

The Living Water

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May 7, 2000

You remember the story of *The Old Man and the Sea*, Hemingway's little mythical novel. This morning I'm going to tell you quite a different story—it could be called *The Young Woman and the Sea*. It happened a long time ago, and it tells how this woman who was ignorant of the sea, of its power and of its meaning, came to know more than she had known. That woman was me.

It started out innocently enough. I was living in New Orleans at the time, and I had begun dating the young doctor whom I subsequently married. This, in fact, was just our second date, and he had asked me to go sailing on Lake Pontchartrain, a huge body of salt water leading to the Gulf of Mexico. Having grown up in North Louisiana, I had never been in a sailboat before, but nevertheless I should have been a little suspicious when we arrived at the lake and I could see no boat. He told me that the boat was in three canvas bags in the rear of his Volkswagen squareback. I did not question, though. Who was I to say?

We arrived at the lake, and he took the pieces out of the canvas bags and assembled the boat, which took the better part of an hour. Then we hopped in and started our journey. I thought the waves were shockingly high that day, and the boat seemed, well, precarious—but how was I to know? My part was just to bring the picnic lunch—fried chicken and steamed artichokes, as I remember. I wanted to impress him with my womanly skills. We did fine for a few minutes, but then as we attempted to sail under the causeway, the mast of our boat got stuck. My guy, who had up until this time appeared very self-contained and in charge, became agitated—I could tell because he handed me a paddle and when I started to speak, commanded, “Row, just row.” He was rowing with all his might, his face growing tight and red.

The little craft began rocking wildly as we tried to extricate ourselves. The lunch was the first to go—it somehow jumped out of the boat and was headed for a watery grave before I could grab it. Bummer, I thought. I spent a lot of time making that lunch. But it gets worse. A minute or so later, I see a billfold floating in the water, and I say, as gently as possible, “Frank, is that your billfold?” He says to me, “Be quiet and keep rowing!” He was the captain—after all, he had served four years in the Navy—how could I not obey? A moment later, though, he slaps his back pocket and says, “Oh, my gosh, that *was* my billfold! And I just got paid!” At this point he does something that, even in my untutored state, I knew was unwise—he jumps overboard and begins diving for his billfold. Now we're not talking about placid pond water here, we're talking about ocean waves. The billfold sinks quickly, and he turns and tries to swim back to the boat, which has become unstuck from the causeway and is sailing itself rapidly to the center of the lake. He realizes that he can't swim as fast as the boat can sail, and so he turns and swims for the causeway.

This is an unnerving moment for me. I'm thinking, "I'm going to have to watch him drown." I am thinking, "Too bad. All that medical training, for nothing." Bummer. But he does not drown. He goes down three times but finally makes it to a ladder on one of the huge columns holding up the causeway. In the meantime, I am sailing—or that is to say, the boat is sailing—further out to sea, and the waves become larger and larger. I think to myself, "Let the sail down and the boat won't go so fast." And I figure out how to do that. But I'm standing up and the boat is wobbling, and as I sit I have another unnerving thought, "You have to stay in this boat or you're dead." I have no life jacket, no flares, nothing. Just the boat and the paddles. I begin to realize that my guy is not entirely competent at this sailing thing. Turns out that you don't actually learn to *sail* in the Navy, that the ships use other power sources these days. How was I to know?

By this time, the sun is beginning to go down. I see people driving by on the causeway, and I wave my paddle at them. Surely they will see me. They do, and they wave back, friendly as can be. I wave and wave, and they wave and wave. The sun is still going down. Finally, just as night falls, I see a light coming out of the darkness, coming over the waves, moving back and forth, a light searching for me. It's the U.S. Coast Guard! I'm saved! They put my boat on their boat and head back to the Coast Guard station, where I am reunited with my guy. He has his feet in hot water and is wrapped in blankets. I am ecstatic! He is grouchy and uncommunicative. A few weeks later, I make chocolate chip cookies and take them to the guys at the Coast Guard station as a way of saying thanks. Frank thinks this gesture is unnecessary. "After all," he says, "here they are stationed in New Orleans, but I, I spent four years on an icebreaker in Antarctica." "Bummer," I say.

