

Stream's Heart

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Water has always resonated with me. I love rain, the sound of the ocean, the gurgle of streams, the stillness of ponds. For thirty-three years I lived on a little river, a river that remained in place but was always changing. Sometimes the water would be rough with the wind's movement, or perfectly smooth in an early summer dawn. It might reflect the autumn leaves from the trees along its shore or a rainbow arching over, and other times it would be the color of the gray winter sky and we could skate over its newly hardened surface. What a miracle it always seemed to me, that I could walk on the frozen river and still see the riverweeds waving slowly in the chill water below the ice.

Shortly before coming to the School of the Spirit (SotS), the image of a stream came to me in meeting for worship, and how it appears to be unchanged but is never the same body of water from one moment to the next—it is always being transformed. I wondered how often does a particular water molecule end up in the same stream? Water is transported all over the place: in the soil, in the aquifer, bound up in organisms, evaporated in the air, massing in the clouds, frozen in glaciers, flowing in the streams and into the oceans. And that seemed like our lives as well: we are always changing, being transformed both physically and spiritually, but aging aside, seem pretty much the same.

A koan came to me: *Where is the heart of the stream?* Where is the Center, which some would call God? Everything changes around us, and we change as well, but that Center is always present. This image of the heart of the Stream has been helpful to me in prayer: as I try to center down but find extraneous thoughts popping up, I picture those thoughts as bubbles that rise to the water's surface and become foam and float away. But the heart of the Stream is always there, even though I don't always dive deeply enough to reach it.

"Flowing" has also had meaning in my own family: my husband and I used to say that our "favorite four-letter 'F' word" was FLOW (we even had a hand signal for it, useful in times when we needed to communicate non-verbally). Living in the flow, surrendering to where life will take you, allowing the Spirit to flow within you...*Where is the heart of the stream?*

This koan stayed with me, and as I pondered what to do for one of my School of the Spirit projects, the idea of making a quilt on this theme kept coming to me, and I decided to flow with it. I took some colored pencils and did a very loose image of what I had in mind. I wanted the quilt—a wall-hanging—to give the sense of flowing and changing, and I wanted it to be a prayer quilt.

I also wanted to make it a community project of sorts. I am blessed to be part of a wonderful group of local women, who gather once a week to talk and eat and

sometimes play games or do crafts or whatever else draws us. One of the women in this group is also on my SotS Care Committee, and another is a participant in this SotS class. A number of these women are very talented artists as well. So I asked my friends if they'd be open to helping me lay out the quilt. And of course, they were!

I decided on a basic pattern—to use 3" squares. I selected the fabrics and cut out squares in the colors I'd chosen. Then came the fun part: my friends came over (I'd also invited the other women in my Care Committee to join us), I showed them the squares of fabric and explained the basic concept of what I wanted to do, and they were off and running. It was a delightful evening, and everyone seemed very pleased with the results. I completed the rest—piecing, basting, and quilting. Photos are included here, showing the process of laying it out, and what the final results were.

Water is vital to life on this planet, and the majority of the planet is water (indeed, some have said that the planet should be called Ocean, not Earth). Its centrality to life is reflected in the spiritual lives of most human cultures: water is often seen as a sacred substance (think of water baptism, for example, and other forms of ritual cleansing). Over the decades I've collected many writings about the natural world, and about spiritual life, and of course many of them refer to the sacred nature of water. As part of this project I've compiled some of those quotes and include them here.

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A Selection of Water Quotes

⁶ Now Jacob's well was there. Jesus therefore, being wearied with his journey, sat thus on the well, and it was about the sixth hour.

⁷ There cometh a woman of Samaria to draw water: Jesus saith unto her, *Give me to drink.*

⁸ (For his disciples were gone away unto the city to buy meat.)

⁹ Then saith the woman of Samaria unto him, How is it that thou, being a Jew, askest drink of me, which am a woman of Samaria? For the Jews have no dealings with the Samaritans.

