

"Returning to the Well"
Beacon Unitarian Universalist Congregation
Ingathering and Water Communion
September 12, 2021
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As is the case in many old folktales, a man sets out one day on a journey. He is lonely in his village and he yearns a new home, a new community. After filling several flasks with water, he straps on his worn leather sandals and heads off down a dusty road.

After a time, he arrives at a village just as his water supply begins to run low; and there at the well, in the center of the square, he comes upon a group of men, women and children. They are obviously thirsty and parched, but they're not drinking.

When he inquires about this oddity, he learns that the villagers are, for some mysterious reason, unable to bend their elbows; and so, they cannot lift the water dipper from the well to their lips and quench their thirst. Needless to say, he fills his water flasks and presses on from this strange and unhappy place. He passes several other outposts, but for one reason or another, he finds them unwelcoming, too. As night falls on the third day of his journey, the man finds himself approaching yet another well in yet another dusty village square.

Once again, he encounters a group of men and women and children who are thirsty and parched. They, too, mysteriously, are unable bend their elbows in order satisfy their own thirst. Yet, as the traveler stood on the outskirts of this human circle, he observed something remarkable: each person, in turn, filled the dipper with water from the well and held it to the lips of his or her neighbor. With a straight arm, filling the dipper was awkward; water spilled, but the village's collective thirst was quenched. The traveler joined the circle. When his turn came, cool water met his lips. Then he grasped the water dipper, turned to his neighbor, and decided, then and there, to make this his new home.

As Unitarian Universalists, as unique individuals, as human beings, we thirst for many different things. And we yearn for places like Beacon where we can admit our thirst: for spiritual deepening, for self-discovery, for challenge and comfort, for healing and laughter, for connection. In a parched and isolating culture, and especially after so many months in COVID separation, we seek out the well of this community because here, we hope to be able to tell the truth about our lives and our beliefs, our suffering and our joy, our loneliness and our zest for living; and that, in turn, our thirst for authenticity will be satisfied.

The poet Robert Frost has written: "Here are your waters and your watering place. Drink and be whole beyond confusion." As your minister, I can't guarantee that confusion...spiritual, intellectual and otherwise, will be removed forever from our lives by attending Beacon – the pandemic is a very bold faced case in point.

We are not in the guarantee business of promising that our thirst is will be quenched once and for all and forever. As Unitarian Universalists, we are encouraged to cherish our doubts, to remain a bit "confused," to engage in collective discovery and to launch our quests from a place of grounded optimism.

Yet, I hold faith that if we continue to gather around this well, as we have for so many years, and if we pledge to hold the water dipper to one another's lips and to the lips of those in need beyond this place, we can move towards greater wholeness, together, one shaky sip at a time.

Fed by sacred springs and by the streams of our own compassion, WE are the well, we are the water, we are the dipper, we are the giver and the receiver of refreshment. That's why we're here. We're here to support one another. That's what a congregation like Beacon is all about. That's why we recite our mission and covenant together each week. We don't need to go it alone! Simply by coming here this morning, to this watering place of wood and glass, we have made the CHOICE not to go it alone. And that's an important and courageous choice in a landscape of growing disconnection and divisiveness.

Earlier in the four- part water reflection, I lifted up the deepening crisis around water scarcity. Around the world and around town, we are using up and/or poisoning our water resources. The droughts in the Southwest are alarming and getting worse. And there is a surely metaphor here for our spiritual lives. Are we poisoning the spiritual well within, not intentionally, but rather by not mindfully conserving our resources for what matters most?

Water can represent refreshment as Wendell Berry suggests in our poem earlier, or it can be relentless and repressive. I'd argue that our penchant towards busy-ness creates a drought rather than a deluge. The Chinese, who are so clever about such things, have two symbols that when written together denote "busyness." The two symbols are "soul" and "killing" None of us embodies a bottomless reservoir to nourish a thirsty soul or a thirsty world. Are you like water flowing everywhere? Let's each do what we can to reclaim **our** water.

In her poem, "The Fountain," Denise Levertov captures the very essence of our collective thirst, as well as our shared responsibility to one another to keep the living well waters from drying up, when she writes:

"Don't say, don't say there is no water
to solace the dryness of our hearts.

I have seen the fountain
springing out of the rock wall
and you drinking there.

And I too, before your eyes
found footholds and climbed to drink the cool water...

Don't say, don't say there is no water.

That fountain is there among its scalloped
green and grey stones;
it is still there and always there
with its quiet song and strange power
to spring in us,
up and out through the rock."

So may it be.. may our waters flow and mingle in this watering place of wood and stone
and glass and love and connection.

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