

**“And to the Water, Great Thanks”**  
**September 11, 2005**  
**Lakehead Unitarian Fellowship**  
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The illustration on the cover of the order of service is a copy of a small painting that is part of a Water Shrine in Minneapolis. The shrine is a work commissioned for the lobby of a philanthropic foundation near the Mississippi River bank, and was done by a friend of mine, Sandy Spieler. Though Sandy is not a Unitarian, the shrine might be seen as a megacosm of our water ritual, for in addition to the 46 little paintings that grace its surfaces, it is filled with water collected from around the world. I myself sent some water from the San Francisco Bay, as well as from the Jordan River from my trip to Israel. Water was collected in Japan, in Thailand, and in Greenbay, WI. In Brazil, in Wales, and in the NW Territory, people collected water and then packed it in small plastic containers and jelly jars to send to Minneapolis.

The Shrine is named “Water Connects the World.” Sandy sees this Water Shrine as a deep prayer for peace for the entire world, a collective prayer filled with the tender love of each person who bowed down to collect the Water, love transformed into water and then poured into a common vessel. Sandy says that as she painted the shrine, she meditated on the miracle of Life that is so abundantly experienced through relationship with Water. For to co-exist with water is the universal relationship, so beautifully illustrated in the children’s story today, a relationship formed by the presence of water in all of life. Water truly connects us all...with each other, and with the natural world.

Whenever we collect water, just as when we breath air, we take in bits and parts of atoms of all that is, all that has ever been, and all that will ever be. We draw it into our cups, and when we drink to create our futures and to satisfy our dreams, we partake of all that has already been. In kind, as we share our water with others, we participate in creating all that is to come.

As I browsed the list of water gatherers, I was momentarily stunned to see that one container of water for that shrine came from Louisiana. I was stunned by the rightness of that. Stunned at the sheer holiness of its presence so far away from home...water from the mouth of the Mississippi returning to near its source... water gathered from what was then a sluggish bayou, water that had no inclinations that it might later be part of a great disaster. Water that could have participated in a tsunami or a hurricane is instead safely delivered to a prayerful shrine.

An early debate on this continent that continues to play a major role in the development both Unitarian and Universalist thought is about the nature of humanity. Were we born depraved, destined for a fiery pit, and in need of salvation? Are we good by nature, already saved, and entirely capable to rely upon our own personal intuition

to know what is right and true? Arminianism, which rejected the Calvinist doctrine of predestination and insisted that we have the power of human will, greatly influenced Unitarian thought. To have free will means that we have within us the potential for good and bad, right and wrong, love and hate, perhaps even damnation and salvation. Our current statement of principles and purposes alludes to this by making a claim for the 'inherent worth' of each individual, but without making any qualitative moral judgment about our natures. We have within us, just like water, the potential to heal or to destroy, to rage or to calm, to nourish or to ruin.

Carl Jung saw water as an archetype of the collective unconscious, perhaps another way to say that water connects us all. As a symbol for the unconscious, water then is central for understanding the transforming processes of the life cycle. It points to the ongoing struggle between the conscious and the unconscious, and our search to make meaning out of what we have been handed, to try to grapple with the whys of life.

In myth and literature and art, water is connected both to creation stories and transformational journeys, and serves as a mediator between life and death...a transitional element between fire and earth. The protagonist must cross a great ocean, or swim to impossible depths, or traverse a swirling river to obtain the goal. Likewise, as we embark on our own epic journeys, we are required to enter and drink of the collective sea from which we have been birthed, the sea to which we continually contribute, and to where we must eventually return.

This helps to explain why we are so drawn to water. Here you all are, and me too now, living next to a large body of water. The power of the water holds us here, pulls us to the shoreline to gaze at the expanse, draws us out onto its surface to paddle or to sail. Water on its own has a particular appeal, but where water meets land, the lure is intensified. The meeting of two pure elements, water and earth, both soothes and mystifies us; this meeting is essential to our existence, for in us, water joins with blood, sinew and bone to give us life.

