

The Stories of Water  
September 4, 2022  
Rev. Dr. Leon Dunkley  
North Universalist Chapel Society

By breath, by blood, by body, by spirit, we are all one

The air that is my breath is the air that you are breathing  
And the air that is your breath is the air that I am breathing...

The water that is my blood, my sweat, tears from crying  
Is the water that is your blood, your sweat, tears from crying

By breath, by blood, by body, by spirit, we are all one

Sara Thomsen goes on to sing about how it is that we are Earth's dust and clay, spit from stars at the great beginning. She also sings about the fire that is soul and spirit burning but we will only deal with water and wind today.

Good morning. In 1998, when the General Assembly of the Unitarian Universalist Association was being held in Salt Lake City, Utah, me and one of my best friends in all of the world decided to make the most out of our travels. 'If we're going to go all the way out west,' we figured to ourselves, 'why not check out Zion National Park and Capitol Reef? Why not spend some time in Bryce Canyon?' Now, I realize the irony. It's practically staring us in the face (which does not necessarily mean that it's easy to see, by the way). But it is ironic, considering the landscape. Utah is a strange place to begin a Sunday service called The Stories of Water but here we are, nevertheless. We begin in Utah, of all places. Our brave state of Vermont gets a yearly average of 43 inches of rain (or 1,092 millimeters). In contrast, the state of Utah averages only 11 inches (or 280 millimeters).

Running through Zion and its land formations is the Virgin River and its tributaries from the north and from the east. The waters of the Virgin are the artists that carved Zion's canyons so beautifully, so thoughtfully...assuming, of course, that the waters of flowing rivers are able to think—more gracefully than we do, I imagine. Capitol Reef is drier but Polk Creek to the north and Pleasant Creek and Oak Creek to the south, they all flow through it...speaking the same, soft language as the rivers of Zion. Bryce Canyon is different. It was hard to find water when we were there. Its canyons are strikingly gorgeous, carved less by water than by wind...so beautifully, so thoughtfully...assuming, of course, that the wind is able to think as well as we can.

We had packed iodine tablets and a water filter—as we'd been advised to do—and we hauled in half of the water we needed, knowing that we could refill at the bottom of the canyon. "The Yellow River is running," the national park ranger told us with confidence. So, we adopted his good spirit as our own and we hiked in...with food enough and cameras, a tent, sleeping bags and various supplies.

It's so dry out there. Our bodies, our northeastern bodies were used to humidity. We were used to wiping beads of sweat from our foreheads. We were used to soaking our t-shirts. But out west, there's no humidity. We were like raisins in the sun—one black and one white, one regular and one golden.

We were both green as well when it came to knowing how to hike a canyon. We had over-packed, more invested in being prepared than in being practical. So, needless to say, we were both drinking a lot of water. At first, we were going through in quickly. We really had to restrain ourselves. We had to slow down. We had to wrestle with our thirst and pace ourselves. And we did pretty well. We were nearing the bottom of the canyon. So, we assumed that the Yellow River was near. We assumed we were getting close...and the landscape supported our assumption. It was a little bit more lush. There were signs of animal-life.

One the banks of the Yellow River, that was where we had decided to camp. We'd set up the tent, prepare our dinner and then, go for a swim as we filtered our water. That was the plan...and it did work out...just not as we had planned.

When we got to the banks of the Yellow River, the Yellow River was barely there. It was unenthusiastic, to say the very least. A foot and a half across, maybe a couple of inches deep. We were initially disappointed and got angry at the national park ranger. We had both assumed a swimming hole and maybe a rope swing but all we got was just a slow trickle...and we were bummed—bummed until we realized that that slow trickle could still refresh us and keep us alive. So, in the scheme of things, it was pretty easy to give up on the rope swing. It was easy to forgive the ranger that we were mad at for simply telling the truth. We slept well by the river that evening and we hiked out the very next day—telling jokes to one another, singing the music of Elton John, laughing at ourselves for our folly and being very happy to be alive. We saw folks starting out that day, climbing into what we had just climbed out of and we smiled to each one of them, exchanging good hellos and sharing with them, reassuringly and with real confidence, “The Yellow River is running.” The rest was up to them.

Water, heal my body

Water, heal my soul

When I go down, down by the water

By the water I feel whole

Good morning and good Sunday. I hope that this new day finds you well. Today is Sunday, September the 4th. Can you believe it's September already? I hear tales from friends—first days of school and new clothes for the cooler seasons. It's still plenty warm these days but we're beginning to dare the edge of things in the evenings and the fog, the angel mist, sits on the mountain longer and longer each morning.

