

**THE RIVERS SPEAK: AN EARTH DAY SERVICE**

The Rev. Julie Stoneberg  
Unitarian Fellowship of Peterborough  
April 23, 2017

**OPENING WORDS**      *The Negro Speaks Of Rivers* ~ Langston Hughes

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.

Come. Let us listen to the rivers together, that our souls may grow deep.

**STORY FOR ALL AGES**      ~ Glen Caradus

*(Glen shared the story of water on the planet by imagining how much water is actually fresh and available to us. He also told of his annual canoe trip with First Nations and non-indigenous youth.)*

**READING**      *The Fifth Day*      ~ Jane Hirshfield

We've chosen to read a new poem by Jane Hirshfield, one that addresses some alarming trends in our governments and our civil life. It is a poem that she shared at the Science March in New York City yesterday. It's called "The Fifth Day," and I assume that refers to the day of the week, in the Genesis creation story (Genesis 1:20-23,) when God said,

"Let the waters bring forth swarms of living creatures, and let birds fly above the earth across the dome of the sky." And so the great sea monsters and every living creature that moves, of every kind, with which the waters swarm, and every winged bird of every kind, was created. And God saw that it was good. And there was evening and there was morning, and that was the fifth day.

And here is Hirshfield's poem:

On the fifth day  
the scientists who studied the rivers  
were forbidden to speak  
or to study the rivers.

The scientists who studied the air

were told not to speak of the air,  
and the ones who worked for the farmers  
were silenced,  
and the ones who worked for the bees.

Someone, from deep in the Badlands,  
began posting facts.

The facts were told not to speak  
and were taken away.  
The facts, surprised to be taken, were silent.

Now it was only the rivers  
that spoke of the rivers,  
and only the wind that spoke of its bees,  
while the unpausing factual buds of the fruit trees  
continued to move toward their fruit.

The silence spoke loudly of silence,  
and the rivers kept speaking,  
of rivers, of boulders and air.

Bound to gravity, earless and tongueless,  
the untested rivers kept speaking.

Bus drivers, shelf stockers,  
code writers, machinists, accountants,  
lab techs, cellists kept speaking.

They spoke, the fifth day,  
of silence.

## MESSAGE

On Friday night, I came to see the two films shown here sponsored by the Council of Canadians. It was a double feature, beginning a local film called *Oshkigmong: A Place Where I Belong*, which tells the story and traditions of Curve Lake. This was one of the films that we sponsored at the ReFrame Festival in January, so I'd seen it before, but it was wonderful to see it a second time.

A section in it is about the Petroglyphs near Stony Lake. You've been there? A stream, or streams, run under the rock there, and their gurgling and trickling sounds can be heard through the cracks in the rock. It is said that the people who created the Petroglyphs believed that those sounds were the voices of the water spirits; their presence, in part, contributes to the sacredness of this particular site. As in many traditional societies, those people approached the water deities or water spirits with great reverence, knowing that they nourish and purify all things. And, a bit later in the film, Dorothy Taylor speaks beautifully of her tradition's belief that all of nature is alive...that water and trees and air are living beings that have spirits...and that the Anishnaabeg treat each part of nature as their living ancestor. Literally.

During the film, I found myself again fascinated by the images on the rocks, and imagined the peoples who gathered there long ago...the rituals they must have had...the conversations they might have engaged in...the process of creating the petroglyphs...but mostly just the image of quietness...a holy listening...to what the waters might have to say to them. Just listening.

*(quiet)*

I've had similar experiences listening to nature. Granted, I was not given the traditional teaching about nature as a living being, but still, I've had those experiences. Haven't you? Like the kind of sounds by a riverside that we heard just a few moments ago. It has also been, for me, the quiet of listening to the wind in the poplars, or the rush of rapids, or the stillness of the stars. Not speaking. Having no words that would have any consequence. Just listening. *(quiet)*

I have no need to think that any of these things speak to me in a way that could ever be directly translated to language. And yet, there is something that can be heard and understood in an ancient primal way about our relationship with one another and about the universality of our existence. The sounds, and the silence, teach me things. In such moments, we connect, and it is that connection...in wordlessness...that matters. Nature, water, has had, and continues to have, something to say to me.

