

*Holy Wells*¹
Rev. Myke Johnson
September 13, 2015
Allen Avenue Unitarian Universalist Church

*Our reading today was “The Fountain” by Denise Levertov.*²

As I return to Allen Avenue from my four-month sabbatical, I am feeling grateful and deeply appreciative of this time. I want to say thank you to all of you who helped to make it possible! It has been a wonderful opportunity for refreshment and renewal.

As I look back, I realize that much of that renewal has been in the presence of water. Holy wells in Ireland. A swimming hole in California. Sunny beaches in Maine. I want to share with you a few stories of that water. But first I want to share a story about water that I read early during my sabbatical, from the book, *Braiding Sweetgrass*.

Its author, the botanist Robin Wall Kimmerer, writes about taking lessons to learn the Potawatomi language of her ancestors. She found that memorizing nouns, the names of things, wasn't too difficult with practice. But then she discovered that 70% of the language is made up of verbs. By comparison, only 30% of English words are verbs. Not only that, all of the verbs are different based on whether they refer to animate or inanimate beings. She says, “You hear a person with a word that is completely different from the one with which you hear an airplane.”³

Many concepts that are nouns in English are verbs in Potawatomi. She discovered that the word for a bay—a body of water like Casco Bay—was a verb. It was described as “to be a bay.” Her mind rebelled at this, and thought—no wonder there are so few native speakers left—it is too strange and hard. But then, she writes:

I swear I heard the zap of synapses firing. An electric current sizzled down my arm and through my finger, and practically scorched the page where that one word lay. In that moment I could smell the water of the bay, watch it rock against the shore and hear it sift onto the sand. A bay is a noun only if water is *dead*. When *bay* is a noun, it is defined by humans, trapped between its shores and contained by the word. But the verb *wiikwegamaa*—to *be* a bay—releases the water from bondage and lets it live. “To be a bay” holds the wonder that, for this moment, the living water has decided to shelter itself between these shores, conversing with cedar roots and a flock of baby mergansers. Because it could do otherwise—become a stream or an ocean or a waterfall, and there are verbs for that, too. To be a hill, to be a sandy beach, to be a Saturday, all are possible verbs in a world where everything is alive.⁴

She goes on to speak about a “grammar of animacy.” In Potawatomi and other indigenous languages, not only humans, not only animals and plants, but also rocks, mountains, water, and fire are seen as living beings. The list of inanimate things is much smaller, mostly objects that are made by people.

1 Copyright 2015 by Rev. Myke Johnson. Permission must be requested to reprint for other than personal use.

2 Denise Levertov, *The Fountain*, from *Poems 1960-1967*

3 Robin Wall Kimmerer, *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge, and the Teachings of Plants* (Minneapolis: Milkweed Editions, 2013), 53.

4 *Ibid.*, 54.

Later, sharing this idea of animate language with her field ecology students, one of them “asked the big question. 'Wait a second,' he said, 'doesn't this mean that speaking English, thinking in English, somehow gives us permission to disrespect nature? By denying everyone else the right to be persons? Wouldn't things be different if nothing was an *it*?'”⁵

I wonder. What might it mean for our lives, if we understood water as a living being? We have just celebrated a water ceremony. We say we are bringing water from many places. But perhaps we should say, the water is coming together to be a ceremony. Perhaps we should say, the water is bringing us into a new year.

In June, Margy and I visited Ireland. She had long been dreaming of going to the land where many of her ancestors came from. One of the best parts of the trip, for me, were visits to three of the holy wells of Ireland. Author Patricia Monaghan writes that “Holy wells are traditional places of healing in Ireland, as well as in England, Scotland, and Wales, all places where the old Celtic belief in water spirits survives.”⁶ Perhaps the Celts also had a language in which the water was understood as a living being.

