

The River of Life

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What would this community be like if we were more like water? Genesis 1: 1-2: “When God began to create the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while the spirit of God swept over the face of the waters.”

There is something primal about flowing water. We live on a wet planet. Water covers over 70% of the earth’s surface and ancients said land emerged from chaotic oceanic depths covering the earth. Living things depend fundamentally on water. Genesis 1:9-10: “God said, ‘Let the waters under the sky be gathered together into one place, and let the dry land appear.’ And it was so. God called the dry land Earth, and the waters that were gathered together he called the Seas. And God saw it was good.”

These passages are translations of some of the oldest sacred texts in the world. Water has always been central to our sense of being. In myth we encounter divine mystery in the form of water: spirits of springs, rivers, or lakes. We are water. While we think we float along the river of life, ancients knew the river of life floats within us, through us.

Thales of Miletus, one of the Seven Sages or earliest Greek philosophers, rejected mythology for scientific thought, and so is sometimes known as its 2,500-year-old father. He taught that water constituted the underlying principle of all things; and that God is the spirit which shaped and created all things from water. The human body consists of over 60% water by weight, and following Thales the earth is alive with its oceanic spirit, and humans are a manifestation of the divine, because water is the basic element of all life.

The contemporary Jungian psychologist and former Catholic monk Thomas Moore writes: “To know water intimately is to know something about ourselves and to appreciate its presence as a means of increasing the life of the soul.” So for 2,500 years, water in the form of primeval oceanic tides, rivers, and floods has given us our powerful metaphors for the flow of life in us.

The ancient Upanishads describes human consciousness as a fish swimming between the banks of a fast flowing river. And the *Tao Te Ching* teaches: “The supreme good is like water, which nourishes all things without trying to. It is content with the low places that people disdain. Thus it is like the way of becoming. ... Do your work, then step back; the only path to serenity.”

This is sometimes known as the watercourse way. Can we, as a community, create a safe environment in which we can let go of our personal expectations and explore our own transformation? Are we open to being changed, transformed? Being like water in our approach to this river of life?

Water is the birthplace of the divine mystery. Mighty ancient rivers -- the Nile, Tigris, Euphrates, and Ganges -- flowed from the source of the divine mystery and were themselves considered holy. One need only bathe in these living waters to make contact with the divine mystery.

Even today Hinduism, Taoism, Judaism, Christianity and Islam make ritual washing or ablutions a central sacrament of coming into union with the divine. It is a tautology to say God is in us and we are mostly made of water.

“The enchantment water provides does not arise directly from its symbolism,” Moore says. “Anyone who lives, or has lived, near water has that water in his or her soul by a process of evaporation and condensation. ... I could write an autobiography based on water, and yet I’ve never lived on an ocean. The many waters I’ve known as part of my own personal world – rivers, streams, and lakes – have taught me, shaped me, and given me a sense of values. They have extended the process of transformation that began the day I was baptized, when a trickle of water flowed over the crown of my head and down its side, initiating me out of sheer physical existence into a life of alchemical, elemental, and religious change. Religion knows something of the mystery by which we become human through our acquaintance with water.”

So, tell me, what is your water autobiography?

I’ll tell you a little of mine. I was born in Tiverton, Rhode Island, long known as the Ocean State. My mother would take us swimming in the local pond, but my brothers and I preferred to escape to Tiverton’s southernmost point, called Sakonnet Point, a long stretch of beach reaching out into Narragansett Bay. We would sit on the shore watching the tides come rolling in, or wander endlessly among the quahog diggers and tidal pools.

My father’s church was on Aquidneck Island, and so at 13 I was baptized in Founder’s Brook, the source of living water Roger Williams used to baptize his congregation. Then many years later, when my brother David died of complications from AIDS, we scattered his ashes from a boat off Sakonnet Point so he could become a part of the ocean floor and tidal waves he so long adored. When my father died three years later, we buried him in Tiverton’s southernmost

graveyard, within site of the Sakonnet River, so his body could be found for the resurrection of the saints, but meanwhile he needn't be far from home.

