

***The Relationship Begins***  
**Ingathering Water Communion Homily**  
**Reverend Kent Hemmen Saleska**  
**Unitarian Universalist Church of Minnetonka**  
**September 13, 2009**

It is amazing and good to realize that this is the beginning of our third year together! As this Sunday service approached, this Sunday of our annual ingathering water communion, I kept thinking about water. Because I also knew that this would be the Sunday when we'd dedicate our new sound system, I also have been thinking a lot about sound. I recalled a quote from Frank Zappa I once discovered on Garrison Keillor's daily *Writer's Almanac*. Zappa once said that he first fell in love with music as a kid after he had a kind of religious experience at his grandmother's funeral. He said, "The choir was singing, and I could see from the way that the candle flames were wavering that they were responding to the sound waves coming from the choir. That was when I realized that sound, music, had a physical presence and that it could move the air around. [I realized that] music is, literally, a recipe for sculpted air."

It is amazing to think that these guttural noises we humans make, these grunts and squeaks, these groans and hiccups, these exquisitely crafted howls and whimpers, are even understood as speech by other human beings, much less interpreted by us as necessary or beautiful. But these sounds do travel among and between us as a form of "sculpted air." Speech and music, subcategories of sound, are among the distinctive qualities of humanity. These qualities help us to form communities, to create religions, to build civilizations and to establish culture.

Yet for all this, our speech and our music typically move in only one direction: from the originator of the sound to the receiver, from the one who speaks or sings to the one who hears the speech or music. With this being the day of our water communion, I couldn't help but also think about sound in relationship to water – especially the ways that water, because of its greater density than air, conducts sound faster and further than it does through the air. In 1490, Leonardo Da Vinci wrote, "If you cause your ship to stop and place the head of a long tube in the water and place the outer extremity to your ear, you will hear ships at a great distance from you."

With this also being the beginning of our third year together, I couldn't help but think about a particular experience in seminary. Way back then, some five or so years ago now (!), one of my favorite professors – in fact, the one who preached the sermon at my ordination here, the Reverend David Bumbaugh – spoke often with us students about life in the church. With more than 40 years in the pulpit, David was taught us well prior to scattering across the country for our ministerial internships, and he guided us through a multitude of reflections once again during our final year of seminary as we transitioned from our internship year into the various ministerial calls that would carry us off after graduation.

I remember one particular class discussion about what we were going to do out in the "real world" of congregational life without the close support of our student cohorts or the wisdom from our many professors, and how we would ever know or learn to make the right decisions or the best decisions once we were out serving a congregation. In response, David reminded us about our Unitarian Universalist heritage and about our living tradition of the covenantal relationship between a minister and the congregation who calls the minister into service. The minister is not a hired staff person, David reminded us. Rather, because the minister is responsible to the entire congregation, the minister is therefore called to serve, and to

service, by the entire congregation. In this context, the engagement is not defined by a legal contractual agreement, but by a covenantal relationship. In its broadest understanding, a covenant is an agreement between two entities, each of which has specific duties and roles, to exist or work together in service to a higher principle or meaning.

To bring his point down out of the theoretical clouds and to into our anxious and inexperienced reality, David Bumbaugh described the arc of our early work with a congregation. “The first year,” he said, “the minister can do nothing wrong. The second year, the minister can do nothing right. The third year, the relationship with the congregation begins.”

Today, indeed, is the day we begin the third year of our relationship together! I realize, of course, that the progression of our relationship may not precisely fit this three-year pattern. I know that some people will probably feel that our relationship is not a good one, and for others, they couldn’t imagine anything more right. For most of us, there’s probably a middle ground. But I believe there is a truth to the arc of a relationship where everything seems so good and wonderful at first, and then when we discover a flaw, it brings about some level of disillusionment. The third step is the one that moves us deeper.

At first, as we react to disillusionment, it may seem that we are moving into a more harmful or mundane relationship. Yet, similar to any long-term marriage or partnership, what we are actually doing is moving into a more authentic, difficult and beautiful relationship. In order to move beyond disillusionment, we recognize in the “other” both their brokenness and their wholeness. In a covenantal relationship, we don’t run away after our first experience with brokenness or disillusionment. Rather, we understand it in the context of the whole, in the context of gifts and vision, in the context of reaching out and receiving in return, in the context of being in the presence of other fallible human beings.

