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Water: Commodity or Human Right?

“I’ve got peace like a river.” Water is often associated in our minds with calmness, serenity, peace – a gently-flowing river, a quiet lake, a waterfall. For the prophet Amos, water was a symbol of justice and righteousness. “But let justice roll down like waters,” he wrote, “and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.” In the decades to come, though, humans are likely to see water as anything but an image of peace. Water is becoming scarce in many parts of the world, and wars may very well be fought over water before too many more years pass. In future years, it may be hard for us to see any justice or righteousness as water becomes monopolized and commodified while billions of people are forced to do without.

We know that water is essential for survival. Just how much water do humans need? The Pacific Institute in Oakland estimates that a rock-bottom minimum of 50 liters per person per day is needed to sustain human life. That’s about 12 gallons. This measure includes clean water for drinking (5 lpd), cooking (10 lpd.), bathing (15 lpd.), and sanitation (20 lpd). Around the world, more than 2.2 billion people live below this daily minimum. That’s one-third of the world’s population, living in some 62 countries. Many live way below the minimum – in both Haiti and Gambia, for example, people are forced to subsist on just 3 liters per day. Imagine trying to live on just a couple of large bottles of, say, Poland Spring, for all your needs.

In April, our California UU Legislative Ministry, together with the UU Service Committee, is hosting a conference on water issues. Entitled “Let Justice Flow,” the conference will be held at our Mt. Diablo UU Church on April 18th. I strongly encourage folks from this area to attend; it will be both thought-provoking and action-oriented. At the conference, our Legislative Ministry will also introduce a curriculum on California water issues. I helped to create the curriculum, and I recommend it for use by UU congregations.

Water is something that we tend to take for granted, and the issues about water tend to be very complicated and technical. So it’s easy for us to lose sight of its importance to our very existence, and to its spiritual place in our existence. Today, I invite you keep in mind a simple question – given that water is essential to sustaining our lives and our spiritual well-being, should access to water be considered a basic human right, or should water be treated as an ordinary commodity to be bought and sold?

There are many ways to approach this basic question. Today, I want to begin by talking about bottled water, which eventually leads us back to the question of water as a human right. I brought a few props with me. [Hold up bottle of Aquafina]. Here’s a good example of a brand of bottled water that most of us probably see regularly – Aquafina. So -- Who owns Aquafina? Can anyone tell me where your money goes when you buy a bottle of Aquafina? That’s right, Pepsi, a giant global corporation! So this isn’t some struggling little Mom and Pop enterprise bottling water from their local spring. But at least it’s good for you right? It comes from a pure mountain spring and contains all sorts of good things? Actually, no – the water in Aquafina comes from municipal water

sources. It's basically the same water that comes from your tap. It's filtered, and they add some stuff to it. But that's what it is – tap water, brought to you by a multi-national conglomerate.

Just so we don't show any favoritism, here's a bottle of Dasani, another popular brand. Who owns Dasani? That's right Coca Cola, another global conglomerate. And its source is essentially the same as Pepsi's – tap water; although marketers claim that it is both better for you and better tasting than the water that comes out of your tap.

And here's another example – Arrowhead, a brand we see a lot locally. Arrowhead at least has the advantage of coming from a spring rather than from a local water tap. The same company that owns Arrowhead also owns Perrier, Poland Spring, San Pellegrino, and Calistoga. Can anyone tell me the name of that company? **Nestlé** is the largest food processing and packaging company in the world. It has annual sales of \$70 billion dollars in the US alone, and ranks among the world's ten largest corporations.

There's one more large multi-national that has a major share of the world's market for bottled water. That's Groupe Danone, a European food processing company, based in France. It owns brands such as Evian and Sparkletts. Together these four large corporations dominate the market for bottled water. And, as we will see, this raises some serious issues for us.

First of all, price. A half-liter bottle of water generally sells for about a dollar. That works out to a price of \$7.50, and often more, per gallon, for water. That's way more than we pay for gasoline, even at last summer's prices. And we already pay -- although far, far less -- for the water that comes out of our faucet. As Professor Charles Wilkes of Indiana University noted: "This is an industry that takes a free liquid that falls from the sky and sells it for as much as four times what we pay for gas."

Well, at least bottled water is of better quality, right? Not really. Most tap water in this country is subject to stricter standards than bottled water. The federal EPA regulates public drinking water under the Safe Drinking Water Act, but bottled water is classified as a food product and is regulated by the Federal Food and Drug Administration. There are huge gaps in the coverage of FDA's regulations, to such an extent that 60-70% of bottled water sold in this country is essentially exempt from regulation. By government and industry estimates, as much as 40% of bottled water simply comes from the tap – sometimes with additional treatment, sometimes not.

One justification used by the industry, of course, is that bottled water tastes better. But I think we want to be careful about accepting this advertising pitch at face value. As a series of articles last year in the SF Chronicle demonstrated, bottled water has become a huge industry -- \$11 Billion dollars in annual sales in the US. Bottled water has become so popular that it is about to overtake many brands of soda in sales. Of course this is not lost on the big soda companies, such as Coke and Pepsi. And many of the bottled waters they sell now have added flavoring. Does any of that taste make it worth \$8 per gallon? You be the judge!

