

Mikvah, Rain, and the Waters of Dwelling

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I slip into an Azaldúan (Anzaldúa, 1987) dream to find myself descending into the earth, descending like Inanna, like Ishtar. It is difficult to consider the global water crisis as I wade into the mikvah, the womb. This ritual water that connects me to others, to life, to the earth, this mikvah reminds me that I am dwelling here in the north suburbs. No, perhaps it is not so difficult now, to recall how I destroy the water commons around me. I dwell here, where my waste collides with my water, the same water I drink and immerse in. In this ancient tradition, where Jewish women have immersed in mikvahs for generations, to reconnect, to reaffirm, one cannot help but examine, unravel and mourn the global water crisis.

Barbara Kingsolver (2010) walks with her daughter, engaging with the aquatic creatures of her dwelling. I think of my own two little girls and their wonder at and fascination with water. They were, after all, the ones who taught me to appreciate the element. “I really love being in the bath, Mommy,” they say innocently. “Are we going to the beach today?” Between watering our plants and running their fingers along the dance of the humidifier’s steam, they have shown me how much I take our water for granted.

Our waters of dwelling, the lakes and rivers we adore in our county, flow in and out of our family excursions. But for how long? If no one fights to save the commons, will no one fight to save the water? Ivan Illich (1985) warned us decades ago about this loss of commons related to water: “The city child has no opportunities to come in touch with living water. Water can no more be observed; it can only be imagined, by reflecting on an occasional drop or a humble puddle” (p. 76). We did not listen.

Illichian Dwelling

Dwelling, *Bauen*, or the building we inhabit: this is where we use and abuse water. We are dwelling, remaining, staying in one place (Heidegger, 1971), such romantic language for a place of such hydrocide. Yes, *hydrocide*, the killing of water.

I clean out my gutters, water my plants, rinse my dishes. I dwell in my *Bauen*. But I recall that where I live and dwell is more than where I garage myself, more than where I park my car between work shifts (see Illich 1985, 1992).

Do we utilize our liberty to dwell? Can we open our door long enough to see that our chemicals run into neighbors' yards? *Nachbar*, *neighbor* in German, or "near dweller" (Heidegger, 1971), loses all meaning on our industrial ears. These are not people who dwell nearby; they merely garage themselves in close proximity to us. It cannot matter to me that I dump salt in the winter or weed killer in the summer, that it all flows to a common watershed; we neighbors are boarding ourselves up for the night only to do our real work elsewhere.

Illich challenges me: "Just tell me how you dwell and I will tell you who you are" (Illich, 1992, p. 55). I can only cringe in embarrassment at my twenty-minute showers, my seventy-year-old plumbing, and the water I steal daily from Lake Michigan. Is this who I am? It is most certainly how I dwell.

Dwelling is "to let daily life write the webs and knots of one's biography into the landscape" (Illich, 1992, p. 55). *How poetic*, I think to myself. *Illich sure had a way of honing in on our society's ailments*. I imagine the Des Plaines River and Old School Forest Preserve weaving themselves into the stanzas of my story. But this public space

rarely comes into contact with human life; we use our living spaces as mere garages, storage units. We travel to work, return home only to sleep and repeat this lifeless cycle. We don't know our landscape and don't care to know our neighbors (see Illich, 1985, p. 10). Like our excrement and toilet water, we easily dismiss our neighbors and dwellings, both as disposable to us as waste.

I have spent far too many years of my life chasing after higher education, moving to wherever the next step in my education took me. It is only now, after finishing my Ph.D. and remaining rooted in one place, that I find myself in a dwelling. My days are filled with the laughter of my kids as we enjoy our dwelling, but at the expense of a full-time salary. "Rootless professors" ignore local watersheds, passing this ambivalence of place on to their students, ever mobile (Zencey, 1996). Must we academics choose between dwellings and careers?

More than a commodity, more than four walls, our dwelling is our sustenance, the air we breathe. Rather than independence and isolation (Chow, 1999), true dwelling can reveal so much more. *Shakan*, the Hebrew verb *to dwell*, develops into *Shekinah*, a name for the divine: She who dwells. Our dwellings hold us, our water, our land, our neighbors; surely we should treat them with the respect of the divine.

I wade deeper into the mikvah, reminding myself of this water in my local dwelling, this water I clean with, cook with, consume, and waste. This is the water I immerse myself in. This is the water of my dwelling.

The Commons and the Commodities

Barbara Kingsolver (2010) claimed that "water is the ultimate commons" (p. 17). This is difficult to swallow, or perhaps just too polluted to swallow. We rarely see our

lake's shoreline; we never canoe down our river. Whatever water we touch is on its way in or out of our plumbing.

Eager to go out for Mexican one night, we dined at Tacos el Norte, the newest chain of Mexican food in our suburb. Just outside the window sat the enchanting water: part fountain, part art. I requested specifically to sit by the window so our kids could watch the water. Water as beauty, as art, never as dwelling. My kids can't play in it. We can't bathe in it. But we can stare at it as we dip our chips into slightly spicy salsa.

And so this element that comprises such a large part of our commons, our what-should-be-public-spaces, becomes private. Corporations flaunt their fountains and the rest of us stare in wonder, only dreaming of what it might be like to skip happily through that water. Not only do we prevent ourselves from dwelling in our public water spaces, but we also insist on sanitizing and enclosing them (see Illich, 1985). The public pool: sanitized, enclosed, off-limits. The local water park: sanitized, enclosed, off-limits. The fountain sculpture in the park: sanitized, enclosed, off-limits.

