

To the Waters

A service by Laurie Stuart, Transitional Minister
South Nassau UU Congregation
September 7, 2014

CALL TO WORSHIP:

Come ye into this house of worship!
Come in and find peace and rest,
inspiration and aspiration, fellowship and love.

Come in and find light for your darkness,
a friend's touch for your loneliness,
and music for your soul.
Yes, music for your soul.
Come in and let your heart sing
for all the blessings that are yours and ours this day.

Adapted from Elizabeth A. Parish

CHALICE LIGHTING:

To the Water, a chant by Laurie Stuart (Sung in unison)

To the waters of the world, we thank you
To the waters of the world, we bow
To the waters of the world, we pledge our protection
To the waters of the world, we send our love.

STORY: Good Luck, Bad Luck: A Taoist Parable

To set the stage for our transitional work ahead and in recognition of the qualities of water that makes it possible for it to flow through and around obstacles, move beyond what might be our initial judgments, I'd like to share a story with you called Good Luck, Bad Luck. It was recommended to me by Religious Education Director David Silver. He thought it would be perfect story for our Water service because it speaks of a spiritual attitude, not unlike water, that can flow with whatever is coming our way. It tells of a farmer who was always aware that we can never actually know whether something is good luck or bad luck. Something that we might think of as good might have negative consequences. Something that we think of as bad might turn out in the end to be very good. Who knows?

Here's the story:

Once there was an old farmer who had an old horse for tilling his fields. One day the horse escaped into the hills. And when all the farmer's neighbors sympathized with the old man over his bad luck. The farmer replied, 'Bad luck? Good luck? Who knows?'

A week later, the horse returned with a herd of wild horses from the hills and this time the neighbors congratulated the farmer on his good luck. The farmer replied, 'Good luck? Bad luck? Who knows?'

Then, when the farmer's son was attempting to tame one of the wild horses, he fell off its back and broke his leg. The neighbors came and said this was very bad luck. But not the farmer. The farmer said, 'Bad luck? Good luck? Who knows?'

Some weeks later, the army marched into the village, because there was a war going on and conscripted every able-bodied youth they found there. When they saw the farmer's son had broken his leg, they knew they couldn't take them with them. And they left him behind. The neighbors said, 'What good luck!' And the farmer replied, 'Good luck? Bad luck? Who knows?'

In our story, the farmer takes a balanced calm view and accepts the life events without judgment or interpretation. I thought this story was especially fitting as we begin this transition year together. As you move from the full-time ministry of Catherine into a part-time transitional ministry can you join me in saying: 'Good luck? Bad luck? Who knows?' (Thank you teens!)

Of course, luck doesn't have anything to do with this situation. But the question is: Are our lives made easier if we could flow with and around obstacles without them making us crazy, or angry, demoralized, or afraid? Can we really assume a "good luck, bad luck," non-anxious approach when our world seems so uncertain and everywhere we look there is some sort of crisis or another? My hope is that we can. My hope is that we can always remember, and share a 'good luck, bad luck, who knows?' moment. If nothing else, perhaps we'll laugh together.

But if we can't, maybe we can remember this passage by Margaret Atwood from "The Penelopiad."

READING:

Water does not resist. Water flows.

When you plunge your hand into it, all you feel is a caress.

Water is not a solid wall, it will not stop you.

But water always goes where it wants to go, and nothing in the end can stand against it.

Water is patient. Dripping water wears away a stone.

Remember that, my child. Remember you are half water.
If you can't go through an obstacle, go around it. Water does. (Margaret Atwood)

HOMILY: To the Waters

I love the image that water does not resist, and that when we plunge our hands into cool or warm water, it feels like a caress. (Not so much with icy water or hot boiling water, I have to say). But water has this unique ability, when we stick our hands in, to make room. It has the ability to split apart into drops, into rivulets, into streams and then recombine, always as a new whole.

Water has an ability to flow through and around all obstacles. In its nature, it is fluid.

And it is an absolutely wonderful and useful metaphor as we begin our transitional ministry together. This year, we will have the opportunity to look at the many separate drops here at the South Nassau UU Congregation, to understand how they come together in one whole body, and to take a look at whether we want to re-direct them in any way. Like children playing in a stream, we have the opportunity to take a look at how this congregation flows together and how we can play with the flowing waters.

Just for fun, and to fill me in a bit, let's call out the different drops that form the whole of SNUCC (a committee, a group, the drops that form.) Let's try to see if we can call them out one at a time and let's have the drummers provide a beat, or several, in between.

Thank you, thank you.

So this year, we'll spend time talking, playing, taking stock of the congregation's history (good timing as Paul Sherrock and Alice Spatt will be going through the closet to catalogue the historical documents there). We'll have the opportunity to let go of what is no longer needed and make ready for new things to come.

