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## **WATER IN THE WEB OF LIFE**

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A few miles outside Farmington, New Mexico, Navajo policeman Jim Chee makes himself a cup of coffee in his trailer. Unlike the hogans of his ancestors, Chee's trailer has running water. When he finishes his coffee and rinses out his cup, he drinks the rinse water. A people who have lived for centuries in a dry and arid land know how precious water is.

Korean Zen Buddhist monks gather for a meal of water, rice, and soup. Each monk has four bowls in front of him. He receives water into the largest bowl, divides that water between the next two bowls, and stores the residue in the smallest bowl. When the meal is over, rice water is served, and with it the monk rinses out the rice bowl, and then the soup bowl and side-dish bowl. After these three bowls are rinsed, the monk drinks the rinse water. "He then puts the clean water he had stored in the small water bowl into his rice bowl and cleans it by hand. He follows by cleaning his other two bowls." The waste water is poured into a bucket. It must be perfectly clear, otherwise the monk will have to drink it too. The waste water is offered to ghosts whose mouths are so tiny they are hurt by even small particles of food.

Modern science tells us that water is the stuff of life; water makes up 75 percent of our bodies and those of most living things. Water unites us in a system at a level perceptible to the senses. The Bird in the Waterfall is more exact: "At birth we are 90 percent water. We dry as we age until, by maturity, our bodies are about 70 percent water and our blood 83 percent, for a total volume of about 10 gallons.... When we eat, our food must be dissolved in liquid in our digestive systems before it can be absorbed into our bodies. Much of our food, therefore is high in water content: a potato contains 80 percent, an apple 85 percent, tomatoes and lettuce 95 percent, a watermelon 97 percent." Water has been put to use in many ways: to quench thirst, to feed and clothe, to cleanse, to manufacture, to restore and recreate, to transport, to inspire and beautify, to extract, to etch and carve, to shelter and propagate life, to cook and wash wounds.

Tears are water. They show compunction, sadness, loss — The disappearance of safe water, clean water, wild cascading water, calls us, perhaps, to an "ecology of grief." Sometimes tears show joy, when water is fresh and clear, cleaned, reclaimed, restored, revitalized. Then we perhaps can speak about an "ecology of joy."

Our minds are streams, we say. We talk about “stream of consciousness” experiences, insights, understandings, judgments, feelings, deliberations. Decisions flow through our bodies and our minds. Our communities’ flowing consciousnesses join earth’s flowing oceans, streams, rivers—in riparian rapids and fathomless pools of peace.

Perhaps the place of water in the web of life and the connection between water and wisdom, the attitude of we who dwell in a web of life, where water’s role is central, is best captured, at least for me, in Robert Frost’s poem:

The Pasture

“I’m going out to clean the pasture spring:  
I’ll only stop to rake the leaves away  
(And wait to watch the water clear, I may)  
I shan’t be gone long.— You come too.

In the Gospel of John, Jesus tells the Samaritan woman: “Whoever drinks the water I give will never be thirsty; no, the water I give shall become a fountain within leaping up to provide eternal life” (John 4:14). Water is a religious symbol for the life of grace, of the effect in a person’s life of the experience of being in love with God. We become one in the web of life, one with Water and one with Wisdom.

In this issue of Catholic Rural Life we explore the increasing concern of the planet and earth’s people for water. Water is a sacramental symbol. We use it in baptism, in liturgical blessings and entrance rites. Water is necessary for life. The articles in this issue explore water-related projects from Connecticut to Texas, from Louisiana to the world. Jeanie Graustein (Diocese of Hartford, CT) Father Carmen Mele (Diocese of El Paso, TX) and Rob Gorman (Diocese of Houma-Thibodeaux) show how dioceses are engaged with water issues in their bioregions. I invite you to ponder with John Hart (Carroll College, Helena, Montana) the theme of Living Water: A Sacramental Commons, and with Timothy Kautza and Robert Gronski of the NCRLC staff, A Water Ethic to Renew the Earth. Wenonah Hauter (Public Citizen) and Martha Noble (Sustainable Agriculture Coalition) provide national and global policy perspectives for serious examination of water and its place in current public policy concerns. The sacred and the social/ecological are connected in our care for water. Water is a leading concern for the world. Catholic Rural Life wants you to have the opportunity for serious consideration of this issue.



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