

“Return Again: Water Communion and Ingathering”

Rev. Mary Gear

Delivered Sunday, September 12, 2021

Reading: From T.S. Eliot’s, *Four Quartets*, in the poem titled “Little Gidding,” originally published 1943.

“We shall not cease from exploration
And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time.
Through the unknown, remembered gate
When the last of earth left to discover
Is that which was the beginning;
At the source of the longest river
The voice of the hidden waterfall
And the children in the apple-tree
Not known, because not looked for
But heard, half-heard, in the stillness
Between two waves of the sea.

Sermon/Homily: “Return Again”

Return again.
Return again.
Return to the home of your soul.

This song is in one of our UU hymnals as we sang it today, but when I researched the origin and history, I learned that the original version written by Shlomo Carlebach was “Return to the land of your soul.” Not the home of your soul, the land of your soul. Rabbi Schlomo Carlebach was writing for his people, the ancient Israelites of the Book of Exodus and the Jews who have been refugees throughout history. They were seeking to return to the land of their soul. I imagine that our Native neighbors would have

something to say about this, returning to the land, the land that they never left. I wonder what we Unitarian Universalists lost when we changed the words. I wonder if we lost our groundedness, our connection to place, to the land. I wonder if we lost our connection to each other, for it is the land that unites us, our Mother Earth. I wonder.

Right now, I can certainly relate to that sense of being lost, losing connection to something solid. Perhaps you can, too. What a time this is! At a time when the pandemic and world events have shown us again and again that we are interconnected, there are forces telling us that we are separate, unconnected, divided.

We are weathering a storm together. Last year in our water communion service, I said that we are in the same storm, not in the same boat, and this is still true. Some of us are weathering the storm in the shelter of a yacht and some of us are holding on for dear life to a piece of driftwood. Some of us are quite literally in a storm-fires, floods, hurricanes, tornados. Many, many storms.

How have you stayed grounded and connected these past months?

I am incredibly grateful for technology, a computer and phone that helps me be connected. And I am so grateful to have begun seeing some of you and some friends in person. As I have met some of you for tea at OUUC these past few weeks, I hear "It's so good to see you! It's so good to be here!" We are beginning to return to the land of our spiritual home. We are just beginning. It will come. We have to hold on to hope that it will and do all we can to make it so.

We left this place, a spiritual home, and as we return, we will experience it for the first time. It is the same and not the same. We are the same and not the same. The same space and yet not the same, for we aren't the same people.

Last year on water communion, I poured water into the bowl alone in my home office. I had water from the 2019 water communion, water from my home faucet, from the kitchen at OUUC, and from Budd Inlet. A bit of the water from 2020 is here; it has been

waiting in that jar in my church office, waiting for this service, this year. We save some water from the year before each year; the water from 2018 was waiting for me when I arrived two years ago. This water holds water from years past—we were, we are, and we can be again.

Sing: Return to who you are,
Return to what you are,
Return to where you are
born and reborn again.

We have been changed. So, as we return—to another congregational year, to community, to this place—we are born and reborn again. And anyone who has done so will tell you that giving birth is hard work! We might be just a bit weary, a bit sweaty, a bit worn.

Poet Jane Hirschfield wrote, we feel like separate water drops but we are also ocean. May we remember that the land is still here, the water is still here, we are still here, still together, still connected.

In last year's ingathering service, I said this:

I won't pretend to have any idea how this year will unfold or what the world will be like next September. But I do know this: we are all in the same sea of life, in the same storm, and we need each other. Our call to shared ministry has never been stronger.

It was true last year, and it is true again this year. The future is uncertain and we are interconnected. We need each other and the world needs the life-saving message of our faith based in covenant and love.

Today we combine the water of our individual lives to create the water of community. As we return to the land of our soul, may we know that there are moments of stillness between the waves of the stormy sea, and may we be those moments of stillness for each other.