¹⁰ Jesus answered and said unto her, *If thou knewest the gift of God, and who it is that saith to thee, Give me to drink; thou wouldest have asked of him, and he would have given thee living water.* —John 4:6-10 [KJV]

That flowing water! That flowing water! My mind wanders across it.

That broad water! That flowing water! My mind wanders across it.

That old age water! That flowing water! My mind wanders across it.

—Myth of the Mountaintop Way (Navaho)

For there is hope of a tree, if it be cut down, that it will sprout again, and that the tender branch thereof will not cease. Though the root thereof wax old in the earth, and the stock thereof die in the ground, yet through the scent of water it will bud, and bring forth boughs like a plant. —The Book of Job 14:7-9

A man that is born falls into a dream as a man who falls into the sea. If he endeavors to climb out, he drowns... No, I tell you, the way is to the destructive element submit yourself, and with the exertions of your hands and feet in the water, let the deep deep sea keep you up. —Joseph Conrad, *Lord Jim*

Sons and daughters of the earth, steep yourself in the sea of matter, bathe in its fiery waters, for it is the source of your life and your youthfulness.

You thought you could do without it because the power of thought has been kindled in you? You hoped that the more thoroughly you rejected the tangible, the closer you would be to spirit: that you would be more divine if you lived in the world of pure thought, or at least more angelic if you fled the corporeal? Well, you were like to have perished of hunger.

You must have oil for your limbs, blood for your veins, water for your soul, the world of reality for your intellect: do you not see that the very law of your own nature makes these a necessity for you?

—Pierre Teilhard de Chardin

What would the world be, once bereft
Of wet and of wildness? Let them be left,
O let them be left, wildness and wet;
Long live the weeds and the wilderness yet.

—Gerard Manley Hopkins

The mountain, I became part of it...
The herbs,
the fir tree,
I became part of it.

The morning mists,
The clouds,
the gathering waters,
I became part of it.
The sun that sweeps across the earth,
I became part of it.
The wilderness,
the dew drops, the pollen...I became part of it.
—Navaho chant

Still glides the stream and shall forever glide; the form remains, the function never dies.
—William Wordsworth, *Valedictory Sonnet to the River Duddon*

Peace:
Not the peace of the stagnant pool
But of deep water flowing
Water quiet and cool.

Poise:
Not the poise of the sheltered tree
But of the oak deeply rooted
Storm-strengthened and free.

Power:
Not the power of fisted might
But of quickened seed stretching
Toward infinite light.
—Juliet Reeves

Ah to be alive
on a mid-September morn
fording a stream
barefoot, pants rolled up
holding boots, pack on,
sunshine, ice in the shallows,
northern rockies.
Rustle and shimmer of icy creek waters
stones turn underfoot, small and hard on toes
cold nose dripping
singing inside
creek music, heart music,
smell of sun on gravel.
I pledge allegiance.
I pledge allegiance to the soil

of Turtle Island
one ecosystem
in diversity
under the sun—
With joyful interpenetration for all.
—Gary Snyder

One generation passeth away, and another generation cometh; but the earth abideth forever.

The sun also ariseth, and the sun goeth down, and hasteth to his place where he arose.

The wind goeth toward the south, and turneth about unto the north; it whirleth about continually, and the wind returneth again according to his circuits.

All the rivers run into the sea; yet the sea is not full; unto the place whence the rivers come, thither they return again.

—Ecclesiastes 1:4-7

Water flows from high in the mountains.

Water runs deep in the Earth.

Miraculously, water comes to us,
and sustains all life.

Water flows over these hands.

May I use them skillfully

to preserve our precious planet.

—Thich Nhat Hanh

“The peace of God which passeth all understanding keep your hearts and minds in the knowledge and love of God.’ Then for a few moments there was silence, a deep, cool silence like the inside of a well...Peace...Henrietta was not quite sure what it was but she knew it was very important. If one wanted it, Grandfather had told her once, one must not hit back when fate hit hard but must allow the hammer-strokes to batter out a hollow place inside one into which peace, like cool water, could flow.”

