asesu, asesu Yemaya* [1x]

Yemaya, the Yorùbá Orisha, the Nigerian Goddess of the living Ocean, considered the mother of all, the source of all the waters As all life is thought to have begun in the sea, all life is held to have begun with Yemaya

<http://www.thaliatook.com/AMGG/yemaya.php>; accessed 8 September 2016.

*Yemaya asesu, asesu Yemaya* [2x]

Traditional Afro-Cuban chant; an Ode to Yemaya, the Goddess of the Ocean

Her name is a contraction of Yey Omo Eja, "Mother Whose Children are the Fish."

*Yemay oloodo, oloodo Yemaya* [2x]

In some cultures – Hawaiian, Haitian – waterfalls are considered sacred. Standing underneath we purify bodies and spirits.

<http://www.foxnews.com/world/2016/07/16/haitians-trek-to-sacred-waterfalls-in-annual-festival.html>; accessed 8 September 2016.

In Buddhist funerals water is poured into a bowl placed before the monks and the dead body. As the water fills and pours over the edge, the monks recite

**"As the rains fill the rivers and overflow into the ocean,  
so likewise may what is given here reach the departed."**

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*Water heal my body*

*Water heal my soul  
When I go down down to the water  
By the water I feel whole*  
Coco Love Alcorn

### **Negative & Positive**

Water is a primary building block of life. Without water there is no life; yet water has the power to destroy as well as to create.

Too little water:

Droughts.  
Wild fires.

Too much water:

In May 2012, Thunder Bay experienced extensive flooding.

<http://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/thunder-bay/story/2012/05/28/tby-flood-state-of-emergency.html>;  
accessed 4 September 2013.

This June [2013] large parts of Calgary flooded.

In July, flooding occurred in Toronto. Lives lost. Damages estimated in the billions.

<http://o.canada.com/2013/07/08/toronto-floods-bring-on-the-calgary-comparisons/>; accessed 4 September 2013.

Floodings [Hermine, Louisiana, Iowa]

Rising sea water.

On a more personal note, many of us have known people who have drowned.

Water – just enough water – clean water, blessed water – is life.

Our having clean water, blessed water, enough water is a growing concern.

And, concerned folks are acting – in a variety of ways.

### **Conclusion**

The Berkeley Pit is a former open pit copper mine that has been filling with acidic water since 1983. A mile long and wide, the huge human-made lake has become a poster child for the environmental damage left behind in the aftermath of mining

On July 10<sup>th</sup>, 2000 150 men, women & children donned blue sarongs, gathered around the Berkeley Pit in Butte, Montana.

### **Cool Water**

Marty Robbins

Also performed by the Sons of the Pioneers

*All day I face the barren waste without the taste of water,*

*Cool water.*

*Old Dan and I with throats burned dry and souls that cry for water,*

*Cool clear water.*

This "Art Action" called attention to the rising threat to the community's drinking water source and to the surrounding rivers.

The Pit is now a major Superfund Site.

*Keep a movin' Dan, don't you listen to him Dan, he's a devil not a man  
and he spreads the burnin' sand with water.*

*Dan can't you see that big green tree where the waters runnin' free  
and it's waiting there for you and me.*

*Water, cool clear water.*

In 2003 the dancers and singers came together at the confluence of the Clark Fork and the Blackfoot Rivers at the Milltown Dam, to sing to the water, to shift people's perception of the place and awareness of the problems of accumulating heavy metal sediments. The dam has since been

In 2008 a new channel was dug, the dam removed, and the silt and sediments removed – another Superfund site. For the first time in a hundred years the river ran free.

Closer to home:

A dozen years ago two Anishinawbe Grandmothers organized primarily other indigenous women, young and old, on sacred walks around the Great Lakes.

In the spring of 2003, around Lake Superior, Lake Michigan in 2004, Lake Huron in 2005, Lake Ontario in 2006 and Lake Erie in 2007.

These women walk to raise awareness that our clean and clear water is regularly polluted by chemicals, vehicle emissions, motor boats, sewage disposal, agricultural runoff, leaking landfill sites, and residential usage.

They remind us water is precious and sacred... one of the basic elements needed for all life to exist.

They "honor the water as a living being."

And currently members of the Standing Rock Sioux tribe [North Dakota] have come together with other Native Americans from across the continent to peacefully oppose a proposed pipeline that would run through four states, disturb native burial sites, and impact drinking water for thousands on the reservation and many more downstream.

<https://outlook.live.com/owa/?path=/mail/inbox/rp>; accessed 8 September 2016.

These people's concerns were mirrored by 100 demonstrators who blocked traffic in downtown Toronto last Tuesday, marching to show solidarity with the Standing Rock Sioux.

All these folks who stand to protect "the Earth, our home, the water, our lifeblood."

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Water is life.

Water is precious.

In this City of a Superior Lake  
In this Land of 3 Million Lakes,  
Water is well-worth handling with care.

Water in me; water in you.

*Water heal my body  
Water heal my soul  
When I go down down to the water  
By the water I feel whole*

May the waters we carry with and in us, in our hands and in our hearts and in our memories, be a blessing to us. May we be a blessing to them.

May it be so. May we make it so. Blessed Be. And Amen.