

A THIRSTY WORLD

March 25, 2012

Respect for the interdependent web of existence of which we are a part.

This is our seventh principle, the great conclusion of the first section of the covenant that binds us to the larger Unitarian Universalist Association—the one that reminds us that all living things are part of one great web of existence. Essential to all members of the web is water. We humans need water every day, as do most animals. Some have devised clever solutions to dry climates, storing water in humps on their backs if they are large, or licking dew from plants if they are small. Plants have evolved methods of storing water or going dormant in dry seasons, but all living creatures require water to live.

I knew that my small black 19-year-old cat was dying when she stopped drinking water. And so we eased her gently into the infinite, rather than let her suffer from not only the illnesses that afflicted her, but also dehydration. All living things require water.

Those of us who are blessed by living in the Great Lakes Basin need not think about this very often. Within the Great Lakes Basin lies 20% of the surface fresh water on Earth. I learned this little factoid when I was in high school, living in Pontiac, Illinois, only 100 miles south of Chicago. It meant nothing to me then. I lived in a county that grew corn, acres and acres of corn. Corn is a very thirsty plant, requiring gallons of water throughout the growing season, often supplied by great irrigation systems if the rains failed to come at the right time.

It was not until I was much older, and learned to think about the Earth as our home, which we shared with not only all the members of our species, but all living things, that I began to understand how fortunate we are.

If you grew up in the Great Lakes Basin, perhaps you experienced a variation of this experience.

We are also blessed by living in a developed country in which, most of the time, all we have to do to get a drink of water is turn a tap. I take this for granted; maybe you do also. Most of the time, I need only walk a few steps to my sink, or refrigerator, or the nearest water fountain. Many of us have learned to carry water with us, all day, every day. Health experts told us that we needed lots of water every day, and corporations rushed to bottle water and/or supply varieties of carrying devices with a wide selection of colors and shapes. We sucked on our water bottles during meetings, walking, biking, watching television—at every moment during the day. We take our water for granted, assuming that it will always be there for us.

Other areas of the world are not so fortunate.

National Public Radio news broadcast on Friday that the U. S. Intelligence Service reported that by 2040 water supplies will not be able to keep up with world demand. Forty percent of the world will have insufficient water for their needs. When I looked this up I located the original Reuters report, which went on to discuss how likely water wars would be in the next 10 years, (not very), but that the likelihood would increase following the next decade.

The report went on to speculate on the effect of an uneven distribution of water on the economics and politics of our world in the future—the fairly near future. However, my mind and heart were engaged elsewhere.

Perhaps influenced by years of reading National Geographic, which often included pictures of women carrying large jars of water on their heads, I began to think of the many children who would say, “Mother I’m thirsty,” in this future world.

And I wondered how their mothers would respond. I remembered the current pictures of the refugees from South Sudan, some of them of mothers carrying their young children who were near death, and I began to think about justice in relationship to water. We already have parts of the world that are thirsty—and the experts tell us the phenomenon will increase.

Scientists who study the climate formed a consensus that it is changing. Most of them agree that at least part of the cause is global warming, and that global warming is at least partially caused by greenhouse gases, the result of industrialization. There may be other causes contributing to climate change, but the cause does not at this time change the current and predicted future effect. That is, that there will be more violent weather in our future; that warmer weather will gradually invade our northern climate, bringing with it more species of bugs, bacteria, and larger animals, plus the plants they feed on. Dry areas may become dryer and wet areas wetter. Large areas of Africa, Asia, and our own Southwest, which are barely able to support human life from their own resources, may well become uninhabitable. There will be more and more children who are thirsty and less and less readily available water to give them.

In this world, it is likely that the Land of the Great Lakes will look like an Eden. We will have plenty of water and a warmer average temperature to which our farmers must adjust. With our experienced industrial workforce, we may attract new industry. It is my belief that we will also experience attempts to move our water to other areas.

What should be our response? What does the future demand of us? What does our dedication to justice demand of us?

The Rev. Galen Guengerich, our guide through this exploration of ethics and values, gives the following definition of justice: “Justice is a process: a procedure we follow in our political life to ensure that all of us are maximally free to pursue whatever goals we choose in life. Justice is also a purpose: a set of goals we pursue in our religious life to ensure that all of us fulfill our potential. What is the purpose of justice? To create a world of beauty—of symmetry, proportion, balance and equality: a world that is just.”

“A world that is just”, is then, our goal. How does this jibe with an Edenic water paradise in the midst of great droughts or violent storms or flooding seacoasts? Should we share our water, our fertile land, our valuable resources?

We have already seen some attempts to grab our water, some successful, some not.

A great corporation, operating as a water bottling company is daily bottling and shipping water out of our state. For the price of a very few jobs, a previous governor gave this company the right to do so. Frankly, I do not wish to share our water in this manner. Earlier some of the politicians in our Southwest states hatched a plan to build a giant pipeline from the Great Lakes to the Southwest. Again, I have little sympathy with this plan. I think people ought to think more than incidentally about sustainability when they choose to build homes, businesses and golf courses in the midst of a desert.

If you Google *Phoenix, Arizona*, site of our General Assembly this year, and add the words golf courses, you will find a map with eleven golf courses in the Phoenix area. Ladies and gentlemen, I do not want one drop of Great Lakes water to be used to green the fairways of one golf course in Phoenix, Arizona.

So far this is fairly easy, right? However, let’s take a different example. Paula Gunn Allen, the poet who wrote *Water* identified as Native American and grew up on the border of the Laguna Pueblo reservation. When I think of the Native Americans confined to reservations in the west, such as the Laguna Pueblo and, closer to home, the Pine Ridge in South Dakota, and remember that I have read that they are suffering from the drought, I have to make a judgment.

We Anglos, who came to this country with our ideas of freedom, who brought Western science, and industrialization, who seized the lands of the people we found here, simply cannot deny them the water of life.

And I think of my son, who lives in Kansas and gardens extensively. Kansans suffered through a drought that dried up the large creek in which he caught fish. Then the rains came this last fall and filled the creek again. However, they have had very little rain, even though the violent storms of last fall and late winter passed through their area.

I'm sure that most of you have family that lives in such areas. What do we do, twenty years from now, when the cities in which our loved ones live run out of water? How do we decide who gets to tap the Great Lakes for its precious liquid?

Rev. Guengerich says that the purpose of justice is to create a world of beauty—of symmetry, proportion, balance and equality. I think we have a difficult problem to address in the not very distant future. I think there will be dry golf courses that corporations want to keep green. I think there will be crop failures because of insufficient rain, or too much. I think there will be thirsty children in this nation, and in many other parts of the world. I think there will be desperate people and selfish people and people who try very hard to think through these problems and do the right thing.

And I think that we, the people, will be called upon to make decisions we would rather not make. And I think that there will be powerful people who will try to make those decisions for us.

We Unitarian Universalists think of ourselves as a people devoted to justice. We will be called upon to demonstrate this virtue in relation to water. Let us strive to educate ourselves, claim our power against those who would usurp it, and struggle toward justice.

Shalom and Salaam.

Blessed Be and Amen.