

In Living Community A Spirituality of Water^{©1}

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*First presented on Saturday July 22, 2006 in Prince Frederick, Maryland,
in the Chesapeake Watershed.*

*A community of faith-based groups sponsored the presentation -- the Bay
Presbyterian Church, the Broadview American Baptist Church, The Patuxent Friends
(Quaker) Meeting, and the Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Southern Maryland.
Chestory: The Center for the Chesapeake Story also co-sponsored.*

*Tom Wisner, a singer of regional songs, deepened the experience with several
songs selected from his song bag to complement the themes. The lyrics of those
songs are included in this version of the essay.*

*The presentation was broadcast with added music and commentary on WRYR 97.5
LP FM on the show Chesapeake Country.*

SONG : CHESAPEAKE BORN By TW ©1979 ²

I'm Chesapeake born, Chesapeake free
Chesapeake bound and flowing with ease
I'm Chesapeake born and bound to thee
Deed I am. I'm Chesapeake free!

I hear your voices singing out and
I know that deep inside
The Mother of these Waters
is flowing deep and wide.

Sons and daughters
of the waters life within
Let your voices blend with the wind.

I

I'm Chesapeake born, Chesapeake free
Chesapeake bound and flowing with ease
I'm Chesapeake born and bound to thee
'Deed I am . . . Chesapeake free!

In 2005, after 35 years of living in the Chesapeake region, I followed my heart's call to return to my birthright waters along the eastern shore of Lake Michigan. Here I continued my daily work of waking up to the spiritual role of water in my life.

Despite my distance, I have stayed in daily touch with Chesapeake news. I know that, in Chesapeake country, kids are getting muddy planting oyster spat or releasing turtles into the waters. Nesting eagles are reported, and sea grass is returning to parts of the Bay.

Yet the Bay Foundation continues to report that the Chesapeake waters are on the edge of dying.³ Sewage, industrial spills and mercury in the air pollute the waters, population growth overloads the water's edge, and fertilizers still add up to dead zones in rivers and the Bay. The Chesapeake's in trouble.

I would not be here today if this was just a problem in the Chesapeake. In Michigan, I quickly discovered a fresh-water version of the degradation pattern – in both the small Lake Macatawa and in the Great Lakes as a whole. That pattern extends out around the planet. In China, people are being poisoned by industrial spills into river water. In Iraq, waters are polluted by the side-effects of war, including breakdown of wastewater treatment plants and the radioactive residue of depleted uranium. In Africa and South Asia, hundreds die daily from disease caused by drinking dirty water.

Something is out of balance, not only in the Chesapeake, but on the planet.

Many of you know that Naval Academy professor Howard Ernst, in his 2004 book *Chesapeake Bay Blues*, charged that the 'Save the Bay' program was not a world-class success but an outstanding failure. What we need, he said, is to change our politics so that healthy water becomes our priority. But so far, it's not happening.

Why? I think it's deeper than politics. As Lynn Strauss, pastor of River Road Unitarian Church outside Washington D.C. put it "Water is a mirror of our communal soul."⁴

Is the state of Chesapeake waters a soul-stirring matter for each of us here? Could it be that what is needed is a spiritual re-awakening to the reality of the role of water in our lives? And could such an awakening lead to unprecedented support for action to heal our human impacts on the waters of this planet?

So my talk today is a call for a shift of consciousness followed by action.

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**Wonder at the Beauty;
 Gratitude for the Gifts of Water;**

SONG Made of Water By TW ©1979

I'm made of water, flowing water,
Sun and salt and winds that blow
Though my bones were formed in mountains
It's through my blood this river flows.

Driving down the wind will sound,
The rain will fall and roll on by
Lord I'm mighty grateful for
The love I see in my brother's eye.

And for the mighty river bringin'
Life a flowin' from the sky.

'Cause I'm made of water, flowin' water,
Sun and salt and winds that blow
Though my bones were formed in mountains
It's through my blood this river flows.

Ancient cultures around the world recognized the power and gift of water in our lives.

In Genesis: "God's spirit hovered over the water" creating light and darkness, then land. "And it was good," the Biblical language says. In the Qur'an, this changes to the words "We have created every living thing from water."

Hindu origin stories tell of the god Indri, who released waters as the source of life and fertility and healing. Hindus today still wade into the sacred Ganges River to seek both physical and spiritual healing.⁵

In the spirit of these great traditions, a water-spirituality calls us to a sense of wonder for the role of water in the creation, maintenance, and healing of all life, including ours – and to express our gratitude.

Earth's water was first formed in the intense heat of the early stars . . . it connects us to the great story of creation in our universe. When we look at the sun- or moon- light flickering on water, we can recall water's birth in starlight.