That day I learned about the power of the ocean, and I began to contemplate its meaning. I have walked the beach by day, heard the roaring of the sea at night. I have swum in the warm Gulf waters; I have gone snorkeling on coral reefs and have seen the beauty of some of the sea creatures. I've come to respect and love the sea. Power and mystery. Her tides move with the sun and the moon, and we are literally connected with our universe through the ocean. The ocean is where life began. Aquatic life millions of years ago crawled from the sea to the land, amphibian ancestors of all of us land creatures.

Water is the source of life, and water nourishes all living things. We can do without sex, books, movies, music, even food, for quite a long while—these are luxuries compared to water. But water—go waterless for a mere 72 hours, and you're dead. Water is the *sine qua non* of human existence. Of all of existence. Water is life.

And yet we so often take water for granted. That's because it's so accessible to us. We turn the faucet. We flush the toilet. We water our lawns. Even in the desert, we water our lawns. We irrigate our crops—once again even in the desert. But this is not so for all places in the world. I remember seeing a picture of a man from Ethiopia getting off a plane in the U.S. In his hand he carried not a laptop, but a small bucket. In his land, a bucket was a person's most

treasured possession, for it was what allowed you to carry a scarce commodity—water—with you.

Marq de Villiers tells the story of visiting a family in a village in Kenya. Many, the senior woman of the household invited him to stay and pressed upon him gifts of food she could not afford. In return, he picked up one of the four yellow plastic drums piled in front of the hut and offered to help her fetch water. The family laughed politely. They were thinking: white people, *mzungu*, are so inept. Fetching water was women's work. Later that evening Many and her daughters came swaying down the trail, singing one of their working songs, each with a 15-liter pail of water balanced on her head. That's close to 15 quarts. At the meal that followed de Villiers declined the water. The well was an old one and had originally been used by 50 families. Now 200 families drew from it. The water was muddy and smelled unclean. In much of Africa, it is normal for people to walk a mile or two or even 5 miles for water. In more arid areas, people walk even greater distances, and sometimes all they find at the end is a slimy pond. More than 90 per cent of Africans still dig for their water, and waterborne diseases like typhoid, dysentery, and cholera are common. The United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF) reports that 40,000 children worldwide are dying daily from hunger or disease caused by lack of water or from contaminated water.

The trouble with water is that we can't make any more of it—there is the same amount of water now that there was in prehistoric times. We are, however, making more and more people, and those people are utterly dependent upon water for their livelihoods, their food, and their industry. We consume it, poison it, and waste it, indifferent to the consequences: too many people, too little water, water in the wrong places and in the wrong amounts. Only 1 per cent of the Earth's water is available for daily use: 97 per cent is in the sea; 2 per cent is frozen in icebergs and glaciers. Of the 1 per cent of usable water, about 98 per cent of that is used for industrial purposes, and only about 2 per cent for nutrition and health.

The chair of the World Water Commission stated bluntly that "the wars of the twenty-first century will be fought over water." Former UN secretary general Boutros Boutros-Ghali said something similar. No one country can really "own" water, since hardly any of the world's major rivers are contained within the borders of one state. Egypt has more than once threatened to go to war over diversions of the Nile. Iraq, Syria, and Turkey have each mobilized troops in defense of water rights on the Euphrates and Tigris. Water is in crisis in China, in Southeast Asia, in many parts of Africa. Even in Europe there are shortages. In Southwest America we have solved our immediate crisis by "stealing" the Colorado River from Mexico, much of it to irrigate the deserts of Arizona and California, and a good deal to fill swimming pools in Los Angeles and to fill the fountains of Las Vegas.

How have we in the United States cared for this most precious of resources? The good news is that since Cleveland's Cuyahoga River burned in 1969, spurring passage of the Clean Water Act, roughly 60 per cent of America's rivers, lakes, and coastlines have become fishable

and swim able. The bad news is that the remaining 40 per cent are not, including our own Willamette. The Environmental Protection Agency found that 1.5 billion pounds of chemicals—many dangerous to children—1.5 billion pounds of chemicals, including arsenic and lead, were released into lakes and streams and along coasts from 1990 to 1994. This massive legal dumping represents only a fraction of the problem—many polluting operations—sewage plants, utilities, mines—are not even required to report their discharges.

