

“Water & Stone Communion”

Rev. Martin Woulfe

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As I have mentioned, as recently as last week, UUs do not have many rituals, do not often partake of communion. There is a long history there. For the first 2 centuries of this religious movement, most of the sacraments, rituals, liturgies were purged from the worship service. It left a rather stark environment. About 25 years ago, with the influx of women in the ministry in our movement, things began to change. In particular, what we now call the “Water & Stone Communion” began.

A group of women ministers gathered at a conference. They were all UUs. At this gathering, they shared their pain and their grief, partly because of the door which had been closed to them in our own denomination, but also other doors, other lost opportunities. Much lost; much grief. Now the organizers of that gathering had asked all participants to come with a small vial of water. They announced that they would have a sharing, a communion, that people would come and add water to a large basin. As they poured the waters into the one, they would share some of their grief, some of their stories, so they all could hear, all could learn to appreciate. Perhaps they could help one another, and begin the process of forgiveness.

It’s been about a quarter century since this ritual has been introduced. It’s become very popular in our houses of worship. It has changed as all rituals do change. In some churches, it’s feared that it has become more of a travelogue, that people will come and talk about all the exotic places to which they have traveled: Hawaii, New York, wherever. But that it lacks the spiritual depth of the original water communion. So for the past several years, ministers have encouraged people to think about - not only where did they travel and they fun and joy that they experienced over the summer months, but to think about how certain experiences touched them. What did they learn? What can we describe that might be called religious or even spiritual? So today we have our ingathering. We come together. We form a large church. We have our communion. We will share. We will listen and we will grow.

Allow me to share some words that were first written by Carolyn McDay who was a participant at that first water communion nearly 25 years ago:

*Water, deep source embracing the earth
Rushing, confronting, transforming the shore.
Water, dear source-cradling haven
Crystalline beauty: rain on parched land.
Water, sweet sources linking eons
Stirring our memories, root for our growth.
Water, warm cauldron for our revolution of
love of life that brings a sea-change.
Water, sweet message. Nourish our spirit.
Christen and bless the new air we breathe,
The path we follow.*

(Martin adds water to the communal container.) As you may know, when Hurricane Charlie ripped through Florida, Angela and Celeste were in Orlando. They had not expected to be there at the same time that the hurricane lashed out. But they were and I was here. It was a

ALUUC Sermon Transcript

lesson for me in fear and helplessness, but also hope. Hope that, in this case, was not disappointed.

Unidentified woman: For 5 years I have attended the Woman Spirit council. Each woman brings water or stones and puts them into a vial that we all then later collect. This is the water from last year for 300 women who brought water from all over the world. Women brought water symbolic of birth, of their lives, from creeks, ponds, and talked about all of their experiences.

Martin: I now invite all of you to add water or stones (*inaudible*) ...and share.

Unidentified man: ...this is from my picture window. It's a dinosaur egg and I thought it would be a good thing to bring today...(*tape ends*).

Roger Powers: This is my wife Jenny. We were able to make a trip to Walden Pond this summer where Thoreau did a lot of his meditation and writing.

Jan Droegkamp: My journey this summer was right in Springfield. The water that I bring today is sterile water that the nurses sent home with my son John when he left the hospital after a near-fatal car accident this summer. The water symbolized the many emotions that my family and I went through. It symbolizes healing and also the love and compassion that I felt from this congregation. It was your outpouring of love and hugs that meant a lot to us. This is our journey in healing and love.

Jeff Johnston: As many of you know, my wife is a Christian Scientist and she always says that we live in a mental atmosphere. I feel that the mental atmosphere that we're all living in has never been more unsettled than I've ever seen. I bring this rock for hopes for the future.

Marla Johnson: I hope you don't mind me cheating a little this morning, but my rock is at home. I intended to bring it. It was one that my daughter had painted and it kind of reminds me of the beauty that we all can create.

Unidentified man: These rocks, this coral that Kathy brings today symbolizes the deep love that we have for each other, the solidness of our relationship. We had a quarrel that almost resolved in our breaking up this past week. She got this coral from her dad. We have the passing down of the coral from her dad. It symbolizes the longevity of a relationship, as well as a relationship that stays together no matter what happens.

Ian Bishop: I went to the Lake of the Ozarks this summer in Missouri for my brother's birthday. We spent 9 days there. I learned how to jet ski. It was really fun.

