

Let Justice Flow Down Like Water

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“I’ve known rivers:

I’ve known rivers ancient as the world and older than
the

flow of human blood in human veins.

My soul has grown deep like the rivers.

I bathed in the Euphrates when dawns were young.

I built my hut near the Congo and it lulled me to sleep.

I looked upon the Nile and raised the pyramids above
it.

I heard the singing of the Mississippi when Abe Lincoln

went down to New Orleans, and I’ve seen its muddy
bosom turn all golden in the sunset.

I've known rivers:

Ancient, dusky rivers.

My soul has grown deep like the rivers."

Langston Hughes' poem of great rivers has a distinctively mystical flavor. He ties together the great rivers of the world, rivers that have played prominent roles in history and religion, and elevates the rivers of the South into the same category. Those rivers, which play such a prominent role in our own tragic history of slavery, are one Hughes is trying to reclaim. Rivers and humans are interwoven together. These great rivers flow through our very bodies and blood.

Obviously Hughes is a poet and a master of metaphor. But his observation has some scientific backing. Water is absolutely necessary for life. While we can go nearly a week without food, we can only survive a few days without water. No wonder it is so often a metaphor in art and religion for life, for renewal, for washing away impurities. The ancient Greeks said that water

was one of the four basic elements that made up everything in the universe. While we now know that wasn't quite right, one can see how they may have come to that conclusion.

Like most things that we take for granted, water is one of those aspects of our existence that we don't truly appreciate until it is gone. The organization "Water for Life" which assists communities with finding access to water around the world collected some of these stories. Here are three very brief ones:

"For the first 66 years since it was established, the Burega School Complex in the Rulindo District of Rwanda had critical water supply issues. Students were required to bring clean water each day, but the nearest safe water source was more than 5k away, so many children would be late for class, skip school altogether, or fetch unsafe water from a closer source.

Doña Raquel lives in the community of Lapalén in the district of Cascas, Peru. In 2009 she and her fellow community members began discussions with the local government in hopes of getting access to drinking water, but with little movement. At that time, households were consuming water from irrigation

ditches and ponds, and Doña Raquel's husband and others contracted water-borne illnesses.

In 1999 after Hurricane Mitch, Marta Lidia Beteta Urizar of Guatemala was a 31-year old mother who found her family homeless from the storm's devastation. Others in her community of Santa Rosa lost family and friends along with their homes. With conviction, Dona Marta moved her family to Chicorral in Santa Cruz for a fresh start. But the hardships continued in their new town, as her family struggled to make new friends and worked to build a house on land of their own. The town was also struggling. Chicorral needed water. A cistern truck would deliver water, but it was expensive, requiring women to walk 25 minutes each way. It was dangerous to go alone, and many got sick in the winter months from long hours of being wet. Chicorral needed change in a big way."

This Sunday is Justice Sunday; a day created by the UUSC to encourage Unitarian Universalist congregations to think globally, as the saying goes. Of course April is also Climate Change month. Water is climate change issue. Because it is so

fundamental to human life, its presence or absence becomes vitally important to human survival around the world. Yet both water rights and climate change are big issues. Sometimes they are such big issues that they are hard to see, imagine, and certainly tangibly experience. We are accustomed to the problems that face us as individuals. We get passionate about the issues facing our family. And if we are at all spiritually sensitive people, then we care deeply about the issues facing our local community. But it is hard sometimes to feel anger, passion, compassion for those who suffer from injustice far away from us.

In a way, this is understandable. In our story this morning, the man who swam in the waterfall was able to do so because he was a local. He knew that waterfall. He understood its power. He knew how to flow with the water; not to resist its streams and eddies. This swimmer had an intimate knowledge of the here and now. Let us be clear: that is NOT a bad thing. It is obviously quite a good thing. It has transformed this swimmer's life. He is able to achieve things few others could – things Confucius and his disciples assumed were impossible for mortals. However, the last line in the story, implies that perhaps

Confucius understood something his new friend didn't quite. Swimming in a waterfall is a metaphor for swimming in the Tao – the interdependent, interconnected spirit of the universe itself. This man may have thought that he knew this waterfall very well; and he did. But Confucius realizes that to know one waterfall is to know the interconnected world itself. Confucius was able to connect the experience of swimming in a powerful waterfall to bathing in the infinite.

That is not easy to do. Only a few spiritual geniuses like Confucius can do that on the spur of the moment. The interdependent web is too big for our minds to grasp in its entirety. We can only experience a few strands of it for ourselves. This man swimming in the waterfall had depth of knowledge and experience, but couldn't quite connect that to breadth. I suppose most of us are like that. I know I am. So we need reminders that our sphere of concern, the circle of people whom our heart breaks for, is usually too small. Our lifelong quest is to make that sphere of concern wider and wider with each passing day.

