

THE WATER HEALS... THE WATER REMEMBERS
ANNUAL INGATHERING WATER CEREMONY
The Rev. Julie Stoneberg
Unitarian Fellowship of Peterborough
September 9, 2018

OPENING WORDS *The Book Of Camp Branch (excerpts) ~ Wendell Berry*

How much delight I've known
in navigating down the flow
by stepping stones, by sounding
stones, by words that are
stepping and sounding stones.

Going down stone by stone,
the song of the water changes,
changing the way I walk
which changes my thought
as I go. Stone to stone
the stream flows. Stone to stone
the walker goes. The words
stand stone-still until
the flow moves them, changing
the sound - a new word -
a new place to step or stand.

This is only
the lowly stream of Camp Branch,
but every stream is lowly.
Only low in the land does
the water flow. It goes
to seek the level that is lowest,
the silence that gathers
many songs, the darkness
made of many lights,
and then by the sun is raised
again into the air.

We have come this morning as many separate streams, having laid low and gathered much in the summer months. So let us now find a new sound, and sing its new song, made by our coming together. Welcome to this time together. Welcome to this shared work.

STORY FOR ALL AGES *The Wave ~ Leah Chelius*

(The story of a lonely wave in the ocean who notices that kayakers, and children, come and then leave her. The stars sing to her, reminding her that she is one with the whole ocean.)

REFLECTION *The Water Heals... The Water Remembers*

You know, I am of two minds about our reduced activity level in the summer. I love the much-needed down time it allows you, and me. And I'm sad that for some it means the loss of much-

needed connection. I am aware that there has been both healing and hurt during the summer months, both joy and loneliness, both anxiety and peace.

All of which makes our ingathering water ritual more meaningful. The water holds all. We come as diverse streams, carrying the realities of our individual lives, and we merge into the sea of community. The water holds all, never forgetting each drop that has been added.

And there is something healing in this...the process of bringing our waters together, of offering our whole selves to one another, of embracing what others have carried with them. It is the reminder, just as the stars sang to the wave, that we are a part of the whole, a part of the mystery, and that we are not alone.

This water ritual has been widely practiced in UU congregations for nearly 40 years. It was first created for a Women and Religions Conference in 1980 by Lucile Shuck Longview and Carolyn McDade...who also wrote "Spirit of Life." They were asked to do something for women, as many had felt excluded from our movement up to that point. McDade called the ceremony a "celebration of connectedness," intended to empower women and demonstrate solidarity...and clearly it both met its purpose and has come to be a Unitarian tradition.

Yet even as it demonstrates union, we must remember that the whole contains unique contributions. Our water, our community, is a collection of beautiful individual beings who hold diverse worldviews, have different talents and interests, and whose life-streams have passed through different landscapes, over different stones, collecting different experiences along the way. And together we make the water that is this community. We are the water.

Robert Fulghum said this: "The grass is not, in fact, always greener on the other side of the fence. No, not at all. Fences have nothing to do with it. The grass is greenest where it is watered. When crossing over fences, carry water with you and tend the grass wherever you may be."

May we use our water, our combined strengths as individuals, to choose to water the grass of this community and our place on the planet...tending to each other and to our world by sharing our gifts, and making things green.

WATER CEREMONY *In Praise Of Water* ~ John O'Donohue

(In our water ceremony, we used stanzas from John O'Donohue's poem to introduce the different 'moods' of water. <http://sustainablenorthland.org/in-praise-of-water/>)

READING *Messy and Imperfect Beloved Community* ~ Laila Ibrahim

I have been going to the same church for a very long time. For nearly thirty years most Sundays I have walked through our beautiful redwood doors. In all those years I have filled a variety of leadership positions...And in all those years my congregation has had ample opportunity to disappoint me.

I am disappointed when people don't think my justice project is the one we should collectively work on; I am disappointed when people want different music than I do; I am disappointed that we don't all agree that our Children's Ministry is the most important priority in the church; I am disappointed that people don't give as much time, talent, or treasure to the church as I do. I am disappointed . . . well, you get the idea. In nearly thirty years of relationship, there have been lots of disappointments.

Two or three times over the years, I have been so disappointed that I seriously questioned remaining in my congregation. . . But staying away has never helped me through such times. Rather, coming in closer, telling people about my spiritual crisis – listening, sharing, caring, and worshipping – have helped me know that this is where I belong, even when church is the source of my frustration and disappointment. Because we are not in church to be with people who want to sing the same music, or rally for the same cause, or attend the same retreats. We are in church to learn to love better. And learning to love better can only happen when we love past our disappointments and return to a place of acceptance and affirmation. This is true in our personal lives, in our work lives, and in our church lives. It is deep spiritual practice. At my best, as a religious person, as a Unitarian Universalist...I am called to love whoever else walks through these doors. I don't need to like everyone. Not everyone is who I would choose for a friend. But if I am living up to my best values, I offer care and respect and commitment to each member, friend, and guest of my beloved community. In the end, we can all try our best to live out our faith as UU's – through study, conversation, service, and commitment. We forgive ourselves and forgive others as we stumble through. We disagree, we annoy, we flake out on one another. And we worship, we support, we hold, and we affirm one another. There is really only one choice: between imperfect community and no community. Again and again, we are all called to choose to commit ourselves to building a more just, more diverse, and yet ever more messy and imperfect beloved community.

CLOSING WORDS

Flow (adapted for community ears)

~ Noel McInnis

Let us be,
as water is,
without friction.
Let us flow around the edges
of those within your path.
Let's surround in our ever-moving depths
all those who come to rest there –
Let's enfold them, while never for a moment holding on.
Let's accept whatever distance
others are moved within our flow.
Let's be with each other gently
as far as we allow our combined strength to take us,
and then fill with our own beings
the remaining space left behind.
When dropping down life's rapids,
Let's froth and bubble into fragments if we must,
knowing that each one of us, now many
will just as many times be one again.
And when we've gone as far as we can go,
may we quietly await our next beginning.

Go, stepping softly onto the next waiting stone, that what is ready to emerge, flows forth!
So be it. Blessed be. Amen.