

“River and Fountain: Water as Connection, Water as Source”
Sermon for the Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Central Michigan
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Water as River: Connecting Us

The water service is one of my favorite Unitarian Universalist rituals. In every UU congregation that I’ve been a part of, we have practiced this ceremony at around this time of the year.

In my brief message this morning, I want to talk about two ways that we can see water. The first is that water connects us, like streams flowing into a river. As a matter of fact, there’s a hymn in our hymnal that fits this very well, called *As Tranquil Streams*:

*As tranquil streams that meet and merge and flow as one to seek
the sea,
our kindred hearts and minds unite to build a church that shall be
free.¹*

And this is exactly what we are doing when we come together on a Sunday morning – or at a Friday night potluck, or any time that we gather. We are *uniting our kindred hearts and minds*.

Except that the hearts and minds of the people in this congregation, like any Unitarian Universalist congregation, are diverse. In this room there is a diversity of what we believe about God, there is a diversity of what countries we come from, there is a diversity of how we identify in gender and sexuality. This is the great challenge as well as the great strength of a UU congregation. We are all different. How do we pull together the points of view and life experiences of all of us into one unified whole?

That's why the Water Ceremony is so beautiful. Our different selves, our individuality, is like the water we pour into this bowl. I pour in Lake Michigan water and you pour in Atlantic Ocean water—but....it's all water! It flows together seamlessly.

We are the water. We come together and blend, and the water becomes one. And the fact that this water blends so easily and so seamlessly becomes one—this is a metaphor for the truth that we are so much the same. Our differences are trivial compared to our similarities. Just like you, I want to be loved and to be free of suffering and to do useful work and make the world a better place. Just like you, I want to be connected in a caring, supportive community.

And the mingling of our water shows that together we believe in something. As Unitarian Universalists, we believe that all people have worth and dignity; we believe that all of life is interconnected; we believe that each of us can and must use our head and our heart to find truth and meaning in the world. We believe in justice, equity and compassion.

So water represents our individuality flowing together into a common purpose – like streams flowing a river, we bring our individual selves to this place and we unite as one because of our common humanity and our commonly held Unitarian Universalist beliefs.

It's a beautiful metaphor.

Water as Fountain: Spiritual Source

When I think about the Water Ceremony, however, I think of another metaphor that's completely different. Water is also like a fountain, a

spring, a source of life. And while we know that biologically water supports physical life, here I'm talking about the spiritual aspect of life.

Naturally, there's also a hymn in our hymnal that reflects this, and it's called Come, Thou Fount of Every Blessing. When I'm done speaking, we're going to sing this hymn together and maybe you'll be as moved by it as I am.

There is rich spiritual language here, so maybe it works for you and maybe it doesn't. If you can imagine that there's a fountain, a source of goodness and mercy and love, that's what I think this song is about. It says,

Come, thou fount of every blessing, tune our hearts to sing thy grace.²

If you are a theist, someone who believes in God, some power outside of ourselves that created us and sustains us, then this metaphor works in that way for you: the "fount of every blessing" is God, Mother Earth, Allah, Yahweh, Krishna, whatever your name for God is. And you sing this hymn to that outside divine power. But if you're not a theist, I invite you to consider the "fount of every blessing" as within yourself. Where does mercy, compassion, love, goodness come from in any of us? To that source of goodness within you I will sing this song.

*Come, thou fount of ev'ry blessing, tune our hearts to sing thy grace.
Streams of mercy never ceasing, call for songs of loudest praise.*

and the second verse says,

Come, thou fount of ev'ry vision, lift our eyes to what may come.

and the third verse says,

*Come, thou fount of inspiration, turn our lives to higher ways.
Lift our gloom and desperation, show the promise of this day.
Help us bind ourselves in union, help our hands tell of our love.
With thine aid, O fount of justice, earth be fair as heav'n above.*

These words were written by a UU Minister, and his name was Eugene Navias. The words were written exactly to be interpreted in this way, so that whatever you think about God, or the Holy, or the Divine, -- whether you're a theist or an atheist, -- I think you can use this metaphor for the source of spiritual goodness.

I mention the words being written by a UU, because this is also a beloved Christian hymn. It's sung with different words today in Christian settings. The original words of the hymn were written in the 1700's by a Baptist minister named Robert Robinson.

For example, one of his verses says

*Jesus sought me when a stranger, Wandering from the fold
of God;
He, to rescue me from danger, Interposed His precious
blood,³*

Clearly you see the Christian theology here, that Jesus died for our sins. And some of us in this congregation are Christian believers, so this kind of wording might be familiar and agreeable. But many of us are not Christian, so this language about Jesus's blood might make some of us uncomfortable...and now I'm back to what I was saying before, that the diversity of our beliefs is a challenge.

The re-writing of the words to a traditional Christian hymn, in order to make the message less about Jesus and God, but still keeping the central idea of the hymn—this is something that we see again and again in our hymnal and in our faith tradition. Because Unitarian Universalism is a historically Christian religion—a hundred years ago, there was the

Unitarian Church and the Universalist Church, and they were both very progressive Christian churches, but they were absolutely Christian. They evolved very quickly in the last century, however. By the time the two churches merged in 1961 to become the Unitarian Universalist Association, they were well on their way to being the multi-faith religion that we are today, what many of us call a post-Christian religion.

I think that Eugene Navias succeeded very well in taking a beautiful Christian hymn and writing words that make it more universal. “Come, thou fount of every blessing” could refer just as easily to a God as it could to the source of goodness within. Either way, this is appropriate for the Water Ceremony today. We are the water that we bring and pour into this common bowl, but also we can acknowledge that there is a source, like a fountain or a spring, for our physical and spiritual lives.

May we all be joined together in common purpose like the water in this bowl is joined.

May we all be connected to the mysterious source of goodness and compassion within us and beyond us.

May it be so.

¹ Ham, Marion Franklin, Singing the Living Tradition #145

² Navias, Eugene, Singing the Living Tradition #126

³ Robinson, Robert, “Come Thou Fount of Every Blessing.”