Because make no mistake: Confucius is correct. That big grand interdependent web out there will impact us. We are a part of it, whether we experience it directly or not. And I am not just talking mysticism here – I am talking about something as tangible and material as, well as water. Tyler Orci is a writer in Los Angeles, and she printed this story about the drought in California:

“The sun is coming up over the Lamp Lighter Inn in the sleepy Central Valley town of Visalia, Calif. The fetid smell of nearby feedlots and dairies is frightfully easy to get used to. Kali Wnuck, a wholesale food buyer of agricultural products, sits on the edge of her hotel bed and mentally checks off everything she wants to cover at the farm she's visiting today. "I'm trying to remember the names of his children," she sleepily says while munching on homemade breakfast.

When we drove up from Los Angeles last week, the Central Valley had just clocked 60 days without rain. Gov. Jerry Brown recently declared a drought state of emergency for California, but urban areas of the state haven't felt the impact of the dry weather

the way farmers have in agricultural regions like the Central Valley.

A shift in weather can mean soggy green onions or citrus that's dry and unflavorful. But if Wanuck can understand potential hardships farmers face, she's better able to explain any subpar produce to her customers, who are then more likely to stay. That's why we're here to see Eugene Etheridge. Etheridge Organics is where Wnuck gets her oranges, plums, persimmons, and other fruit. And although she's done business with Etheridge for years, she's never toured his farm.

Etheridge's orchards are rigged with irrigation, and like many farmers in California, he usually reserves groundwater for watering his land in the dry months. In the winter, however, a farmer is supposed to be able to turn off the tap and rely on the rain—but if everyone keeps dipping into the wells and stubborn weather doesn't offer any relief, down it goes.

Etheridge has been farming in the area since the '70s, and since then he's witnessed a gradual but nonetheless dramatic

lowering of the water table. "I got this land with a water well that was dug in the '20s. That well went down 100 feet. You could pump water as close to nine feet from the surface. Now you have to go down at least 80 feet, but we're lucky." He's referring to the plight of his counterparts farming on the west side of the San Joaquin Valley. On the opposite side of the valley from Etheridge, farmers have to go down as far as 1,500 feet to get water.

He remembers when his family ran out of water. "It was in the '70s. We had three young children at the time, and one day, the well just ran out." For four months, Etheridge had to borrow water from his neighbor's water well. This reminded me of a conversation I had with a recent transplant to Los Angeles who innocently asked me if the drought meant one day the water would stop coming out of the tap.

Too sure of myself, I snipped, "No, that wouldn't ever happen." And yet it does, and it did. I wondered if my concept of the drought back in L.A. would be different if our water could be measured not by a statistic on the radio but by the rising and

falling of something as tangible as a well. Would it change the way I wash dishes? Take showers? Water my plants?”

Although she is no Confucius, we see in this story a similar kind of spiritual awakening for Tyler Orci. Water seems like a remote problem for other people in faraway places...until it isn't! Orci is allowed the privilege of ignorance because she lives in an urban environment. Until the recent water rationings in California, I am sure water shortages and a lack of snow pack in the Sierra Nevada Mountains was just a quaint item on the news. But it is crucial to the economic survival of California's agriculture industry. Which by the way is not just a California problem. Ever wonder how we are able to buy produce out of season, nearly year round? Most of that is because of agriculture in California, Mexico, and in some cases, South America. These places produce so much that the cost is able to stay relatively low. However if California doesn't have water to irrigate those fields, and the crops suffer or dry up, then there is less supply. Less supply means higher costs for everyone.

So we are not just swimming in our own little waterfall here. It is a powerful body of water interrelated to the entire system. I believe that anytime we narrow our sphere of concern to just ourselves, our family, and our community, then we are doing ourselves a disservice. Having a wide sphere of concern can be exhausting. It can be frightening. There is fear once again, our theme for April. Fear comes when we feel the pain and suffering of those folks in California, in Peru and Bolivia and Rwanda. And so instead we just worry about our kind. But then that circle gets smaller and smaller and smaller.

Unitarian Universalists lay claim to two of the biggest words in our language: Unity and Universal. Our faith calls us not to narrow our sphere of concern. We do not react out of fear because that would be more convenient and perhaps make us feel better. That is not who we are. Rather Unitarian Universalism understands that if we are to grow as spiritual beings, then we have a lifelong project. Our spiritual homework for this life is to constantly be trying to widen our sphere of concern. So that we are more and more sensitive to the suffering of others. It is that suffering that connects us to other people.

May we be forever widening that sphere of concern. As difficult as it might be, may our hearts break for more and more people each day. For as we grow as spiritually mature beings, that is the best way to do it. Amen Blessed Be.