Hikers along our Des Plaines River are warned to "keep on marked trails" (Lake County Forest Preserves, 2011a). This communal river, where Native Americans once washed, drank, fished, traveled and played, is no longer accessible to people. If we wanted to fish in this river just two-fifths of a mile from our front door, we would need to acquire permits, be sixteen or older and walk further to a designated fishing spot (Lake County Forest Preserves, 2011b). In trying to preserve our local ecology, we have encased it in a protective covering protecting it even from ourselves.

In 1892, Illinois fought to ban private ownership of Lake Michigan's shoreline (Dowie, 2010). However, we now have a shoreline that is rarely accessible in Lake

County and only through a handful of public parks. Most of those public parks require a local parking sticker. Should we expect any better from a society where people are barely tolerated on the streets? “Water once hydrated us, helped our plants grow. It was our commons. Now we privatize it, enclose it, commodify it.” (Illich, 2010, p. 68)

Water runs through us, through our dwellings, through our atmosphere, through our land; it gives life and it takes life. Yet, we buy and sell it just as we do everything else in our society. “Unlike oil and coal, water is much more than a commodity: It is the basis of life” (Postel, 2010, p. 19). We buy water that comes into our pipes and into our mouths. We pay to have it removed. We steal it from others and bottle it for sale. Water, water with a *capital W*, because it is a capitalist’s dream.

To begin to see water as something other than commodity, we must begin with a respect for water and for others’ rights to water (see de Villiers, 1999). Ecuador has begun this process; they are the first country to put water rights in their constitution “so that rivers and forests are not simply property, but maintain their own right to flourish” (Kingsolver, 2010, p. 17). We also can begin to de-commodify water. Collecting rainwater and fighting for our rights to use the local water sources freely are excellent ways to begin.

Homes (2010b) shows us that the global south has a drastically worse quality of water than their northern neighbors. The industrial northern countries causing the most environmental damage have the best quality drinking water. Are we even aware of how we destroy water globally, how our water commons are diminishing? Does the average American ever consider aquifer and groundwater mining, virtual water exports (food and other products), pipeline diversions, deforestation, urban heat islands, climate change and

thus greater evaporation (see Barlow, 2010b, pp. 163-164)? No, we do not bring these conversations to the dinner table. We do not dwell, so we do not care.

When Illich (1992) prophetically claims that the destruction of the commons “paralyzes the art of dwelling” (p. 60), we cannot help hold out our hands for stray droplets of hope. We search for ways to revive the art of dwelling as we engage with our water commons. In re-membering our communities (see Esteva & Prakash, 1998), we revive the autonomy of people in the commons. We can begin to fight legal battles to win back our autonomous rights for water, or we can simply start by collecting our own rainwater. Through this simple step, we can offer a *collective no* to water enclosures (see Esteva & Prakash, 1998).

We take further hope from those who dare to reclaim their water commons. Uruguay, India, and South Africa use grassroots movements to fight privatization of water (Barlow, 2010a). Brazil, Michigan, and Wisconsin are fighting bottled water companies that steal and drain the local water supply (Barlow, 2010c). From groups like Beyond Factory Farming in Canada, to Waterkeepers of North America, to Clean up the World Campaign, to locals fighting for reclamation of Lake Constance in Europe (Barlow, 2010c), to a suburban family refusing to water their lawn, we all can begin to wade reverently into the waters of dwelling once again.

But to do so, we must think beyond competition, privatization and profit, moving beyond our capitalist sensibilities toward “cooperation, sustainability, and public stewardship” (Barlow, 2010c, p. 113). And we have the tools to help us; we have religion, ritual, language, multiple perspectives, common sense, local knowledge and local learning.

Water Reverence: The Tool of Religion

Illich (1985) saw water for what it was, its mundane use as our much-needed element as well as its mystical quality that reflects our *histoire*. “As a vehicle for metaphors, water is a shifting mirror. What it says reflects the fashions of the age; what it seems to reveal and betray hides the stuff that lies beneath” (p. 25). Just like water, religion reflects back to us that which we would prefer to keep hidden. Religious and spiritual responses to water offer a path toward hope, an alternative to further commodification of water. Or as Bill McKibben (2010) hopes, a new spiritual valuation of water might just help us see it as finite, not to be taken for granted (p. 22).

Water rituals have been intertwined with religion throughout human history, just as water has been tied to each of us individually since conception. It “flows though our lives, scribing a line between sacred and profane, life and death. We are doused, dunked, dipped, sprinkled” (Newman & Stanmeyer, 2010). This tradition of infusing water into our most sacred moments should humble us, just as the act of crossing a river or flushing a toilet should.

Our ancestors knew water gave them life and saw bodies of water as places of worship and healing. “It is through our ancient ancestors that we find the first connections of water with the mysteries of life and death; creation and destruction; death and rebirth; health and illness; good and evil; the known and the unknown” (Waterway, 2010, p. 173). Even now we see the dual nature of water. Water gives life and takes it; it purifies and it cleanses (Illich, 1985, p. 27). Surely, then, we can see water as both mundane element and sacred mystery.

Water also becomes a symbolic triad in religious settings. The water trinity awes us as solid, liquid and gas. H₂O contains three atoms, a trinity of matter. The mystery of water continues as it breaks the rules of physics; it becomes lighter as a solid (Waterway, 2010, p. 174).

