

27 July, 2008 * Appetites, Part 3: Designer Water, Dying Lands
Rev. Erika Hewitt * Live Oak Unitarian Universalist Congregation

A note from Rev. Erika:

Remember, please, that what we do as a congregation, most Sundays, is to deepen our awareness, find ways to be in our integrity, and invite transformation that will make us agents of justice and compassion in the world. As you read this sermon, know that we don't judge one another – not for the food we eat, the stuff we buy, or the water we drink. As always, I deem guilt to be one of the most unproductive emotions there is.

Reading #1: excerpt from *Bottlemania* by Elizabeth Royte (pp. 39-42):

In 2005, the bottled-water industry spent \$158 million on advertising in the United States... (...\$20 million is a typical budget for a bottled-water campaign)... The outrageous success of bottled water, in a country where more than 89 percent of tap water meets or exceeds federal health and safety regulations, regularly wins in blind taste tests against name-brand waters, and costs 240 to 10,000 times less than bottled water, is an unparalleled social phenomenon, one of the greatest marketing coups of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries...

[The marketing works, in part, because]... bottled water plays into our ever-growing laziness and impatience... An entire generation is growing up with the idea that drinking water comes in small plastic bottles... Like iPods and cell phones, bottled water is private, portable, and individual... Somehow, we've become a nation obsessed with hygiene and sterility.

Reading #2:

a 4-page glossy fold-out ad for Glacéau smartwater® (“the water with all the answers”), from a recent issue of a women’s magazine: black-and-white photos of the stunning Jennifer Aniston, cavorting on a dock.

Text reads:

I love the reflection of water (but what I drink is a reflection of me.)
our bodies are more than 50 percent water, so when
it comes to the water I drink, I want something I can count
on. Smartwater is inspired by the way nature makes
water but one-ups it. perfected in a totally pure environment,
It tastes the way nature intended. clean. how smart is that?

Sermon: “Designer Water, Dying Lands”

Here's what's *really* smart about smartwater®: the profits it earns for Glacéau. A twenty ounce bottle retails for \$1.19 (+ CRV), which puts the cost of smartwater® at \$7.62 per gallon – more expensive than milk, juice, or gasoline. (And if you want your smartwater® laced with color, flavor, and additives, you'd buy smartwater®'s sister product, vitaminwater, whose price works out to \$10.24 per gallon.¹)

These are a but few of the discoveries that I made last month, when I visited my favorite organo-groovy, holistic health store in Berkeley.² After seeking out the bottled water selection, I began taking notes (to the consternation of the employee stocking shelves next to me). In addition to the standard brands of bottled water – Calistoga Springs, Crystal Geysir – I counted at least eleven others. They included:

- * smartwater®
- * vitaminwater
- * Essentia (“formulated” with anti-oxidants, electrolytes, and increased alkalinity)
- * Penta water with oxygen (“ultra-premium purified drinking water...hundreds of times cleaner than many of the bottled spring waters”)
- * MetroMint (reverse-osmosis treated water flavored with “pesticide-free mint grown in Washington State’s Yakima Valley” and treated with “a double-distillation process”)

...and rounding out the North American selection:

- * Ice Age water (“the only Canadian bottled water carrying the American Culinary Institute Gold Seal of Approval”)

The overseas front was represented by Perrier (France), Pellegrino (Italy), and Gerolsteiner (Germany). There were also bottles of Icelandic Glacial (which claims to be bottled by a carbon-neutral facility³) and Fiji water (“we saved you a trip to Fiji”⁴).

When did this happen? When did we begin to develop a taste for water imported from Fiji, and to distrust and disavow the water from our own taps? Where does our appetite (OK – *thirst*) for bottled water come from, and – more importantly – what are the costs of that thirst? Most relevant for us this morning, as a religious community: where is the intersection between bottled drinking water and our Unitarian Universalist values?

* **the environmental cost**

The first “cost” that bottled water exacts on our planet is, of course, environmental. In *Bottlemania*, journalist Elizabeth Royte notes⁵ that the average American drinks 27.6 gallons of bottled water per year. All of that water, in all of that plastic, contributes over 1.5 million tons of plastic to the eco-stream each year.⁶ The cost isn’t just in the bottles produced, but also in “the energy required to manufacture and transport these bottles to market,” severely draining the world’s finite supply of fossil fuels.

This is one reason that the City of Santa Barbara passed a resolution, in May, which bans the spending of city funds to buy bottled water for city meetings and special events.⁷ Like San Francisco, Boston, Philadelphia, Minneapolis, Miami, Chicago, and other cities, our city’s leaders have recognized the need to save the environmental cost of the plastic... which also has a favorable impact on the city’s budget.

*** the financial co\$t**

Clearly, our desire to drink exotic water in sculpted bottles bears a financial cost. Partly because of extensive marketing campaigns, and partly because of how much fuel it takes to deliver bottled water to stores, designer water is expensive. Worldwide, bottled water sales exceed \$35 billion per year.⁸ In the United States, we spend more than \$10 billion per year on bottled water – more than we spend on beer or milk.⁹

The cost of designer water hits us in the wallet, which I suppose is a choice we're each entitled to make. On principle, though, it's worth considering where those profits are funneled. For example, guess who owns Glacéau (the company that bottles smartwater and Vitaminwater? Coca-Cola! As another example, Nestlé "controls one-third of the U.S. market," selling under 70 brand names... which it draws from 75 springs located all over the country.¹⁰ Across the country, notes one journalist,

multinational corporations are targeting hundreds of rural communities to gain control of their most precious resource. By strong-arming small towns with limited economic means, these corporations are part of a growing trend to privatize public water supplies for economic gain in the ballooning bottled water industry.