As you know now, the title of this morning's service is The Stories of Water. River, ocean, lake and stream, silver sea and babbling brook, mossy pond and crooked creek... What bodies of water buoy your body, your mind, your spirit and your soul these days? Which ones call you by your true name and in what ways do you answer? These are real questions and they might say something meaningful about ourselves. We could share that meaning with one another. I want to ask you

these questions, Mary Jeanne, and I want to know your answers. I would like to ask all of you. I am so curious about what you might say. What body of water is most special to you? Do you find yourself saying that it's the Indian Ocean on the other side of the world or that it's the Ottawaquheechee River, right here in our own backyard? Would it be Silver Lake...or maybe, one of the Greats—Michigan, Superior, Huron, Ontario or Erie? Would it be the Hudson River...a body of water which, as it wanders, slowly become a tidal estuary...the nearer it gets to the island of Manhattan.

If we asked Jonatha Brooke about her favorite body of water, she just might say it was the Hudson. She used to live around there...if the song that she wrote called West Point is autobiographical and true. It seems that she goes back there every now and again. She writes,

I'm retraveling this lifeline that's so close to home  
We are on our way to West Point  
Where your perfect, blonde cousin  
    will throw his hat up in the air  
And we will watch it fall

I so completely love this verse because the music captures the freshness and the excitement of returning home—and the anticipation and the anxiety—and because the melody describes the action in the story that the lyrics convey. Let's take a listen. [play though "I'm still the girl that loved you"]

There was going to be a graduation at West Point Military Academy and the storyteller had been invited. West Point overlooks the Hudson River...and I think it is still a river at that spot, north of Peekskill and east of Goshen, on the west side of the water, about 60 miles south of Woodstock, NY and 215 miles away from North Chapel. When you go home sometimes, old ghosts come back to life. Ways in which we've grown and changed are erased by family dynamics and memories of childhood. Jonatha Brooke writes about these memories in the song. She writes, admitting and almost confessing, that,

I'm still the girl that loved you  
When your eyes were open wide  
And I'm still the girl that wandered on  
    and I'm still the girl that lied  
'Cause when I'd tell the truth, you would run and hide

She says,  
My hands get shaky and I think of all the reasons  
and I start to drink  
I get lonely, get depressed, don't sleep well nights, can't get dressed  
I can't help myself

She's searingly honest, daringly revealed. She is an artist in the true sense of the word...in the sense that Franz Kafka. He believed that art must be "the axe that cleaves the frozen sea inside of us."

These last two years have been very hard on us. They've been very hard on ALL of us. And there's no control, no shoreline marker that tells exactly how far we've drifted. You know, when one of us faces a serious challenge, when tragedy befalls us individually, it's easy to see how powerfully this one-of-us has been affected. If we fall and break a leg, our friends and family can rally around us to the measure of their gift. It is real and possible to extend a helping hand. When an identifying few face challenges, when tragedy befalls us as a small group, it's a bit more difficult to see how powerfully this small part of us has been affected. If an apartment building burns down or if part of the city becomes flooded, our friends and family can do the same but it's a bit harder...a lot harder, if you live in Pakistan at the moment...or in Jackson, Mississippi. They have both been utterly deluged. When all of us face serious challenge, when tragedy befalls everybody, it's impossible to see how powerfully we have been affected. If we all fell and broke a leg, our habits of responding would be overwhelmed and over time, a subtle kind of trauma would set in...and when it did set, when really it took hold of us, none of us would notice...and even if we did notice, we wouldn't know what to do but we'd figure it out...but our hands would get shaky and we might feel lonely and a little depressed. Maybe these are the times when we need healing waters the most.

Water, heal my body  
Water, heal my soul

We've been struggling through these past few years, struggling to make good sense of things. We've never had to try this hard before...not as a whole. We believe in wining and losing. To the victors go the spoils of war...but we are outgrowing war, maybe not in politics but in the spirit-life of things. It is a long haul, for sure, but clearly we are on our way. I can hear this in the water. It sings as we recover from broken hearts and broken dreams.

It's hard to go home sometimes, because all of our memories are there...and the beautiful and perfect and flawless human beings that we are now were then, only in a process of becoming. Here, of course, I'm joking...but only to call attention to the journey and deepen the point—it's hard to return sometimes. It's easier, though, when we make a plan to stand by water...or to sit or swim or row...or sing.  
Water, heal my body

It's easier when we make the space we need to live and love and learn to tell the stories of water. They are calling out to us. Can we hear them? Can we hear the calls of river, ocean, lake, pond and stream? Can we hear the calls of babbling brook and crooked creek? How do we respond? What is the answer to their calling? Shall we sit quietly at water's edge or diving in loud and laughing? Do we sail or row or paddle our ways across the pitching surfaces? Do we paint these waters or take pictures of them? Do we write them poetry or tell their tales? Shall we gather in our hands what we can carry? Should we try to fill our pockets? Do we drink the waters in? Do we allow them to wash us clean—cleansing, holding healing up the places where we've been broken? A Jersey poet writes,  
I got a sixty-nine Chevy with a three-ninety-six  
Fuelie heads and a Hurst on the floor

She's waiting tonight down in the parking lot  
Outside the Seven-Eleven store  
Me and my partner Sonny built her straight out of scratch