The giving and the receiving within a covenantal relationship is where I notice a connection to the function of sound in water. Leonardo Da Vinci’s discovery in 1490 of listening to underwater sounds by placing your ear next to a tube in the water is the first known human experiment with what would later be called “sonar,” yet whales and dolphins have been capable of biological echolocation for millions of years. According to Wikipedia, our great modern theological encyclopedia, “Echolocating animals emit calls out to the environment and listen to the echoes of those calls that return from various objects in the environment. They use these echoes to locate, range, and identify the objects.”

A covenantal relationship is an elastic relationship. When it is attended to and maintained well, a covenantal relationship is stable overall even as – and because – it encompasses the broad scope of the dynamic flux between ongoing challenge and ongoing sustenance. In typical communication, our sound flows through the air in only one direction. But in a covenantal relationship, similar to a the capacity for echolocation, communication flows out and back. A covenantal relationship calls out to the environment, to other people...and then listens to the echoes of those calls in return from various objects and people in the environment.

In this coming year, as our relationship deepens, and as we work toward our vision of greater engagement with the wider world, let us remember this practice of echolocation, this practice of continuously calling out to each other and our environment...and then, with great attentiveness and great care, let us listen to the echoes and responses. In this way we may safely navigate through our world.

**Water Communion 2009**  
**Reverend Kent Hemmen Saleska**

In a few moments we will recognize and celebrate our returning again and joining together this fall by merging the waters of our summer. Our process is simple: I will read a poem and offer an invitation to bring forward waters from each of the four directions, and then Greg will play music. You are invited to bring your waters forward at the time you feel is most appropriate to you. If you did not bring water this morning, a pitcher of water is here for you to pour a bit of water that symbolizes your journey. As the music plays, I invite you to speak the name of the source of your water, or a word that symbolizes a journey you took this summer, and then to pour a little of it into the bowl.

While it may be tempting to tell a longer story of how you got your water or what it means to you, during the service we ask that you simply name the source of your water, and then share your longer stories after the service during coffee hour.

As you contemplate where your journey took you this summer, remember that each direction also has various qualities of the heart and spirit associated with it, and which are also printed in your order of service:

**East** is the direction of air, sunlight, new beginnings, and spring.

**South** is the direction of fire, compassion, passion, inspiration, and summer.

**West** is the direction of water, healing, harvest, sunset, and fall.

**North** is the direction of earth, death, completion of a life cycle, winter.

So if you traveled to the Great Lakes or the Atlantic Ocean, then the East would be your direction. But the East is also associated with new beginnings, so if you had a birth in your family, or if you got a new job, then you may choose to share your water when I ask for waters of the East to come forward.

I encourage you to take this time of merging of our gathered waters to reflect upon the many kinds of journeys we travel, both the exterior and the interior, the physical and the spiritual. Where are you coming from? What gifts of the journey do you bring back to our beloved community?

We will begin with pouring a bit of the water that was collected last year.

*Waters of the East*  
**East, Air, Birth, Beginnings, Spring**

**The Faces of Children**

By Elizabeth Spires

Meeting old friends after a long time, we see  
with surprise how they have changed, and must imagine,  
despite the mirror's lies, that change is upon us, too.

Once, in our twenties, we thought we would never die.  
Now, as one thoughtlessly shuffles a deck of cards,  
we have run through half our lives.

The afternoon has vanished, the evening changing  
us into four shadows mildly talking on a porch.  
And as we talk, we listen to the children play  
the games that we played once. In joy and terror,  
they cry out in surprise as the seeker finds the one in hiding,  
or in fairytale tableau, each one is tapped and turned

to stone. The lawn is full of breathing statues who wait  
to be changed back again, and we can do nothing but stand  
to one side of our children's games, our children's lives.