I left the ocean behind when I married Loretta and moved to Boston. Since she was a California girl, she knew what our house ideally would be like, a California contemporary with a swimming pool. Since we had both gone to public schools, it should also be in a town with a great public school system. The rest she left up to me.

I am a Transcendentalist, and Concord, Massachusetts has one of the finest public school systems in the country. So we found a California contemporary in Concord with a swimming pool, which when we added gas heat became swimmable from Memorial Day to after Labor Day. But there was something special about this neighborhood we found.

When English settlers first made their way into the deep wilderness west of Boston, their easiest path was up the Merrimack River, along the Musquetaquid River, which came to a confluence of two rivers around higher ground native people called Nashawtuc, which means between the rivers. This area was home to thousands of Nipmuck people. The colonists, however, carried the plague which killed off two-thirds of the native peoples by 1617, and small-pox outbreaks killed off most of the rest by 1630.

So the few hundred native peoples who survived settled in this Nashawtuc neighborhood around their Squaw Sachem, who led these people. The native people kept the western Nashawtuc area for themselves and sold the colonists three square miles of their farmland east of the river for what became Concord in 1636.

We're told that it was only later that the native people's told the colonists they had sold them the land on the side of the river that floods with each spring's rain. When Loretta and I moved into our house in the neighborhood at the confluence of three rivers, 350 years after that first treaty, I felt intuitively we were living on holy ground.

I have taken long kayak trips down the Assabet River that flows by the end of our street, and spent languid days on the Sudbury and Concord Rivers, so movingly written about by Henry David Thoreau. Nathaniel Hawthorne even described our section of the Assabet River in his 19th Century *Mosses from an Old Manse*, saying: "A more lovely stream than this, for a mile above its junction with the Concord, has never flowed on earth – nowhere indeed except [in] the interior of a poet's imagination. It is sheltered from the breeze by woods and a hillside; so that elsewhere there may be a hurricane, and here scarcely a ripple across the shaded water."

Some of you may wonder why Loretta and I live where we do, it is because we live sheltered by these rivers, making our own unique contributions in the on-flowing river of life of which we partake. It's in the water!

Did you know this faith community is settled on an area known originally as Muddy River? When you read Boston's early town records, downtown Boston (originally the Neck) was surrounded by Rumney Marsh (now Chelsea), Noodles Island (now South Boston) and Muddy River (Brookline). Salem (with its biblical connotations) was the first town built in the Massachusetts Bay colony because of its good harbor, then Charlestown (named after the King), and the first mention of the Muddy River area was for gathering clay along banks of the Charles River for bricks for the new town of Salem.

Muddy River is mentioned on November 10, 1634, when Mr. Blackstone agrees to pay Boston 30 pounds per year to keep his cows and goats along the Fens and Muddy River, areas previously inhabited primarily by Sagamore Indians. However, by 1635 Boston was already experiencing a wood shortage, since everyone heated their homes with wood, and the general court banned further harvesting wood on Boston Neck but instead to be gathered from Muddy River, Dorchester Neck or Noodles island.

Later that same year the general court began allocating allotments of land for farms to be built at Muddy River. Great lengths were taken to specify how much tillable land, how much marshland, and how much swampland each family's allotment included.

Eventually Boston filled in the entire Back Bay between the Neck and Brookline, leaving only the Fens in a marsh-like state, and drained much of our marshland to make the Brookline reservoirs and Jamaica Pond. In 1651 Boston hired Peter Aspinwall to survey the land around Muddy River to lay out roadways, the first of which runs just outside this sanctuary. And four years later the first common field for grazing cattle was created here, actually on this very spot.

And the great cedar swamps in this area were ordered drained and filled for pasturage. By 1686 enough people lived on this land to have their own representatives in the Boston town government, in 1705 we were granted incorporation as the town of Brookline, and in 1717 became the First Parish Church of Brookline.