Me: So you're saying that water was necessary for life because ice floats?

Husband: Yeah. If ice didn't float, then the first life on earth would have died. It's because ice floats up to the top of bodies of water that life could begin at the bottom of the oceans.

Me: Wow, that's pretty amazing when you think about it. I never thought of water that way. I thought water was necessary for life only because we drink it.

Husband: Well, it's really interesting, you see. If you...

Me: ...Okay, okay that's enough. I just need enough information to write my paper.

Ice floats; what a divine mystery.

Waterway (2010) describes water rituals from mythology, reminding us—and humbling us—that water was here before us, gave life to us, and gives life to us still. Tibetans place prayer bells on Lake Manosaravar and revere the holy waters of Mount Kailash; the Ijaw tribe on the Niger River believe that water transmits knowledge to people; Sufis use water rituals to pass on knowledge; Christians participate in baptisms, the washing of feet, and the use of holy water; Jews immerse in a mikvah; Japanese Kamikazes will drink from a common bowl before death; Muslims wash their hands before a Koran reading; Daoism teaches that water represents the Dao itself. Hindus

believe that the waters of life bring us the life force itself; the Rameshvaram temple has twenty-two sacred bathing pools for healing and the Ganges River will wash away sins (pp. 176-177). Shinto practices in Japan include a ritual cleansing before worship, a belief that departed spirits return to rivers, and the use of cold spring water for healing. The Taos Pueblo Indians of New Mexico consider the Blue Lake to be the center of the universe that will sustain our well-being; Aboriginal clans in Australia believe that spirits go to a “water place” and so associate spirits with coastal rains, rainbows, the sky, and the cycle of seasons (p. 178).

The Stanmeyer (Newman & Stanmeyer, 2010) photography collection in National Geographic’s recent water issue visually shares how many religions value water.¹ The Mayans believe natural wells lead to the underworld; Laotians see the Mekong River as the “mother of waters” and give offerings for the new year; Russian Christians use ice carving to commemorate Christ on Epiphany; healing waters of Lourdes give hope to Christians; Vodou and Christian beliefs combine to honor spirits in a Hatian waterfall (Newman & Stanmeyer, 2010).

So I ponder these mythologies, particularly the stone circles and wood circles of ancient Britain. I ask why these people travelled along a river to a wood circle of life, only to follow that same river back to a stone circle of death. It was water that led them to both life and death.

¹ See the full photography collection online at <http://ngm.nationalgeographic.com/2010/04/sacred-water/stanmeyer-photography>.



Solstice. Acrylic on canvas.

Inspired by the pre-Roman Stonehenge people's solstice rituals, this painting helps me visualize the route along the river. Constructions of stone were associated with the dead; constructions of wood with the living. Durrington Walls, a circle of wood, was linked to Stonehenge, a circle of stone, by the River Avon. Water linked the two ritual places, and the people who built them would walk between the two circles on the solstices (Nova, 2010).

When in modern religions do we have such reverence for our water commons?
How often do we consider life and death with the flush of a toilet?

Even without religion in our lives, water is still a mysterious element, experienced physically, emotionally, mentally, and spiritually. We use hot tubs, hot springs, waterfalls, feet washing, hand washing, drinks, and bodies of water in ways not unlike religious experiences (see Waterway, 2010). Water infuses itself into every moment of our lives, sacred or mundane.

Swedish (2008) describes that a traditional interpretation of the Judaic creation story is not sufficient for helping us build a sustainable discourse on the environment. It justifies an assault on nature; humans are given an order from God to conquer and control nature; we psychologically alienate ourselves from nature, unnaturally. Western religion too often places man apart from nature, dominating, controlling and conquering it (Swedish, 2008, p. 146 and Chamberlain, 2008, p. 163). However, when we consider that so many of our holidays and traditions are rooted in natural occurrences, we can retrace our religious steps back to the mystery of the natural world. Many religions bring light into the darkness of the winter solstice; many celebrate fertility in the spring, just as the earth once again becomes fertile. Many religious thinkers are reaching back to their roots, offering more complex views of ecology and placing humans squarely in their natural setting (see Chamberlain, 2008; Bernstein, 2000; Elon et al, 1999 and Waskow, 2000).

Reconstructed or practiced traditionally, religions have the potential to guide us into a more respectful and reverent water ethos. Religious paradigms can challenge other current paradigms (Chamberlain, 2008, p. 58), including the one in which we commodify and destroy water. We also need religion as a “framework of values that can inspire humans as they face one difficulty after another as a result of ecosystem breakdowns and stresses” (Swedish, 2008, 192).

Water Reverence: The Tool of Ritual

Mikvah, literally a *gathering of waters*, reminds us of rituals that ground us in local waters and revives in us a sense of mystery for this element.

Mikvah has long been part of Jewish identity, used from ancient Massada to Soviet Russia (Kaplan, 2007, p. 2), from China to Chicago. Some scholars consider the mikvah even more important than a synagogue (Kaplan, 2007, p. 3). “During the many generations of persecution, Jews build mikvahs in hiding—in underground tunnels, in cellars, under tables, and yes, often literally in closets” (Slonim, 2006, p. 17).