We begin in a watery womb and we are passed into this life in a rushing stream. For some, baptism by water marks the entrance into life and into the loving embrace of god and community. Water is seen as a cleanser of both the body and the spirit, such as the ritual cleansing required in Judaism before entering a covenant, or the foot-washing required before entering an Ashram. As a child, I was very confused by the requirement to take a shower before entering a swimming pool; it seemed redundant. But isn't this beautiful really? ...to intentionally cleanse ourselves before entering into a community which will be affected, or infected, by what we bring to it? 'Being human' seems to insist that we feel our separateness, but to enter a river is to stand in harmony with all that is, to know our connectedness, and to experience grace.

Yes, when we choose to walk into the water, when we take that leap that Suzanne spoke of earlier, we walk into a sea of connection. Here boundaries are dissolved and the illusion of separateness disappears. Water is the great equalizer...swimming in it we can no longer name what is earth or sky, head or heart, fin or fowl. It holds us, soothes our rough edges...and it is changed by our presence...and that very fact makes our presence significant.

You know, another part of that early theological debate was the question of what might impel us toward goodness, especially if there was no fear of eternal damnation. In other words, hell serves a purpose as a moral motivator, and those who believe in universal salvation are seen to lack any impetus toward goodness. Later that same question swirled within debates about the existence of God. Without a God to lure us in that direction, why be good? Why choose to contribute something of value?

Well, I believe that choosing to live fully in the soup of life impels us to right action. With eyes and arms open, we are able to see that how we live and what we do makes a difference, that others are affected by our choices, and that we are affected by the choices of everyone else. In that soup, individual survival becomes indistinguishable from communal survival and the common good wins out over individual gain.

I stand here in awe of water. I take it for granted countless times a day...for us it is readily available and rarely dangerous. To say, in this context, "And to the water, great thanks!" may seem a tossed-off sentiment, an afterthought. After all, this little painting is the last of the 46 on Sandy's water shrine, yet for me it colors the effect of the entire piece. None of it is of much value without the gratitude that grounds it. Gratitude is the source, the wellspring...it cuts through the rock to allow the water to flow. Gratitude is a spiritual discipline allowing us to see that whatever the destructive powers of water, those powers co-exist with beneficial, life-giving properties. Though seemingly faint compensation, Hurricane Katrina has washed away the invisibility of the poor in America. In her powerful wake, Katrina leaves an entire nation with the possibility of new priorities and commitments. Just so, in death there exists always the seeds of new life. There is much to be grateful for. We might not understand it, we may often rail against it, but we can be grateful for it, just the same, because going through life with a grateful heart, bends us toward all that is good and just. Gratitude is the cleansing agent that prepares us to enter the communal pool, in right relation with all.

Canadian writer Hugh MacLennan wrote that "To be able to love the mystery around us is the final and only sanction of human existence."<sup>1</sup> In that spirit, I invite you into a time of silence, to consider the mystery of the water that you gathered to bring here today, to consider the meaning that water holds for you, and above all, to connect

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<sup>1</sup> MacLennan, Hugh, *The Watch That Ends the Night*, (Toronto: Macmillan Canada, 1959), p. 372.

with your gratitude for it. I introduce this time of silence with a poem that was written by UU minister Tess Baumberger, a poem that speaks to the great joy to be found in drinking from life's well. After the reading, turn your listening to your own heart, and we'll sit for a few minutes in silence, a silence I will break by beginning the water ritual. The poem is entitled, "Wells."

Have you ever sipped from the golden pond of tomorrow  
as the setting sun transforms the landscape of today  
into purple possibilities?  
Take the silver cup you find there, dip it in, breaking the surface  
of wondering, and draw out a measure  
of life-scented gladness.

Clasp it within the flower of your weary  
fingers, drink in the essence  
of imagined futures, hold them on your tongue,  
and close your eyes.  
Swallow, and feel each drop  
separately enter your bloodstream,  
soothing the frenetic features of your heart, and seeping  
into every thirsty cell.

Lie back as midnight lights the stars, and let darkness envelop your doubts  
in blankets of ascendant sleep, cradling you as the moon croons  
a lullaby of "All will be well."  
Set the cup of expectation near your pillow, and your hand will loosen  
as you slumber, allowing its mereness to deepen  
to a new and fragrant well.

Waking, partake in joy of its birthing water,  
fill your vessels, and depart,  
praising.  
This source, originated in faith, grown by waiting, will reflect the  
changing  
skies of now until the next sojourner comes,  
willing to attend upon Grace.