Dan: Good morning. I have stones today representing Nags Head, NC, from last September, and Jacksonville, IL in May of this year. I think the lesson that I learned is connectedness. They are many small stones. Each individually would not look like much but together, they are a handful. In Nags Head, during the couple of days I was there before Hurricane Isabel chased us out, I learned a connection to nature, to the sand, to the ocean, and to all the wonderful things that the Great Spirit above has provided for us. In Jacksonville, I reconnected, not only with my own network of friends and loved ones, but with the wider and under-siege world of the Illinois Visually Impaired Alumni Association. It's connectedness with the world and it's connectedness with people that I took away from this year. Those small stones, connected together can teach that lesson, too.

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Mike: Water is necessary for life, but tamed water is necessary for civilization. This is water from a slow leak in a pipe in my basement (laughter), but the plumber is coming on Tuesday! (More laughter.)

Ruth: Last November, I took a trip to New Mexico. One of the places I stopped at was the sanctuary of Chimayo, in Chimayo, NM. It's known as the Lourdes of the Americas. It's a very special healing place. I had delivered some momentos to friends and family from Chimayo, and also brought back some water from there, holy water. I also have a couple of other momentos. One is of the (*inaudible*) valley in Costa Rica where there was a profusion of flowers, birds, trees - a gorgeous place. My last momento is a stone from the plains of Salisbury near Stonehenge. It's a very mysterious and spiritual place. I bring all of these things today.

Vinnie Gupta: Good morning. I have water here, just like Mike said, it's from the basement! (Laughter.) It reminds me of a couple of things: one, I have a picture of young children in Africa. They have buckets on their heads, going long distances to get water. Then another picture of India. There's a huge well. 200 - 300 people, they're just hanging their buckets, trying to get water from the well. It's a very heart-rendering picture. So one can thank God for all the blessings we have here. The stone reminds me of God as the rock of the ages. If we stand with rock, we are on safe ground. Thank you.

Buffy Lael and Jon Wolf: We spent a fabulous week in New York City. This water comes from New York harbor, where we visited the Statue of Liberty, Ellis Island, and walked where Jon's great-great grandfather walked when he came over to this country. It was a very moving experience for us. It was a great lesson about family, and it's also where Jon and I became engaged. (Applause.)

Nancy Standen: This summer, in Florida, giant sea turtles came up out of the sea. They don't have legs like land turtles; they have flippers. The turtles are huge - 200 to 400 pounds. They're unbelievably big. Since they don't have feet, they use their flippers. With great power, they propel themselves up across the beach and to the dunes. The female digs a hole and lays between 40 and 60 eggs. Then she covers her nest and tamps down the sand. She is exhausted and she very laboriously flips back down and into the ocean. I had the great and wonderful fortune of being there and seeing that this summer. Have a seashell!

Brian Otwell: I've brought a little water here representative of the waters of Lake Geneva, where we went for the Lake Geneva Summer Assembly, which is a week long summer camp for 100+ UUs from all over the place. It was my family's 8th year. Keegan and I stayed with my mother, so we had 3 generations there. It was her 2nd year. Jodi and Ali Perko joined us for their 1st year - they were newbies this year, and loved it as well. Jodi and I sang with what's called the Awesome Choir. The name gives us a lot to live up to in a very short time! Bonnie is the pianist for the choir of course. There was a woman there - Kelly - who is a professional musician and had recently collected songs and hymns from Africa. Late in the week, she taught us one of these songs, and the choir's probably 30 people or so, and we sang that for the morning celebration. It was just one of those moments. We sang it. There was rhythm. One of the drums was an upturned plastic garbage can. Everybody just started moving and dancing. It was one of those moments where I think everybody in that large room felt connected with everybody else at that moment. It was truly a joy to experience. It was certainly one of the highlights of my summer.

ALUUC Sermon Transcript

Delinda Chapman: ...how water brings back many memories from my last few weeks with John, as it was drawn from his lungs and from around his heart. And it symbolizes the outpouring of love from this congregation to me and my family, and of course, our connectedness with all of you. And then, of course, the rock symbolizes what we've been doing since John's death and that's throwing rocks on the shore to secure the banks there. So I add this rock, but I'd like Michael to bring up the other one that we brought, because Michael and I have been throwing rocks this size from under the water up onto the bank. These are the old ones. Of course, we'll be bringing new big rocks like that. But we have learned a little about zen from this experience and how we all, when thrown wherever we're thrown, land where we're supposed to land.