Women use the mikvah after menstruation, after their state of *tumah*. “The main significance of such *Tumah* was that a person in that state was forbidden to enter the grounds of the Holy Temple in Jerusalem” (Kaplan, 2007, p. 10). A woman in this state is unable to bear life and must use the mikvah to once again return to her state of holiness, a vessel of life. “After the mikvah, she is *taharah*, ritually pure. She is returned to her creative potential; she is able to conceive again. In a sense, she becomes godly” (Steinberg, 2006, p. 222).

Yes, perhaps these women too often hear that they are impure, to often feel forced to purify in a mikvah. But a new movement to revive mikvah as a ritual of choice helps to link us back to our water commons. As women wade, step by step, into the tepid, natural water of mikvah, we see rivers, natural flowing waters, as our link back to Eden (Kaplan, 2007, p. 36); we see water as the one thing that existed before creation (Westheimer & Mark, 1995, p. 105); we see how water helps to purify us just as rainwater purifies the earth (Westheimer & Mark, 1995, p. 105).

There is a reason that *mayim*, water, is also used only in the plural in Hebrew, indicating intensity (see Hammer, 2004 and Boman, 1960). Entering the womb of the earth is an intense experience, a religious and fascinating feeling that reminds us of our smallness.

Our bodies are two-thirds water, just as the earth is (Kingsolver, 2010, p. 15), connecting *adam* (mankind) to *adamah* (earth). “The waters around us, the water beneath us, the water within us cries out incessantly, urging us to reconnect” (Slonim, 2007, p. 12).



Miriam. Acrylic and paper

The text on this painting comes from Numbers 12:1: *El na r'fah na la* (Oh God, please heal her). The prayer was from Moses, on behalf of his sister Miriam. Miriam, so often connected with water, humbles us before water. The prayer becomes meaningful in many contexts as we think of “her” as earth, water, and ecology.

So we use ritual, whether mikvah or baptism, whether a bottle of holy water or The Holy Ganges. We use water rituals to find humility, to immerse ourselves in the earth's womb, to root ourselves in our dwellings.

Water Reverence: The Tool of Language

In an age when English is becoming a global language, too often at the expense of dying native languages (Skutnabb-Kangas, 2000, and Macedo et al, 2003), we must acknowledge that no one language can ever fully describe all experiences. When we limit ourselves to monolingualism, we limit ourselves to only one way of looking at the world, one way of describing the world. We will never envision a better water ethos without multiple perspectives, and thus, multiple languages. Consider the following two examples in Hebrew:

First, our English word *human* is linguistically disconnected from *earth*. We unconsciously sever these two concepts. Waskow (2000) points out that in Hebrew, the two words are undeniably linked: *Adam. Adamah. Human. Earth*. The two are intertwined. In English, we have no equivalent. We never refer to ourselves as *earthlings* or *soilings*; nor do we refer to the earth as *humus*. We have severed all linguistic ties between soil and human. How then, will we remember this crucial relationship without these languages that still make this connection?

Second, our English word *water* does not itself invoke reverence and respect toward the element. In Hebrew, however, water is only ever written in the plural form, as *mayim*. "Water is *mayim*, a word always plural, for water is multiplicity and change" (Hammer, 2004). The plural marker in Hebrew indicates not only plurality, but also intensity (Boman, 1960, pp. 166-167). Another word pluralized for intensity is *Elohim*, a

name of the Divine (Boman, 1960, p. 167). Certainly, these words do not refer to *waters* or *gods*, but to water and divinity as intense forces of nature and sources of life. We have no way of even translating this concept into a single English word or phrase.

The Kogi indigenous tribe of Colombia has a unique linguistic use of *water*. “Their word for water is the same as their word for spirit, and that all of creation was born from ‘water thinking’” (Waterway, 2010, p. 180). We use our English word *water* only in one literal sense, thus disconnecting it from so much of our religious, spiritual, communal, and ecological reality.

We have lost so much of our interest in and knowledge of the waters of dwelling, unable to conceive of water beyond our linguistic limits. *Water*: a consolation fluid for when there is no soda. *Water*: the service we are billed for each month. *Water crisis*: a warning to boil our water. Clearly our English word has some limitations.

If we are truly committed to a new water ethos—and in general a more sustainable approach toward living and learning—multilingualism must be a part of our lives. We must stop fooling ourselves into thinking that English monolingualism will suffice. Our limited view of the world through one language will never dig us out of the hole in which we have found ourselves.

Perhaps English, the language of power, will be that which we use to describe to our children how we ignored the spiritual, physical, artistic, and ecological needs that water satisfies. O tal vez vamos a aprender a valorar otras lenguas y otras perspectivas, mientras que todavía tenemos el agua.²

Water Reverence: The Tool of Multiple Perspectives

² Or perhaps we will learn to value other language and other cultures while we still have water.

Still sleepwalking in my Anzaldúan dream, I offer a predominantly qualitative approach toward the water issues that we face ecologically, spiritually, educationally, and economically. We need multiple perspectives, multiple ways of looking at the problems. As much as qualitative interpretations, we also need quantitative approaches to open our eyes to the destructive nature of our actions, to look at the indisputable facts that must lead us to a new water ethos. Water is a reflection of our current age (Illich, 1985, p. 25), and so the facts about water reveal our modern era's characteristics.

We often forget that so little of the water on earth is useable; “only about 3.5 percent is freshwater—and two-thirds of that is locked up in glaciers and ice caps” (Postel, 2010, p. 18). Of this water, we are all pumping our reservoirs dry in China, India, the U.S., and many other countries (McKiben, 2010). Bottled water robs local communities of their water source, wastes much water just to create the bottles, then pollutes through landfills (see Louaillier, 2010).

