

UU Church of Waterville
Water Communion: Herstory/History of the Ritual
Sunday, September 12, 2021 – Kathy McKay

Many Unitarian Universalist congregations hold a Water Communion once a year, often at the beginning of the new church year in September, but it is a relatively recent tradition.

Just over 40 years ago, in 1980, two UU women—Carolyn McDade and Lucile Schuck Longview—were asked to create a worship service for the Women and Religion Continental Convocation of Unitarian Universalists. That first “water ritual” was part of their worship service: “Coming Home, Like Rivers to the Sea,” reflected in the graphic Dennis just screen-shared, and on the OOS Beth sent this morning; the lovely graphic is a reproduction from their first water ritual service.

As they shaped that service, McDade and Longview wanted to create a new ritual “that spoke to our connectedness to one another, to the totality of life, and to our place on this planet.” They included a new, inclusive symbol of women’s spirituality: water. They wrote, *“Water is more than simply a metaphor. It is elemental and primary, calling forth feelings of awe and reverence. Acknowledging that the ocean is considered by many to be the place from which all life on our planet came—it is the womb of life—and that amniotic waters surround each of us prenatally, we now realize that [this worship service] was for us a new story of creation... We choose water as our symbol of our empowerment.”* “As the ritual is continued,” said Carolyn McDade, *“water deepens in meaning for us, just as water deepens during its long and winding journey to the sea.”*

That first Unitarian Universalist water ritual was an important part of the feminist movement inside of Unitarian Universalism, and it is closely related to the development of the current UUA’s “Principles and Purposes.”

In 1975, Lucile Shuck Longview, then a devoted member of the UU Parish in Lexington MA, served as the UU delegate to the United Nations “Women’s Year” assembly in Mexico City. She returned from that assembly convinced that religion, even her beloved Unitarian Universalism, was a chief culprit in the perpetuation of oppressive sexism. Back in Lexington she gathered support and authored what became the “Women and Religion” Resolution passed by the 1977 General Assembly. That resolution called for an intensive examination of the “sexism inherent in religious literature and institutions” – beginning with the UUA itself.

UUA President Paul Carnes put together a committee to work on the resolutions, and districts were encouraged to support related Women and Religion groups. These groups quickly noted the necessity of rewriting the original 1961 UUA’s Purposes and Principles, which used male gendered language to express the concerns and dignity of “mankind,” and which failed to address the care of Mother Earth as a religious priority. In 1985 the Principles and Purposes as we know them today, were passed by General Assembly, complete with the inclusion of the 7th: **“Respect for the interdependent web of existence of which we are a part.”** as a new principle.

The path from Longview’s 1975 experience with the United Nations to the General Assembly in 1985 was long and difficult. In between those two benchmark dates there were countless meetings, conversations, and worship services that served as profound spiritual explorations of the sought after transformations. That first “water ritual” as mentioned previously, was part of one such worship service, and this is what McDade and Longview later said about the significance of the service:

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“The water ceremony became the central part of a religious service that broke with tradition in significant ways. It was created by lay women, women who had long been silent in the pews. The ritual space was also made sacred by the women themselves. We gathered to worship in a way authentic and liberating to us, not as in a church but in a semicircle around a large common earthen bowl. It was a ritual of women’s being connected by a universal symbol, water, a ritual of women being connected to the totality of life.

Just like in contemporary water celebrations, different participants had been asked to bring to the service water that held special meaning for them. Those waters were then co-mingled as the women shared. Unlike many contemporary celebrations, however, the original ritual noted that it was important for those participating to have the opportunity to take some of the co-mingled waters home. Indeed, they invited the women present to empty out any bottle of cosmetics or perfume that they might have brought with them and to use it to convey some of the water home—thus abandoning a product that exploited perceived feminine inadequacies to make room for that which might remind them of their shared power.

But most of all, persons accustomed to the current practice of water celebrations might be surprised by the depth of sharing that took place as the waters were mingled. Here is an example of what one participant shared as she poured her water into the common bowl: the words of Jean Bramadet, of Winnipeg Canada.

Assiniboine River in Winnipeg, Canada...Jean Bramadet

I bring water from Canada, from the north, from the prairies. This water comes from the Assiniboine River which ultimately flows into Hudson Bay. The water from this river is very important to me because I live on this river (it is almost an extension of my living room) and constantly observe the changes. Sometimes it flows fast and sometimes slowly—quite a bit like my own moods and my own life. I have listened at night to the boom and crack of the ice flows breaking as winter turns into spring. I have watched helplessly as a man drowned in the fast moving waters before me. I have observed with pleasure the blue herons receiving sustenance from its banks. I have enjoyed the river in all its seasons, skating in the winter, canoeing in the summer. But most of all, the river is a symbol of the lasting power of life. The physical part of me may die but, like the river, my spirit will live on.

A fine thought: ***The physical part of me may die but, like the river, my spirit will live on.***

Many of us have regularly or periodically had an impactful connection to particular bodies of water. When my nieces were married a few years ago, their ceremony included the water Becca brought from her home in Boston and that Molly contributed from her native Anchorage—combined as a sign of the union they formed.

For this service, you may have considered bringing a sample to share in our virtual communal bowl, or you may have **intended** to do so, but not quite made it. You may have tap water brought symbolically. We’re lucky, we’re fortunate, to have it. It’s all good.

(Message heavily excerpted from UUA sources.)