

Healing Water¹

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Allen Avenue Unitarian Universalist Church

Anthem: O Healing River

Fred Hellerman, Fran Minkoff (arr. Sheena Phillips)

O healing river, send down your waters.
Send down your waters upon the land.
O healing river, send down your waters,
and wash the blood from off the sand.

Sermon

Perhaps this has been a hard week for you. Perhaps you watched the presidential debate. Enough said about that. I went to testify at a Public Utility Commission hearing about new rules for solar power that could pretty much eliminate net-metering and destroy the solar industry in Maine. Discouraging to say the least. Or perhaps you've been reading the news about more people dying in Syria, more police brutality in North Dakota, more flooding along the Atlantic coast, or another school whose water is contaminated with lead. Are you still holding those small stones that the ushers gave you today? Imagine that whatever has been hard for you these days is in that stone.

Perhaps on a more personal level, you've been triggered by the misogyny in the public debate, male boasting about sexual objectification, or, as a woman, reconnecting with the ever present fear that lives in our bones—when we walk to our cars at night, or wander on a solitary path in the woods. So much misogyny, racism, xenophobia, violence.

Or maybe the burdens in your stone are private and heavy: an illness diagnosed, and uncertain prognosis. Or difficulty finding work, and bills piling up. A relationship that is on the rocks. Trying to find support for a child who struggles at school. Trying to sort out help for a loved one who is frail. There are so many burdens we carry in our hearts—personal, and yet also interconnected with the large social issues of our time—health care, education, economics.

What do we do when it all seems too hard, and we don't know how to fix it? Is there anyone we can turn to? Can Unitarian Universalists pray?

“O Healing River” is a prayer of a song. It speaks to the hunger in our hearts for healing and for justice in a broken land. “Oh healing river, send down your waters, send down your waters upon this land.”

The song was written in the 1960s, in the context of the civil rights movement, by Fred Hellerman and Fran Minkoff.² Fred Hellerman had been one of the members of the folk group The Weavers, with Pete Seeger, Ronnie Gilbert & Lee Hays. They had gotten together in 1948 and brought folk music to the top of the pop music charts. But in 1955 they were threatened by the House UnAmerican Activities Committee because of the socially oriented messages in their songs. They were blacklisted and could no longer get gigs, or be played on the radio, or publish their music.

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² http://www.walkaboutclearwater.org/dev/imagesarchives/2004_talkabout_dec.pdf

I heard a sweet story about Fred Hellerman. During those years under the blacklist, Fred taught himself more of the craft of music; he learned arranging and orchestration, and secretly wrote songs under pseudonyms such as "Fred Brooks." Harry Belafonte's manager once commented of "Fred Brooks" that it was great to finally find someone "who can write like Freddy Hellerman."

In August of 1964, during Freedom Summer in Mississippi, Pete Seeger was singing for about 200 people in a church gathering, when they got word that the bodies of three missing civil rights activists had been found—Andrew Goodman, Michael Schwerner and James Chaney. Seeger made the sad announcement. There was no shouting, no anger, he said. Rather, he saw lips moving in prayer. So he began to sing the song that Fred and Fran had written: “O Healing River, send down your waters, send down your waters upon this land, and wash the blood from off the sand.”³

But who or what is the healing river? To whom or what are we crying? The healing river has sometimes been described as a metaphor for God. I like a river as a metaphor for the divine. Mysterious, somehow present, yet always larger than we are, not to be easily put in a box. Always on the side of justice and love. A river can carry our burdens. A river can even carry us. When I go into the Presumpscot River, I can float, I am held up by the buoyant water. It is a reminder to let go of all that I cannot control, to trust, to move with the energy of life.

In the Tao Te Ching, flowing water is a metaphor for the Tao. The Tao is not a personal divinity, but out of it all things come into being. It has been inadequately translated as “the way.” It is a flow of life energy that lies beneath all other flows. Humble like water, yet all things are accomplished by it. In the Tao Te Ching, we read:

The supreme goodness is like water,
nourishing all of creation
without trying to compete with it.
It gathers in the low places unpopular with men.
Therefore it is like the Tao.