Americans use between 100 and 175 gallons of water a day. Outdoor watering accounts for fifty percent or more of our water use (Postel, 2010). The gallons of water used to produce our foods include 2900 for one quarter-pound hamburger, 2500 for one pound of coffee, and 130 for mixed salad or one pound of wheat (Holmes, 2010a). Buying local food helps cut down on water pollution as well as trading water through food. Eating more vegetarian meals also cuts down on water use.

Prakash (2008) advocates the use of ecological (compost) toilets. We blindly ignore our addiction, our constant flushing that sends our natural fertilizers away. Our modernist minds cannot comprehend a new water ethos that involves our waste being

kept in our dwelling areas; water and waste are piped out only. We cannot conceive of allowing any smells into our homes (see Illich, 1985).

Holmes (2010b) predicts that “by the year 2025 as much as two-thirds of the world will be living with water scarcity or total water deprivation” (p. 118). All over the globe, we are draining aquifers, polluting rivers, draining or damming rivers, overusing household water, drying up wetlands, diverting rivers that should never be diverted and starting wars over this precious resource (see Pearce, 2006). The horrors of what we do to our water are so numerous and so heartbreaking that it pains me to write this. It pains me to do the rewrites. *It’s so much easier just to flush my toilet and not think about it.*

What will my children wake up to twenty or thirty years from now? What kind of world will we leave them? I hand my little toddler a cup of water and watch her playfully experiment with the cool and refreshing taste on her little mouth. Will she have any water to drink in her adult years? What new concerns will she have for her own little ones?

Forty years ago, it took a river catching fire, the Cuyahoga River, for us to finally notice what the data already told us (McKibben, 2010). After the droughts, hurricanes, earthquakes, tsunamis and flooding that have devastated so many countries recently, what will it take to make us pay attention to the data?

Water Reverence: The Tool of Common Sense

“The most important liquid in living things is water. Water dissolves the nutrients necessary for life, transports them to the various parts of the body, and then does the precise opposite with the body’s wastes” (Kaplan, 2007, p. 63). We underestimate the necessity of water. In fact, Batmanghelidj (2003) advocates that we drink only water, and

drink it many times throughout the day. The consistent intake of water even reverses debilitating diseases like diabetes.

Drink water. Common sense.

When did we stop listening to our common sense, that our bodies and our land need water and we should take care of it for that reason?

But water only gives us health when it is sanitary; unsanitary water is becoming a global issue that affects public health, too often ignored by policy makers and leaders in poor urban areas (Goldstein & Kickbusch, 1996). Health issues also need to become central to the new water ethos as we rebuild the commons. In my own local setting, I find it distressing that so many pharmaceuticals and toiletries are found in local North Shore waters: antihypertensives, antidepressants, antihistamines, antiseizures (Uberti et al, 2010). We need clean water for our own health and for all life in the ecosystem.

Water should be clean. Common sense.

"You can't take your flower out of the water or it will die."

"But I want it!"

"Okay, you can play with it, but it will die." I watch as she eventually puts it back in the water.

"Look Mommy, the flower likes the water!"

Plants need water. Common sense.

There is more complexity to this water-as-basic-necessity common sense. Water exists as both a culturally created need and as an actual need in many ways. First, water is a need in terms of health. The culturally created need is manifested in the marketing of

bottled water; you cannot be healthy without *our* fresh spring water. With the actual health need, discussed above, we need water to survive and thrive, for the entire ecology.

Second, we have an aesthetic need that is culturally created; we feel we must have non-dwelling beauty space (see Illich, 1985) and the need is only satisfied through sanitized, bleached, untouchable water. In actuality, we do need water as part of our aesthetic life experience. However, this need can be met by walking down to our local river or watching the rain on a quiet afternoon.

Finally, we have a culturally defined religious/spiritual need for water; we believe that we must escape, such as on a vacation, to connect spiritually to water, or we must pay to access meaningful water areas. How is this need met? We pay to go on a beach vacation. We pay to go to a sauna or hot springs. We even pay to go to the mikvah. Our actual need for spiritual waters can occur right outside in our yard, in a walk to the local beach, in the reverence we show each time we shower, in the gratefulness we feel each time we water our plants, and in the stewardship we practice when we wash our dishes.

Water Reverence: The Tool of Local Knowledge

Knowledge of our local water systems need not be limited to the realm of academe. We must begin to tap into local knowledge of the watershed to begin a path toward reverence and stewardship. “People will continue to flush plastics down the toilet, for example, until they understand that their toilets are connected to the waterways” (Outwater, 1996, p. 182).

In understanding rain and the cycle of water throughout the ecosystem, we begin to see the abundance of water that becomes part of our dwellings. Over half the rain that falls on a forest goes directly back into the air through evaporation and transpiration; any

rainwater not evaporated eventually flows into rivers then to seas (Outwater, 1996, p. 55-56), which we are fine with polluting for the good of industrial society.

We passed the Clean Water Act of 1972 to clean up streams by 1985, yet never met that goal. Most programs to help have since been discontinued (Palmer, 2006, p. 186). Pollution comes from runoff farms and pastures among many other industrial sources. “A compliant federal administration in 2005 waived antipollution requirements on the oversized feedlots if the owners simply agreed to ‘self-monitor’ their levels of waste” (Palmer, 2006, p. 187).

