

“Troubled Water” – Rev. Tracy Johnson
March 17, 2019 – Unitarian Church of Barnstable UU

“The water crisis in Flint, Michigan, began in 2014, when the city switched its drinking water supply from Detroit’s system to the Flint River in a cost-saving move. Inadequate treatment and testing of the water resulted in a series of major water quality and health issues for Flint residents—issues that were chronically ignored, overlooked, and discounted by government officials even as complaints mounted that the foul-smelling, discolored, and off-tasting water piped into Flint homes for 18 months was causing skin rashes, hair loss, and itchy skin.”ⁱ

Around on the opposite side of our earth home, “In Lesotho,” a small independent country surrounded by South Africa, “water, sanitation and hygiene lie at the center of the poverty cycle in which almost two out of every three Basotho live in poverty. The lack of those services both drives vulnerability and increases it, particularly for those already at risk. These include orphans, people living with HIV/AIDs, households headed by women, rural women and girls, and those living in remote areas,”ⁱⁱ

And close to home - the first widespread realization of Cape Cod’s water fragility came in the 1980s with the discovery that the Massachusetts Military Reservation, now Joint Base Cape Cod, was leaking plumes of toxic chemicals and heavy metals into the ground water. In a more recent year, just before vacation season kicked into high gear, town officials said there was something wrong with the drinking water. The previous week, the US Environmental Protection Agency had dramatically lowered its advisory levels for two chemical compounds with names too long for me attempt pronouncing, once found in things like nonstick coatings and stain-resistant clothes, and still used in some industrial applications such as flame retardants, instantly putting water from the Hyannis Water System over the limit. Town officials recommended that pregnant women and nursing mothers in Hyannis not drink or cook with municipal water, nor should babies drink it, they said, noting that exposure to elevated levels of these chemicals might cause developmental problems.ⁱⁱⁱ I read a couple of weeks ago that the fight about the County Fire and Rescue Training Academy being closed and cleaned up continues on.

The common thread in all of these stories is the people who are most effected. It is the marginalized in our local community; nationally, in Flint and Toledo and other urban areas; and internationally in small countries across the globe from here. “The Michigan Civil Rights Commission, a state-established body, concluded that the poor governmental response to the Flint crisis was a, quote, “result of systemic racism.” And, according to UN Special Reporter on water and sanitation, Léo Heller, again, I will quote, “Using the framework of human rights as a guide would help Lesotho to identify its highest priorities in water and sanitation including key issues like those most vulnerable, equality and non-discrimination and access to information.” Locally, we see the highest concentration of persons living closest to where our water problems originate; people who work in the service industries trying to get by year-round here on the

Cape, immigrants, women and children. There is no rush because they have less of a voice at the table.

March 22nd is World Water Day, an annual United Nations observance in recognition of the importance of fresh water set aside to advocate for sustainable management of this precious resource. “In 2010, the UN recognized the right to safe and clean drinking water and sanitation as a human right that is essential for the full enjoyment of life and all human rights.”^{iv} The World Water Day theme this year is “Leaving no one behind.” The human right to clean, clear water ought to be a given, but more and more we find that it has become the property of the affluent with little concern for those of lesser means. When I read that a small percentage of the billionaires in our midst could alleviate the need worldwide with only a minimal contribution, I wonder why we have a problem at all. It seems so simple, so straightforward, but it is not the case; we can’t manage to get there.

And perhaps we can’t get there because of the here from which we begin the journey. Destructive environmental choices are said to follow the path of least resistance according to Paula Cole Jones which translates into devastation in areas where those with the least access to control over their environments live and work and play. Decisions like the one in Flint smack of structured and institutional discrimination. Low income communities and communities of color face proximity to industry, environmental waste disposal, resource retrieval or use and air and water pollution, she writes in her essay in this year’s UU Common Read: Justice on Earth – People of Faith Working at the Intersections of Race, Class and the Environment. Historically, it is these people who bear the impact. It is our history as a nation and we see it on our own small spit of land. When something runs this deep it is hard to shake.

The kinds of intersections explored in the book happen when the environments in which people live; their context, overlap with the degradation of the natural environments that surround them. It is disproportionately the case that racist and classist practices allow for the ruin and decay of the natural environment in ways that disrupt the sanctity of life for the marginalized in our communities. The troubled waters that I began with are emblematic of a much larger issue. People are being left behind; cast off; denied the most basic of human rights.

Our Unitarian Universalist Principles – not the first one, although it certainly applies – everyone is inherently worthy of the basics required to maintain one’s dignity. And not the last one – even though our interdependence tells us that decisions that fail some of us ultimately fail all of us. I want to talk about the second one! Justice, equity and compassion in human relations.

When I talk about justice I do so in the Hebrew bible sense of the word. It is about right relationship. Right relationship between a people or person and their god, however they may define that. Right relationship among all the people – not just those we agree with or see every day at work or on the street. It’s the people we don’t typically see that I want us to be developing a right relationship with! Those around the corner or across state lines or on the other side of the globe. The people that are easily overlooked because they may not be a part of our context. It is a big picture justice that I am seeking.