In dwelling, live close to the ground.
In dealing with others, be gentle and kind.
In speaking, stand by your word.
In governing, lead with integrity.
In making a move, choose the right moment.

One who lives in accordance with nature
does not go against the way of things.
He moves in harmony with the present moment,
always knowing the truth of what must be done.

The healing river will flow to the lowest places of our world, the places where people have been hurt, the places where violence has done its damage, close to the ground.

³ Pete Seeger Interview, 7-22-11 Page 2 of 14 Civil Rights History Project Interview completed by the Southern Oral History Program
https://cdn.loc.gov/service/afc/afc2010039/afc2010039_crhp0039_seeger_transcript/afc2010039_crhp0039_seeger_transcript.xml

The river can also be a metaphor for the healing power of Love. Like a river, love flows between people, it cannot be contained—it is not an object but a process. When we love someone, we care for them, we comfort them, we nurture them. In our mission, we say we are growing a community that transforms lives through the power of love. It cannot be a static thing, but is made present through everyday small actions—the ride given, the meal brought over, the visit to someone who is in the hospital or nursing home, a listening ear. The accumulation of so many small acts of kindness create the healing river of transformation. Today in our sanctuary, we have the handiwork of the children, a cardboard machine symbolic of the transformative power of love. Try walking through that machine at the end of the service, and see if you can detect the power of children's love.

Then again, we might also let go of any symbolism, and let the healing river be actual rivers, actual water. Water is the great solvent of nature, hydrogen and oxygen flowing over most of the earth, and flowing also in our own veins: the source of healing and life. Rivers are the natural pathways through forests. All cities were built next to rivers: a source of food and drink and transportation and medicine. If we wanted to pick a god from the natural phenomena around us, we could do worse than a River. In India, rivers are still considered goddesses.

And rivers aren't really a “thing” either. The water that makes up a river is never the same water—but rather the river might be understood as a stable pattern or flow in constantly changing water. So in this way, a river is more like energy than matter, even though we can see it before our eyes, and we often think of it as a thing. But it is a current, like electricity.

I want to share a story about water from the book, *Braiding Sweetgrass*. Some of you may remember this from last year's water ceremony. 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.”⁴

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 she thought this is too strange and hard. But then something sunk in. 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.⁵

⁴ Robin Wall Kimmerer, *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge, and the Teachings of Plants* (Minneapolis: Milkweed Editions, 2013), 53.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 54.

She goes on to call this a “grammar of animacy.” In Potawatomi and other indigenous languages, not only humans, not only animals and plants, but also stones, mountains, water, and fire are seen as living beings. The list of inanimate things is much smaller, mostly objects that are made by people. 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*?'”⁶

I wonder. What might it mean for our lives, if we understood water as a living being? In Jewish tradition, the healing ritual bath of the Mikvah must take place in flowing waters. And water is almost continually flowing, except for occasional sojourns in a cup or basin. It comes down as rain, seeps into the soil, going deep underground. It bubbles up in springs, or is drawn up through the roots of plants. It transpires through their leaves back into the air again as vapor. Or it flows into small brooks like the branch of the Capisic Brook near my house. The water then flows into rivers and into bays and into the great sea, where evaporation once again draws it up into clouds and storms. Water flows through us too. We drink those 8 glasses a day, and later we sweat or cry or pee it out again.

Life is a kind of flowing water, too—we think of breathing as the mark of being alive—the air flowing in and out of our lungs. But water must flow in and out of all living beings just as much. All life is in water, or has water inside, never stagnant, always moving through. So water is life, and a kind of creator God, so why not pray to water with all our thanksgivings for what life brings? And our longing, our worry, our burdens. Why not pray to water?

“Oh healing river, send down your waters, send down your waters, upon the land.”

