

# **May You Never Thirst**

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**The Unitarian Universalist Society in Stamford**

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**I hope you never have a nightmare like this one:**

**You turn on the kitchen faucet. Nothing comes out.**

**You try the bathroom sink. Nothing. You phone your neighbor and ask if they have water. They don't. You turn on the TV and hear a TV anchor announcing that everyone in North America and Europe has had their water turned off. Everyone must find their own water, even if it's polluted, or if you have to carry it for miles. Or, some may have the option of buying clean water, though it may cost them a quarter of their income or simply be unaffordable. Though you're in shock, the TV announcer goes on that in addition to North America and Europe not having safe, affordable water, there would no longer be access to proper sanitation in these areas, nor in the whole of East Asia. The nightmare flashes forward to a year later. The TV**

**announcer, looking haggard and visibly aged, says that over the past year over two million people, or most of Connecticut's population, had died of preventable water-borne illnesses.**

**You wake up from your nightmare with a huge sense of relief. But your dream had been so real. You run to the bathroom faucet just to convince yourself it had all been a dream. And there it comes, cool, clear, drinkable water.**

**But, through the day, the dream still haunts you. You try to reassure yourself that it was just a stupid nightmare, probably caused by something you ate. After all, this is the 21<sup>st</sup> century, right? Water is just automatic, isn't it? And water is pretty safe, right?**

**But something convinces you to sit down at a computer and check. What you read isn't pleasant. It turns out your nightmare was all too real. The places were mostly different, but the facts were mostly the same. One-and-a-quarter billion, that *billion* with a "b," people don't have access to safe drinking water. Most of these people are women and girls. Most of them live in the countries of the**

**south. Two and a half billion people don't have access to proper sanitation. Polluted water kills 2.2 million people per year. Most of these are children. Twice as many die every day from water-borne illness than died on September 11<sup>th</sup>. Seventy percent of these deaths could be prevented.**

**If these problems were occurring in North America and Europe like they are in other parts of the world, we surely would all be familiar with the problem. Shouldn't we be concerned no matter where we live when our fellow humans suffer?**

**But access to safe, affordable water isn't just an issue "out there" in other countries. Right here in Connecticut, we are rapidly losing our natural watersheds to development. Debates have raged in various communities over turning over municipal water systems to private companies. In one case, a British water company tried to sell off watershed land here in Connecticut, only to be stopped in that effort by an alert and active public.**

**But the residents of one neighborhood in Detroit were not so fortunate. According to the Unitarian Universalist Service Committee (UUSC),**

Over 40,000 Highland Park/Detroit families learned about the problems of water privatization in the time it took them to turn on a tap. Nothing came out. The city government of Detroit had decided that the only way to repair and re-invigorate their old, debilitated public water system was to sell it to the corporate sector to run for profit. In order to make their faltering water system more marketable, they hiked up the rates and turned off the taps. Suddenly, these families, mostly African American women-headed households became part of the 1.25 billion people in the world who do not have access to clean drinking water. The Michigan Welfare Rights Organization has taken the city to court.<sup>1</sup>

**Sometimes war contributes to the lack of safe water. In the Mabuia region of Angola, crocodiles snatched seven people a few years ago,**

But the women of the village had to go back to the river to get water – they had no other choice. After years of war, the pipes in this part of Angola were broken, the reservoir was cracked, and there were no generators to power pumps. Not only was the water dangerous to fetch, though – it was also dangerous to drink. Aurora Jeremias, a local woman, says that three of her family have died from diarrhea.<sup>2</sup>

**But the biggest obstacle to safe water for the world's people is pollution. According to UUSC,**

Though over three quarters of the earth is covered with water, only one percent of that water is fresh water and only 1/100th of that is available for human use, the other 99 percent being locked up into glaciers. Of that usable water, 92 percent is used for agriculture and industry, leaving only eight percent of 1/100th percent for

the 6.4 billion people living on the planet. According to the latest report released from the United Nations, more people are getting clean water, some 83 percent of all people, up from 77 percent in 1990, but the distribution is far from equitable. And who is being squeezed by the growing shortage of water? You guessed it – poor people, indigenous people, and women and children....

The main reasons for this crisis are massive pollution; inadequate regulation of water extraction by agribusiness and water companies; and lakes and streams drying up due to global warming and deforestation.<sup>3</sup>

**The World Bank estimates that in only twenty years, the modest gains made recently will be swept away as the proportion of the world's population with access to safe drinking water rises from 1/6<sup>th</sup> today to 2/3rds in 2025.**

**This nightmare has been explored through science fiction, a medium that has the potential for helping us explore possible future worlds. I recall my favorite cartoon at age 12, the Japanese space odyssey, “Star Blazers.” In the series, the earth has been reduced to an arid, radioactive waste by an alien attack. One earth ship, the Argo, flies from the stricken planet to the far reaches of space to bring back extraterrestrial technology that will restore the earth to life. All these years, I've reflected over one particularly moving scene in which the old captain and**

**young first mate of that lone earth ship share the water of a pure spring collected before the planet was destroyed.**

**Or Frank Herbert's *Dune* books and movie roving bands called *Fremen* live a sparse existence in desert conditions that suggest the struggle for life so many in our world must engage in every day. The fictional Fremen recognize their vital relationship with water, as we surely will soon. The Fremen's reverence for water reflects itself in their culture, which may seem strange to us. One reviewer writes,**

