

## What Floats Your Boat?

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Unitarian Universalist Meeting House

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A couple of weeks ago, I talked about light as a metaphor for things of the spirit. Water has some of the same properties. Water in liquid form has no inherent shape or color; it takes the color of what surrounds it or is dissolved in it, and it takes the shape of whatever vessel holds it.

But water is essential for life in a way that light is not. Billions of years ago, the first life forms evolved in water, they were made possible because of the chemical properties of water, and when the first animal crawled out on land, it could only do that by evolving a way to take the water with it. Our bloodstreams carry a liquid that is 98% identical with sea water, and we also need to slake our thirst with fresh water on a regular basis or die of dehydration.

We carry the sea within us, and that is one of the source of the deep attraction that the seashore has for many of us. Here on the Cape we live in a liminal place, at the doorway of our deep ancestral home. Many of us find ways to spend a lot of time on or in these waters fishing and boating and swimming, returning not only to our own childhoods, but to the childhood of life itself.

Our religious heritage is concerned with this world a lot more than some other, and while we recognize and deeply honor the spiritual side of life, we are also concerned with the practical and the political – how to take this precious and vital resource and protect it, keep it clean and healthy, and see that it is distributed fairly and wisely.

The UU Legislative Ministry of California, the lobbying arm for UUS in that state, yesterday posted a video on YouTube touting a piece of legislation that they had put through the state legislature, which is on Gov. Schwarznegger's desk awaiting signature<sup>1</sup>. 150,000 Californians have drinking water that is toxic. The bill would make it the policy of the State of California that water for basic human needs is a human right.

Would we want such a legislative initiative here? We have a UU lobbying group, Mass Action, which I support financially and encourage you all to do the same. And the idea of water as a basic human right has a lot of appeal.

But here on the Cape it raises questions. There is a serious threat to the aquifer from which our drinking water is drawn, the Monomoy lens, caused by the growth in population we have seen in the past half-century in Brewster, Dennis, Harwich, Orleans and, to a lesser extent, Chatham<sup>2</sup>. Does saying water is a basic human right commit us to providing water for everyone no matter how many?

Some among you have expressed alarm at Chatham's planned wastewater system, that when it is put into place, it will remove the principal restraint on development and open Chatham

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<sup>1</sup><http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=C1aZ6c30yZI>

<sup>2</sup>Since 1960, Brewster's population has grown by a factor of 8, Dennis by a factor of 4, Harwich and Orleans by factors of 3, and Chatham has doubled., according to a mid 1990's study by the Cape Cod Commission.

to the explosive population growth that surrounding towns have seen, further stressing the Monomoy lens from which all our water is drawn. Yet do we want to adopt policies that say to those off-Cape, in effect, we're here but the rest of you stay put and don't think of moving out to this paradise because we don't want you using our water? Do we want to adopt Oregon's attitude towards growth?

A more profound question involves water as an economic resource. My visceral take is that water is part of the commons, that everybody owns it but nobody should own it as private property. The thought of large corporations buying up water systems in the West sickens me.

And yet it is undeniable that water has an economic impact, it is a player in the economic game. Real estate values on the Cape are very dependent on water access; a long-time friend who lives in the Upper Cape visited us a few months ago and offered the observation that this part of the Cape is divided between those on the salt-water side of Rtes 28 and 6A and those in the interior. Having looked at many properties in my real estate search, I can confirm this, but there are also some pretty nice ponds in the interior of the Cape whose houses command a hefty water-access premium. There is even an enhancement for water view.

Water is what makes the Cape a desirable place to visit and to live. The basis of the economy in this part of the Cape is resorts such as Chatham Bars and Wequasset and the dozens of small hotels, motels and B&B's, private seasonal rentals, second homes, retirement homes, residences for our seniors, and recreation, restaurants and retail associated with these populations. Fisheries remain a factor as well as some farming and other light industry.

Clean and plentiful water is an essential part of this economy. People would not visit or settle here if there were not an adequate supply of drinking water, an effective means of disposal of wastewater, and an abundance of lake and seawater. Chatham in particular seems more water than land, and we can imagine what a ghost town it would become if the water was gone or unsafe for swimming. Just the shark threat of last week probably put a kink in the receipts of some local businesses, though whatever tourists stayed away may have been offset by the thrill-seekers who came here hoping to catch a sight of a Great White.

Water thus is a major player in the economy of the region; fortunately, the way it plays makes it in everyone's interest to clean up the waters and keep them clean. There is a convergence of public and private interests on this point. And Chatham's commitment to a huge public outlay, supported in part by taxpayers, to treat nitrogen in wastewater is a recognition of the common stake everyone has in restoring the balance in the surrounding ocean and bringing back local fisheries.

As we gather ourselves after the summer, let us honor this element which not only floats our boats but sustains us physically and ecologically and economically and spiritually. We sang Marion Ham's great hymn of confluence, seeing the free church as tranquil streams that meet and merge and flow as one to meet the sea. We are not always tranquil streams here; we will have our disagreements about policy. And yet we come together in one covenanted body. That is what a free church is about. Amen.