Human beings make choices. We can play a part and shape our world. But so little is actually under our control. Why not acknowledge this? Why not acknowledge our sorrow, our needs, our despair, our vulnerability, our anger? Why not reach out to the river that is life, the river that is God, the river that is Love, the River that is the River? Ask for healing for our land, healing for our families, healing for our nation, healing for our hearts.

There is another song you may know about the healing power of water. The hymn *Wade in the Water* is a spiritual originating during the time of slavery in America. It makes reference to a verse from the Gospel of John about the pool of Bethesda in Jerusalem—“wade in the water, children, God's gonna trouble the water.”

Surrounding the pool of Bethesda were five porticos where sick people waited, hoping for the water to move—because, it was said, “...an angel came down at intervals into the pool, and troubled the water, and the next person to enter the water would be healed of their ailments.” So *Wade in the Water* is an invitation to personal healing, and also, likely, a coded message about the underground railroad, and how those enslaved might follow the water to freedom.

Thornton Wilder wrote a very short play, called *The Angel that Troubled the Waters*. He tells a story of a physician who came one day to the pool of Bethesda, praying to be healed of his own hidden illness.

⁶ Ibid., 56.

But the angel came and whispered in his ear saying, “Stand back; [this] healing is not for you. Without your wound where would your power be? It is your very remorse that makes your low voice tremble into the hearts of men. Not the angels themselves in Heaven can persuade the wretched and blundering children of earth as can one human being broken on the wheels of living. In love's service only the wounded soldiers can serve.”

And then the angel went down into the waters. The physician drew back as an old lame neighbor who had been waiting by the pool for years, plunged in and was healed. Then the neighbor consoled him: "Perhaps", he said, "it will be your turn next! But meanwhile come with me to my house. My son is lost in dark thoughts. I do not understand him. Only you have ever lifted his mood. And my daughter, since her child died, sits in the shadow. She will not listen to us. Come with me but an hour!" And so the physician went back to his work of healing like a wounded soldier.⁷

What does it mean to be healers for each other and for our world? Rabbi Moshe Leib of Sasov put it like this: “No one is as whole as he who has a broken heart.”⁸ We find strength to respond to the pain of others because we also know our own pain. In the Talmud it says,

Do not be daunted by the enormity of the world's grief.
Do justly, now. Love mercy, now. Walk humbly, now.
You are not obligated to complete the work,
but neither are you free to abandon it.

The other morning, I was feeling rather discouraged after looking at more depressing news, and I went out for a walk. I walked three blocks until I came to a trail near the Hall School, that runs along and above a brook that feeds into Capisic Brook. Usually I walk through that trail, then go further down Warwick Street and come through another wooded trail on my way home. But this foggy morning I decided to walk down a side trail to the brook itself. I stood under a patch of gnarly trees at the edge of the flowing water, admiring the reflection of the colorful leaves on the surface. Then I saw some sort of metal contraption underneath all that beauty. It had two wheels, and a long handle, and it was rusting and ugly in the shallow water.

I mulled it over for a while. What is my covenant with water, I wondered? I am grateful to water for life and cool drinks and I am comforted by going down into the river to swim. I want to keep water clean and unpolluted. I know that this little brook is filled with all the run-off from my neighborhood. There were cigarette butts, and old soda cans here and there. So what can one person do? But I decided to get a long branch and try to get that rusty contraption out of the brook. After moving it around in the mud, I was able to pull it out. I wheeled it back to my yard to take it to the dump. On a later walk, I took away more of the trash.

There is so much that we cannot do to fix the problems in the world. But it felt good to do one small thing to clean up the brook in my watershed. It wasn't heroic. The biggest discomfort it caused was getting my hands dirty and my socks muddy. But it was a small way of stepping outside my usual routines and acting from my core values—treating the water as a living being, completing the circular flow of my prayers to the healing river, offering love to the river, by caring for its needs.

⁷ <http://www.9th-hour.ca/wp-content/uploads/2013/04/The-Angel-That-Troubled-the-Waters.pdf>

⁸ From Ernest Kurtz and Katherine Ketcham, *The Spirituality of Imperfection*, p. 61.

