

Our Water Communion: The Soft Power of Water

Rev. Stephen A. Landale's first service
as Minister of
The Unitarian Universalist Church in Eugene
September 7, 2007

CALL TO WORSHIP

We gather here
travelers, home-keepers,
people lifted in joy and people weighted with sorrow,
grandparents, grandchildren, friends, lovers, and loners,
souls rooted, spirits finding their way.

We gather here
bringing water from our journeys, our homes,
bringing our hopes, concerns, talents.
bringing
our thirst to know and to be known,
our hunger to experience ourselves
as part of something greater,
our need to offer ourselves in the service of Life.

We gather *here*
a spiritual home,
a place of memory, hope, and joy,
the sounds of this choir, and music from gatherings past,
still reverberating,
however faintly,
in these walls,
the limbs of oak trees outside
raised like arms lifted in blessing.

We gather here, *together*
visitors, travelers, people curious and cautious,
members and friends,
muscles stretched by the labors of community,
hopeful of a new chapter in the life of this church,
children and youth,
patiently sitting through the talky parts,
reuniting with friends young and old,
ready, I think, to sing,
and a new minister,
thrilled to be with you,
grateful for all you've doing and keep on doing
to enrich and enliven this community,
grateful to be your partner in this great work.

We gather here, together,
lighting this chalice,
symbol of our Unitarian Universalist heritage,
symbol of sanctuary in a time of great darkness,
symbol of the light of Truth
and the warmth of Love.

Come, let us worship together.

STORY FOR ALL AGES
Little River (source unknown)

There once was a little river
that tried to find the ocean.

It trickled down mountain valleys,
flowed through forests,
and meandered slowly over the plains.

One day, it came to a hot, dry desert –
so wide the other side could not be seen!

The little river cried out,
“How shall I cross this desert,
when I am just a little river?
I will surely dry up and be no more.
How can I cross this desert?”

Then a voice came from the desert.
The voice said, “Little river,
if you want to cross over me,
look to the wind.
It crosses over me every day.
If you want to get to the other side,
you must lift yourself into the air
and let yourself be carried by the wind.”

So the little river, inspired by the voice,
lifted itself to the wind.
And the wind carried the river across the desert,
in the form of a cloud.
And on the other side, the cloud rained.
And there the little river took shape again,
flowing to the ocean.

FIRST READING
from *The Tao te Ching* (#78)
translated by Stephen Mitchell

Nothing in the world
is as soft and yielding as water.

Yet for dissolving the hard and inflexible,
nothing can surpass it.

The soft overcomes the hard;
the gentle overcomes the rigid.
Everyone knows this is true,
yet few can put it into practice.

SECOND READING
Be Like Water
Kendra Ford¹

run deep run clear
fill any space to its own dimensions
respond to the moon, to gravity
change colors with the light

hold your temperature longer than the surrounding air
take the coast by storm

go under ground

bend light
be the one things people need, even when they're fasting

eat boulders, quietly
be a universal solvent

SERMON
The Soft Power of Water
9/9/07

I've heard it said that trying to get a roomful of Unitarian Universalists to agree on something is like trying to herd cats. So I've been reflecting on the small miracle that is the water communion – a September ritual adopted freely by most UU congregations.

Why do we do this? Why does it seem fitting to begin our church year by taking water from places of meaning in our individual lives, and pool these waters together in a common basin?

While we have a broad range of theological outlooks in our tradition, we seem to be agreed, despite our feisty feline-ness, on the importance of nature and community. We find in nature beauty in itself, as well as a language for our spiritual lives, feeding our religious imaginations. We find in community an expression of our values. The water communion unites the two: we gather together, in the context of a worship service, waters from special places in our lives, and we use this as our holy water for child blessings and other passages.

¹ from Benard and Anderson, *How We Are Called, A Meditation Anthology* (Skinner House: Boston, 2003).
Page 9.

