A Call to Reverence: The Mystery of Water

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Years ago, in the high desert country of Oregon, I was invited to participate in a ceremony on the Warm Springs Indian Reservation. Several of us, Roman Catholic and Lutheran clergy, were present as guests, part of a cross-cultural conference on spirituality and environment. We gathered in a circle with a tribal elder who gently lifted up a bowl of water. Sounds of a hand drum echoed across the room. We paused, then after a period of silence she lifted up a song of thanks for water in a language I couldn't understand.

Over the course of my years in ministry, I'd led hundreds of liturgies and rituals in my own Christian tradition in both rural and urban settings. But on this occasion, there was an intention, a reverence, which filled the ceremonial space we were gathered in a way I had not experienced before.

In the months that followed, I discovered that specific practices honoring the mystery of water -- a sense of water as gift -- are still carried on in traditional rituals of many Native American communities (including the Hopi, Navaho, Ojibwa, Cree) across North America. In this case, with the Confederated Tribes of Warm Springs — the Wasco, Tenino and Paiute — water is spiritually and practically linked to their very existence. For centuries, the nearby Deschutes River served, and continues to serve, as the primary source of life for their fishing, agriculture and community life.

Catholic priest and ecologist Thomas Berry, CP, PhD, was among the prophetic theologians and cultural historians who 30 years ago drew attention to the importance of a recovery of reverence for the environment. I sat with him in a church basement in Seattle with a handful of interfaith activists not long after his classic book, *The Dream of the Earth,* was first published in 1988. Berry suggested that in our times we are all living as part of "The Great Turning." He observed that three rivers of knowledge and wisdom are contributing to this deepening of consciousness about the planet earth: First, a new awareness reinforced by science about the interconnectedness of everything; second, a deeper recognition of the fragile relationship of human health with natural environments; third, a renewed appreciation and recovery for indigenous (Native American) teachings about spiritual life.[1]

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Larry Moore

tions can be appropriated to address urgent problems of a global water crisis, we need to embrace humility about the essential mystery of the natural world, in this case water. And that is happening. The recent discoveries of science in the 21st century now are inviting us to lift our arms up in gratitude. And bow our heads in reverence.

HONORING THE GIFT

From a basic, practical point of view, it's important to understand and appreciate that water literally regulates the earth's temperature. It also regulates the temperature of the human body, carries nutrients and oxygen to cells, cushions joints, protects organs and tissues, removes waste. We know that a person can live about a month without food, but only a week without water. Along with oxygen, it is the world's most essential nutrient.

What's also helpful to remember is that water is more deceptive than one might initially think. While it appears to pour freely from the heavens, seems to flow endlessly in rivers, it is actually a finite resource. We only have what we have. Water is a precious resource more valuable than gold or silver. Although a volume of about 332,500,000 cubic miles of it exists on earth — much less than 1 percent of the world's water is readily available for human use.

What's frequently overlooked is that 97 percent of the world's water is salty or otherwise undrinkable. Another 2 percent is locked in ice caps and glaciers. That leaves less than 1 percent for all of humanity's agricultural, residential, manufacturing, community and personal use.

WATER'S ORIGIN ON EARTH

Here's where the deeper riddle begins. Despite what we may consider our scientific sophistication, no one is certain about the origin of water on earth. What we have are two competing theories. One suggests water arrived in the form of meteors and asteroids early in the beginning of our planet's formation. Some scientists believed the meteors and asteroids carried moisture that eventually dissolved and formed Earth's atmosphere. A second point of view is that water was a part of the earth's earliest evolution, that water was built into the very rocks of the earth's crust, then was released after gases from the planet's volcanoes and eruptions were dissolved.[2]

The mystery deepens even further. There's a finite amount of water on our planet. Water is constantly being recycled. It falls, condenses, evaporates and reappears, over and over again. Water droplets continually are transforming themselves. In a 100-year period, a water molecule spends 98 percent of its existence in the ocean, 20 months as ice, about two weeks in lakes and rivers and less than a week in the atmosphere. None of this water is new; it is just recycled, over, over and over again.

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— HEIDI STEVENSON

Michigan writer Heidi Stevenson poetically reflects on this remarkable phenomenon: "Swimming in Lake Superior, I imagine all of the seagulls, sturgeon, people, and plovers also touching the water. I remember reading long ago that all of Earth's water is continuously recycled. I imagine swimming in water that was once dinosaur urine. Genghis Khan's sneeze. Marilyn Monroe's soup. Water, in both metaphor and substance, is the real Internet."[3]

WATER, PLANTS AND THE HUMAN CONNECTION

This is where it really gets interesting. In 2013, Gerald Pollack, PhD, a researcher at the University of Washington, challenged conventional thinking when he hypothesized that water (H_20) has a fourth dimension. In scientific circles, water had been understood to take three different forms — liquid, solid (ice), and vapor (steam, mist).[4]

Pollack suggests there is a fourth phase, which hadn't been recognized before. He and his col-

leagues call it H_30_2 or EZ (Exclusion Zone) water. The fascinating characteristic of this type of water, Pollack suggests, becomes apparent when it comes in contact with "hydrophilic" (friendly, organic) surfaces such as human cells and plants. With that contact, the H_30_2 becomes electromagnetically negative. In contrast, the vast amount of H_20 (bulk water) found in lakes, wells and streams is charged positively.

Pollack and his colleagues posit that all water is not the same. Water molecules in plants and that exist in human cells are "alive." Pollack shows evidence that fourth stage water molecules communicate with each other.[5] This type of EZ water carries electromagnetic messages to organs, tissues and within plants. He and his colleagues suggest enhancing H_30_2 in the human body and the natural environment benefits health and well-being.

According to Pollack, clean water contributes to this hidden circulatory and communication system of EZ water in plants and animals. Water that contains traces of toxic chemicals and is stored in plastic containers and bottles hinders this process and contributes to illness and physical dysfunction. In that context, then, water can be seen as the primary carrier of soul. That was something that intuitively rang clear for me, I understand now, years ago on the Oregon desert in the midst of that prayer with indigenous people. Science may someday affirm the insight carried by ancient prayers from centuries past.

Water invites reverence and gratitude from those whose lives it sustains.

RE-ENCHANTING THE WORLD

The struggle over preserving and sharing clean water in the years ahead will be a test of the planet and global community. It will be hard fought, values will clash, governments will be threatened.

Berry warned us at the end of the 20th century that we are headed into a collision course with how we will protect, share and sustain our essential sacred, natural resources. We know now his prediction was correct.

There is trouble ahead. If history proves correct, armed conflicts on a global scale will be inevitable. And the stakes are high. It will be a race against time to discover and build a new scale of international cooperation. Religious sensibility and hard science will need to form deeper, respectful partnerships. We would do well if we can find a way to begin this important work with a quiet bow.

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NOTES

1. Thomas Berry, *The Dream of the Earth* (San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 1988).
2. Brian Greene, "How Did Water Come to Earth?," *Smithsonian Magazine*, (May 2013), https://www.smithsonianmag.com/science-nature/how-did-water-come-to-earth-72037248/.
3. Heidi Stevenson, "The Gift of Water," *Marquette Monthly*, (January 2018).
4. Gerald H. Pollack, *The Fourth Phase of Water: Beyond Solid, Liquid, and Vapor* (Seattle, Ebner and Sons, 2013).
5. Pollack, "The Fourth Phase."

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