Irish people have a deeply indigenous relationship to their land. Despite centuries of oppression, and the painful migrations of millions of people away from their country, the people who remain have a long history with their villages and farms, their ancient burial places and customs. The old coexists with the new. At Knowth and Newgrange, we touched rock art that was five thousand years old.

In Laragh, we found a stone house where Margy's great-great-great grandfather had lived over 160 years ago. It was still part of a working farm, and the current resident had lived there her entire seventy years. She showed us where an underground spring came up right in their scullery room, to be used for washing clothing and dishes. Living water seemed to bubble up in countless places in that green and fertile land.

But sometimes, there was a hiddenness about the ancient connections. If we had not been looking for holy wells, we would never have known they were there. On our way from the west to the east of Ireland, we stopped in Kildare, the town which was home to St. Brigid, one of the most loved saints of Ireland and according to the stories, an abbess who founded a monastery in the fifth or sixth century. Tradition also links her to the goddess Brigid, Celtic goddess of smith-craft, poetry, and healing. Dozens of holy wells all over Ireland are named Brigid's well.

According to Patricia Monaghan, there are two Brigid's wells in Kildare—one now designated for St. Brigid, and an older pagan well still associated with the goddess Brigid.⁷ The pagan well wasn't publicized, but Monaghan pointed out that it could be found near the parking lot of the Japanese Gardens at the National Stud. Now, in case you are wondering about the Irish having a National Stud—it was not some sort of contest for hunky men. Rather, it was a national horse breeding center, and also a tourist attraction. So we followed directions to the National Stud, and hoped we could find the old pagan well.

5 Ibid., 56.

6 Patricia Monaghan, *The Red-Haired Girl from the Bog*, 159.

7 Ibid., 158.

On the way, close to our destination, we saw a little sign for St. Brigid's well and so we followed it to the saint's well. It was in a small fenced-in area of grass. No one was there. There was a stone circular well with a cross on its rim, the water a couple feet deep; from there the water flowed under ground and emerged in a little enclosed stream near a statue of the saint. Some say that this well, too, may have ancient connections to the goddess Brigid. Others say that the local Catholic church shifted attention to this well because the other well was near a busy intersection.

Monaghan writes that there had been a move in mid-nineteenth century to pave over the older well, to eliminate the temptation for children and other pagans to reach it, endangering themselves in the process. But the well turned out to be unstoppable. So deep that it draws directly from the Curragh aquifer, it could not be plugged no matter how much asphalt went down its narrow throat. So the pagan well remained undisturbed except by people driving by at desperate speeds ...until, spurred by the ...revival [of interest in Brigid], the town shifted the road.⁸

After our visit to the saint's well, we went on to the National Stud, and searched around the parking lot, but couldn't find any signs of the well. We went inside and asked a man at the ticket counter about the second Brigid's well. He told us to go around to the other side of the parking lot, behind a little wooden gate. So off we went, and there it was.

Totally unmarked on the outside, when we walked through the gate we saw a modest little patio of paving stones, and a half circle of stone wall that could be used as seats. The well itself was at the edge of the patio, a couple feet down, and surrounded by its own circle of stone. It was only about a foot deep. In trees and bushes near the water, people had left ribbons on the branches, which we learned were called clouties—they were dipped in the water, touched to the body and left as prayers for healing.

After the drama of the search to find it, the well itself seemed humble and unobtrusive. Again, no one else was around. We took photos, and drank some of the water, and left our own ribbon in the branches. Then there was an unexpected occurrence. I was down on the stones next to the well, with the camera, and Margy was above on the patio with my backpack. She must have leaned over, because suddenly my metal water bottle, which had been in the open pocket of the backpack, fell out, and landed with a big splash right in the well.

Some of you may remember this water bottle. I have spoken of it in earlier sermons as part of my spiritual practice. I have chosen to avoid using commercially bottled water, which is so harmful to the environment, and this reusable bottle is a reminder to me of the sacredness of water. When I saw it there on the bottom of the well, I remembered that I wanted to take home some of Brigid's healing waters. Was Brigid herself giving me a reminder? Or is there a verb in some ancient language for living water deciding to pull a water bottle into its well?