Will: Some of you who have been here as long as I have or almost as long, know that the last decade or so I've gone back east to my little town in New Hampshire for a week or two, which is where a lot of my family is. I usually manage to touch base with most of them during the time I'm there, although you couldn't really call it a formal family reunion. They just sort of happen to be there over the course of the week or two. I was not able to do that this year, but I wasn't going to let that stop me from bringing some of water from Sugarhill, NH. How I was able to do that, believe it or not, I returned from one of my trips from several years ago with a full bottle full of it - one even bigger than this - and I only used part of it at the subsequent water communion service. I managed to still have some and I brought it with me.

Unidentified woman: This is symbolic water. In the past year, I remembered to get some water from Lake Geneva, but this time I didn't. I like the idea that there are so many varieties of water in here. This is symbolic of the joyful week I had at Lake Geneva, a beautiful site, with some wonderful people and the music, like Brian said, I still have the CDs in my CD player that I bought from all the musicians that were there. I'm still listening to them. It brings back that, including the choral group, the African song. It also represents water from the lake in Charlotte, NC where I had the opportunity to spend 4 days with my sister, her youngest son and his family, that don't ever come here. They're all in California and I'm living here. He's a professional fisherman and he was fishing in a pro-classic. I got to go and that for me was just a joy, to be a part of their lives. It's very bizarre in the pro-fishing world! Really bizarre! But it was great to spend time with my sister, her new granddaughter and her family.

Unidentified woman: This water represents the water from Pleasant Lake, Wisconsin. I actually did bring some water and of course I didn't remember it - it's at home. As many of you know, I have had life-long problems with various mental health disorders and when I get to a certain point, I crave silence. My husband knew that I was getting to that point this summer and so we went for a week to a place we had been. We used to go there when the kids were real little. We probably hadn't been there for 5 or 6 years. It's a wonderful primitive cabin with no computers, no telephone, no television, no radios, no nothing. It was perfect, totally silence and it was wonderful! We were there for a week with our kids and our kids actually were getting into the silence. It was great! Including one incredible, memorable evening where we spent out on a dock, fishing with a family, with our Amish neighbors there. They had so much to teach us. It was wonderful.

Berkley Moore: Last April, my 2 sons and I went mainly to Austria, but we also got to 3 other countries nearby for a brief period of time. Two of these - Austria and one of the other countries - was in the European Union. The other 2, Slovakia and Hungary, were not in the European Union. I didn't bring back exactly a stone. It's a coin, a 1 cent Euro. It comes from Europe. It was legal tender in 2 of the countries we visited. I'm happy to say that since then - and that was only last April - the other 2 are now in the EU. It's really wonderful to see what's

ALUUC Sermon Transcript

happening over there. People of different countries, some of which have traditionally been enemies, are drawing closer together. I hope that this is a prelude of what will happen, not only in Europe, but all over the world. I look forward to the day when the curse of national sovereignty is obliterated from the earth.

Sandy: My son and a friend of ours, we were gone for 2 weeks this summer. We went to the lava beds in New Mexico. We spent most of the time in the 4 corners, went to the Grand Canyon, Bryce Canyon, Arches National Park, the Great Dunes. This is water from the Great Dunes, the (*inaudible*) creek in the Great Dunes, the Colorado River which also flows right near Arches in Utah and then goes down to the Grand Canyon. There had to be something that created this beautiful country. Something had to create this!

Jennifer: This is a little rock of lava that one of my students gave to me. It's symbolic of all the confusion and craziness melted into just a little stone, which is kind of like me. I know you're probably tired out from the 9/11 thing, but I'm a New Yorker that has come to Illinois as a result of everything that happened on 9/11. I had been here before. I had lived here for a couple of years after college. I'd gone back to New York to start my life again. After the towers fell, a lot of New Yorkers, a lot of people (*inaudible*) felt that it wasn't a good thing anymore. To be in a place of (*inaudible*). I had lost some friends. My mother used to work in the Towers. She's OK. She cleaned them at night. She wasn't there in the morning. Some of my friends are in Florida. So, I'm a little ball of confusion. I ended up in Illinois and it feels safe.