Earth is our solar system's water-planet, just the right distance from the sun for water to create life here. Venus is too hot; Mars too cold. Our bodies are about 70% water and about 70% of the Earth's surface is covered by water. We're in tune with the Earth in our common relation to water.

Here in the Chesapeake, heavy salt water pushes in from the Atlantic under the fresh water flowing down from streams and rivers. Once a simple river by whose shores elephants, horses and mammoths grazed; the Chesapeake began its life with the melting of the last great glaciers of North America, as the salty sea began its push over dry land. Rising more than three feet each century, it became one of the great life-filled estuaries of the planet.

For water, we are grateful

When we are grateful for something, we focus on it – asking in ever-deeper levels: what *is* this? What’s happening here?

One of water’s extraordinary movements is the simple but powerful cycle in which it moves daily through our lives. Because our human ways of entering into this cycle are a major cause of our water troubles, we urgently need to bring awareness of this movement into our spiritual lives.

In the wild, water’s cycle from atmosphere to earth and back again is as beautiful as rain dripping from trees or the rising of a mist over a spring river, as terrifying as the spiral of a hurricane coming up the Bay, and as simple as watching raindrops form a mud puddle and then vanish into the ground.

It’s summer, so trees and plants all over this region are pulling water out of the soil and transpiring it into the air. A large oak like the old Wye on the Eastern Shore could lift 40,000 gallons a year from the soil into the air. There the water joins hundreds of tons of water evaporating from mud puddles, the Patuxent and Potomac Rivers, and all the surface waters of the Chesapeake region to become clouds that swirl over the earth and, eventually, return water to the planet’s surface. In this great cycle, the movement of water from earth into air and back again causes our home plant to do a ‘pirouette,’ increasing, then decreasing the speed of its revolution through space.⁶ Amazing.

We’re always in this cycling of water – and one of my favorite practices is asking: what’s water doing here, now?

Water is pulsing through our bodies as part of our blood. In this room, moisture in the air keeps our throat from drying out, or lack of it makes us thirsty. If we’re hot, we may be doing our own ‘transpiration’ – sweating. Breathe in the air’s water, breath out air permeated with your body’s water.

Southern Maryland’s drinking water comes from rains in the cycles of the past – pumped up from wells drilled into slow-moving underground ‘rivers’ that are up to 8,000 years old, part of the rain stored and then melted at the ending of the last ice age. -- Drink some water – be conscious as you taste it, let it flow down your throat and be absorbed into your body. Breath some of it back out. Express your gratitude.

In its endless recycling over millennia, this water connects us to the human community past and present – to Buddha and Jesus Christ and Black Elk, to Cleopatra and Sappho the Greek poet . . . to the whole communion of beings from around this planet over time. Our blood is mostly water, making us blood-relatives of not only all humans on the planet but all four-legged, singed and finned beings involved in the cycle. They are all our relations, as the Lakota say.

SONG: THE MOUTH OF THE WATERS By TW ©2006
(for the Dakota ancient river The Mouth of the Sacred Waters: Ba-doe-tay Mini Wakan)

Now my people no longer live for the land
We follow prophets whose central demand
Seems solely focused on saving our fear ridden souls
And the love of the wind and the power within ... the river
Lay dormant and cold

Ba- doe-tay Mini Wakan!
The mouth of the sacred waters lay muted and still
While my people so bold have traded and sold
All the mystery is wrung from God's will
And a Native American River lay lost in the American land
I am a Native American River lost in the American land

It's the song of the word that the wild wind is singing
Invoking a prayer for the new life its bringing

And every word in the song was first formed in the mouth of the waters
Ba-doe-tay Mini Wakan: the Mouth of the Waters!

II: Grief at Water's Pollution

As we develop deeper consciousness of the water that is cycling out of our bodies, our homes and businesses; and of the water that receive wastes from our cars, trucks and boats -- we will also wake up to grief.

Chesapeake waters are sick largely because of pollutants we humans are adding to water in its natural cycle. We switch on electricity; mercury and sulfur dioxide flare out of the smoke stacks of Chesapeake-region coal-fired power plant. Fertilizers and pesticides on our lawns and farms are carried along by runoff into rivers, then to the Chesapeake and the Atlantic; sewage from our cities and urban sprawl spills raw into the rivers during heavy rains. One-third of the nitrogen polluting the bay comes

from the exhaust pipes of our cars and trucks. You get a perm in a local beautyshop, and the chemicals are washed down the drain into the local sewer system, that has no capacity to purify such chemicals from the water before it's flushed into the river and Bay. Cleaning products and medications flushed from your body flow into your sewage – and move on with the waters.