Water is about the most ancient element that is. The first Genesis creation myth in the Hebrew bible begins "In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters." Creation ex profundo<sup>1</sup>, out of the chaotic depths. The waters were here even BEFORE creation.

And in similar manner, water features prominently in other creation myths, where an earth diver, usually a bird or amphibian, plunges to the seabed through a primordial ocean to bring up sand or mud which develops into a terrestrial world.<sup>2</sup>

Water is ancient.

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I've had occasion to speak to some of you about the many white supremacy issues/ conversations/ learnings that are being surfaced within our faith. As I hope you're aware, our service on May 7<sup>th</sup> is dedicated to exploring this, and I trust you can be present so that we can do this work together as a community. White people, white culture is being called to examine itself, and to own its privilege and the systems of domination and oppression that it has created. And, it occurs to me... duh... that there is a similar pattern evident in western culture's treatment of nature. Disrespect and disregard. Ownership. Domination. Control. Obliteration.

There is a tendency, at least within my soul, to respond to our history with guilt. But more and more, I'm able to hear the voices that say, "let go of the guilt...step into your accountability." Sitting in guilt will not serve us, and it will not serve the planet or the generations to come. But accountability...accepting that our actions matter and have real impact...will definitely serve all that is.

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<sup>1</sup> See the theology of Catherine Keller and Sallie McFague

<sup>2</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Creation\\_myth](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Creation_myth)

One of the things I've noticed in all the social media storm about white supremacy, is that there are words.... zillions and zillions of words. People trying to explain themselves. Make excuses. Justify what has been. Blame others. Blame systems. Back pedal as fast as possible. And so today, I am suggesting that we take another stance. To simply listen. (*quiet*)

The second film on Friday night was *To The Ends Of The Earth*, which explores the consequences of the expansion of Canada's tar sands operations and pipelines - and the rise of extreme energy extraction. One of the stories told was of the underwater blasting happening in the Arctic, booms that are deafening whales and narwhals. We're so good at making noise and not so good at listening.

So. Don't assume that what we have to say is important. Don't think our words will fix something. Don't situate ourselves as experts. Listen. (*quiet*)

Listen to the sounds of the planet. Listen to the rivers. Listen to voices that we don't usually hear, voices we usually don't take the time to hear. Abandon our hubris. Listen. (*quiet*)

Our Indigenous Working Group engages in some reading before each monthly meeting, to ground ourselves in education and further understanding. Last month, Barbara Herring shared an article from a book of Indigenous essays titled *Original Instructions*. We read the chapter, "An Okanagan Worldview of Society," authored by Jeannette Armstrong. (The Okanagan are a First Nation from a territory within what is now known as British Columbia.) In this article, she writes of decision-making within her community, and says that "the minority voice is the most important voice to consider...[it] expresses the things that are going wrong, the things we're not looking after, ... the things that we're not being responsible toward, the things we're...trying to sweep under the carpet or shove out the door."

And in order to hear these voices, they have six people designated as speakers...for the land, for the children, for the mothers, for the Elders, for the medicine people, and for the water. Each time a decision is being made, it is the responsibility of these designees to stand up and ask, for example... "How will this decision affect our water? How will this affect the fish and other creatures? How will this impact everything that relies on the water?"

This process, Armstrong says, gives everyone "a deeper understanding of the variety of components that are required to create harmony within community." And I'm pretty sure she's talking about the community that is comprised of 'all that is.' Her role is that of the 'land speaker'...and at the end of the chapter, she tells of times when all generations go out together to restore the land, by gathering seeds and replanting the habitat. While she's talking here about the land, I'm sure this could also be said of water: "It's being with people, the community and communing with each other...it is how the land communes its spirit to you; it heals people and it does this in an incredibly profound way."