In any case, I leaned in to scoop it out, and filled it with water from this holy well, and the water came back home with me, and my spirit felt renewed and refreshed by its powers.

⁸ Ibid., 158.

Later on our trip, I also found St. Kevin's well at Glendalough in County Wicklow. It was intriguing to me that neither of these wells were marked on any of the tourist materials at the National Stud or Glendalough Monastery. It was as if they were hidden in plain sight. I don't know if people are trying to protect them from tourists, or if perhaps, there are mixed emotions about the old ways that the wells represent. After all, the language of modern Ireland is now English.

But under that modern exterior the old ways and beliefs seem to linger, and they emerged in occasional quiet conversations—a woman admonished us to never cut a hawthorne tree, an old gardener told Margy he was a bit of a pagan. When I carried that water back across the ocean to our home here in Maine, I also brought with me the beautiful connection to land and ancestors and old gods and goddesses that filled our visit.

From the watery green of Ireland, my travels next brought me to the drought-ridden hills of northern California. I attended an 11-day intensive workshop with ecologist Joanna Macy. There, the water was a river, and my search was for the swimming hole. There were several paths down to the river, but most of it was a shallow trickle surrounded by rocks. For some reason, it took me four tries to find the path that led to the swimming hole.

The weather was hot and dry—it never rained during our time together. But the workshop often overflowed with the tears of the seventy participants. Joanna Macy leads practices that help us to feel our grief for the world, for all of the painful realities of the times we are living in—climate change, racism, the extinction of species, the clear-cutting of old forests.

These realities are the constant backdrop to our every day lives, but often I find that I shut down my emotions just to get through the work of the day. Then, sometimes late at night, I feel afraid, as if I am fighting in a huge battle, but I'm not even sure what the enemy is, only that I feel alone and too small for the task. Perhaps some of you have a similar experience.

For me, those eleven days were a healing process that helped me to feel like a whole person again, with my mind, body, and spirit re-united. I could express and feel my fear for the future, my confusion about how to take steps that might turn things around, my sadness at the hate and violence being perpetrated on black people in our country, my anger at how much destruction is going on for the sake of business as usual. This too was another kind of holy well, from which I drew deep sustenance.

When I came back to Maine, I was filled with new energy and ideas from that experience that I hope to bring to you in future weeks. We are so blessed here to be close to living water being the ocean. During my last month of sabbatical, I was able to go often to the beach, to dive into the water being Casco Bay. When I go into the ocean, it is like diving into another holy well. I feel in my body that I am not alone, that there is a larger energy in this universe holding us, and moving us in the direction of life.

This evening, the Jewish tradition celebrates Rosh Hashanah, a new year. People are invited to cast our sins upon the water, and during the next ten days, to re-connect with all those persons we may have wronged during the past year. We are invited to heal the broken bonds between us.

What I learned from my visits to the holy wells is that in order for wholeness to be restored, we need to be reconnected to all of life. We need to heal the broken bonds between us and the larger circle of all living beings—including our fellow human beings, but also including the trees and the stars, the soil and the stones, the fish and the birds, and the living water. Can we make it a practice for the next ten days to reach out to all those living beings we may have wronged?

Denise Levertov reminds us, there is a fountain that can refresh our spirits, can bring solace to the dryness of our hearts.⁹ It may be hidden in the rock, or tucked away behind a parking lot. But it is also right here in plain sight, ready to be found if we but search it out. To heal, to be whole, we need to feel once again the power of water to be a bay, to be a swimming hole in a river, or tears in a community of grieving humans, or ocean waves lapping against the sand. Let us return to the holy well of the community of all living beings.

9 From our reading today, the poem, “The Fountain,” from *Poems 1960-1967*.