These facts are painful. So they are usually well-disguised behind the masks of the comforts provided by our society. But a spirituality of water calls us to look past the masks of easy energy, attractive products, and lack of easy information.

That's the challenge: Find out about more effective septic systems; get a list of earth-friendly cleaning products and watch what you allow to go down the drain; be willing to pay higher taxes for better waste treatment systems. Push for them, locally and at state and national levels. That's a beginning.

III: JUSTICE: THE RIGHT TO CLEAN WATER as a spiritual concern

From his unique position, UN Secretary General Kofi Annan has surveyed the world water situation. His succinct comment:

Access to safe **water** is a fundamental human need and therefore a basic human **right** ... We need to safeguard the global supply of healthy water and to ensure that everyone has access to it.⁷

By the year 2025, 48 countries are expected to face water shortages – among them Ethiopia, India, Kenya, Nigeria and Peru -- affecting nearly 5 billion people. According to the World Health Organization, 80% of diseases in developing nations stem from consumption and exposure to unsafe water, which kills more than 10,000 people each day.

Seventy percent of water used around the world goes to farm crops. It takes 3000 gallons of water to grow feed for enough cow to make a quarter-pound hamburger. When you wear a T-shirt made of cotton from Pakistan, drink coffee grown in Central America, or eat rice grown in Asia – you are affecting the water systems of those places on earth.⁸

Here in the United States, we have water-rich and water-poor regions. The Great Lakes hold 20% of the world's fresh water. Albuquerque, New Mexico has a water-bleak future as it continues to expand while draining the remnants of the heavily polluted Rio Grande as it flows through the city.

In Southern Maryland, aquifer levels drop while buildout continues. Older homes with less deep wells find those wells going dry. If the owner is affluent, a new well

may not be a problem. Less moneyed owners will find themselves deeper in debt and some may not be able to afford new wells. When the area moves to desalinization, the cost may mean moving to water-stamps comparable to food stamps.

What of the inequality between a nation like the U.S., with 5% of the global population, that has in the Great Lakes alone 20% of the world's fresh water – and a nation like Kenya, already running out of water? As the 2003 International Year of Freshwater put it: One flush of a Western toilet uses as much water as the average person in the developing world uses for a whole day's drinking, cleaning, washing, and cooking.

We speak now of the peak of oil production. But we also live in a time that is crossing over a peak point of free water and into an era where clean water may come to cost more than oil. Are we thinking of our children and grandchildren's access to water as we wash our cars with some of the purest water in the world from Southern Maryland aquifers?

World religions speak clearly to this justice issue.

HINDUISM: "Nature has enough for everybody's need, but not for everybody's greed." Mahatma Gandhi

ISLAM: Eat and drink, but do not be wasteful
For God does not like the prodigals. *Qur'an* 7:31

BUDDHISM: Let us . . . live in a way which will not deprive other beings of air, water, food, shelter, or the chance to live."
Thich Nhat Hahn

CHRISTIAN Gregory, a 4th century monk: To all earth's creatures God has given the . . . springs, the rivers and the forests, [giving] the air to the birds, and the waters to those who live in water. . . not as a private possession, but as common to all.

These ideas can enter our spiritual lives and encourage us to develop a sharing relationship to water.

SONG: WHO ANSWERS THE PRAYERS OF THE FISHES By TW ©2004

Who answers the prayers of the fishes,

Insures their abundance and more?
 Who guides them to life everlasting,
 As they swim to some far distant shore?

Who insures that their prime motivation
 Is guided by powers on high?
 Is the God that is made in their image
 Like the one we have in our sky?

IV Water Manifests Divine Creativity It is a Spiritual Teacher

Scientists trace the earth's water back to the fires in the early stars. But each of the world religions trace it back further -- to creation by or existence with the deepest level of spiritual power.

In turn, the mystical tradition within each religion leaps beyond the stewardship ethic, which sees humans as managers of the earth. All that is, is also a teacher, the mystical traditions say. Water is telling us about the creative spiritual power within the world.

BUDDHISM: "The ocean speaks and the mountains have tongues -- that is the everyday speech of the Buddha." Dogen Kigen
 13th century Zen master

SONG: Wild river by TW ©1979

Hey there wild river
 Teach me to flow
 Tell me your poems
 And all the songs that you know
 Touch me and wash me and let me lie down
 By the peace of your waters
 At night on the ground

Deep flowin' river
 Where are you bound?
 Tell me your story
 Teach me your sound
 Hey there wild river
 Won't you teach me to flow
 Won't you stop a lazy moment
 While you're rolling along
 And sing me your song?

