

The Oneness of Water

By Reverend Jane Smith, Channing Memorial Church, Ellicott City, MD, Sept. 13, 2020

In Irish mythology there are stories about the magical land of Tir na Nog – ancient stories of Celtic wisdom. Tir na Nog – the land of youth - is filled with poetry and beauty. One tale follows the story of Oisín, a Celtic warrior. The story begins when Oisín visits this special land, inhabited by fairies. The Celtic warrior travels to the land and falls in love with the beautiful Niamh. Together, they are so happy, and time seems to travel quickly. Eventually, however, Oisín begins to long for home, and becomes forlorn. After what he imagined to be about three years, he left this land and ventured home. He traveled home on a magical horse given to him by Niamh – a horse he was told never to dismount. Yet, when he returned home, he found that he had indeed been gone for hundreds of years! The town he remembered was gone. He was devastated. He then traveled the earth on his magical horse in sorrow. Eventually, he fell off. As soon as he touched the ground, he became a frail old man, and quickly died of old age.¹

What does this story mean? It shows two different kinds of time – fairy time of eternal youth, and human time. John O’Donohue, Irish poet, author, and priest, writes that one of these times – human time – is linear, and ends in death. The other time is fairy time, what O’Donohue describes as “eternal time” with an “unbroken presence.” This time has no beginning and no end.²

This story resonates with me today as we celebrate water communion. I feel water has this same eternal essence - this “fairy time” – an “eternal time” with an “unbroken presence.” Water cannot end in death; water cannot be broken. I feel this “fairy time” – this magic – when I am immersed in nature, walking along a bubbling brook lined with trees and rich vegetation – water that almost seems to know

¹ *Anam Cara: A Book of Celtic Wisdom* John O’Donohue pg. 174

² *Ibid* 177

me. The lifespan of water is hard to imagine – beginning on this earth billions of years ago – an amount of time unfathomable to a mortal human. Water, morphing and transforming each and every day – immortal, sacred, and timeless

In this stretch of time – the billions of years that water has existed on this planet – our individual lives are but a passing thought. For billions of years, an eternity when compared to our short lives, water has traversed this planet. Water, falling from the sky, filling streams, ponds, rivers, oceans. Drops from the night rain collecting where gravity pulls it, the heat of the sun evaporating droplets from pools of water, these droplets then forming clouds, waiting to descend yet again, in an unending cycle. Water pours from the sky so thick roads become streams. Tranquil ponds reflect on their smooth surface the world around them. Rushing rivers clamber over large rocks. Clouds of water droplets turn pink in the sunset. Every bit of water experiences this in turn. Just like the book we read for our Time for All Ages – water experiences everything! Every bit of water, throughout billions of years, has been a pond, risen as a stream, hardened as ice, provided needed sustenance and flowed through the veins of living creatures. The oneness of water.

To me it feels like water welcomes us as if it already knows us. For water does know us. This water that has experienced all things – that knows no end – this water knows our ancestors, both those who have passed away in living memory and those lost millennia ago. It fed our ancestors – it sustained them. Water was present for all the changes of the earth – present for the life and death of all plants and animals that have cycled through. Knowing our ancestors, water recognizes each and every one of us. And this connects us! Water connects each one of us joined together here, today. Having all experienced this same water that has been around for billions of years – whether as rainfall, or a thirst-quenching drink, or as the substance that gave life to our food.

Water connects us in a sacred way through our 7th Principle of Unitarian Universalism – holding us together in the interdependent web of existence of which we are all a part. Giving us life. Without water, there would be no web, for water sustains and nourishes all life. The threads of our interdependent web are not like those of a spider web, as I have imagined before, but that of water, silky strands of water that connect us – give us life – quench our thirst, fill our stomachs, and flow through our very veins. In Unitarian Universalism this idea of an interdependent web is a sacred part of our shared values – a web connecting us and all living creatures in every moment, through every joy and every sorrow. And this is what we celebrate today – for as distance keeps us from joining our water together in one sacred vessel, we will instead engage in a ritual to pour that water back into the earth. Each vessel we have collected is filled with water steeped in meaning. And as each vessel is emptied into the earth after service and enters the soil, it will eventually join with each and every other drop that we pour today. The water connects us as it cycles through eternity. We are one, connected by this web born of water.

