

## “Water as Symbol”

SEPTEMBER 4, 2016

“My birthday begins with the water,” wrote the poet Dylan Thomas, describing the matrix of co-mingled energies in Wales that nurtured his sense of self and self-expression. “Birds and the birds of the winged trees flying my name/ Above the farms and the white horses/ And I rose.../ And walked abroad in a shower of all my days....” On a wet, blustery morning the poet wanders the hills and fields of his youth, reminiscing....

It is in this spirit of re-mem-bering and re-connecting that we congregate this morning. And in the Dylan Thomas spirit of *rising*: to meet and greet one another. To support one another. And to support the best—*and the most creative*—within each one of us.

*And* of rising to renew and reaffirm our mutual connections—to this place and to each person among us. Including new people, we are *going* to meet (who are going to join us) over the course of the next ten months. So—welcome! Welcome back. And welcome forward, too.

It’s good to be here, and among you. But it’s a little scary, too. For me, personally, as a newcomer, of course, but it’s not only that. These are scary times. One doesn’t have to be a fundamentalist to know that we’re living in *apocalyptic* times. This coming week we recall the 9/11 attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon. Naturally, we think back and lament the tragic events of that day fifteen years ago—and much of what’s come about in its wake.

Ironically, the week just past is also *the 110<sup>th</sup> anniversary* of Mahatma Gandhi’s launching of the *Satyagraha* campaign. *Satyagraha: Soul Force or Truth Force*. Nonviolent resistance: the religious and political philosophy Gandhi and his followers used to end imperialism; and that Martin Luther King and Nelson Mandela also used in their respective struggles—a philosophy 180 degrees from that of the British Home office in 1906 and 180 degrees’ form that of Donald Trump today.

Another anniversary: this morning’s water communion coincides with the eleventh anniversary of Hurricane Katrina—just as new disastrous floods inundate the Gulf and Southern Atlantic Coast. Some people who became members of the Santa Fe Congregation where I served during Katrina and its aftermath were forced to relocate among us because of that calamity. Katrina reminded us—for anyone who’d forgotten—of the destructive capacity of water. While living in Pittsburgh through the ‘90s I became familiar with the terrible Johnstown Flood of 1889. Water can unleash terrible fury.

It can also unleash—or, rather, sow the seeds of—deep insight.

As Claire reminded us in her Lesson for All Ages, people are close to 80% water. All *living* things are largely water, and need water to thrive; “Water is the blood of the Earth,

and flows through its muscles and veins,” wrote the Chinese sage Kaun Chung 2300 years ago. The draught we’re currently suffering here in California—now in its fifth year—has made it abundantly clear: *water is life*.

So it’s not surprising that philosophers of all times and places have used water as a symbol.

Western philosophy derives largely from the ancient Greeks, who looked upon water as *a natural phenomenon*. And ever since (broadly speaking) Western thought has focused on physical, social, and scientific problems. That’s one tradition.

Asian traditions are different. In India water was associated with creation. And Indian thought, over the centuries, has been largely associated with *religious* problems. (As the 1982 Richard Attenborough movie *Gandhi* clearly explains, Mohandas Gandhi considered colonialism a *religious* problem and he considered resistance to imperialism a *religious* struggle.)

Chinese thought and philosophy is essentially *humanistic*. It concerns itself principally with *social* and *ethical* problems. Its founders, basically, were *Confucius*—a practical, good government fellow—and *Lao Tzu*—of a more mystical and naturalistic frame of mind. Both of them looked to water for moral lessons: how to behave properly and how to maintain right relationships within one’s family, community, country, with the natural world, and so on.

The Chinese concept of *Tao* is a little elusive to most Westerners, at least when first introduced to it; essentially it means *that on which something or someone goes*, a path, a road, later extended to mean “method,” “principle,” “truth,” and finally “reality.” All of this is summed up in the common English translation, “the Way.” Alan Watts describes *Tao* as nature’s “organic *pattern*.” And water, for the Chinese, is the *Tao*’s most elegant metaphor. Alignment with this pattern is the basis of all ethics, believed Taoists and Confucians alike. How to align? How to be ethical? Consider this morning’s reading by Lao Tzu:

The highest form of goodness is like water.  
Water knows how to benefit all things without striving with them.  
It stays in places disdained by others.  
Therefore, it comes near to *Tao*.

In choosing your dwelling, know how to keep to the ground.  
In cultivating your mind, know how to dive in the hidden depths.  
In dealing with others, know how to be gentle and kind.  
In speaking, know how to keep your words.  
In governing, know how to keep order.  
In transacting business, know how to be efficient.  
In making a move, know how to choose the right moment.

If you do not strive with others,  
You will be free from blame

(John C. H. Wu translation)

Being humanistic, Chinese philosophy focuses on wholesome behavior and what's good for society. People should spend time in nature, contemplating its pattern, believe the Taoists, because it makes us better, more ethical persons: good parents, brothers and sisters, and better citizens. It also makes us happier. One of the best things about summer vacation is the chance it offers to lay back for a while and ponder the big picture—and our place in it. Sitting by the water's edge is healing; all nature is healing.

Former *Boston Globe* columnist Linda Weltner is a member of the Marblehead, MA Unitarian Universalist Church. In one of her columns, Weltner notes that the cosmologist Brian Swimme considers *communion* to be one of the underlying principles of the universe. All aspects of life are in profound relationship to one another, including humanity—when we sit still for a minute and get in touch with it. “It is this communion aspect of existence,” Weltner goes on,

that allows us to digest plants, to decipher the language of people halfway around the world, to have love affairs with our pets. It's why we thrill to the sight of snowcapped mountains when we might just as easily be indifferent. We come with an inborn response to nature that requires only the right stimulus to leap into being. That's the reason that all it takes to convince humankind of the value of whales is to give enough people a glimpse of one.

Maybe it's the fact that human beings are close to 80% water that makes us slow down and relax when we're at the water's edge; helps us re-member our connections to the rest of the universe—and one another.

This morning we celebrate those moments of summer contemplation, and celebrate, too, our reconnections to one another *in this community*. So it is that we resume our regular Sunday schedule by sharing a simplified water communion together. In some of our congregations, the water in our communion bowl includes a vial taken from last year's ritual—as last year's water included some from the year before (and every year back for many years)—reminding members that the congregation is bigger than they alone. It includes good people who went before and others who will follow: for we are a community of memory and hope; wonderful memories and great, often valiant hopes.

This morning we begin our 59<sup>th</sup> year as a liberal religious community here in Rancho Palos Verdes. And let our birthday, like Dylan Thomas's, begins with the water.

So may it be.

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