

Welcomed Home
Delivered at Second Parish in Hingham on September 8, 2024
For the Water Communion Service
By Rev. Stephanie Shute Kelsch

Communion. Seems like a rather churchy word for Unitarian Universalists to embrace. But embrace it we do. Many UU churches choose to end their church year in June with Flower **Communion** and then begin their church year in September with Water **Communion** - utilizing this word that so many have long associated with the Christian church. For many that association means a sacrament where bread and wine actually or symbolically become the body and blood of Jesus Christ.

But if we limit the word “communion” to a very traditional Christian meaning, we’re missing a great deal of its power. Like so many other words that trigger an instant response based on a limited understanding, it’s worth our time to consider the word carefully, particularly given that - as our Centering Thought notes, “the sacred yearning for communion is at the heart of all being.” Newell is telling us it’s a fundamental part of our lives and hardly the property of one religion.

In fact, we can’t decide “communion” belongs solely to one religion, because the concept can be found in most other major world religions. Hinduism includes the concept of *prasad* - “a sacred act of receiving blessings and spiritual nourishment, fostering a sense of unity and shared devotion to the divine. (That) creates a communal bond.”(christian.net Which Religions Have Communion Published: February 25, 2024 written by: Mark Wai).

The Buddhist concept of *dana*, “recognizes, the inherent interconnectedness of all life and the importance of supporting one another on the path to spiritual awakening.” (christian.net)

In actuality, the concept of communion also goes beyond religion. Certainly the word “communion” shares its root with words like “community” and “communicate” - words hardly exclusive to religious language; words that capture feelings of relationship and connection in other contexts. Perhaps you’ve experienced a kind of communion involving the arts - a musical or dramatic performance that brings listeners and performers together in a profound sense of connection; or perhaps a piece of sculpture that demands prolonged attention and offers new insight. You may even have experienced communion in some sort of civic endeavor - working with others to get out the vote; even offering water to Fourth of July runners right here in front of the church.

And then communion certainly can be experienced beyond human life - what a gift to experience it in Nature. Something William Cullen Bryant nicely expresses in the opening of his poem “Thanatopsis” where he claims that to those, “... who in the love of Nature holds Communion with her visible forms, she speaks /A various language.” Nature’s language is so various that “communion” with Nature can appear more powerful than the religious association to some - reinforcing Rev. Samuel Chadwick’s observation that, “Communion is deeper than theology.”

When we begin to consider the wide embrace of the idea of “communion” perhaps it is no surprise that we UU’s employ the term or that we meet here today ready to share our Water Communion water. In the process, we find ourselves sharing what’s mattered to each of us this past summer. A portion of Water Communion’s joy can be found in the “where each drop of water came from and when and what it means.” That’s the STORY part that’s kind of gossipy and fun. As human beings we want to know where and how those we care about have been. But there’s something deeper and more profound than “catching up” in our Water Communion joy.

Consider:

Water Communion involves our sharing of water, something essential to life.

Most of the Earth is water. When we seek life on other planets we look for water. Water comprises much of our bodies. In general, while we can survive up to 3 weeks if stop eating, if we also stop drinking, we'd only last 3-5 days. (*Outdoor Life How Long Can You Survive Without Food? By Christine Peterson. Updated On Nov 29, 2023 4:46 PM EST*)

When we share water, symbolically we share something **essential** to our lives - not something extra, or superficial, or of lesser value to us; not something unnecessary and thus easier to give away, but something we know that WE and OTHERS all require. Sharing water suggests that we are all **together** - in communion - **together** in our need for water, not only with everyone here and online, with EVERY ONE in the world, with Nature, with every living thing and the planet.

This profound sharing of water acknowledges our commonality with all of life. The water in today's ceremony doesn't represent differences in status - whether it comes from Europe or the kitchen tap it is essential to each one of us, representing and reminding us **that we ALL share our needs in life**. The water reminds us that we share many **physical** needs of life and beyond that, given its symbolism, the water also reminds us we share **spiritual** needs. And we share such needs not just with those who view their spiritual needs the same way that we do, but also with those whose views we may not share.

Water Communion thus speaks to some of our most challenging obligations. It reminds us of communion not just with people we like, but also with people we may not like or understand. It reminds us of our communion beyond human beings. In the scramble for survival - physically and spiritually - this communion with ALL others and with Nature can be hard work. What can help us do this hard work?

Susman reminds us in our Responsive Reading of our need to "quiet" ourselves to "reflect, think, and plan." In the "churning waters" of our busy lives we can't accurately see our true selves. Each one of us knows the busy-ness and ceaseless

activity of those “churning waters” in some form. And understands the need for the “water to be still to see (our) reflection”

We need a place, and a practice, to meet the still waters, to help us see what is important - to see the necessary inclusiveness of true communion, even when we might find it easier to focus on “our own kind.”

We need what Joanna Macy describes in our Reading as a necessary “spiritual practice” and as such, one that can inspire us to “hold life sacred and (encourage) joyful communion with ALL (our) fellow human beings.” Whether that’s experienced in this physical sanctuary or online, by regularly getting out into Nature or experiencing a work of art or shared endeavor, we require the **practice** of getting to a spiritual space to help us truly see ourselves and then truly see others, to find the perspective that makes meeting the “deeper challenges ahead” possible.

Our Water Communion speaks to the effect of regularly gathering together. The very choice of the essential element of water reminds us that we’re not just demonstrating that we HAVE things to share with others, it also reminds us that the interdependence in this sharing goes beyond these walls and perspectives.

Something about the communion of gathering together in regular ritual - even as relaxed as it may be here - nourishes not only our **NEEDS**, but also our **ABILITIES**. This communion of our **regularly** shared yet diverse search for truth combines our individual, unique strengths and weaknesses with the strengths and weaknesses of others to help us keep moving forward in a healthy, loving, balanced way. And even as it expands our perspective, it assures us that here - **ALL** can be welcomed home.