

**The Gathering of the Waters: *Miraculous: Solid/Liquid/Gas***

September 23, 2012

**Reading** Excerpts from “Walking,” by Henry David Thoreau

Today’s service makes a special point about gathering water from our many and various travels—whether on the globe or inside our own hearts. This morning’s reading is in honor of those who remain close to home, because some of our greatest travelers—Emily Dickinson comes to mind—rarely left town. Here are two brief passages from Thoreau’s great essay entitled “Walking”:

My vicinity affords many good walks; and though for so many years I have walked almost every day, and sometimes for several days together, I have not yet exhausted them... Two or three hours’ walking will carry me to as strange a country as I expect ever to see...

We had a remarkable sunset one day last November. I was walking in a meadow, the source of a small brook, when the sun at last, just before setting, after a cold gray day, reached a clear stratum in the horizon, and the softest, brightest morning sunlight fell on the dry grass and on the stems of the trees in the opposite horizon.... It was such a light as we could not have imagined a moment before, and the air also was so warm and serene that nothing was wanting to make a paradise of that meadow.

**Miraculous: Solid/Liquid/Gas**

Homily delivered by Joseph Bednarik

September 23, 2012

It is a pleasure to be here this morning. Thank you so much for inviting me. It is a singular honor to share the ritual of your inaugural water service.

I love water services, and I need to warn you on the front end: This sermon, like water, goes *everywhere*—from ancient China and glacial lakes to waterfalls and jail cells.

I sprinkle in science and poetry and stories, and sometimes make quick, almost irrational, changes in direction. I even bring in the image of a muskie fisherman drinking canned beer.

I simply couldn't control myself; water made me do it.

As we prepare to come forward in a ritual where we gather together our waters, I would like to call your attention to a quote from George Wald, a Nobel laureate scientist:

“Out of 92 natural elements, we could never have predicted man. We could never even get to the wetness of water, the miracle of ordinary water. Water is one of the strangest substances in all of chemistry.”

There is so much to love about this quote, beginning with the close association of “miracle” and “ordinary.” Like Thoreau in our reading this morning: “Two or three hours' walking will carry me to as strange a country as I expect ever to see.”

The miracle of the ordinary. A miracle as ordinary as water.

I also like the conclusion of that quote: “water is one of the strangest substances in all of chemistry.” It is true that water is strange. Strange and beautiful and powerful and terrifying and sublime, because water is capital-L Life itself.

It is our first home in the womb. It is, physiologically, over half of our body. It is the medium of our blood and tears and sweat. And it is strange and miraculous because it can float when it freezes, flow when it's liquid, and fly when it's gas.

And this floating and flowing brings me to the other side of the world, and even highlights our connection to the galaxy, in a poem written over a thousand years ago, in China—"Waterfall," by Li Po:

Sunlight steams on the river stones.  
from high above, the river steadily plunges—  
three thousand feet of sparkling water—  
the Milky Way pouring down from heaven.

And here we are this morning, prepared to share waters. Waters that represent our many travels, whether in the world, or in our heart; and combine them into common water, *here*, that represents our home, our homecoming, and our community.

There is the common idea in organizational development—whether it be a corporation, a family, or a Unitarian Universalist fellowship—that great tasks are accomplished by working *together* toward a common goal, and in doing so, people actualize themselves and each other *within* the group—in right relation—and the goals provide the ways and the means to grow, in directions and in depth that individuals could not achieve on their own.

And it gets more complicated as the organization gets larger... especially in an election year.

A very simplistic notion, perhaps, but consider: Our reading this morning was from Thoreau, someone who became a world-wide legend because he made a big deal about living alone near that pond called Walden.

While he was in deep relationship with that water—a modest pond—he became an American icon, a poster-child for individualism and self-sufficiency. And, to my mind, the "self-sufficiency" idea is a huge misreading and a vast misunderstanding.

Nobody, strictly speaking, is “self-sufficient.” The most solo a person can be is self-reliant.

We are social creatures and, to call forth the Greek philosopher Aristotle, we live inside the “polis.” You cannot *be* human, Aristotle argued, unless you live in community, in relation to one another. And if all is working well, *right* relation.

And water is the perfect metaphor for right relation.

The town I grew up in, in Western New York, was near a gorgeous lake that was carved out eons ago by a glacier that moved through the region. The lake is beloved by sports enthusiasts. Cottages and homes and marinas rim the entire 50-miles of shoreline. There is abundant fish, including bass, walleye, and the mighty muskellunge. There are also active farms on the surrounding hills.

As far back as anyone can remember, the lake has also struggled with a chronic and choking over-abundance of seaweed. Some say because of all the fertilizer and manure that flows into the lake.

The “weed problem,” so called, is always described in military terms, as a battle, and one of the weapons used to combat the enemy is herbicide. When I was a kid the lake actually got sprayed by crop dusters, and we were advised to wait 24-hours before we went swimming.

Years later I heard rumors that the herbicide that was used was akin to Agent Orange.

And one of my older fishing buddies—a man named Chip who had a waxed handle-bar moustache and essentially lived on the lake in a little cottage—became a watershed activist after his wife died of some weird cancer.

He simply couldn't shake the notion that spraying the lake with herbicides had something to do with her illness.

And what does this vignette show?

We're *all* in the watershed, and any lake is connected to the creek which is connected to the rain which is connected to the yards and gardens and fields of the surrounding hills.

And water flows down; we're all downstream from somewhere; none of us can solve watershed problems on our own, because everything is connected... In short, a healthy watershed requires an engaged, healthy community.

And consider one of the amazing qualities of Unitarian Universalism: Our first principle: The inherent worth and dignity of every person.

