



## NEIGHBORHOOD UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST CHURCH

### Water Communion Ingathering

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Good morning! It's so good to be together in worship once again. A welcome back to our children and families, to our newcomers who have found a spiritual home in Neighborhood over the summer, to those who are rejoining the congregation after your own summer church of family, friends and recreation in nature.

This has been my first true California summer. While I traveled to the east coast for a few weeks in July, I have spent most of my days here settling into a new home in North east Los Angeles and exploring the local landscape. One of the walks I took frequently this summer was in the Atwater Village and Frogtown neighborhoods of Los Angeles. Having heard so much about it, I went looking for the LA River. I walked alongside a concrete channel, a vast drainage ditch with power lines on one side and freeway on the other. I noticed a trickle of water meandering through grasses and some spindly trees. Plastic bags billowed in the wind. This, I was told, was the Los Angeles River.

I was puzzled, my gaze shifting between the freeway and the concrete channel. This is our river? Where? How? Used to the wide Hudson and East Rivers hugging the shores of New York City, I was puzzled-- how is it that our river has come to look just like the freeway?

I began learning about the river's history. I learned that water was the key to the city's success. The abundance of nearby natural water sources turned dry land into farm land. By draining the wetlands, the missionary outpost of Los Angeles became an agricultural hub of vineyards and cattle ranches. Pasadena became a lush paradise of orange groves and fruit orchards. But when a devastating flood hit the city in 1938, the water that had been so life giving became a hazard. The army corps of engineers channeled the river to help the city to overcome its unpredictable cycles and become a major metropolis, bustling with factories, business and industry. The river was contained, but the search for bountiful and consistent sources of water continued. There were always more people to support, and farmland turned into land for houses and freeways. At many times people have thought that the LA river channel, sitting empty alongside congested major thoroughfares, would be better used as a freeway than as a waterway. Now it doesn't seem so strange at all that our river and freeways look so much alike.

Charles Fishman is a journalist best known for his recent book *The Big Thirst: The Secret Life and Turbulent Future of Water*. He writes about a hidden history of water. Like the puzzling plight of the LA River, Fishman points out that the stories of our difficult relationship to our water sources aren't always visible.

In fact, he says, so much about our relationship to water is hidden or unconscious—our pipes are submerged, we don't know where our water comes from or who controls it. We aren't always conscious of our daily water use habits. We aren't aware of all of the water required for the lifestyles we enjoy, to produce the food we eat or to create the products we depend upon.

How many of us have ever turned on the faucet in the morning to only a trickle of water flowing forth, or had to choose between a shower, flushing the toilet, or cooking, or to doubt whether or not the water was safe to drink or cook with?

So too, we aren't aware of the peoples who deal with these struggles to secure water in a real, daily way. Charles Fishman puts it this way: "You can't appreciate what you don't understand. You don't value and protect what you don't know is there."

Many of you may have been following the protests in North Dakota on the Sioux Standing Rock reservation. Until construction was suspended yesterday, the Dakota oil pipeline was proposed to run through the Sioux tribe's ancestral lands, and to run under the Missouri river, their primary water source. The tribe claims an oil spill on their lands would destroy their water sources instantly, impacting schools and residences along the pipeline's route. Listen to the words of Ladonna Brave Bull Allard, tribal historian of the Standing Rock reservation, who has been active in the protests:

We love the water. Every year, our people sacrifice. We go four days without drinking water, so that it reminds us how important this water is. And I ask everybody: Do you go four days without water? What happens to your body on that third day? Your body starts shutting down. So, we remind ourselves every day how important. We say *mini wichoni*, water of life. Every time we drink water, we say *mini wichoni*, water of life. We cannot live without water. So I don't understand why America doesn't understand how important water is. So we have no choice. We have to stand. No matter what happens, we have to stand to save the water.

Remember Fishman's words, "You can't appreciate what you don't understand. You don't value and protect what you don't know is there."

Visible or not, rivers are not freeways, nor are they pipelines. From the LA River to the Missouri, these water struggles are interconnected.

This morning our board invites people to the first meeting about reducing our car culture at church. As we reduce our carbon footprint, we know we are reducing our water footprint as well—we know that less demand for oil creates less need a pipeline like the Dakota to exist in the first place. By doing this, we surface issues of water justice and join ourselves in solidarity with Standing Rock and other similar struggles worldwide. We now have to make these problems visible in order to understand how we can be a part of the solution.

A story from the Tongva people goes like this:

A lone coyote named Itaru, cunning and a little arrogant, approaches the bank of a small river  
Seeing its water running slow, he challenges it to a race.

Itaru began to run  
He ran so fast that other animals gave up trying to keep pace with him  
Itaru ran until he was tired, then, looking over the river bank, he saw the river  
running along beside him  
He could see the river stretching way out before him, running and laughing all the  
way to the sea  
So Itaru ran again  
He ran until he was so tired he had to stop and lie down  
But the river ran on past him  
Then Itaru knew that the river had run the race  
He ran as fast as he could, but still the river ran ahead of him, untired, quiet and  
strong  
Exhausted, frustrated and a little bruised by the defeat, Itaru sat by the bank to catch  
his breath and watched the river rush by. He took a cool drink of water from the river  
and found himself refreshed. The other creatures came out from hiding and began to  
join him on the banks and talk to him once again. He watched the river laugh, dance  
and play, inviting him to do the same. Itaru no longer needed to run.

This fall, I am inviting everyone in our congregation into a spirit of renewal, the refreshment we know when we drink a cool drink of water, or sit at the banks of a river simply to enjoy it rushing by. We know the value of water in these moments, and how much we need it for our own renewal. Today, we renew our covenant with one another, the earth, and the water. Like Itaru, we don't need to run anymore, but to live in harmony with our water, to restore relationship, to heal from the races we each fight in our own way. Today, let us allow the deep waters of community to quench our thirst. And let us say to one another-- Welcome home. May it be so, and amen.