But in response to these devastating setbacks, Palmer (2006) notes several important steps currently in place for conservation. We are limiting dams and natural flows are reinstated by conservation groups. We are also seeing the beginning of “the protection of flood plains and large riverfront corridors as open space” (p. 189). Furthermore, “local activism has exploded” in the form of citizen volunteers, organizers, scientists, activists, educators, communicators, fund-raisers, and soulful leaders (p. 190). Wherever you dwell, you can take part in reviving the water commons. The first step can be learning about your local watershed.

When rootless professors have no idea about local watersheds, they pass this ambivalence of place on to their students, ever mobile (Zencey, 1996). In advocating for a more rooted approach toward living and learning, I describe here my own first steps in learning more about the local watershed. Doman (2010) describes that, “at the most basic level, a watershed encompasses all of the land surface that collects and drains water down to a single exit point” (p. 125). On a large scale, the Mississippi Basin drains 41% of the lower 48 states into the Gulf of Mexico. On a small scale, one’s local yard water drains to

the street and eventually to a river. Watersheds underlie all human endeavors. “The health of your watershed depends on collaborative relations between neighbors in your shared basin” (p. 125). Watershed literacy is “a literacy of home, a literacy of place” (p. 126).

In searching for how we as a family might incorporate a better water ethos into our dwelling, we found that we knew very little about our local watershed. The river just two-fifths of a mile from our house, The Des Plaines River, was once the sight of commercialized, bottled mineral water; this water was valued both by Native Americans and White settlers (Libertyville-Mundelein Historical Society, 1993). A look at a simple map also revealed that our Des Plaines river flows south through Chicagoland and eventually meets up with the Kankakee River, the river flowing through my birthplace. The water of my dwelling and the water of my youth, all Illinois water, eventually flows to the Mississippi River and to the Gulf of Mexico.

Libertyville water used to come from local wells. It was not until 1976 that the village began using Lake Michigan water. We currently purchase water from The Central Lake County Joint Action Water Agency with a few wells functioning only as back-up. The water is treated in four stages before it reaches our home. Nowhere in the 2010 Drinking Water Quality Report are citizens asked to collect rainwater (Village of Libertyville, 2010).

Lake Michigan is lower than it has been in years, yet still we are taking water from it that is not replenished. Why are we not collecting our rainwater?

Chicago’s 2011 Blizzard was one of the biggest snowstorms of my lifetime. We waited for weeks as the snow slowly melted, only to find our little river flooded.

Neighbors' back yards became small lakes as tall proud trees along our hiking trail pop out of the bulging waters. My heart jolted in pain every at every flooded site. This poor ecology was not meant to sustain such levels of water. Now, in early 2013, we have no snow, little rain, and still we flush toilets constantly.

Warnings of global warming echo in my ear as my four-year-old kicks ice over the bridge. *Extreme flooding and drought will become the norm.* Will this be the legacy I leave my children and their children? Will they look back and ask: "Why did you do nothing?" How can I look at our local waters—where so many of our neighbors and wildlife find the joys of dwelling—and not see how we are destroying it? How can I not change my habits knowing we are draining Lake Michigan faster than it can be replenished?

Water Reverence: The Tool of Local Learning

"Only education costs the taxpayer more," wrote Illich (1985) of our water costs. (p. 75). Certainly we can educate our children ourselves, just as we can collect rainwater ourselves and compost our waste ourselves. However, many schools are offering hopeful examples of connecting education to local water issues.

In Bolivia's Saint Francis Xavier University we see a grassroots approach toward groundwater management, offering a master's degree program in hydrogeology that addresses local water issues (Moore, 2010). Native Waters, an informal science education program at Montana State University-Bozeman (with help from National Science Foundation), provides Native American elders the opportunity to teach alongside other educators. In this "tribal community planning process," individual communities

determine content for week-long camps in this program (Sachatello-Sawyer & Cohn, 2005).

In public schools, we see students raising money for water sanitation worldwide with H₂O for Life (see Halperin & Whitcraft, 2010). We also see examples of local water issues in the curriculum. Boulder Creek runs through the backyard of Donnelly Elementary School, so 5th graders tackled the issue of the creek being too polluted and too warm. The school developed a scientific six-week study for student inquiry, involving collecting and analyzing data while also connecting to state standards (Bingaman & Bradley Eitel, 2010). Similarly, a Syracuse, New York class of 5th graders studied local watersheds (Endreny, 2007). A Bloomington, Indiana high school science class began community-based projects, including analyzing local plant, soil, and water samples. The students presented their controversial findings in public forums (Hanes & Sadler, 2005). In Washington, sixth grade teachers allowed students to tap into multiple styles of learning as they took samples of local water. Students chose an assessment style and learn community values while also connecting to a local watershed (Meyer, 1997).

Students in California debated development issues in the local watershed (Roman, 2010). High school students in Nebraska helped educate the public and monitor the local watershed. Using the “Adopt-A-Stream Program,” students gave presentations to local community groups (Seier & Goedeken, 2005). In the Chesapeake Bay watershed, a school near Beaver Pond created interdisciplinary work that includes parent involvement and local watershed connection (Simms-Smith & Sterling, 2008). Near New York’s Finger Lakes, students looked at sustaining the health of local watersheds. Students shared documented observations with the school board and the Water Quality Committee

(Tompkins, 2005). In all these examples, we see how students can contribute to their community through actual scientific research. These interdisciplinary authentic tasks benefit both the student and society (see Zaikowski & Lichtman, 2007).

