



Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Athens

The Reverend Alison Wilbur Eskildsen, Parish Minister
The Reverend Don Randall, Community Minister

“Holy Waters, Holy Wells”

© by the Reverend Alison W. Eskildsen

A sermon reflection delivered on August 13, 2017

At the Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Athens, GA

Centering Thoughts:

When you drink the water, remember the spring. Chinese Proverb

Water, then, is the most beautiful element and rich in usefulness, and purifies from all filth, and not only from the filth of the body but from that of the soul, if it should have received the grace of the Spirit. John of Damascus

Those who dwell among the beauties and mysteries of the earth are never alone or weary of life. Rachel Carson

All water is holy water. Rajiv Joseph

Reflection:

As you may know, the highlight of my sabbatical was a Celtic Spirituality Pilgrimage to western Ireland. You’ll hear about that in more detail next Sunday, but today I want to share one experience of that pilgrimage—visiting holy wells.

Ireland is a land teeming with myth and spiritual connection. In ancient days, and for some today, the mysteries of life were explained through the personification of the natural elements. For example, Earth was the goddess Ériu (*Air-ru*), meaning land, and the Sun was the god Lugh, meaning shining one or light. Each day Lugh danced around Ériu, and each night Lugh went to sleep beside her. Their relationship described earth’s day and night cycle. And if Earth was a goddess, then the entire planet was filled with the presence of the divine.

Places where water sprang from the Earth were considered especially sacred because they were imagined as an entrance to the goddess Ériu’s womb or as milk flowing from her breasts, both giving and sustaining life. As such, touching natural spring and well water was done with reverence.

Over time, various holy water sites were connected to local deities or holy persons who the people believed had performed a miracle of healing at that site. After the coming of Christianity many holy wells were rededicated to Roman Catholic saints.

During my pilgrimage I visited several holy wells; the first was to a well dedicated to St. Sourney, a 6th century woman who founded a church at the site of the sacred well. We didn’t go as tourists

but as pilgrims seeking to be changed in some way by the experience or to make a spiritual connection to the divine or sacredness of the site. At St. Sourney's well I felt its spiritual power and the numinous experience deepened my connection to the natural world of which we are a part. This threshold between land and water truly felt like holy place.

When we arrived at the holy well we already knew what was expected of us. We followed the traditional practice of entering the sacred space in silence. We then walked around the well three times, three being a Celtic sacred number. We circled the well in a sunwise, or *deiseal*, direction. *Deiseal* is the Irish Gaelic term describing the Sun god Lugh's path across the sky. This clockwise movement aligns one to nature's cycle as it traces the sun's apparent circular path around Earth.

As we journeyed sunwise three times, we chanted 'Oscail Mo Chroi' (*us-kull mah kree*), meaning 'Open My Heart.' Then we silently took turns kneeling at the well to dip our hands in the water.

When I reached in to touch the water, Ériu's source of life, I was unprepared for the shock of energy I felt. A visceral charge moved up from the water, into my arm, and throughout my body. And in that instant of connection between the water and my hand I had an immediate vision. In my mind's eye I followed that water from the well, deep down into the heart of the Earth and to its source, to the great underworld aquifer where all Earth's water connects.

In that instant of physical touch, I felt connected to all of the water flowing within the Earth, and to the miracle of life on Earth. In that instant, I felt blessed by the goddess Ériu. And I gave thanks for that blessing. I gave thanks for that proof of our Seventh Principle—that we are connected and interdependent with all that exists. All this in a brief touch.

In our everyday, routine walk through life, we rarely notice this sacredness or connection. When we turn on a faucet, the water flows, but it's disconnected from its source deep within the planet. We forget that water is not the product of human creativity, a resource to be monetized and utilized, but a true gift of life to be revered.

The next time you draw water from a faucet, stand beneath a shower, or dive into a body of water, may you remember the sacred source of that water, know you are blessed by it, and offer your gratitude.

Questions for Reflection & Discussion

1. When have you felt most connected to the life-energy of the Earth? Describe your experience.
2. Are you drawn to a particular water source, and if so, what do you believe draws you? How does being at or in this water source affect you?
3. What rituals, if any, do you find personally meaningful or moving? In your view, is UUFA's water ceremony a meaningful symbolic act for the gathering of this community? Explain.