From the most high-minded Nobel laureate scientist to the beer-drinking muskie fisherman who's pissed off because weeds are clogging the prop of his outboard.

It is our responsibility as Unitarian Universalists to see the dignity—and even the *divinity*—in each of these people, especially as we work the political realities to create and maintain healthy watersheds.

To be in right relation—with nature, with water, and with each other.

When confronted with the need to stop using fertilizers on their lawns, or to stop washing their cars near a storm drain, or to fix their aging septic tanks, these citizens, our neighbors, need to understand that we're all in this together.

And in this meeting between the individual and the collective, we often hear the words that create more heat than light: “leave me *alone*.”

These words have been embraced by many in this country, and they're akin to a "No Trespassing" sign on what our fellow citizens of the polis consider their god-given rights—from owning assault rifles to paying as few taxes as possible.

And since it is an election year, how about *this* bumper sticker: "I love clean water and I vote!"

And, since it is an election year, I designed this little quiz: When I say the word "taxes," what do you see:

- a) safe roads and good schools
- b) bombers that fly through the eyes of needles
- c) a monster slurping up your money
- d) any combination of the above

Taxes are a collective challenge. Thoreau sat inside a jail cell when he refused to pay *his* taxes because, as he argued, those taxes were being used to fund an unjust war.

Inside that cell he focused his thoughts and wrote an essay called "Civil Disobedience," that had a profound impact on the history of the world. People named Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King, Jr. read the essay and took it deep into their lives and made Thoreau's ideas core to their political actions.

What Thoreau did in that jail cell is the deepest sort of community living. We are all downstream from his articulate thoughts and principled action.

And remember that beer-drinking muskie fisherman who was pissed off because lake weeds were clogging the prop of his outboard?

That man's nickname is Chip. He owns a cottage on a beloved lake that was annually sprayed with herbicide. His wife died years ago from some weird cancer. He became a watershed activist.

And how, you ask, did we get from Li Po's "Waterfall" to Thoreau's jail cell?

Because all waters, eventually, spend some time riding a Chinese water and hanging out in Walden Pond.

When I was a kid, someone told me that the Earth has all the water it is ever going to have, and that it just keeps circulating around and around, and therefore it was profoundly important that we keep the waters clean... that the puddle evaporating after watering the garden becomes the cloud floating above your head becomes part of a rainstorm in the mountains... that then becomes the nameless trickle that flows to the creek that flows to the river that flows to the sea that surges with storms and tides and currents... and eventually evaporates and becomes cloud again, this time over our communist enemies the Soviet Union or Mao's China...

and on and on and on... and that during your life you might be drinking some of the water that baptized Jesus or even water that a caveman once drank.

You don't want to think too far into the science that one...

Like I said, I heard this piece of thinking when I was young and, to be honest, I have never pursued its scientific validity. All I need is its poetic truth: We're here on the planet, and the planet is a contained and living system—capped on top and bottom by ice and continuously spinning within swirling clouds.

The resources are finite and precious and *you*—as part of a vast and strange and miraculous "we"—are the steward of these—*our*—waters.

You and I are connected, in a tangible, wet way, to everyone who has ever lived, because to live *they* needed clean, healthy water.

As I said earlier, water is capital-L Life itself. It is the Life of an individual, and it is the Life of a community.

As such, thinking about Water can get as vast as the oceans, or as focused and finite as *this* small sample of water.

A sample that co-mingles waters saved from nineteen years of Water Services from Quimper Unitarian Universalist Fellowship in Port Townsend, Washington, the mentoring congregation for Peninsula Unitarian Universalist Fellowship.

Water from oceans, glaciers, rivers,

swamps, mountain springs, lakes,

rain barrels, ponds, puddles,

birdbaths, garden hoses, and backyard pools.

Waters that were sailed on, swam in, sluiced through, and sat beside.

And, most beautifully, fresh, clean water that was collected when we turned a handle and potable water flowed freely.

Be so very happy that you can turn a handle and receive, on command, clean water.

This water has been gathered and gifted from hundreds of people whose lives have flowed into and through a Unitarian Universalist fellowship on the edge of the continent, along a strait, connected directly to one of the world's great oceans.

In that fellowship, those people learned about and practiced seven principles, the core of which is “A free and responsible search for truth and meaning.”

And through years of attending water services, I can assure you that so much of that searching is represented by the water in this jar.

The Palestinian poet Taha Muhammad Ali, who visited the Olympic Peninsula several years ago, and who recently passed away, composed a beautiful poem “Twigs,” which included this passage:

And so  
it has taken me  
all of sixty years  
to understand  
that water is the finest drink,  
and bread the most delicious food,  
and that art is worthless  
unless it plants  
a measure of splendor in people’s hearts.

One of the world’s most splendid miracles is water:

Solid. Liquid. Gas.  
Glacier. River. Cloud.

Because we are water, we too can float and flow and fly.

And this morning, we gather our various waters together, back home, here, to become one intermingled connection.

I know for a fact that part of this water is Walden Pond. I know for a fact that part of this water is the Ganges. I know for a fact these waters are finding a good home. I have great faith that we will steward this strange and miraculous and ordinary substance.

Our life depends upon it.

### **Closing Words for Water Service**

The closing words this morning is a proverb from the Spanish poet Antonio Machado:

Beyond living and dreaming  
what matters most  
is waking up

Footnotes & References:

“Waterfall at Lu-shan,” by Li Po, translated by Sam Hamill, from *Banished Immortal: Visions of Li T'ai-po* (White Pine Press, 1987).

Excerpt from “Twigs,” by Taha Muhammad Ali, from *So What: New & Selected Poems, 1971–2005* (Copper Canyon Press, 2006).