

**“The Tensile Strands of Love”**  
**Ingathering Water Ritual Homily**  
**Unitarian Universalist Church of Minnetonka**  
**September 9, 2007**

This morning we join with each other and with Unitarian Universalists across the United States and Canada in a ritual of joining waters together. After nearly 20 years since it was first done at a women’s conference in Michigan – and some say it was at youth conferences even before that – this ritual has become a widely shared process for gathering a church community back together in the fall.

I’ve been thinking about this service for the past four months: ever since last May when you voted to call me as your new minister. This is a vivacious and meaningful time in the life of this congregation. Even as the year is fading into fall, many new things are occurring: we are creating a new relationship together, new congregational structures are being created, and a capital campaign is on the way as we plot a collective course toward purchasing property and constructing a new building. So, for this Water Communion Sunday, I’ve been wondering what water might teach us about joining together in this intentional religious community. So I did some research. It may be that I’ve learned just enough to be dangerous (!), but here are some things I found.

One atom of Oxygen and two atoms of Hydrogen form a molecule of water. The bond between them is called a “covalent bond.” A covalent bond occurs when two atoms, each with an odd number of electrons, connect together; these atoms, in essence, “search for” each other because they “need” to make an even amount out of their total number of electrons. When atoms share their electrons, they create a covalent bond and the molecule they form becomes more stable. This sharing makes covalent bonds very strong.

The water molecule also contains a slight negative charge in the Oxygen atom and a slight positive charge in the Hydrogen atoms. This magnetic charge causes the three-point molecule to “bend.” The magnetic charge and bent shape are crucial to the amazing and varied qualities of water.

For instance, bonding between many water molecules is stronger because positive Hydrogen and negative Oxygen link together easily. And though the bonds between the Hydrogen molecules are weaker, when billions of water molecules connect, as they do in our streams, lakes and oceans, the overall bonding is stronger because of strength in numbers. The strength and flexibility of its bond helps explain why water does not simply break like a tree branch, but flows in ripples and waves and easily connects back together when it falls apart.

Water also responds to magnetic fields by orienting its molecules in the same direction. This polarization also allows water to interact with other polarized molecules – and this is how substances become dissolved in water.

As I look out upon this gathering it seems, because of our individual polarized charges, that we are all “bent” into a shape that helps us converge and connect with one another here rather than with some other religious community. Like molecules of H<sub>2</sub>O, we originate and rise from the deep springs of our lives, then trickle and gather into small streams that flow into this congregational ocean. And I wonder if the Board of Trustees and the minister may be magnetic fields that orient our individual polarized identities into a greater universal calling? As we move into the anxieties of fund-raising and church building, I also imagine in this congregational ocean that neither hurricane winds nor shifting continental plates on our ocean floor will break our

unified orientation, but that we will be strong and flexible as a wave, perhaps splashing apart into droplets but then easily bonding back together again. I ponder too, how we may welcome and invite visitors and guests into this sea. Perhaps, similar to what happens when water is mixed with other molecules, their substance will dissolve into our substance: not to lose all sense of individual identity, but to bond our individual identities with one another to create ever-evolving new forms and new substances.

So what is the strong covalent bond between our individual selves? What are our electrons and how does sharing them stabilize us? I invite you to listen to a poem by Robert Walsh that gives us a clue. The poem is called "Fault Line."

### **Fault Line**

Did you ever think there might be a fault line  
passing underneath your living room:  
A place in which your life is lived in meeting  
and in separating, wondering  
and telling, unaware that just beneath  
you is the unseen seam of great plates  
that strain through time? And that your life, already  
spilling over the brim, could be invaded,  
sent off in a new direction, turned  
aside by forces you were warned about  
but not prepared for? Shelves could be spilled out,  
the level floor set at an angle in  
some seconds' shaking. You would have to take  
your losses, do whatever must be done next.

When the great plates slip  
and the earth shivers and the flaw is seen  
to lie in what you trusted most, look not  
to more solidity, to weighty slabs  
of concrete poured or strength of cantilevered  
beam to save the fractured order. Trust  
more the tensile strands of love that bend  
and stretch to hold you in the web of life  
that's often torn but always healing. There's  
your strength. The shifting plates, the restive earth,  
your room, your precious life, they all proceed  
from love, the ground on which we walk together.

"Trust/ more the tensile strands of love that bend/ and stretch to hold you in the web of life/  
that's often torn but always healing. There's/ your strength." Yes, there is our strength. Not in  
hoarding. Not in anxiety. Not in holding on. Our strength lies in letting go, in sharing our odd  
electron with those others who have odd electrons too: sharing our time, sharing our money,  
sharing our lives, sharing our "tensile strands of love that bend/ and stretch to hold [us] in the  
web of life/ that's often torn but always healing." May we join with one another, be as flexible  
as a wave, fall apart and merge together once again.

In a few moments we will recognize and celebrate our coming back to together again 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 and Amy and Kelby will play music. You are invited to bring your waters forward at the time most appropriate to you. If you did not bring water with you this morning, a pitcher of water is here for you to pour a bit of symbolic water if you wish. As the music plays, you are invited to call out the name of the source of your water or a word that symbolizes a journey you took this summer.

If you traveled to the Great Lakes or the Atlantic Ocean, then the East would be your direction. It may be though that your journey was through a geography of the heart or spirit. Each direction also has other qualities associated with them:

**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.

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.

