

Water, water everywhere . . .

April 23, 2006

Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Montgomery

© 2006 Paul Britner

Christians have Easter, Jews have Yom Kippur, Moslems have Ramadan and UUs have Earth Day. It is not, strictly speaking, a UU religious holiday. Still, Earth Day is perhaps the most widely celebrated holiday by UU congregations. Here are a few samples taken from the UUA website of what other congregations are doing either for Earth Day or more generally out of their commitment to environmental stewardship:

“The Unitarian Universalist Church of Amherst has become the first church in New York State to purchase 100% wind energy for its church buildings.... The UU Congregation of Akron is co-sponsoring with other organizations a "Green Faire" on Sunday, April 30 from 12:00 Noon to 3:00 p.m. The event will feature games and crafts for children, healthy lunches, "No Sweat (shops)" clothing, green cleaning supplies, and much more as well as exhibits on hybrid and electric cars, information about socially responsible investments, organic horticulture, local library resources, recycling, and area environmental groups and parks.... In March, Central Coast UU (Oregon) Fellowship hosted a forum on ecology of the local coastline and specifically on preservation of seaweed (in light of a recent decision to allow seaweed harvesting).... To honor Earth Day, First Unitarian Society of Madison, WI will be having a bicycle fair. May is Bicycle Month, but after a long winter, they often need tuning up! Both bicyclists and bike shops will be participating, and there will be displays for all ages, terrains, and tastes. People can share stories, and maps of the various bicycle trails in the city, county, and state will be provided.... In June 2005, Minnesota Valley UUF collaborated with 5 UU congregations to create Metro UU Social Justice Alliance environmental subcommittee and participated in Minnesota interfaith environmental group (C3) Congregations Caring for Creation. ... The Clarksville, Tennessee congregation's youth group is volunteering to work at Dunbar Cave State Natural Area for Earth Day on April 22.”

At the Association level, the Commission on Social Witness is preparing a Statement of Conscience on global warming to be considered at this year's General Assembly in Saint Louis at the end of June. A Statement of Conscience is the UUA's highest form of witness. Such statements are passed by delegates to the General Assembly after two years of study, review and comment by all of the UUA's approximately 1042 congregations.

In addition to the work of individual congregations and the Unitarian Universalist Association, there is the work of the Unitarian Universalist Service Committee, which I described in detail during our Justice Sunday service last month. As a very brief reminder, the UUSC is an affiliate organization of the UUA. It has its own governing board and staff and more importantly, is financed through individual memberships.

It is because of the work of the UUSC that I became aware of the water issues on which I am focusing today. The UUSC's Executive Director, Charlie Clements, spoke on water issues at the Mid-South District Healthy Congregations conference conducted at the Auburn Fellowship last fall, which happened to have as its theme, simplicity and sustainability. I thought then that his topic would be a good topic for an Earth Day service, and so, here we are.

Here's a little trivia about water taken from a UUSC fact sheet which references a non-profit organization called Development and Peace:

“Over three-quarters of the earth is cover with water, but only one percent of that water is fresh water. Of that one percent only 1/100th is available for humans to use. Presently, 70% of that water is used for agricultural purposes—largely industrialized agriculture—22 percent is used for industry and only 8 percent is used domestically by the 6.4 billion people living on the plant.” (See www.uusc.org to download this and other fact sheets.)

From these numbers, we see that water is not the renewable resource we often think it is. The water that is available for health and hygiene is very limited, and for that reason, it has become a commodity very much like oil, and like oil or any other scarce resource, the story of accessible water is one filled with corruption, violence, and greed. Unlike oil, though, those who must do without safe drinking water die, and it is children who die in disproportionate numbers.

Thirty-nine hundred children die every day for lack of safe drinking water and sanitary conditions.¹ Most of those deaths are attributable to water borne diseases. For example, 88% of diarrhoeal disease is attributed to unsafe water supply, inadequate sanitation and hygiene. One point eight million people die every year from diarrhoeal diseases (including cholera); 90% are children under 5, mostly in developing countries.² Diarrhoeal diseases have killed more children in the last 10 years than all people lost to armed conflict since World War II³

Despite the small amount of usable water I noted earlier, the problem is not a lack of water. The problem is a lack of access to safe water. Water may be unsafe because it is polluted or contaminated, and people may lack access to water because the infrastructure is not in place to get the water from point A to point B—which may be due to violence and warfare—or it may be because people can't afford it.