Outside the institution of schooling, many communities are collectively working to restore the waters of their dwellings. A Scotland community pulled together to restore a local stream. The area faces various “social problems” and the water project opens up new commons for recreation and informal play. Although externally funded, community members took ownership of the project to reclaim their commons (Austin, 2008). Near Lake Titicaca, a Peruvian government agency and teachers of a local school met for a workshop to incorporate lake health into local curriculum. An environmentalist group suggested that all areas of their lifestyles affect the lake’s health, including spirituality. Holston (2008) sees this as an example of cross-border collaboration at multiple levels of society, revealing positive results such as lowering pollution.

West Virginia citizens, involved with the Save Our Streams Program, have reduced local pollution in their watershed and stabilized the effects of interstate runoff (Middleton, 2001). The Sister Watersheds project, of São Paulo, Brazil, gives women voice in the public arena. The program involves environmental education, watershed management and community-based organizing (Perkins, 2008). In Iowa's Maquoketa River Basin, local residents partner with state government regulatory agencies and a land-grant state university to clean up the pollution of livestock and industrial agriculture (Zacharakis et al, 2002). May their stories inspire.

L'Chayim! To Life! A New Water Ethos

Many world mythologies connect the afterlife to crossing a body of water: “The water has the power to strip those who cross it of memories that attach them to life” (Illich, 1985, p. 30).³ Let us find a new water ethos that connects us to life while we are living. The following list is comprised solely of suggestions, of what this new life-affirming water ethos might include:

1. *We begin to collect rainwater (and compost our waste).* Rural Chinese communities are beginning to solve their own water problems by catching rainwater in cellars, a practice lost some eight hundred years ago (Pearce, 2006, p. 259). “Harvesting the rain was once a worldwide technology on which hundreds of millions of people depended. Every locality had its own systems. Almost everyone did it” (Pearce, 2006, p. 267). Harvesting rain may be the key to renewing the water commons. We can take back and do for ourselves what others want to charge us for. We can work as a community to conserve and respect our commons while utilizing our resources for our basic needs. Pearce (2006) advocates that we must return to ancient ways, such as collecting the rain where it falls.

2. *We utilize the spiritual and linguistic resources around us.* Clearly an attitude of humility is called for here. Respect, conservation, and stewardship should be built into our paradigm (see Berry, 2006). As Wendell Berry (2002) teaches, we cannot possibly respect and love one another if we do not respect and love the earth. These teachings are common to all religions.

³ For a full discussion on water’s connection to forgetting, see Illich (1985).

These concepts are also not foreign to most world languages; the more learn each other's languages, the more resources and wisdom we will find to address the water crisis from many perspectives.

For more on a new spiritual water ethos, see Chamberlain's (2008) seven suggestions, including a water identity: "We are water people, born in amniotic water with bodies composed of great amounts of water. We take in water daily. We are nourished with water. We are intimate with water" (p. 172).

3. *We work to renew the commons.* "Some kind of communal water ethic seems to be the magic ingredient" (Pearce, 2006, p. 266). A new water ethos must involve the restoration of the commons, a reclaiming of our communal dwelling spaces, including our rivers and lakes. Self-imposed limits must be part of reviving the commons (see Kingsolver, 2010). We must place limits on water as commodity, water as private property, and water as a sterile aesthetic wonder. Simple technology is key; we must place limits on the technology we use with water (Pearce, 2006).

4. *We view water as a basic human right.* Water must be viewed as a basic human right, as advocated by The World Summit on Sustainable Development in Johannesburg in 2002 (Pearce, 2006). Every community worldwide deserves access to clean water; we can no longer ignore how our own industrial pollution creates unclean water worldwide. We must also stop ignoring the rights of future humans to clean, accessible water. Our grandchildren and the communities that dwell in our spots after us deserve the same clean water we have.

5. *We use interdisciplinary approaches, including the arts.* Rather than place the burden of environmental research on the shoulders of scientists alone, we all can play a

part in utilizing our strengths to create better dwelling spaces. Interdisciplinary approaches—including religion, spirituality, multilingualism, scientific/quantitative data, mythology, and arts-based/qualitative work—allow more voices to enter the conversation.

Rev. Cannon Thomas Miller (2010) describes that artists “prompt our imaginations in the contemplation of water” (p. 18). It is only through multi-sensory sources and diverse perspectives that we will begin to find paths toward healthy water commons. Illich (1985) leaves us with the haunting reminder that “the water we seek is the fluid that drenches the inner and outer spaces of the imagination” (p. 24). I conclude this Anzaldúan dream with my own imaginative space, my play *Mar Yam: Bitter Waters*.

MAR YAM, BITTER WATERS

Characters:

Woman 1: Female dressed as if she lived several thousand years ago in the Middle East, with cloth wrapped on her head and flowing clothing to stay cool.

Woman 2: Female that looks very similar to Woman 1, but completely modern in appearance. She is dressed in comfortable but trendy walking clothing, with cell phone and water bottle in hand. The trail has a bench on the side for resting hikers. The trail is visibly distanced from the river.

Set:

Stage Right is a desert scene, much like modern day Israel, but set up as in ancient Biblical times. A river divides the set, meandering.

Stage Left is a hiking trail along the river with Midwestern American scenery. This should include lush green trees that would typically be grown near lake and rivers north of Chicago.