Being with the land, being with the water, communes its ancient spirit to you, and it does this in an incredibly profound way. Listen. (*quiet*)

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Here's some great news. Earlier this year, courts in New Zealand<sup>3</sup> and in India<sup>4</sup> have granted 'legal personhood' status to a couple of rivers, and in India's case, to the glaciers that feed them. Those rulings give the rivers the power to represent their own interests, to advocate on their own behalf, and to make claims for any harm done to them. This is done through human representatives...in the New Zealand case, the representatives are always to include someone from the Maori indigenous community. Very much like the decision-making system described by Jeannette Armstrong, these rulings make a few people responsible for speaking on behalf of the river, people who I assume, listen very carefully to the rivers. Environmentalists are calling this kind of legislation revolutionary, because by recognizing the 'rights of nature,' it has the potential to radically shift how we protect ecosystems.<sup>5</sup>

I didn't get a chance to speak with Ian Attridge about this...he's an environmental lawyer... but I expect he knows something about these cases. I did find that Canada has the potential for similar public interest litigation. Like, what if the watershed that is being threatened by developments at Harper Park here in Peterborough was granted 'legal personhood?' Would this require that we listen to the water more carefully? I dream of a time when that might be so.

And yet, we 'don't need no piece of paper from the city hall' to listen to the water. You can go for a walk at Harper Park this afternoon (after the Community Conversation of course!) and spend some time in the quiet there, listening to the water. You can go for a walk along the Otonabee or Jackson Creek or any number of places in this area, and simply listen. We are blessed by being in close proximity to water. So go. Quiet your mind and slow your heartbeat, and listen. The water will help you, and heal you, and commune its ancient spirit to you.

I know that many people, many of us, are despairing about the state of the planet and climate change. (There is even a forum being held here in Peterborough to support those folks who are actively grieving for the earth. It's on the evening of May 9, and there's a poster about it on our bulletin board.) I know that it is overwhelming. I know that at times it seems irreparable. And I also trust that nature contains within itself all of the knowledge that we need to heal, and do reparations, and move on. If we but listen.

I found this beautiful story in a blog post from Deena Metzger. She writes:<sup>6</sup>

"I was standing before the Ocean with environmentalist, Carolyn Raffensperger ... She had been speaking of the crippling despair of environmentalists who must be aware of each detail of the process of devastation, and of her anguish before the young students who ask her why they should not hasten apocalypse so that the world can be rid of the human element quickly enough for the natural world to restore itself. It is as if they are considering being suicide bombers ... on behalf of the environment.

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<sup>3</sup><http://news.nationalpost.com/news/world/new-zealand-grants-whanganui-river-legal-personhood-settles-case-dating-back-to-1870s>

<sup>4</sup><https://www.csmonitor.com/Environment/2017/0407/An-Indian-court-says-glaciers-and-rivers-are-living-entities.-Could-the-same-approach-work-in-the-US>

<sup>5</sup> <https://freshwaterblog.net/2016/09/07/why-a-river-in-new-zealand-is-being-granted-legal-personhood/>

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.deenametzger.com/water.html>

"She pauses. The sun is about to set. She says, "You know, there is only one ocean. We give the waters many different names, differentiating one area from another, but there is only one ocean." As she speaks, I am aware of the ocean that is inside me as well as the ocean I am standing before. I can no more distinguish the waters within from the Pacific without than I can the Pacific from the Sea of Japan or the Coral Sea. I understand we are one being."

May we listen to the wisdom of the rivers...rivers that flow deep within and around us. We are a part of one ocean, one earth, one being. The water is sacred. We are sacred. Listen. Listen. (*quiet*)

So be it.

**RESPONSIVE READING**

*Beginners* ~ Denise Levertov

But we have only begun to love the earth. We have only begun to imagine the fullness of life

\_\_How could we tire of hope? -- so much is in bud.

How can desire fail?-we have only begun to imagine justice and mercy,

\_\_Only begun to envision how it might be to live as siblings with beast and flower, not as oppressors.

Surely our river cannot already be hastening into the sea of nonbeing?

\_\_Surely it cannot drag, in the silt, all that is innocent?

Not yet, not yet -- there is too much broken that must be mended,

\_\_Too much hurt that we have done to each other that cannot yet be forgiven.

We have only begun to know the power that is in us if we would join our solitudes in the communion of struggle.

\_\_So much is unfolding that must complete its gesture, so much is in bud.

**CLOSING WORDS**

~ Denise Levertov (*reprise*)

But we have only begun to love the earth. We have only begun to imagine the fullness of life

We have only begun to envision how it might be to live as siblings with beast and flower, not as oppressors.

We have only begun to know the power that is in us... there is so much is unfolding that must complete its gesture, so much is in bud.

There is so much that can be learned by listening to the rivers. Let them speak to you. Let them show us the way.

Amen.