One of the greatest, growing threats to accessible water is the privatization of water. Currently, about 5% of the world's waterworks are privatized, but it is growing almost exponentially. Since 1990, the number of people served by private water companies has increased from 51 million to over 300 million and, what's worse, it's the poorest people who are having to pay the price.⁴

Here are a couple of examples of the impact of water privatization. The Center for Public Integrity found that water privatization was the direct cause of a cholera epidemic in South Africa in August 2000. Quoting from their report:

“In 1998, local councils had begun taking steps to commercialize their waterworks by forcing residents to pay the full cost of drinking water. But many of the millions of people living in the tin-roof slums of the region couldn't afford the rates. Cut off at the tap, they were forced to find water in streams, ponds, and lakes polluted with manure and human waste. By January 2002, when the worst cholera epidemic in South

1 <http://www.medicalnewstoday.com/medicalnews.php?newsid=20328>

2 http://www.who.int/water_sanitation_health/publications/facts2004/en/

3 <http://www.unep.org/ceh/main01.html>

4 Marsden, Bill. “Cholera and the Age of Water Barons”, Center for Public Integrity, <http://www.publicintegrity.org/waer/report.aspx?aid=44>. (hereafter, Public Integrity)

Africa's history ended, it had infected more than 250,000 people and killed almost 300, spreading as far as Johannesburg, 300 miles away."⁵

A UUSC fact sheet has this account:

"In Accra, Ghana, water prices rose 95 percent after privatization, a condition of their loans from the World Bank. Overnight, families earning less than \$1 a day (50% of the population) had to pay double for a bucket of water. In the slums of Accra, families were paying up to 25% of their income for water."⁶

That reference to the World Bank is important. There are plenty of villains in this story to go around, but, some of them are supposed to be the good guys. We expect corporations to do what corporations do, which is to return investments to their shareholders. Some are better corporate citizens than others. Some economic decisions, though, must not be left solely to market forces because other factors--environmental, justice, health and simple human decency--compel us to act in the public interest to constrain those market forces.

In our case, the public interest is protected by our state and local governments, at least in theory. We can argue how effectively state and local governments protect citizens here. No one disputes, though, that we do not face anything like the kinds of crisis I described earlier in places like Ghana and South Africa. In those and other developing countries, it is the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund that are calling the shots. Though one may find mission statements alluding to some broad public interest, these institutions increasingly are being dominated by transnational corporations seeking to override public interest in favor of their shareholders' interests. As the Center for Public Integrity puts it, "...water companies have joined forces with the World Bank and the United Nations to create an array of international think tanks, advisory commissions and forums that have dominated the water debate and established privatization as the dominate solution to the world's water problems."⁷

Well, this could go on for awhile. I think you get the idea. So, why talk about this today. As I suggested, there are villains in this story: people, organizations, and corporations who are systematically and oftentimes with the support of governments, including our own, exploiting water resources at the cost of millions of lives, most of them children. It is our responsibility as Unitarian Universalists to speak our truth to these powers that be and witness in favor of safe and accessible drinking water and sanitary conditions as a matter of human rights. You may engage in this witness by supporting the UUSC or acting on your own by raising this issue with our elected leaders. As a congregation, we may consider the variety of Earth Day and other environmental activities that I described earlier and challenge ourselves to find creative ways to lift this issue up in our larger community.

While public advocacy is a necessary part of the process of change, it is no substitute for changing our behavior. There is a time and place to rant with indignation, but that is not enough. Though written in the context of global warming, this quote from the draft Statement of Conscience being circulated for review speaks my mind, as my Quaker friends would say:

⁵ Id.

⁶ UUSC Fact Sheet "Right To Water" www.uusc.org.

⁷ Public Integrity, *supra*.

“By our mindful deeds, Unitarian Universalists can become agents for positive change. Unitarian Universalists are called to transform our habits of life as a religious witness in a culture of economic privilege. To live substantially simpler lives and demonstrate the type of personal behavior required of citizens in all developed countries will demand solidarity with one another and with all who depend on the sacrifice of our luxuries to guarantee their necessities.”⁸

Here’s a small suggestion. It takes 132 gallons of water to grow a pound of wheat and it takes 3000 gallons of water to grow enough feed for enough cow to produce a quarter-pound hamburger.⁹ So, something as simple as having a meatless menu one day a week may serve as a small gesture of gratitude for your many blessings and, as Gandhi would say, be the change you want to see in the world.

Speaking of small changes, at the Healthy Congregations conference where I first heard Charlie Clements talk about water privatization, the audience members were asked to share how they conserve water. One person said that, when she runs the bathwater to get it warm, she places a bucket under the faucet and collects that water for her plants. Then another fellow stood up and said that he saves water by taking showers with his wife. So, if you can’t bring yourself to embrace that meatless menu one day a week, you do have options.

So, Happy Earth Day everyone. I hope the seriousness of my message regarding water doesn’t overshadow the many causes for celebration we are provided every day by this incredible planet, from sunrises to sunsets, from grassy meadows to fields of flowers, which brings me to this wisdom from the Prophet Mohammed: “If you have two loaves of bread, trade one for a flower. For the bread feeds the body, while the flower nourishes the soul.”

May it always be so. Blessed Be.

⁸ <http://www.uua.org/csw/threatofgw.html#NewDraft>

⁹ <http://www.uusc.org/watercommunion/index.html>, quoting from Fred Pearce, “When the Rivers Run Dry: Water—The Defining Crisis of the Twenty-First Century” Beacon Press (Boston 2006).