There's a final way in which the financial cost of bottled water is damaging: I believe that, like the stuff we buy, bottled water plays into an "insidious trend."¹¹ In my sermon last week, I listed a number of luxuries – like cable TV, gym memberships, and lattes – that our culture tricks us into regarding as "necessities." Similarly, the bottled water trend lures many of us to pay for what we used to think nothing of drinking for free, right out of our taps – and *that* has psychological and social implications for the communities we live in.

*** the psycho-social cost**

Of course, we might be willing to pay more for bottled water – with its myriad options for carbonation, minerals, and additives – because it plays to our tastebuds. But it also plays to our fears: the perception that municipal water supplies are unsafe or unfit to drink from – even though most cities' water supplies are just as safe as bottled water.¹² "Not all tap water is perfect," admits Elizabeth Royte,¹³

But it is the devil we know, the devil we have standing to negotiate with and to improve. Bottled-water companies don't answer to the public, they answer to shareholders. As Alan Snitow and Deborah Kaufman write in *Thirst*, 'If citizens no longer control their most basic resource, their water, do they really control anything at all?'

*** the cost of the fraying of "the commons"**

This is where the conversation about the water we drink shifts into "spiritual" gear. This is where we're invited beyond simple awareness of our own habits – how we might examine their impact on our wallets, our landfills, and our local watersheds – and into a more

meaningful conversation about water and its place in “the commons.”

Our world is one with finite resources and an expanding population, and yet we as Unitarian Universalists hold up the notion of our world as an *interdependent web*, in which small actions in one corner of the Earth ripple out to affect us all. Given that interconnectedness, what does it mean for the communities that we live in, and for the human family, when water, “our most essential natural resource,” is “commodifi[ed] and manipul[at]ed?”¹⁴

At the heart of this conversation lie the questions *who owns the water?* and *who should control it?* My colleague Darcey Laine asks,¹⁵ “Are there some things so basic to life that they should be governed by different rules than those of private property? Like air? Like sunshine? Like water? Like our genetic code? I believe there are.”

My perspective, like Laine’s, is informed by the work of our Unitarian Universalist Legislative Ministry (of California), which has adopted water as one of their three top issues for the past few years. The UULM has adopted a set of Guiding Principles around water justice; those Principles include the affirmations that “access to clean water for basic human needs is a fundamental human right and is essential for human health and dignity,” and “water is a public trust and part of the global commons; it should not be treated as a commodity.”¹⁶

In other words, *justice* takes as many forms as *injustice*. Part of our responsibility for keeping watch over “the commons,” and living out our commitment to those without a voice, is to name injustice when we see it. It’s not enough to care for the fragile Earth and our ecosystems; we’re called to count the human cost when multinational corporations assume control of, and make profits from, essential resources.

We’re not alone, as UU’s, in attaching spiritual or religious significance to how water is controlled. Other religious traditions, from the United Church of Canada to the National Coalition of American Nuns, have called the “privatization of something so essential to life... immoral.”¹⁷ Notice that strong, overtly religious word attached to something as plain as water: “immoral.” Unjust. Sinful. Wrong. Strong words, perhaps, to describe something as neutral as water – and yet isn’t that what religious traditions do at their best? Call attention to injustice, and bear witness to the marginalized.

“Water is not a commodity,” notes Laine, “it is the very substance of life, it is sacred, and it is precious.” In six Sundays, we’ll gather here in this Fellowship Hall for our last service as one worshipping body: our Water Communion service. You’ll be invited, as always, to pour a bit of water from your summer into a common vessel. As our summer travels carry us from place to place – from beach to lake, from garden to table – may we mindful of the water we use; may we remember its essential role in the global commons; and may we be good stewards of this precious gift.

Endnotes

1. A search on Froogle (Google's shopping arm) showed an average price of \$1.59 for a 20 oz. bottle of vitamin water, which works out to eight cents per ounce. There are 128 ounces in a gallon; $.08 \times 128 = \$10.24$.
2. Elephant Pharmacy: part grocery store, part pharmacy, part health & beauty, with a fun gift section and DVD rentals. See www.elephantpharm.com
3. See www.icelandicglacial.com/location/green-credentials
4. See www.fijiwater.com/Ecosystem.aspx
5. Royte, p. 43.
6. From www.allaboutwater.org/environment.html
7. See www.independent.com/news/2007/jun/28/bottled-water-ban/
8. "Rural Communities Exploited by Nestlé for Your Bottled Water," by Tara Lohan for AlterNet. See www.alternet.org/environment/52526/
9. Royte, pp. 6-7.
10. Lohan.
11. Royte.
12. According to Royte (p. 112), "89.3 percent of the country's nearly fifty-three thousand public water systems met or exceeded federal standards for health and safety in 2006."
13. p. 225.
14. Abe Strep, Associate Editor at *Outside* magazine, in his review of *Bottlemania*, printed in the San Francisco Chronicle.
15. In her wonderful sermon, "Who Owns the Water." See www.uulmca.org/documents/who_owns_the_water.pdf
16. Again, see Laine, or visit www.uulmca.org/programs/water.html
17. Royte, p. 6.