**The Fremen refer to blood as "the body's water," suggesting that the Fremen view water as the blood of the environment. When Thufir Hawat agrees to join the Fremen, he enters the "bond of water," rather than a blood oath. People show their loyalty to one another by spitting or sharing water. Paul and Jessica, during their time with the Fremen, engage in many rituals that involve water. For example, Paul accepts the water of Jamis's corpse after he kills him. After drinking the water, Paul is baptized into the culture of the Fremen, and he is reborn as a leader in their world. For the Fremen, water and life are the same.<sup>4</sup>**

**But isn't it so for all of us, and everyone who has ever lived? None of us can go more than a few days without water and live. Most of our body is water. The need for water is an absolute commonality among human beings. Republicans? Mostly water. Democrats? Mostly water.**

**Men? Mostly water. Women? Mostly water. Africans? Americans? Chinese? Nepalese? Mostly water. And it's all the same water, circulating as long as there's been water on earth, from one being to another, one region to another. Should only some people have access to the earth's lifeblood?**

**All the way back at the time of the Hebrew Bible, water was just as crucial a resource as it is now. And it was and is scarce in Palestine. We read in Genesis of peoples fighting over wells. And today the unequal distribution of water is one of the causes of the Israeli/Palestinian conflict.**

**In our first reading this morning, we heard part of a story about Abraham and Sarah, the supposed patriarch and matriarch of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Abraham and Sarah don't come across too well in the story. They send the slave girl Hagar out to the desert, due to Sarah's jealousy over Hagar's motherhood of Abraham's first child, Ishmael, who Moslems revere as an ancestor. Hagar and Ishmael nearly die of thirst, only saved**

**by a miracle from God that opens Hagar's eyes to a spring of water.**

**Here we have a horrible act of cruelty, wholly without human sympathy as those in power cast out a vulnerable mother and child to a place where she has no access to water. Can you imagine taking your young child through a desert with death from lack of water closing in on him, then on you? But we read that God's intent for the child was not a pointless death. How could this be anyone's highest purpose?**

**Whether we believe in God, or whether we prefer other explanations of how the universe works, it's clear that there are billions of Hagar's and Ishmael's in our world today. Will we be among those who send them into the desert without adequate water? Or will we be a messenger of mercy? Will we do our part to open eyes to the problems and to the solutions within our reach? Will we open new, safe wells and water systems for all the world's people regardless of race, class, or nationality?**



**Remembering our contemporary reading this morning, by Mary Wellemeyer, will the water in our hearts be stuck and frozen or will it flow freely?**

**There were many things the late Pope John Paul II disagreed about. But one we did agree on is the right of people to clean water. Whatever theological differences may exist, water is such a basic necessity, any respectable moral system must grant at least this right to people, and it is guaranteed by international law.**

**But only action will change the situation on the ground. Some of that action is being taken by the Unitarian Universalist Service Committee. A human rights organization, they've decided to devote much effort into promoting the human right to water, advocating against unregulated privatization, and working with groups in the developing world to help their efforts to guarantee safe water to their peoples. Of course, they still continue to work for women's rights, minority rights, and human rights in general. I hope you'll take a moment later today to become a member of UUSC, or renew your membership. You'll**

**find an envelope in your order of service you can mail in. UUSC received no money from the Unitarian Universalist Association. It relies on people like you and me to do the right thing.**

**I will close this morning with another image from the world of imagination. Robert Heinlein's cult classic, *Stranger in a Strange Land* features one Valentine Michael Smith, or "Mike," a human raised on Mars by Martians. When he comes to live on earth, Mike initiates a number of humans into the Martian custom of sharing water, which is practiced a real-life faith based on the book called the Church of All Worlds. One of the Church's priests explains the ritual like this:**

**A fundamental rite of CAW is a communion of souls called Water-sharing. In this rite participants share water with one another. They recognize within each other the Divine Being with the phrase "Thou art God" or "Thou art Goddess". This similar to the Hindu greeting of "Namaste" which means the "Divine in me greets the Divine in you." "May you never thirst" is spoken when the shared water is drunk. Since water is essential to all known life on this planet it is seen as being very precious. CAW envisions Water-sharing as a way of honoring this preciousness. This symbolic act also recognizes one believes Divine Being is a living experience in all Humanity. The phrase "never thirst" serves as a reminder of one's conscious connection with living as an experience of Divine being.<sup>5</sup>**

**Let's us do our part to bring closer a world where every person is honored and protected. May you never thirst!**

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.uusc.org/news/alert032905.html>

<sup>2</sup> [http://www.uusc.org/ia/justice\\_sunday/2005/pdfs/resources.pdf](http://www.uusc.org/ia/justice_sunday/2005/pdfs/resources.pdf)

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> [http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/tg/cm/member-glance/-/A33T4OQBH7UCTZ/1/ref=cm\\_cr\\_auth/002-4804735-6220040?%5Fencoding=UTF8](http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/tg/cm/member-glance/-/A33T4OQBH7UCTZ/1/ref=cm_cr_auth/002-4804735-6220040?%5Fencoding=UTF8)

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.caw.org/articles/WhatIsCaw.html>