

“Sacred Water” What Indigenous Spirituality Teaches Us?

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As blood is life giving to our bodies, so is water life giving to the body of Mother Earth. Water is an inseparable part of Creation given to us by God and it brings about and sustains anything and everything that breathes. For this reason, how can we not say that water is “sacred?”

The Justice Peace and Integrity of Creation (JPIC) National Gathering entitled “Sacred Water” was the very first conference I have attended that focused on indigenous spirituality, social justice, and ecological issues in connection with water. Water is indeed the string that connects all areas of our society and so when we talk about the spiritual aspect of respecting water we find ourselves discussing the social need to utilize water.

Exploitation of Water

Interestingly enough, as pointed out numerous times during the conference, the political exploitation of water is also a fact. For someone like me who is very new to this scenario, the amount and kind of information was very enlightening. I used to buy bottled water even before coming to Canada, not knowing its damaging effect ecologically and being completely unaware of the social injustice committed by large companies who commercialize the natural supply of water.

Thankfully, there are people like Maude Barlow and Fr. Nicolas Barla, and organizations like KAIROS, Development and Peace, and Ecologos that strive to educate people on the real situations surrounding the exploitation of water.

The dumping of waste into bodies of water, the privatization of the water supply, the technological processes that affect nature such as extraction of oil and gas through fracking and mining that disturbs the earth—and consequently the natural water resources—are examples of this exploitation. It is happening not only in Canada but also all around the world and contributes to the rapidly-changing climate globally.

Seeing Water as Our “Relative”

Dissemination of information is the key to solving problems on the water crisis but a more important key is realizing how sacred water is. In accepting and adopting the indigenous spirituality of respecting nature and seeing it as a “relative,” then we can truly take it upon ourselves to protect the nature, to protect our “Sister Water.”

On the first day of the JPIC conference, I saw Elder Josephine Mandamin walking aided by a walker. She said that at the time of the conference she was finishing her last water walk. That is what I would call determination and deep love for “Sacred Water.” This woman has a strong conviction that no medical diagnosis and physical hindrance would

keep her from doing what she started. She walked all the five great lakes of Ontario and other bodies of water including the St. Lawrence River.

How can she not love water so much when she sees water as a relative, a person, someone who can hear and talk and someone who has emotions just like a human being? She would speak of Mother Earth and Sister Water in the same way that she would speak of a woman. The cleansing period of a woman referred to as “moon time” is comparable to when the gravitational force of the moon causes a change in the tides of Mother Earth’s water.

When Elder Josephine referred to the exploitation of our Mother Earth, she used the word “prostituted” as if talking about the body of a person. She said, “Mother Earth’s body is being prostituted by those who are after money.” Sadly, this is true when water is being sold as a commodity rather than it being a gift from God freely given to all.

“We are all related”

The role of women, particularly indigenous women, in the protection of water is rooted in the fact that when women conceive life in them, this life, sheltered for nine months, is cradled in water inside a woman’s womb. In this context, water is synonymous with life. Elder Josephine points out that we are all related. In fact, all of our DNAs are formed in water ... we are all born from water and that makes us all related no matter what our skin colour is.

In the prayer honouring the four directions, Sr. Priscilla Solomon prayed for our brothers and sisters of the red-skinned, white-skinned, black-skinned and yellow-skinned races, indicating that all of us are connected. In accepting and adopting the indigenous spirituality of respecting nature and seeing it as a “relative,” then we can truly take it upon ourselves to protect the nature, to protect our “sister water.”

Being Stewards of Creation

The way Elder Josephine Mandamin spoke was a wonderful witness to how we, as stewards of Creation, should respond with gratitude and respect to the wonderful gift of nature given to us by God. Water is an indispensable part of Creation entrusted to us humans so we can be stewards of it.

Contrary to previous belief that everything we have on Earth exists for us humans to “subdue,” we must rather relate to nature with as much respect as we would with other human beings. This does not mean that we place nature in the same hierarchy of Creation as humans but we need to realize that all parts of Creation have value simply because God is the source of Creation and the author of everything. This echoes the teaching of Pope Francis in *Laudato Si...the Gospel of Creation*.

The goods of the Earth are there to sustain us but as good stewards we must take only what we need, nothing more nothing less. However, the problem with our society now is that we are driven to consume more than what we need. In this day and age, marketing strategies succeed at creating the “want” in people to have more and better products than what is really “needed.” “More” requires more materials and energy, which are ultimately coming from natural resources. Taking only what is needed also ensures sufficient if not equal distribution of the goods of the Earth to humankind.

Our Experience of Water

Elder Josephine invited each of us to introduce ourselves and speak about our experience of water. A lot of us spoke beautifully about our memories of the oceans, rivers, falls and lakes...there were also some who spoke about the “anger” of water during storms and typhoons. In addition, there were the missionaries who have been to different parts of the world where they experienced the lack of clean water. We are very blessed to have 24/7 access to clean drinking water and most of the time we forget how others are deprived when the rest of us have an abundance of it, and because we have an abundance of water we fail to responsibly conserve it.

With this, I began to examine my own use of water. When people take a shower for more than 40 minutes with constant running water or when someone keeps the water running while brushing his/her teeth, is it **needed**? Is it **respectful** to Mother Nature? Most of all, is it **just** to use that much when other people do not even have enough? With the current ecological situation, we need to protect our natural resources more than ever.

I believe Mother Earth is now speaking loudly to us beginning with last year’s massive forest fire in Fort McMurray dubbed as “The Beast,” and before that was the fire in Slave Lake. Recently there were wildfires in Portugal and in Italy where casualties were recorded, there was extreme heat in Arizona some months ago, and now the forest fires around British Columbia. If we do not start protecting Mother Earth, we will be uprooted from our homes so we had better start listening.

Hope in the Future

Elder Josephine said that water spoke to her when she was ready to listen. Her presence in itself, as simple and as gentle as she was, was a strong image of advocacy for our sacred water. To me, she is the image of hope for the future of Mother Earth. Her faith in the Creator, her heartfelt prayer for her children and her children’s children to have a clean, life-giving water, and her reverent appreciation each time she drinks water spoke to me and to most of those present at the conference.

It enkindled in us a desire to take a stand to protect our water but, more importantly, to examine ourselves on how we use and appreciate water. I believe there is no better way to be an advocate for a cause than to start the change in your own self.

When asked how she sees hope in the future of Mother Earth and of water, Elder Josephine answered, *“Ask our Creator in a good way, always in a good way.”* This is a confession of how water and the rest of Creation is from God, and how God is the ultimate healer of a planet that is hurting...