We are the conjurors who take away all pain,  
and we are the ones who cannot take away the pain at all.  
They do not ask, as lately we have asked ourselves,

Who was I then? And what must I become?  
Like newly minted coins, their faces catch  
the evening's radiance. They are so sure of us,

more sure than we are of ourselves. Our children:  
who gently push us toward the end of our own lives.  
The future beckons brightly. They trust us to lead them there.

We call on the waters of the east, the waters of sunrise and new beginnings. Water from  
the St. Croix River, Lake Michigan, from the Atlantic Ocean.

We call on waters that nourish young green plants. We call on the waters of courage and  
inspiration that allow us to begin again. We call on waters of birth, rebirth, new life and  
resurrection, freshness and springtime.

Bring forward your waters of the East.

*Waters of the South*  
**Fire, Passion, Growth, Summer**

**“I went to the woods” (from Chapter 2 of *Walden*) - Henry David Thoreau**

“I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived. I did not wish to live what was not life, living is so dear; nor did I wish to practise resignation, unless it was quite necessary. I wanted to live deep and suck out all the marrow of life, to live so sturdily and Spartan-like as to put to rout all that was not life, to cut a broad swath and shave close, to drive life into a corner, and reduce it to its lowest terms, and, if it proved to be mean, why then to get the whole and genuine meanness of it, and publish its meanness to the world; or if it were sublime, to know it by experience, and be able to give a true account of it in my next excursion.”

We call forth the waters of the South, waters of fire, passion, growth and summer. From Lake Okiboji in Iowa, from New Orleans, the Gulf of Mexico, the Caribbean Sea, the Amazon, from the Antarctic Sea.

We call on waters of the heat of the day, the precious and often spare waters of summer and brown landscapes. We call on the waters that calm the parched mouth, that revive the burned spirits that power us on. Bring waters of power and passion that drive us forward, help us to grow, fill us with light and life.

Bring the waters of the South.

*Waters of the West*  
**Water, Calm, Harvest, Autumn**

**My November Guest**

By Robert Frost

My Sorrow, when she's here with me,  
Thinks these dark days of autumn rain  
Are beautiful as days can be;  
She loves the bare, the withered tree;  
She walks the sodden pasture lane.

Her pleasure will not let me stay.  
She talks and I am fain to list:  
She's glad the birds are gone away,  
She's glad her simple worsted gray  
Is silver now with clinging mist.

The desolate, deserted trees,  
The faded earth, the heavy sky,  
The beauties she so truly sees,  
She thinks I have no eye for these,  
And vexes me for reason why.

Not yesterday I learned to know  
The love of bare November days  
Before the coming of the snow,  
But it were vain to tell her so,  
For they are better for her praise.

We call on the waters of the West, waters of harvest and sunset; on waters of the Missouri River, the Rocky Mountains, the Columbia River. We call on waters from the Pacific Ocean, from unnamed islands lost in vast blue.

We call on the sweat of harvest time, the waters of the times of completion. Bring the cooling waters of autumn, rust colored and peaceful.

Bring the waters of the West.

***Waters of the North***  
**Earth, Death, Wholeness, Winter**

**December Moon**

By May Sarton

Before going to bed  
After a fall of snow  
I look out on the field  
Shining there in the moonlight  
So calm, untouched and white  
Snow silence fills my head  
After I leave the window.

Hours later near dawn  
When I look down again  
The whole landscape has changed  
The perfect surface gone  
Criss-crossed and written on  
Where the wild creatures ranged  
While the moon rose and shone.

Why did my dog not bark?  
Why did I hear no sound  
There on the snow-locked ground  
In the tumultuous dark?

How much can come, how much can go  
When the December moon is bright,  
What worlds of play we'll never know  
Sleeping away the cold white night  
After a fall of snow.

We call on waters of the north, the waters of winter, of death, of completion, peacefulness, and of the grace of the world. We call on the waters of the Boundary Waters, the Quetico, Lake Superior, Hudson's Bay, the Arctic Ocean.

Bring waters of the times of preparation, of becoming ready for that which comes further along. Bring waters of death, of the night, of rest. Bring waters of the peace that comes without bidding. Bring waters of the north.