In Racing in the Streets, Bruce Springsteen describes his engine of escape...and he's not just singing about a car. He is singing about his heart. He writes,  
I met her on the strip three years ago  
In a Camaro with this dude from L.A.  
I blew that Camaro off my back  
And drove that little girl away  
But now there's wrinkles around my baby's eyes...  
But all her pretty dreams are torn...  
For all the shut down strangers and hot rod angels  
Rumbling through this promised land  
Tonight my baby and me, we're gonna ride to the sea  
And wash these sins off our hands

Honestly, I can't hear him singing anymore. Now, I only hear his song as prayer. His muscle cars are churches to me, soul-engine running through a night so tender. Tough enough to overcome the ghosts that haunt the past, cool enough meet the challenge of the day. Firebird cool. That's us. That's also everyone around us. It's time to stop fighting with our selves and with one another. It's time to get to know ourselves again. It's time to ride to the sea and wash clean of recent challenges. In 2006, when General Assembly was being held in Fort Worth, Texas, there was a catchy slogan going around. It was this: The most radical thing that we can do is to introduce ourselves to one another. Once again, the most radical thing that we can do is to introduce ourselves to one another—especially now, considering all of the changes that we're going through.

So, in closing, let's do a low-tech survey. In your orders of service, you should have received a set of colored voting cards. We can use these cards to canvas the feelings in the room. I will ask a series of seven questions, two of which will have a ranking feature. By raising our responses, we will be able to get a sense of the disposition of the room. We can reveal just a little bit of what lay beneath the surfaces of things. I promise not to ask anything that's too embarrassing but I should tell you that the game is best when we take honest risks.

Okay. So, the first question is a ranking question. It has to do with your own, individual stories of water. Which is your most favorite and which is your least. Please go ahead and rank them—1, being your most favorite and 4, being your least favorite. When you are done, I will ask you to share your answers. Look around the room and check out who we are! Raise your card if "Ocean or Sea" was your most favorite, ranked #1. Raise your card if "Ocean or Sea" was your least favorite, ranked #4.

Raise your card if "Lake or Pond" was your most favorite, ranked #1. Raise your card if "Lake or Pond" was your least favorite, ranked #4.

Raise your card if "River or Estuary" was your most favorite, ranked #1. Raise your card if "River or Estuary" was your least favorite, ranked #4.

And finally, raise your card if “Stream or Brook or Creek” was your most favorite, ranked #1. Raise your card if “Stream or Brook or Creek” was your least favorite, ranked #4.

The next five questions are not raking questions. How do you connect with water? Do you sit quietly on the shoreline or do you write poetry or prose in the presence of it? Do you dive in laughing and swim or do you float, sail or row across its waters? How many sit quietly at the shoreline? How many writers are in the house? How many dive in laughing? How many float, sail or row?

Here’s the spiritually important question. How many Red Sox fans do we have? How many primarily love the Celtics? How many Lakers fans? How many primarily love the Yankees?

Next question. How many think of ourselves as Fiercely Competitive when playing with others? How many are Non-competitive? Mildly Competitive? Secretly Competitive? I invite you to ask these questions of yourself but I won’t ask you to reveal your answers (although I am so curious). Are we fiercely competitive with ourselves? Mildly so? Non-competitive? Secretly so? If you care to share later, feel free to tell me privately.

How many of us see ourselves as deeply compassionate or empathetic? How many of us are mildly compassionate or empathetic? Neither compassionate nor empathetic? Secretly compassionate and empathetic?

The last question is a ranking question but here again, I will not ask you today about your ranking. I may sometime tomorrow or in the future. Today, I am only interested in your top choice. Sara Thomsen tells us musically that “by breath, by blood, by body, by spirit, we are all one.” As it is possible that we are nearing the end of this time of isolation and terrible division, as are striving for something more beautiful, how do you feel that we can become more interconnected—by breath, blood, body or spirit. Please make your choice and we will do them all at once this time. Are you ready? Make your top choice and take your top choice and hold it in your hand. Raise it high and look around the room for those who chose as you did and for those who chose as you did not, knowing that it takes us all for greatness.

West Point on the Hudson is a military academy. West Point on the Ottawaquechee is a spiritual academy. We have been training love warriors here and today is graduation day. We are standing at a threshold, at an inflection point in life. We are transitioning...changing, as always, from who we were before into who we will be someday. Today is the in-between-ness called becoming. It’s a joyful place. This is why it’s beautiful outside. In celebration and in salutation of our process of becoming, we will throw our hats into the air (and I will film it) just like a college graduation.

We don’t have special hats—or graduation caps, as they say—but we do have these cards that we’ve been given. So, stack them up in no logical order and get ready to toss them in the air, sing the final hymn and leave the sanctuary WITHOUT CLEANING THEM UP. I have a team that will do that but it’s important to leave cards where they fall.

Have you got it? On a count of three, we will throw our cards high and just maybe it will be beautiful. Then, we will sing our closing hymn and step out into this beautiful day.

On the count of three. Ready? One, two, three!!!