In seeing water simply as a resource, as a means to an end, however noble or ignoble that end may be, we have lost touch with the sacredness of water. Water cleans, heals, transforms. Every ancient culture revered water. In Sumerian the word *mar* meant sea, but it was also the word for womb; it was the word for water, and it also meant sperm, conception, generation. The Hebraic language includes the concept of *Mem*, deciphered as mother, life, womb, or sea. “Everything was water,” say Hindu texts, and in Tantric manuscripts water is *prana*, the vital breath that brings life. In most known religious traditions, water is taken to be the first significant element, that which precedes all form and supports all of creation. Creation myths from Hindu tradition, from European folklore, from North American Indian tribes are remarkably similar. From the Hebrew scripture, the book of Genesis opens: “In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth. And the earth was without form, and void; and darkness was upon the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters.”

As water gives life, it also carries within it the possibility of death, as I learned so dramatically in my little sailing trip. If you live near water, you will learn to respect it. You will learn how the landscape changes when the river begins to recede in time of drought. You’ll know how a flash flood in the creek can carry off a sheep—or a child. You’ll learn to be wary of ocean waves as they toss logs like matchsticks up upon the shore. Water is life-giving and is life-threatening. We underestimate its power at our peril.

Through the ages, people have seen water as having healing powers. Water cults have been universal, cross-culturally, and in Celtic Europe they were particularly common, until the Christian church suppressed these practices. But it’s hard to stamp out archetypal forms, so the lure of sacred water was acknowledged and pagan practices metamorphosed into Christian shrines. People still make pilgrimages to wells and pools to heal physical and emotional problems. Lourdes alone is visited by six million people a year. In Ireland, a country with hundreds of small springs and wells, it is not unusual to come across pieces of ribbon tied to plants and to discover a tiny spring, known locally for some specific healing powers. I myself have a little blue bottle of healing water given to me by one of my research assistants—it is from the fountain of Our Lady of the Angels in Cartago, Costa Rica. Do I believe this water has healing powers? I don’t know, but I acknowledge that the mystery pulls at me. I can’t just put it in the pancake mix.

Water is transformational, and baptism is a universal symbol of purification and regeneration. Even people who are not interested in the institutional church often want their children baptized or christened. It's as if the parents continue to believe on some deep level that the blessing of the water will bring some protection to the child. At our church, we have child dedication services, and during the ceremony, I touch a rose into water and then touch the forehead of the child, acknowledging that water makes all the fertile earth bear fruit and by analogy, asking that the child be blessed and have a fruitful life.

Because of the essential nature, the foundational nature of water, it has become a symbol of our collective unconscious. Why is it that we can sit and muse by the side of a river for hours, watching the current flow in graceful patterns, or why is it we hear in the ocean's roar the voice of civilizations past? Why is it that we are comforted by these sights and sounds? I remember when I lived in Berkeley, I would walk up Euclid Ave. until I came to a particularly splendid view of the bay. As I gazed and gave myself in wonder to the scene, I felt my fearful heart go quiet, and I knew strangely enough that I could die without fear if I could just remember this water and just know that I am a part of this creation and a part of all creation.

David Duncan tells the story of his visit to Camas, Washington, to see a confluence, or a joining of rivers. This is where Lackamas Creek and the Washougal meet the Columbia. In India such a place is a sacred site, and David wanted to experience this confluence in Camas, hoping for some sense of the sacred. Trouble is, where these rivers met, the Crown Z paper mill met them all. This is how David tells it: "My friend Jared and I parked in the Crown Z visitors' lot, ignored the No Trespassing and High Voltage and Danger signs, passed through a hole in a cyclone fence, detoured round a gigantic mill building, crossed disused railroad tracks and bulldozed fields, reaching the Washougal at last. The river bank was made of hard packed clay, bare rock, spilled oil, logging cable, pop, beer, and booze bottles, a flood-crushed car, appliance parts, slabs of broken concrete with rebar sticking out of them, and huge reject mill-parts. We found a rusted sprocket the size of a merry-go-round and sat on it.