And then there's the whole issue of packaging. A few years ago, I returned to India for a visit after having lived there some 30 years ago. Back then, most garbage was picked up and recycled. Someone almost always had a use for whatever somebody else had discarded. Now, the streets are littered with empty plastic water bottles. And those simply are not going to go away, in India, or anywhere else. Water

bottles are typically made from polyethylene terephthalate, a petroleum-derived plastic known as PET. Making one bottle out of PET uses twice as much water as the bottle will eventually hold when it's filled. Currently, nine out of 10 plastic water bottles end up as garbage or litter – 30 million of them a day. Only 16 percent of water bottles sold in California are being recycled, a much lower rate than either aluminum or glass. The question is obvious – what are we going to do with all that waste?

As important as these issues are, they are dwarfed by the issue that the public seldom perceives – privatization of water sources and the commodification of water. These large corporations that are selling us water have to get their water somewhere. Whether they take it from tap water or from the ground, they are taking a precious natural resource and selling it for a profit. In many parts of the world, and in this country, companies are buying up local water supplies so that they can turn around and sell it.

Some of you may have seen the movie “Thirst,” which documents several instances of privatization of water sources. One of the stories concerns villagers in the Indian state of Rajasthan. Long in need of a more secure water supply, the villagers constructed a system of catch basins for rain water as a way of replenishing their groundwater. Now, both Coke and Pepsi are acquiring surrounding land in an effort to pump out that ground water and bottle it. Have these villagers no rights to this water, which they have collected, and which they need for their survival? Or do the companies have the right to treat this precious water as a commodity like any other?

The movie “Thirst” also shows two instances of privatization of municipal water supplies – in Cochabamba, Bolivia, and nearby in Stockton. In Cochabamba, an American company bought the town's water supply and the system for delivering it to the people, Water prices immediately sky-rocketed. People received huge water bills that they had no ability to pay and then had their supply cut off. The people took to the streets, the police and army were called in, many demonstrators were wounded or killed. But eventually, public pressure caused the company and the local government to give in. In Stockton, the city council contracted with another European company to take over its water system. A bitter political struggle ensued, but the contract was finally approved. Water prices rose, and many jobs in the water district were lost. Millions were spent in litigation, but eventually the city council voted to negotiate its way out of the contract and to revert to a municipally-owned water system again.

This brings us back to my original question. Do the people of the world benefit or lose when water becomes privatized and turned into a commodity to be bought and sold? Or – given that water is essential for survival, should all people have a basic right to access to water? Water starts out as something that falls from the sky and that is stored on Earth. Shouldn't we treat it as a resource that should be available to all, at least at some minimal level?

Curiously, access to water has never been explicitly included in any of the various declarations of human rights that have been produced over the last 50 years. Water is actually more crucial to sustaining life than many of the items that are protected. For example, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights was adopted by the UN General Assembly in 1948. Article 25 of the Declaration states:

everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of himself and of his family, including food, clothing, housing, medical care, and necessary social services.

There is no mention of water at all in this Declaration, which outlaws torture, slavery, and political persecution, and declares that people have the right to work, rest, and leisure, among many other things. Don't we need some sort of international declaration of a basic human right to access to clean, safe water? The Unitarian Universalist Service Committee has been working to establish that right for a number of years. And, here in California, our UU Legislative Ministry has worked with a coalition of groups to draft a bill that would establish a basic right to access to safe, affordable water for every Californian. The coalition has been working with a legislator willing to carry the bill, which should be introduced soon in the legislature.

While the California UU Legislative Ministry focuses on water issues in California, the UU Service Committee's Environmental Justice Program addresses water rights issues throughout the world. The UUSC states its basic beliefs on water as follows:

- Water is a fundamental human right and must be provided equitably to all people regardless of gender, race or class.
- Water is part of the global commons, not a commodity.
- Water democracy means that citizens must be involved in water management in their communities.
- Water conservation and stewardship must be a top priority.

OK, so all these issues about water are facing us and future generations. Why should that be a concern of religious communities in general or of UU congregations in particular? Well, let me suggest at least one important reason. Water has always had a sacred aspect to it. Most religions include water in their rituals and liturgies in some way. Christians use water in baptisms; Catholics have holy water at the entrances to their sanctuaries; Muslims and Hindus both honor ritual cleansing with water before worship. Buddhists place bowls of water on their shrines. Native Americans conduct religious ceremonies around a spring on Mt. Shasta. And many Unitarian Universalist congregations mark the end of summer, and the beginning of the church year, with a water ceremony – despite our continuing aversion to ritual.

In our reading, Mary Evelyn Tucker wrote of the religious dimension of water, and of the central place that water occupies in the human imagination and religious consciousness. And yet, she notes, we look at water through two different lenses: one sacred, one secular. Is water something we revere as that which sustains many forms of life, or is it something we simply use to support human life (or at least some human life)? Is our concern for water reduced to how we use it and manage it for human ends?

And she concludes by urging us to create a new synthesis of science and religion for a world of scarcity. On the one hand, we need to regard water as part of a sacred life process and not simply another product for consumption. At the same time, based on our increased comprehension of the story of evolution, we have a renewed appreciation of the role of water in sustaining life.

This world view speaks to us as Unitarian Universalists. We have traditionally placed a high priority on reason and science, giving us an understanding of the role of water in sustaining life. Our commitment to social justice inspires us to care about the 2.2 billion people who daily go without adequate water to sustain human existence. And, as a religious community, we can appreciate water as essential to supporting life, as a

part of the sacred processes of life, and as a crucial aspect of the awe and wonder that we feel when we contemplate the beauty and mystery of the universe.

May we find ways to re-invigorate our appreciation of water as both symbol and sacrament.

And may we find the strength, the courage, the wisdom to wage the struggle to ensure that access to clean, safe water is recognized as a basic human right.