Stacy Tischkau: Last week Nancy Standen and I had a wonderful experience. Eight Tibetan monks were at IC college in Jacksonville, IL. They were there to build a mandala of compassion. It was a completely spiritual experience to watch them work. In their closing ceremony, they destroyed the mandala as a symbol of the impermanence of the world. These sands, that they passed out to us, are a symbol of that compassion and feeling. (*inaudible*) Thank you.

Wes Duiker: This water that I'm pouring in here is from Aiken, SC, where my wife and I went to visit my 94 year old uncle, who was with us when we were newlyweds and traveled with us with our newborn baby from CA to SD. I went down there with a lot of family heirlooms, history and pictures of both sides of our family. My cousin from the Outer Banks, with his wife, had come down and prepared food. For 2 days we spent reminiscing about our families and all of our experiences together. Since that wonderful time in May, my aunt, my uncle's wife, 88 years old, died of cancer and was buried about 2 weeks ago.

Rita Stepp: I brought with me some water from Sunset Lake where I spent a wonderful weekend at the home of Nancy Standen, as extraordinary and gracious a hostess as a person could imagine staying with. Nancy and Stacy T. worked hard to try to keep me relaxed. I did that and it made it one of the most delightful summers in my memory!

Nicole Babcook: Last October, my father was missing at sea for several weeks. He was an avid fisherman. He lived in Naples. He went out fishing for the weekend and never returned. He always said he wasn't a fisherman; he was a catcher-man. When I was in his home afterwards, when we were down there while he was missing, I found a picture. His boat was officially called 'What's Left', but the picture said "The Love Boat - love to go catch 'em, that is!" A few weeks later, his boat washed up in Cape Canaveral and the sea had claimed my father. This is representative of the water.

ALUUC Sermon Transcript

Tina: I have 2 stones. The first one is Lake Geneva Summer Assembly. I don't think I need to tell you anymore about that one. This other is from Morocco. We went on a family trip this summer to Spain, Portugal and Morocco. Spain and Portugal are of course beautiful places. I had been there before but I hadn't been to Morocco. It's different. It's more exotic and it is an Islamic country. There are some terrorists from there, but there are also some really normal people who live there. It's just nice to take my children to these places, to see other countries and see that people live in more than one way. There is more than one way to do things and there can be more than one right way to do things. Sometimes we get so insulated in this country. Especially here in Illinois. We're so far from anything foreign. This is my rock from Morocco. We do need to have a larger world view.

Jack: These rocks represent the creek that my mother has lived by for the last 30 years or so. There's more rocks there. It's as hard to find dirt there as it's hard to find rocks in this land here. This water represents the creek that's flowed by her place for the last 30 years. And the two places our children most likely will attend - one in the west in Oregon and one in the east in South Carolina - (*inaudible*).

Vinnie G.: I'm here for the second time. Thank you for your patience! I could not help it. Last night I attended one worship by a group from India. They are followers of a saint in India and they serve food at Helping Hands. Once a month, I celebrate with them. At the end of the service, they distribute ashes. These ashes are from (*inaudible*) stone. It symbolizes God's glory. It symbolizes that God is among us. They're culture says that without God we are nothing. One is supposed to put it on one's forehead. I didn't do that. I brought it with me. I thought I'd share this experience with you. I put it here. On behalf of this congregation, I want to take the liberty thanking Jan Droegkamp for bringing (*inaudible*). Thank you very much.

Martin: And so, we've had our communion. Sharing water, earth and earlier, fire, and speech, or air. The waters and earth, the stones, have come from near and from far. Some are symbols of joy. Others are of grief. Some are memories and profound insight. Following the service, I will take this and we will mingle the water and the stones in our memorial garden, as we have done in the past. So these waters and stones will be mixed with the good earth, with the ashes of our beloved dead, with the waters and stones from previous communions such as today.

Let me conclude with a blessing, written by a Unitarian minister, Frances Manly:

Blessed be these waters gathered from far and near.

Blessed be the hands that gathered these waters and poured them out.

Blessed be the sharing of our lives and our stories that makes this community of faith a font for all who choose to come here.

Blessed be those whose lives are touched by these waters and their thirst may be quenched.

Blessed be those whose lives are like flowing springs, who bring refreshment to those who are parched.

Blessed be this community of memory and hope, which in it's coming together, and it's sharing of joy and sorrow, struggle and triumph, blesses all who come here, and make these waters holy.

Blessed be. Amen.