"Yet it was still beautiful at the confluence. We could see east to the Cascade foothills, west clear to the Coast Range. There is a majesty to the lower Columbia, something awesome if not holy. But when I tried to incorporate the third waterway into the picture, things broke down: Lackamas Creek, a genuine little river, entered the uphill side of the Crown Zellerback mill. The mill waste that shot from the flume at our feet bore no resemblance to water—it looked like hot pancake batter, gushing forth in a quantity vast and foul. It was a steaming, poisonous killing joke that shot across the river's mouth in a yellow-gray scythe and coated the Columbia's north shore with what looked like dead human skin for miles.

"And then, over the gushing, a strange double splash. The first half of the splash was a bright Coho salmon. The second half was its echo, bouncing hard off the mill wall. 'Look!' Jared whispered as a second bright Coho leapt high in the evening light and then fell back into the

river. Then another one leapt, and another, all amazingly high, all in the same place—a point in mid river, just upstream from the scythe of mill waste.

“These unlikely creatures had been born way up this mountain river, had grown strong in it, then had left it for the Pacific; yet some impression of their birthplace, some memory of scent touched them years later in that vastness, brought them schooling in off the Columbia’s mouth, forced them to run the gauntlet of nets, hooks, and predators, and enter again the waters of their home. Then came the twist—the scythe of mill waste.

“Salmon are not stupid. They know when to spook, and when to wait quietly; when to leap, when to hide, when to fight for their lives. As these Coho entered their confluence, they must have tried everything—must have hesitated, sought another channel, circled back out into the Columbia, come round again and again, waiting for the pain of the thing to die. But like all indigenous species, including in the end our own, salmon have no choice: their great speed and long journeys create an illusion of freedom, but to live, they must finally become as much a part of their river as its water and its stones. So in the end, they entered. With eyes that can’t close and breath that can’t be held they darted straight into this confounding of the vast, the pure, and the insane. And the slashing leaps that now shattered the river’s surface were each the Coho word for their cold, primordial rage against whatever it was that maimed them—and their equally cold, primordial joy at having reached the waters of their home. After each leap my breath would catch as the splash resounded, impossibly loud, against the walls of the mill. When I finally turned to look at Jared, he didn’t even notice me. And in his eyes, which were brimming, I saw nothing but that same cold anger, and that same wild joy. He was raging and exulting with the Coho as if they were our people, ours the unclosing eyes the scythe betrayed and blinded, ours the bright bodies leaping and falling back into the home waters—falling just to burst them apart; just to force them to receive, even now, our gleaming silver sides.” (1)

We are not creatures apart; we are at one with the salmon, with the river, with the sky and the clouds and the earth and the ocean. Knowing this kinship will be our salvation. Understanding the sacredness of this relationship will be what preserves the earth for our children and grandchildren and great-grandchildren and their children to come. Water is our health and our life. It carries the memory of past life and the seeds of all future life. It is the mediator between life and death.

We profane our water at our own great risk. If we see it as holy stuff, we will cherish it and protect it. We would never desecrate it with filth and poison. We know we thirst. Let water heal and inspire us. Seeing a fountain, we touch the coolness of the spray and feel our spirits rise. Soaking in a warm bath, we let our tired bodies relax and rest. Hiking by a rushing stream, we know that far above us the snow is melting on the mountain. Walking by the sea, we are a part of all life that has ever been and all life that will be. In all humility, even as we just lift a glass of water to our lips, we say with our hearts, thank you. Thank you, Source of our Being, Giver of Life. So be it. Amen.

(1) "Northwest Passage," by David James Duncan. Collected in *Head/Waters*, ed. Linny Stovall, Hillsboro, OR: Blue Heron Publishing, Inc., 1994. This book is a collection of essays with some connection to water. I have taken liberties with the text, to shorten it for use in this sermon.)