[Water Communion ritual begins on next page]

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

**O sweet spontaneous**

e.e. cummings

O sweet spontaneous  
earth how often have  
the  
doting  
    fingers of  
purient philosophers pinched  
and  
poked  
thee  
,has the naughty thumb  
of science prodded  
thy  
    beauty .how  
ofn have religions taken  
thee upon their scraggy knees  
squeezing and  
buffeting thee that thou mightest conceive  
gods  
    (but  
true  
to the incomparable  
couch of death thy  
rhythmic  
lover  
    thou answerest  
them only with  
    spring)

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 the waters that have nourished young plants, we call on waters of new life. We call on the waters of courage and inspiration that allow us to begin again. We call on waters of springtime and freshness.

Bring forward your waters of the East.

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

**Thus Spake the Mockingbird** – By Barbara Hamby

The mockingbird says, Hallelujah, coreopsis, I make the day  
bright, I wake the night-blooming jasmine. I am  
the duodecimo of desperate love, the hocus-pocus passion  
flower of delirious retribution. You never saw such a bird,  
such a triage of blood and feathers, tongues and bone. O the world  
is a sad address, bitterness melting the tongues of babies,  
breasts full of accidental milk, but I can teach the flowers to grow,  
take their tight buds, unfurl them like flags in the morning heat,  
fat banners of scent, flat platters of riot on the emerald scene.

I am the green god of pine trees, conducting the music  
of rustling needle through a harp of wind. I am the heart of men,  
the wild bird that drives their sex, forges their engines,  
jimmies their shattered locks in the dark flare where midnight slinks.

I am the careless minx in the skirts of women, the bright moon  
caressing their hair, the sharp words pouring from their beautiful mouths  
in board rooms, on bar stools, in big city laundrettes. I am  
Lester Young's sidwinding sax, sending that Pony Express  
message out west in the Marconi tube hidden in every torso  
tied tight in the corset of do and don't, high and low, yes and no. I am  
the radio, first god of the twentieth century, broadcasting  
the news, the blues, the death counts, the mothers wailing  
when everyone's gone home. I am sweeping  
through the Eustachian tube of the great plains, transmitting  
through every ear of corn, shimmying down the spine  
of every Bible-thumping banker and bureaucrat, relaying the anointed  
word of the shimmering world. Every dirty foot that walks  
the broken streets moves on my wings. I speak from the golden  
screens. Hear the roar of my discord murdering the trees,  
screaming its furious rag. The fuselage of my revival-tent brag. Open  
your windows, slip on your castanets. I am the flamenco  
in the heel of desire. I am the dancer. I am the choir. Hear my wild  
throat crowd the exploding sky. O I can make a noise.

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

**Harbingers of Frost**

(#538 in Hymnal)

By Robert T. Weston

Autumn, we know,  
Is life en route to death.  
The asters are but harbingers of frost.

The trees, flaunting their colors at the sky,  
In other times will follow where  
    the leaves have fallen,  
And so shall we.

Yet other lives will come.  
So may we know, accept, embrace,  
The mystery of life we hold a while

Nor mourn that it outgrows each  
    separate self, but still rejoice  
    that we may have our day.

Lift high our colors to the sky!  
    and give,  
In our time, fresh glory  
    to the earth.

We call on the waters of the West, waters of harvest and sunset. Waters of the Missouri River, of the Rocky Mountains, of the Pacific Ocean. Bring waters from the coast of unnamed islands lost in vast blue, bring waters from the Bay of Japan.

Bring the sweat of harvest time, 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**

**When Great Trees Fall**

By Maya Angelou

When great trees fall,  
rocks on distant hills shudder,  
lions hunker down  
in tall grasses,  
and even elephants lumber after safety.

When great trees fall  
in forests,  
small things recoil into silence,  
their senses  
eroded beyond fear.

When great souls die,  
the air around us becomes light, rare, sterile,  
We breathe briefly.  
our eyes, briefly,  
see with  
a hurtful clarity.  
Our memory, suddenly sharpened,  
examines,  
gnaws on kind words  
unsaid,  
promised walks never taken.

Great souls die and  
our reality, bound to  
them, takes leave of us.  
Our souls,  
dependent upon their  
nurture,  
now shrink, wizened.  
Our minds, formed  
and informed by their  
radiance,  
fall away.  
We are not so much maddened  
as reduced to the unutterable ignorance  
of dark, cold  
caves.

And when great souls die,  
after a period peace blooms,  
slowly and always  
irregularly. Spaces fill  
with a kind of  
soothing electric vibration.  
Our senses, restored, never  
to be the same, whisper to us,  
They existed. They existed.  
We can be. Be and be  
better. For they existed.

Bring the waters of the north, the waters of winter, of death, of peacefulness, completion,  
and of the grace of the world. Bring the waters of the Boundary Waters, of Lake Superior, from  
Hudson's Bay, from 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.

### **Closing to Water Communion**

*Coming Home*, by Peter Mayer; Musicians: Kent Saleska, Greg Membrez, Amy and Kelby Stine

When trees are turning  
Chimney smoke is curling  
Fallen leaves are swirling  
I'll be coming home  
When geese are wending  
Apple branches bending  
When the summer's ending  
I'll be coming home

When Autumn's first frost  
Glistens on the corn stalks  
The bales of hay and sweet squash  
I'll be coming home  
And hill and meadow  
Are crimson, rust and yellow  
When the fruits of August mellow  
I'll be coming home

CHORUS:   And rest will greet me  
              Love will receive me  
              And joy, like a deep red wine  
              Fill my heart

I have been trodding  
The furrowed fields of summer  
Footsteps heavy under  
The seeds I've come to sow  
When some have sprouted  
And I have hoped and doubted  
And every bushel's counted  
I'll be coming home

CHORUS (2 times)

Nights will be cold then  
Foxes in their holes then  
Skies awaiting snow when  
I'll be coming home  
When hearths are burning  
Tables set with sterling  
I will be returning