Not only does this connection sustain our church community but all of those we miss while quarantining. Water connects us to our family, to our friends, to all of those we cannot be with. Water can serve as that thread holding together the webs of families and friends that may feel so very distant. And it is not only water that provides these connections – strengthens our web – but so many of the blessings found in nature. We put our own meaning into nature – myths told for generations about mountains, prairies steeped in history, ashes cast into a loved one’s favorite pond.

Mary Oliver writes of a profound experience she had while visiting a pond. In connecting with the nature of that sacred space, she experienced a mystical interconnection with the frogs – seeing through their eyes, feeling their joy, craving the things they craved, her fingers becoming webbed and throat morphing into that of one of these amphibians. She experienced – she momentarily lived - the life of

another. This is an example of our web – our Unitarian Universalist web – as we experience each other and feel each other’s joys and sorrows. When we pause, meditate, and immerse ourselves in nature, we can enter into that secret world of frogs, just as we can enter the depths of the worlds of those we love. Oliver writes, during her experience of becoming one with the frogs,

And that’s when you know

You will live whether you will or not,

One way or another,

Because everything is everything else,

One long muscle.³

When experiencing the secret life of a frog, the poet realized that “everything is everything else.” We are all connected, floating in and out of each other’s experiences - stories and actions overlapping. Everything is everything else – all creatures, all plants – all living things connected. We may feel we are a part of someone we love, or connected intimately in memory, or share an experience with an animal or nature. Everything is everything else, intimately weaving together our web. And the one common denominator? Water. Water – connecting us all.

I wonder of that vast expanse of water that is the ocean. What else has that water experienced? What glaciers was it once solidified into? What dinosaur’s thirst did it quench? What floods destroyed lands or hurricanes offered volatile winds? What did it experience in endless time? And how does this endless time - this unbroken time - connect us to our ancestors? The same water they drank – we drink. The same water they swam in, we swim in. Water can also be extremely symbolic. I have my own story that I hold dear.

³ *Devotions: The Selected Poems of Mary Oliver* Mary Oliver pg 419-20

The ocean connects me to one of my beloved ancestors – my aunt Nancy. It knows her and it knows me. Every summer as children, my mom, sister, Aunt Nancy, her two daughters, and I traveled to Ocean City, New Jersey, where we waded in the waves and spent hours exploring the boardwalk. After the loss of my aunt, the family continues to travel to that sacred beach each year that we can to celebrate her life and her memory. Our bodies in the same salty water hers was, our lungs breathing the same air. Memories etched in the sand, and hovering above us in those water droplets in the sky, crashing waves reminding us of times past. Of her quick wit, caring soul, and the steady flow of laughter. The beach is no longer a simple beach, but land of memories, held together forever by that water with its endless time, connecting Nancy to us and everyone else she, or we, ever loved.

For not only does water allow us to connect with those of our past, but also with all of those who will come after us! We will all return to water, because all human time ends in death, where we reunite with the water and the rest of the earth. Just as we are connected in this web with our ancestors, we are also connected to each and every person who will come to be long after we have left this realm. In this way, we are eternal! The water we drink or the water that flows through our veins has also flowed in the veins of those past and will flow the veins of those yet to come. While our time is measured in death, the time of water is endless. Water has existed for billions of years, flowing through the ecosystem, connecting the life of the past, present, and future. Connecting us to our ancestors and our descendants. The oneness of water, and the oneness of life.

John O’Donohue writes, “Essentially, we belong beautifully to nature. The body knows this belonging and desires it. It does not exile us either spiritually or emotionally. The human body is at home on the earth.”⁴ We belong to nature. We belong to water. All the water that flows in our bodies was part of oceans and glaciers before it was a part of us – was a part of our ancestors before it was a part of

⁴ *Anam Cara: A Book of Celtic Wisdom* John O’Donohue pg 95

us. And this consistent flow of water connects all of us to each other. This flow – this nature – this water that experiences unbroken time with no ending and no beginning. This ties us together – intimately – in our interdependent web.

I invite us now to imagine that glistening thread – that delicate thread of water holding us all together. Next time you turn on a tap, play in a pool, or admire a pond, know you are connected to all of those who came before you, all of those you hold dear today, and all of those yet to come. We can pause, and, for a moment, live in fairy time. In endless time. Unbroken. Connected to all, with no real beginning and no real end. Part of the dinosaurs, of glaciers, of rain and of the ocean. Held together with all of those you love in this sacred web.

May it be so, and Amen.