
Sacred Water

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Introduction

The next time you go to the kitchen or bath-room, pour yourself a glass of water. View this container of water as a gift. To whom shall we extend our thanks for this wonderful substance, this elixir of life? Shall we thank some omnipotent, omniscient, omnipresent power? Shall we thank the water itself? Shall we simply thank ourselves for turning on the faucet and holding the glass under it? Or shall we thank no one, drink the water or pour it out as we see fit, and be on our merry way? How we choose to treat this gift depends largely upon our cultural conditioning, tempered to some perhaps immeasurable degree by our own experience and by our own reflections upon that experience.

As an ecologist, I came to realize long ago that our tenuous existence as a species here on planet earth relies on maintaining a state of harmony between our environment and us. By environment I mean all the things on, over, or within the earth. But while I could easily intellectualize this relationship, it took some time to shift from knowing the relationship existed to actually feeling its existence. It was not until the early 1980s, as I passed my 50th birthday, that I began to explore the possibility that my relationship to my environment was much more holistic than I had ever imagined. This awakening was coincident with my acceptance and practice of certain Native American traditional spiritual ceremonies and teachings as the answer to that part of me that could never quite close the gap between what I believed to be true as a scientist and the personal truth I was seeking as a human being. This pathway has led me to a reverence and respect for my environment that grows with each passing day. It is this pathway that has brought me to the belief that all elements of our environment have a sacred quality, a quality we also must consider when seeking to fulfill our niche in this complex network of energy transfers we so blithely call "Life."

Limitations exist as to the type of questions one can approach scientifically. Describing water as "sacred" is an unscientific explanation of its properties. There may be an explanation, but when

we seek it, we are often impeded by what we have already been taught to be true. These cultural perspectives lie at the very heart of the difference between traditional indigenous peoples' views and our Western mechanistic, reductionist, scientific perspective on the natural world.

We would do well at this point to briefly define our terms by considering the word "sacred" in the context in which I wish to use it. Dictionary definitions vary, but all include a central theme depicting that which is considered sacred as being entitled to reverence, honor, or respect; dedicated or set apart; and secured against any defamation, violation, or infringement. That which is considered sacred in many Native cultures may be the object of highly organized ceremonial and traditionalistic values and patterns, often to the exclusion of new ones.

At the very core of the differences between traditional Native and Western scientific or technological perspectives on nature lie fundamentally different concepts regarding the underlying causes of natural features and phenomena. A Native American might be more inclined to address natural phenomena by asking, "Who did this?" and "Why?" rather than "How does this work?" Regardless of geographic, racial, or cultural lineage, long and intimate contact with nature is leading many people to accept a new dimension to the ecological perspective dealing with internal relations. We now perceive events in the earth's biosphere to be cyclical in nature wherein no event first occurs and then relates to the world, but rather each event is a synthesis of relations to all other events. Traditional indigenous cultures tend to view this totality of nature through the same lens with which they view themselves: the bonds of human kinship. It is in this manner that all things, including water, become "sacred."

The Resource Concept

Scientists and environmental managers addressing policy development and management of water supplies and their application for human uses have published many papers. That broad group of organizations often lumped together under the term "resource agencies" performs much of the resulting research and management. Others serve their respective organizations or clientele as "resource persons" and, in many corporate organizations, upper management voices concern over the well being of its "human resources."

Being a resource in today's world is both degrading and dangerous. This condition did not always prevail. People lived for centuries with no resources at all. They possessed food, water, heat, and the necessary knowledge and materials to clothe and shelter themselves. All of these were obtained from the natural processes and substances surrounding them. But people did not have "resources" until the invention of that concept in modern times.

The transformation of mutual gifts into lifeless commodities by calling them resources results in much more than a change in language. Gifts from the earth become resources as part of a process that deprives nature of any rights that might restrain the means by which people make use of its goods. Gifts imply some reciprocity between giver and receiver, such as mutual respect and shared obligations. Gifts also imply a giver, someone whom the recipient must then recognize and acknowledge. We seldom extend such conscience or courtesy to the earth's goods when they are regarded as resources. Resources exist only as potential wealth and power for the people who exploit them—topsoil mined of nutrients, and air polluted with the gaseous refuse of our exhaust pipes and smokestacks.