Does our location effect our participation in the river of life now? I leave it to you to perambulate this neighborhood and decide. But many UU ministers believe knowing our proper orientation in this world, water included, is essential to knowing ourselves.

Rev. Gary Kowalski says it helps in coming to terms with grief to know the river flows on. He writes, “As long as there are otters in the river, you know everything will be all right. That’s what a bereaved father told me shortly after his little girl died. Emily was only three. She had been ill and feverish then one night simply stopped breathing ... just one of those unavoidable, unaccountable sorrows the universe sometimes lays upon us. I was meeting with Emily’s father to plan her memorial service. He hoped to scatter her ashes near a nature trail that had recently been constructed near a local river. It was comforting to think of otter’s swimming and playing there, frolicking in the sun and mostly innocent of the kind of grief we humans have to suffer. ... So even in a world where three-year-olds sometimes get sick and die, one might still have faith in an order that underlies creation. This natural order doesn’t take away the pain. But it does help me to know that while the world is full of grief, it remains full of wet, splashing, animal gladness. The river claims us all, and the river flows on. So long as there are otters, you know that somehow, everything will be all right.”

Elizabeth Tarbox, a longtime UU minister on Cape Cod, sees life in the ocean tides. “The bay at high tide is an invitation,” she writes. “It calls and I follow, falling into the chill wet blanket of motion and mystery. ... Swim out to the raft and fill your ears; hear the throb of the ocean massaging the land. Experience the momentary panic of salt water in your nose and mouth; go on, it’s here for you. The bay at high tide is. ... relentlessly sucking at the shore. ... But at low tide the sand is strewn with the waves’ forgotten favors. I stand, abandoned like one of the empty shells, staring out beyond the horizon where the water receded, where I cannot follow. Low tide is for reflection and acceptance. ... There is a time for high tide – being involved and active, taking risks, and putting our effort to master the elements – and there is a time for low tide – inactivity and reflection – and both are necessary in our lives.”

Finally a story from Richard Gilbert, longtime UU minister in Upstate New York, who writes: “We approached the falls from upstream, hearing only a roar designed to intimidate the faint-hearted. At first glance we saw only white water cascading over the cliff and plunging into the pool in front of us. The thought that I might be in that water, tumbling from an unknown height, kept my heart pounding. ... clumsily I pulled myself up the rocky slope to the top, hand over trembling hand. ... slid into the center of the stream. ... [then] I pushed myself deeper into the stream’s center. Gradually I lost control. Quickly the current pushed me toward the edge and even more quickly hurled me over the falls. I plummeted like a great stone. Mouth open in a smile of joy or look of terror, I’ve forgotten which, down into the deep pool – deeper and deeper. There is something to be said for letting go, for risking the uncertain, for putting oneself in strong life currents with a rich mixture of faith and fear. Unknown pools sustain us, buoy us; forgotten instincts stretch our spirits to the surface where the air is clear and the water cold and refreshing.”

Why embody our relationships with water? Because only then do we experience the full import of these words we've heard and these songs we've sung: when gentle tides go rolling by along the salt sea strand, the quiet joys of humankind when love embraces all.

Langston Hughes' poem has us bathing in the Euphrates, sleeping by the Congo, looking upon the Nile, listening to the singing of the Mississippi, as our souls grow deep like primeval rivers.

The Hindu poet Rabindranath Tagore reminds us the same stream of life runs through our veins, teaching us to keep beat with the pulsing of the earth, oceanic currents rocking us in the cradle of life, making the life of ages dance in our blood.

And so we sing of planet earth, our blue boat home, as we cast ourselves off from harbor or port, to travel the wide universe. For the River of Life runs swiftly and deep, and we must risk chances in throwing ourselves out upon the waves, but we who would live our lives fully have no choice but to cast off from the shore. I love you all dearly. Blessed Be and Amen.