In other traditions, holy water is that which has been blessed by an intermediary: the blessing comes from on high. In our tradition, holy water is that which comes from each of us, from the sacred and the ordinary of our lives, offered in the service of the whole. The blessings come from the earth, from our moments of deep connection with life.

I suppose we could bring something other than water for this ritual – a pinch of soil, for instance. But we bring water. Water is a symbol of life. And, as Taoism reminds us, water is a symbol of a special kind of power, a soft power, a way of being in the world. This soft power might be named “The Tao” or “The Way,” but ultimately it is beyond all naming and understanding.

Which is stronger, a big boulder or a little river? Pile rocks or boulders in a stream, and the water has to change its course. Build a dam, and the river becomes a lake. So the boulder may seem to be strong, and the river weak. But water is fluid, shifting course – it moves around the rock, seeps underneath the rock, or even rises in the air to be carried by the wind as a cloud. Water keeps flowing, in one form or another. And over time, it slowly changes everything around it. It flows around boulders, smoothing them. It digs into the ground, creating gorges and waterfalls. It laps seashores into cliffs; it makes the ground a deep, rich brown and the plants a life-filled green.

Taoism teaches us, be like water. Be fluid rather than rigid. Let your strength include yielding.

This teaching runs so contrary to the ways our society usually teaches us to be. We are taught that being powerful means being rigid and domineering. We’re taught that power means not changing ourselves, but forcing others to change. We’re taught that power means making others fear us. The anniversary of 9/11 this week is a reminder of this – terrorists used violence to intimidate, and our government has responded with its own forms of terror. Our government leaders speak as if there are only two choices – do nothing, or “take action” – and “take action” means violence, it means war. The problem has less to do with particular leaders than it does with a culture in which “take action” is understood to mean “commit violence.”

There are ways of acting effectively that are not violent. In fact, violence is not truly effective; it can never create – at best, it can only stop something. And even then, what it stops usually emerges elsewhere in stronger form. We need alternatives to violence, alternatives to coercion and all forms of what we might call “hard power”. We need soft power – power like water – power which can be diverted but never truly stopped.

Soft power is the power of nonviolence, the power of listening and creating relationship. Where hard power uses coercion, soft power uses persuasion. Where hard power seeks to control and stamp out dissent and difference, soft power celebrates diversity, seeking not uniformity but unity. Soft power says, when each of us becomes ourselves more fully, the community is blessed.

Soft power wears down the rock of violence, seeps underneath the dams of ignorance, splashes cold on the face of apathy. Soft power finds a way – transforming itself from a river to a cloud if need be. Soft power lets itself be carried by the wind. This is the kind of power we invoke by beginning our church year with a water communion ceremony.

In a society that too often teaches us that power means power *over*, power to dominate, we gather here to celebrate the power *of*, the power of *life*, the power of our own willingness to be nourished, changed, even transformed, by life.

In this ritual, you may add water from a sacred or special place in your life to our bowl – or add water symbolic of it. We ask you to remind us of your name and tell us the place you found it. Though we do not have time in the service for the sharing of stories, we know that each place named has a story as rich as the one we want to tell. Each place named has nourished or changed one or more of us in some way. I hope you'll ask others about the stories of their water sources after the service.

By this ritual we celebrate the blessings of life we find in nature and in community and many surprising places as well. We celebrate and uphold our community as a gathering place and source of soft power.

On this day, as we mark the beginning of the church year, the beginning of our ministry together, we say YES to life, YES to community, and YES to receiving our blessings, the beginning of soft power.

Choir: Down in the River to Pray

WATER COMMUNION RITUAL

BLESSING OF THE WATER

May this water truly be a blessing to newborn babies and others who receive it during rites of passage.

May it provide comfort and connection to those who are unable to come here and receive first-hand the blessing of your fellowship.

May it be a fitting blessing to dedicate new grounds, new homes.

May it remind us to honor the sacredness of each and every life in this community and beyond.

May it remind us of the greater Life that is our source, our sustenance, our Holy Disturber, our power, and our final peace.

Amen, and Blessed Be.