—Elizabeth Goudge, *A City of Bells*

When over the flowery, sharp pasture
edge, the salt ocean
lifts its form—chickory and daisies
tied, released, seem hardly flowers alone
but color and the movement—or the shape
perhaps—
of restlessness whereas
the sea is circled and sways
peacefully upon its plantlike stem.

...There is nothing to eat
seek it where you will,
but the body of the Lord.
The blessed plants
and the sea, yield it
to the imagination
intact...

—William Carlos Williams, *Flowers By the Sea*, from *The Host*

Centering prayer as a discipline is designed to withdraw our attention from the ordinary flow of our thoughts. We tend to identify ourselves with that flow. But there is a deeper part of ourselves. This prayer opens our awareness to the spiritual level of our being. This level might be compared to a great river on which our memories, images, feelings, inner experiences, and the awareness of outward things are resting. Many people are so identified with the ordinary flow of their thoughts and feelings that they are not aware of the source from which these mental objects are emerging. Like boats or debris floating along the surface of a river, our thoughts and feelings must be resting on something. They are resting on the inner stream of consciousness, which is our participation in God's being. That level is not immediately evident to ordinary consciousness. Since we are not in immediate contact with that level, we have to do something to develop our awareness of it. It is the level of our being that makes us most human. The values that we find there are more delightful than the values that float along the surface of the psyche. We need to refresh ourselves at this deep level every day. Just as we need exercise, food, rest, and sleep, so also we need moments of interior silence because they bring the deepest kind of refreshment.

—Thomas Keating, *Open Mind, Open Heart: The Contemplative Dimension of the Gospel*

To achieve the powerful outward influence that I believe Friends are called to have, we must be deeply rooted in the living waters of our Divine Source. ...We are called to seek and meet God even more fully, intimately, and immediately than early Friends did.

—Marcelle Martin, *Deep, Tall, and Wide*

The way we are, we are members of each other. All of us. Everything. The difference ain't in who is a member and who is not, but in who knows it and who don't."

—Wendell Berry, *The Wild Birds*

Anything divine must come to us in worldly clothing, and so it comes to us altered. The divine is like rain striking the earth, and all our efforts at godliness are therefore muddy—all but those few seconds of complete inundation, the moments that the mystics describe, when we are nothing but rain. But those moments are always brief...

—Kim Stanley Robinson, *The Years of Rice and Salt*

Then will the growing plants, the rushing river, the murmuring stream, the lightning and thunder from the clouds, not merely speak to us in an indifferent way. Rather from all that the flowers speak, from all that the radiant stars and the shining Sun speak, as the result of every observation of nature, there will stream into our eyes, stream into our ears, into our hearts, words which proclaim nothing else than this: God reveals Himself in the heavenly heights, and peace must reign amongst human beings of good will.
—Rudolf Steiner

“...that in the deeps all men are already brothers awaiting a call to become conscious of this in their daily lives; and that, from stone-age flint to electronic chip, all cultures in their greatest seeking are tributaries of one great river, which, however enigmatic its flow and tortuous its bends, is seeking the same sea of truth.”

—Laurens Van der Post, *Yet Being Something Other*

I am the one
whose praise echoes on high.
I adorn all the earth.

I am the breeze
that nurtures all things green.
I encourage blossoms
to flourish with ripening fruits.

I am led by the spirit
to feed the purest streams.

I am the rain
coming from the dew
that causes the grasses to laugh
with the joy of life...

I am the yearning for good.
—Hildegard of Bingen

Air I am...
Fire I am...
Water and
Earth and
Spirit I am.

—Native American chant

I strolled across
an open field;
the sun was out;
heat was happy.

This way! This way!
The wren's throat shimmered,
either to other,

the blossoms sang.

The stones sang,
the little ones did,
and flowers jumped
like small goats.

A ragged fringe
of daisies waved;
I wasn't alone
in a grove of apples.

Far in the wood
a nestling sighed;
the dew loosened
its morning smells.

I came where the river
ran over stones:
my ears knew
an early joy.

And all the waters
of all the streams
sang in my veins
that summer day.

—Theodore Roethke, *The Waking*

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