

“All Water Runs Together”

Rev. Laurel Gray

September 12th, 2021

Yesterday you may have heard the ringing of our bell, thanks to Bruce and Ben, along with others in town as we commemorated the 20th anniversary of 9/11 together. Though some of us are too young to remember that day, I for one can say it is seared in my mind with extraordinary clarity. Perhaps you can say the same.

We'll share some silence together to make space for remembering, not only all the people who were killed, but the staggering courage of so many that day as well as the cascade of violence and hate crimes that followed. When I think about 9/11 it feels like a glorified but untended wound in the fabric of our country. So I want to share these words from Valarie Kaur's new book *See No Stranger*. Kaur is a renowned Sikh activist, filmmaker, and civil rights lawyer.

“History is littered with the wreckage of mass violence on the scale of 9/11. But 9/11 was the first attack that occurred as a global televised experience, unfolding in real time for the world to see.

No tragedy has been so roundly condemned. In those first days after the attacks, the world as a whole poured its goodwill into us, despite any grievances with the United States. What if we hadn't squandered that goodwill? What would have happened if we used that outpouring of love as a balm for the wound?

It takes bravery to grieve well. We could have grieved with all of our fellow Americans, not just the ones who looked like us, but also the ones who looked like the people we feared. We could have grieved with people around the world and drawn connections between their suffering and ours.

The mass killing of three thousand people and the trauma of a world that watched could have sustained a kind of public grieving that expanded our sense of who counts as 'us' beyond what anyone had previously experienced. It could have made us safer. Today we might have remembered 9/11 as the tragedy that initiated an era of global cooperation rather than global war.”

Here, in this place together, there is room for our grief, for the moments when everything changed and we had to find our way forwards anew.

And the thing with community is that we do this together. There is a balm in collective grief that cannot be created alone. There is power in finding our way together.

As we gather together to start a new church year, we come holding the fullness of the human experience. Together, we make space for joy and for sorrow, for lamenting and for celebrating.

“The same stream of life that runs through my veins night and day runs through the world,” Tagore writes.

In life we all go through times of waiting, of hope and grief tied up with the vulnerability of waiting for news. It’s part of life. But to ride these waves together, as we did on 9/11, and we continue to with this pandemic - to have a collective, even global, experience of waiting for news, that is an unusual thing.

As we remember the 20th anniversary of 9/11 and look back on all that came after that horrific day, it makes me wonder how we’ll feel twenty years after this pandemic. What will we have learned about how our lives and our choices are all connected? Will we believe that we squandered this moment or used it create a greater sense of connection and care?

On this first Sunday of the church year, it is our custom to begin again with Water communion. A ritual in which we typically bring small amounts of water, each person pouring their water into one collective well.

Again this year, like last, we’re doing this service virtually.

We local UU ministers meet once a month to support each other and find ways to collaborate. At the meeting two weeks ago we were sharing our Covid plans, our bafflement at starting a second church year in this pandemic, and the question of water communion came up.

The Rev. Dr. Cynthia Landrum who serves the First Parish Church in Stowe and Acton was kind enough to share a ritual that another colleague has shared with her. Instead of bringing water and risking the service turning into a travel log, everyone starts with the same water, and the ritual follows the hymn “I’ve Got Peace Like a River.” With each verse the congregation pours small amounts of their water into a bowl - water for the peace like a river in our souls, for the joy like a fountain. We’ll do this version of water communion in a few moments ourselves, as are the other UU churches around us.

Because, as Rev. Landrum reminded us all “you don’t actually need to have people bring different water - all water runs together anyways.”

And in truth, that is sort of the point. Just as all of us are inextricably connected to each other, all water runs together.

The original water communion ritual was created by Carolyn McDade, who wrote the hymn “Spirit of Life,” and Lucile Schuck Longview in the 1980s. It was born of the feminist movement within Unitarian Universalism.

The women chose water as their symbol because, they said, “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 service was for us a new story of creation.”

In that very first Water communion, McDade and Longview said this: “celebrating now our connectedness, we choose water as our symbol of empowerment. As rivers in cycle release their waters and regain new beginnings, so do we cycle...we come to create and to celebrate and to live by the only spirituality worthy of our devotion—a spirituality that uplifts, empowers, and connects.”

So today, all these years later, we gather again, beginning a new year, holding the fullness of this moment in time, and the depth of the human experience - we gather together to remember our connectedness, to water our spirits, and to feel the empowerment of being more together than we are on our own.

Amen