It is a good time in your history to do this. And you're in good company as all religious institutions are imaging, or reimagining, what church of the present and of the future might look like. Organized religion is on the downturn – for some that might be a welcomed idea – but still, I believe that religious communities are essential, especially as our world gets more and more fragmented. We need a community to support our deepest concerns. We need a community to hold our collective hopes, our fears and our desire for equity and compassion in the world.

As we enter in into a time of shrinking resources, those places, those communities, that are essential will survive. In the year ahead, we will explore just what is essential and viable here at SNUUC. Collectively, we will water what has the capacity to grow.

May our year be blessed with an expectant attitude, an attitude that cheerfully acknowledges “Good luck? Bad luck? Who knows? Bad luck? Good luck? Who knows?”

And I’ll be here with you, leading this exploration with a transition team. So here’s a little bit about me, ‘cause I know you’re interested. I was raised Unitarian Universalist. I think our religious pluralism and good will is essential in our world. I have spent a lifetime living and working with my UU values in a large community ministry that took the form of a community newspaper.

Personally, I am cheerful and upbeat about the magic that collaboration and communities can bring forth. (I’ll speak more about this in my next service called New Possibilities on September 28.) My cheerful and upbeat nature is not because of good luck or that it hasn’t been tested. Rather, it comes from my religious grounding that the moral arc of the universe bends toward justice, as Unitarian minister Theodore Parker said, and which was paraphrased by Martin Luther King Jr. I also believe that we reap what we sow.

So I’m excited about the opportunity that we have to explore the nature, the vision and the future of this congregation. As we embark on this transitional time, beyond good luck, bad luck, and who knows, I hope that we remember that while we pool our time, talent and resources for the congregation, this congregation also helps to sustain each of our individual existence and the community at large.

We are continually in this fluid cycle, this ebb and flow, this transference of energy spirit from the congregation to the congregants, from the congregants to the congregation.

And because we always want to bring into our lived experience of the messages of our Sunday services, we now will stop talking and do a ritual where we combine the water from all of our individual journeys of the summer into one common bowl.

Our ritual this year will mirror the original ritual that had been created for the Convocation of Feminist Theology in 1980. It was a ritual that celebrated the strength of women’s presence within our denomination and how women needed to be invited into leadership. In that first ritual, eight women brought water from across the country, and combined it into a common bowl. Songs were sung. “And then when they left they each took a piece of that water back with them. (Which we will do today.) They reclaimed the water; they reclaimed the Earth; They reclaimed their history. They laid claim to their future, and the future of all living things. [It was] A vow and a promise, to each other and to themselves.” (The Lamp in the Corner, Skinner Books, page 33)

We are thankful for this history, for the stories of our denominational elders and our their and our responsiveness to witness and embody change and transition.

So I want to end this homily with this prayer:

As we gather our waters, let us be thankful to the waters, for its lessons, for its ability to cleanse us, to quench us and to sustain us. For reminding us of our connection to the earth and all its creatures, and the reverence that helps give our lives meaning – for all the blessings that are yours and ours this day.

WATER RITUAL:

To make this portion orderly and beautiful, we ask that you come up the right hand aisle and after contributing your water, walk down the left hand aisle. The choir will sing Blue Boat home and There's a River in My Soul." Please join in.

May this water bless our lives.

As we leave this sacred place, let us take the essence of what we have experienced today, and have it nurture our lives in the coming week. Let us remember our connection to each other and to the earth – to the past and to the present – let us imagine a future where hope and equality bless the land and may we, like the origins of this water ceremony – with roots in inequality and unequal distribution of power — use our fear and our outrage, our vulnerability and our love to bring forth something new and beautiful. Let us be inspired and inspiring – as only we can be. May we dwell in a non-anxious place joyfully exclaiming: Good luck? Bad luck? Who Knows?

And as a final goodbye gesture, please turn to your neighbor and tell them what you will do with your portion of the common water, which you will receive as you walk out of the sanctuary. And don't worry about saving it; we'll do that here. Think of what you will water with your piece of the collective whole. Where will you pour it? What will your blessing be?

CLOSING WORDS

It starts with a drop,

Then a trickle...

A burble, a rush of water, bubbling toward its destination;

And finally the wide, endless sea.

All rivers run to the sea.

Today you brought water

Poured it into a common bowl.
Today you came
And shared in this sacred community.
May you depart this sacred space,
Hearts filled with hope for new beginnings;
And a vial of water to bring home to signify
A fresh start.

Go forth, but return to this community,
Where rivers of tears may be shed,
Where dry souls are watered,
Where your joy bubbles,
Where your life cup overflows,
Where deep in your spirit you have found in this place a home.

All rivers run to the sea.

—Kayle Rice

BENEDICTION AND EXTINGUISHING CHALICE

May the peace of flowing water be with us,
May the beauty of starry skies be with us,
May the warmth of companionship be with us,
And may the miracle of this world in its fullness bless us with this day and each day of
our lives.

Until we meet again.