CHRISTIANITY: “I, the fiery light of divine wisdom....I sparkle the waters”
12th century mystic Hildegard of Bingen

DAOISM “The supreme good is like water, which nourishes all things
without trying to. It is content with the low places that people
disdain. Thus it is like the Dao.” *Dao de Jing* V. 8

Water is a revelation of divine wisdom. Its nourishing, life-giving power can tell us about the life-nourishing work to which we are called. Will we sit by the banks of our streams or kayak down our rivers thinking of how they call us to nourishing life in the world? How will we respond?

Being present to water is a soul-touching experience . . . and there may be present in water, as in the rest of the universe, a level of existence that I simply call ‘the soul of water.’ Consider the lines of Mary Oliver:

Some things, say the wise ones who know everything,
Are not living. I say. . .

About cows and starfish and roses, there is no
argument. They die, after all.

But water is a question, so many living things in it,
But what is it, itself, living or not? Oh, gleaming
Generosity, how can they write you out?⁹

Chesapeake, oh gleaming generosity, help us understand your spirit!

This way of approaching water leads us into a deep and practical mysticism that is not apart from our world, but woven into its heart. Its effect is a change in the way we experience the ordinary – as extraordinary. Can we begin to think of the Patuxent, the Potomac and the Chesapeake as having creative spiritual power? As being teachers?

To pursue a spiritual life is to seek right-relationships with all members of our community. The more we become sensitive and responsive to water, the further it leads us into a vital recognition of our larger community. We *are* active participants in a story of water that is creating the future of all life on this planet. Let us, then, become spiritually-aware participants!

It is not we who need to bless water. . . but water that blesses us.

HOLY NOW by Peter Mayer ©¹⁰

When I was a boy each week on Sunday we would go to church
 And pay attention to the preacher and he would read the holy word
 And consecrate the holy bread and every one would kneel and bow
 Today the only difference is -- everything is holy now
 Everything, everything, everything is holy now

And when I was in Sunday school we would learn about the time
 Moses split the sea in two and Jesus made the water wine
 And I remember feeling sad miracles don't happen still
 Today I can't keep track 'cause every thing's a miracle
 Everything, everything, everything's a miracle

Wine from water is not so small
 But an even greater magic trick is anything is here at all!
 So the challenging thing becomes not to look for miracles
 But finding where there isn't one

When holy water was rare at best it barely wet my finger tips
 Today I have to hold my breath I'm swimin' in a sea of it.
 It used to be a world have there, heaven's 2nd-rate, hand-me-down
 Now I walk it with a reverent air, everything is holy now!

Read a questioning child's face
 Say its not a testament, that'd be very hard to say!
 See another new morning come; say it's not a sacrament
 I tell you that it can't be done

This morning outside I stood. I saw a little red wing bird
 Shining like a burning bush, singing like a scripture verse
 It made me want to bow my head. I remember when church let out.
 How things have changed since then -- everything is holy now!

It used to be a world half there, heavens second rate hand me down
 Now I walk it with a reverent air 'cause every thing is holy now!
 Everything, everything, everything is holy now.

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² All of the songs used in this presentation --other than Peter Mayer's "Holy Now" -- were authored by Tom Wisner. "Chesapeake Born", "Made of Water" and "Wild River" are recorded on the CD Made of Water © offered on this web site. The songs "Who Answers the Prayers of the Fishes" and "The Mouth of the Sacred Waters" are being considered for the newest CD working title of I am a Native American River Lost in the American Land.

³ 2005 State of the Bay report. (Annapolis: Chesapeake Bay Foundation, Nov. 2005).

⁴ "The Chesapeake Bay Watershed," Re. Lynn Strauss, River Road Unitarian Church, Sept. 5, 2004. At: 222.rruc.org/sermons/sermon040905.htm.

⁵ For a short, readable overview of "Water and the Sacred," see witcombe.sbc.edu/sacredplaces/water.html.

⁶ Hoimar von Ditfurth, *Children of the Universe* (New York: Atheneum, 1976) p. 145-56. See also "Earth's erratic pirouette" from NASA, IERS Bulletin, Jan. 2005.

⁷ Taken from the press release at: www.un.org/News/Press/docs/2001.

⁸ See the introductory chapter in *When the Rivers Run Dry*, by Fred Pearce (Boston: Beacon Press, 2006).

⁹ *Why I Wake Early* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2004), p. 57.

¹⁰ Peter Mayer's song "Holy Now" is recorded on his CD *A Million Year Mind*. You may access all of his wonderful songs at his website <www.blueboat.net>