Equity in human relations has more to do with fairness; a level playing field, unlike equality which talks about one person, place or thing being equal to another. The latter sets us up for either/or binary thinking that places one side higher and one side lower; assumes that the lower must rise or be lifted up to the level of the higher; creates competition in human relations. Equity says we are all in this together; all of humanity on the same plane.

I love this next word: compassion. In the Greek language it is a verb: *spangchnizomai*. Its most literal translation I learned in a very early seminary class is actually – now this may sound a little gross, but – guts or entrails, however, it implies action. It is the grieving we experience when we hear of extreme suffering, pain or loss – that twisting in the gut feeling. It is an inner knowing we sometimes sense in the absence of more intellectual cues. And I want to suggest that as an action it becomes most clear in our response to the initial feeling. According to American author and scholar, Marcus Borg, in his book *Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time*, it is the life of compassion; the life that follows that intense inner leading, that listens to the sacred fire within, which reaches across and shatters boundaries. It is a life that calls for a restructuring of our social world. To “be compassionate as God is compassionate” (same Greek word here) was Jesus’ admonition to the people of his time, shifting from holiness, purity and exclusivity that builds walls amongst people, and a call for us in this time to take a closer look at the paradigms and core values that shape our lives. This is the compassion our Principles ask us to affirm.

Diving into the intersections of race and class and environment can be scary place to go. The layers of pain and anguish go deep and we need to be willing to go deep into that well ourselves. It will be painful at times as we realize our complicity with oppression in ways we haven’t considered before. Those of us who are white, comfortable middle-class folks need to be prepared to become a bit uncomfortable as we learn what the marginalized have understood for so, so long. Institutional racism and its partner, classism are a given that people of color, poor people, immigrants, women raising children on their own; the list is long and only growing under the current leadership in our country, a given that has been the accepted norm to which many have reconciled themselves. People are being left behind again and again. How is this justice?

Exploring intersectionality with this second Principle in hand offers us some insights into how it might begin. What does ‘being in right relationship’ look like in real time? First off, it makes no assumptions about how another person feels or is experiencing a situation. It asks questions – awkward questions – the kinds of things we were likely raised not to ask! Some things we just don’t talk about and complex, hurtful experiences in the lives of others are one of them. But right relationship is born of new understandings among people from differing experiences of the same event who can share those honestly, say they are sorry when they need to, cry together about the state of things. And for those of us who come to it from a place of privilege it is a humble act of listening more than anything else.

A sense of equity has to come from the heart if it is to be meaningful. “We are all each other” we say in my work with WE CAN. We sang together last weekend at the talent show this song, “Nothing More.” I welled up a bit as we sang the refrain – We are love. We are one. We are how we treat each other when the day is done. We are peace. We are war. We are how we treat each other, nothing more. It’s a song that I had the band from the First Parish of Watertown, UU in Watertown, MA where I did my parish internship sing at my ordination there because it speaks to the core of my ministry. The song arose in response to the shootings in Sandy Hook in 2012, two towns over from my UU home at the time, and so it has special significance to me. But it speaks to this idea of equity also; all of us journeyers born into the world in the same way. What would it be like if all of humanity could live in ways that consider each other as one? To begin from this frame of reference gives us an authentic chance to make it work.

Moving from a place of compassion means listening to our guts. They react to circumstances all day long. If we tune in to what they are saying, we will know how to respond as we navigate troubled waters. Hearing someone’s expression of pain does that twisting thing I mentioned earlier. It is a grieving within us and from which we are called to act. Not shame or guilt or anger, but grief, I think best describes how I feel. And a desire to make right follows; to live differently, more thoughtfully. We can’t fix or smooth over the injustices of the past, but we can certainly ensure we aren’t party to them going forward.

Some of you may be interested in exploring the essays in the Common Read book more deeply. I want to invite you to do so along with some folks from First Parish Brewster and the UU Meetinghouse in Chatham. I will be leading a book discussion at First Parish on Friday evening, April 26th and you are welcome to join the conversation. It is an annual pot luck affair. Please see me if you are interested and perhaps we can employ some of your Social Justice leadership here to help make that happen!

The times are ripe for this conversation about intersections as we bear witness daily to further injustices, oppression, marginalization based so clearly in racist and classist tendencies in our government and, if we look closely, in our day to day lives as well. As Unitarian Universalists we have these aspirational tools in our Principles – what a gift of our forebears! I invite you to parse out the meaning for yourselves in each of these words from our second Principle: justice, equity, compassion, and to think about how they may come alive in your human relationships. May you find in that search blessings for the journey. Amen.

ⁱ <https://www.nrdc.org/stories/flint-water-crisis-everything-you-need-know>

ⁱⁱ <http://www.worldwaterday.org/fulfilling-human-rights-to-water-and-sanitation-critical-for-human-development/>

ⁱⁱⁱ <https://www.bostonglobe.com/magazine/2016/08/02/cape-cod-big-drinking-water-problem/Q17CHGAXFoYGJzWeak7YNP/story.html>

^{iv} UN (2010): A/RES/64/292 Resolution adopted by the General Assembly on 28 July 2010: http://www.un.org/en/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=A/RES/64/292