Woman 1: *(She enters stage right, hums to herself, walks right up to the water and shows visible joy at being so close to the water.)*

Woman 2: *(Woman 2 enters, stage left, walk on the trail, carrying her water bottle. She gets to the bench and sits. Rests only a moment before her cell phone rings. Both women look startled. Woman 2 answers the call.)*

Laura! How are you? *(pause)*

Oh, no, I'm just going for a walk on the river trail. I can talk. So did you hear about Sarah getting pregnant? *(pause)* Yeah, I can't believe it either. Like three kids isn't enough! *(laughs)*
(pause) I know! So what are you doing?

(conversation continues indistinctly, with "uh huh" and "oh")

Woman 1: *(Begins peeling a sweet lemon from a basket. Eats a bit of it. Sees a fish in the river and catches it with a sharp stick nearby. Places the fish in her basket.)*

Woman 2: *(still on cell phone conversation)*
So I need to stop by the grocery store on the way home. Should I pick up some frozen pizzas or maybe a few things from the deli? *(pause)*
Oh, I didn't know that new Chinese place was open! Maybe I'll just see if Ben wants to order in tonight.

Woman 1: *(bends her head in reverence toward the water)*
Blessed are you, my God, for the waters you provide. With thanks I enter this space and drink of this water.

(cups her hands and gathers water, takes a drink.)

Woman 2: *(still on phone conversation)*
Oh, sure, that's fine. I'll talk to you tomorrow. *(pause)* Okay, yeah, bye bye.
(drinks loudly from her plastic water bottle, drops cap on the ground and forgets about it.)

Woman 1: *(still drinking quietly and slowly from her cupped hands).*

Woman 2: *(Finishes drinking her plastic water and places the plastic bottle on bench, not noticing that it falls to the ground. Jerks up as she hears sticks and leaves moving off stage left.)*

Woman 1: *(Also hears the noise and jerks her head up, drops her hands)*

Woman 2: *(with dread)*

A coyote!

(She begins to whimper, gaping. She stands by the bench, frozen, staring off stage left where she heard the noise. She shows no other response than being frozen in fear.)

Woman 1: *(Stands up tall, arms stretched out far, stomps to make a lot of noise)*

Get out of here! Go back home!

(makes growling noises to scare off the wild animal. Reaches down, picks up a couple small sticks lying nearby and clicks them together loudly)

Woman 2: *(squinting, looking farther off in the distance)*

Is it gone? What in the world? Why is an animal like that on a walking trail?

(She sits back down on the bench to calm her nerves. Stares blankly at the river for a moment.)

Woman 1: *(She returns to the spot where she had been drinking, begins to take off some of her layers of desert clothing.)*

Woman 2: *(cell phone rings loudly, jarringly. BOTH women are startled.)*

Hello? Oh hi Lynn. How are you? How are the wedding plans? *(pause)*
Oh good, good! So what's up?

Woman 1: *(She is fully undressing herself. Actress might want to wear a flesh-colored body suit underneath to avoid nudity on stage.)*

Woman 2: Oh, the closest mikvah? I'm really not sure. I remember my mom made me do it before I got married, but that was back in New York. I don't have any clue where one would be around here.

Woman 1: *(Walks into the river, lays down to begin fully immersing herself.)*

Woman 2: *Splashing noise from Woman 1, in a different time and place. Woman 2 looks up, startled, gasps a little.)*

Oh yeah, Lynn, I'm still here. I heard a splash and I'm still just a little jumpy. I think I saw a coyote earlier. *(pause)*

Oh, yeah, I'm fine. It ran away.

So anyway, do you think you'll keep doing the mikvah after your wedding?

Woman 1: Blessed are You, our Creator of time and space, who has supported us, protected us, and brought us to this moment.

(She immerses herself in the river just for a moment, then emerges, closes eyes to appreciate the moment..)

Woman 2: Yeah, I think it's totally patriarchal. It's so ridiculous... the idea that a woman is unclean and has to be separated from her husband. This is the 21st Century!

Woman 1: *(Stands up to get out of the river, begins putting her layers back on.)*

Woman 2: So have you made plans for the honeymoon?

Woman 1: *(Gathers dirt in her hands, gently throws a bit to the south, toward audience.)*

Thank you breath of clarity and cleansing.

(Throws a bit of dirt toward the west, stage right.)

Thank you breath of fear and death.

Woman 2: Uh huh. I've never been to Hawai'i but I'm sure you'll love it.
(Throws a few small pebbles into the river just as she is talking on her cell phone.)

Woman 1: *(Throws a bit of dirt toward the north, facing away from the audience.)*

Thank you breath of vision, of the unknown.

(Throws a bit of dirt toward the east, toward river, stage left.)

Thank you breath of balance, of new beginnings.⁴

(Begins to fill a few pails with water to bring back to her dwelling.)

Woman 2: (still on cell phone)

Oh you know what? I lost my water bottle! That reminds me, I need to get more bottled water when I stop at the store. I should probably be going soon, so I can get home before the kids get home from school. *(pause)*

Oh you too! Bye bye!

⁴ The writings of Gershon Winkler (2003) inspired this ritual.

(folds up cell phone and simply walks off stage on the hiking trail, stage left. Her used plastic water bottle is still noticeably laying by the side of the trail.)

Woman 1: *(Kneels at the river, takes her last pail full of water and states simply):*

Thank you.

(As she is still kneeling, she dips her fingertips in the water one last time, smiles peacefully, then stands. She carries her water pails back to her family, off stage right)

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