Some concealed, unarticulated reality always goes unrecognized when the word "resource" is used. And this is just the point I wish to make. The word "resource" serves the desired purpose of cloaking our thoughts and actions in an abstraction that possesses absolutely no perceptible qualities. Whatever resource we refer to, we can be certain that it has no rights, no character, no life, and no value of its own. The only value attached to a resource lies in the utility (e.g., water) and wealth (e.g., petroleum) it can provide to those who exploit it.

Sacred Waters

The objective of treating water as sacred, and not as a resource, is not to withhold it from being used but to have as our goal its inviolability. We should strive not to violate or injure the water that we use, but return it to the earth in as good or better condition than when we received it. We can certainly extend the concept of sacred waters to include sacred soil, sacred air, and sacred plants and animals—to say nothing of a sacred universe. We must return to viewing the useful products of the earth as goods having worth and value to be prized and respected in their own right. They are also gifts: unearned benefits derived from our reciprocal relationship with our

planet. As gifts, they entail in us an obligation to give something beneficial in return. "Goods" and "gifts" are accurate and meaningful terms for the things we use from the earth to support ourselves. Such terms appropriately reflect the emerging human role as responsible participants in all the earth's processes as evidenced by the growing awareness that our role as good stewards must not be violated.

Stop the next time you pour a glass of water.

Reflect for a moment on that elegant circle we call the hydrologic cycle and the fact that nearly every molecule of water present in the world today was formed at the time seas covered our planet some three to four billion years ago. These "ancient" waters provide us with an unsurpassed economic and ecological abundance. We can continue to take this natural wealth for granted only at our own peril. The hydrology of any region imposes certain limitations, and technological solutions for overcoming those limitations often create their own environmental problems. The threats to the quality and quantity of our water—along with the associated human health, ecological, and economic risks—are primarily of our own making. Consequently, any solutions must be primarily of our own devising. Competition among water uses will only intensify in the years ahead, and the challenge of reconciling conflicts exacerbated by years of drought—especially between instream and out-of-stream uses—loom on the environmental horizon throughout the western United States.

Looking Toward the Future

How we touch the earth reflects upon each and every one of us. We are all given the unique opportunity of participating in the greatest natural phenomenon of all, life itself. Today there exists a groundswell movement of people who recognize that the human agenda differs not one whit from the agenda of all living creatures, if we are to survive with dignity and compassion.

Today our mounting numbers and technological power demonstrate a single demanding necessity: to consciously reenter and preserve, for our own safety, the old first world from which we originally emerged some 1.5 million years ago. Our present world, drawn from our own brain, has brought us far, but it cannot take us out of nature. In a world increasingly dominated by the growth imperative of global economics, our infatuation with technology and the ever expanding

demands of an exploding human population, we tenaciously cling to assumptions based on the inadequate worldview of Descartes and Newton. Truly we are in danger of our technology outstripping our philosophical ability to control it.

New Perspectives

Science alone is not enough to solve the planetary environmental crisis. Instead, we must recreate for ourselves a sense of place within the biosphere that is steeped in humility and reverence for all life. Are there truly other perspectives from which to judge and assess our role, other ways of perceiving our place in the cosmos? I began to realize, when I became involved with Native American teachers in the early 1980s, that other, profoundly different, concepts of our relationship with nature do indeed exist. I found that there are those who have never stopped believing that the elements of their world were sacred and were to be treated with honor and respect.

When Columbus came to the West Indies some 500 years ago, he introduced Western culture to a people whose wisdom respecting their environment far surpassed his own. Indigenous peoples throughout the world often refer to the earth as their Mother. This statement is more than a sentimental platitude. While, on the one hand, the earth probably has no maternal feelings toward humankind (indeed, if she did, they might be somewhat hostile), we are shaped by the earth. The characteristics of the environment in which we develop deeply affect our biological and mental state as well as our quality of life.

Even if only for selfish reasons, we must maintain a state of harmony with nature. My Native friends have a universal prayer that they employ in many of their sacred ceremonies that acknowledges each person's relationship with the entire universe. In the Lakota Sioux dialect, the prayer is "Mitakuye oyasin," in English, simply "All My Relations."

Are the waters truly sacred? Indeed, the answer to that question rests within each and every one of us.

Mitakuye oyasin.

All my relations.

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