

# Gathering the Waters, Going with the Flow

## Story ...of three drops of water hanging on a branch.

Has anyone gone back to school this week – new class, new teacher, new people in your class perhaps? I want to talk today about a certain sort of person, probably somebody we have all met at some time or another. Do you know that kind of person who thinks they are the best at everything, there is probably somebody a bit like that in your school somewhere, there usually is. They are the kind of person who goes on and on about how good they are at ... football or skating or mathematics – ‘oh I’m always first to be picked for the team’ ‘oh I can do that much better than you’. You know that person.

Often there’s another sort too – the person who says ‘oh I’m no good at anything’.

Well it’s not just people who say these things – this story is about three drops of water hanging on a branch of a tree over a stream in a beautiful valley in the countryside. The drops of water had been left there hanging on the branch after some rain earlier in the day. And as they say they talked to one another. Well actually the truth is it was only one of the raindrops that said much at all because the others couldn’t get a word in edgeways. On and on and on he went ‘look at me, I’m the most beautiful raindrop in the world. Look at the way the sunlight reflects on my shiny surface. Look what a marvellous shape I am. See how I glisten.’ He just wouldn’t stop talking about himself. But at last he stopped for breath and as soon as he was quiet the raindrop at the other end started to talk – but what a different story he had to tell – ‘oh I’m not very good at anything. I’m not a nice shape for a raindrop at all, I’m not very shiny.’ The raindrop in the middle didn’t say a word but just enjoyed the view around – the beautiful valley spreading out all around them, the lovely big tree whose branch they were hanging upon and the stream dancing merrily below them. That middle raindrop just listened in silence as the first raindrop started up again boasting about how special he was – on and on an on he went.

But then a gentle breeze started to blow in that valley, the wind touched the tree and the branch moved in the wind and the three raindrops were shaken off the branch into the lovely stream underneath them. And the wise old tree who had been listening to their chatter all morning thought with a gentle smile ‘well I wonder which of them is the best looking raindrop now’.

## Prayer and Reflection:

I call on the divine spirit of life and love to be with us now at this time in this place, blessing our community and our worship. May this be a time and a place where people find what they need. May the troubled find inner peace, may the weary find rest, may the joyful have space to give thanks, may the uncertain find a way forward, may the confident know the limits of their powers. May we be people who know the challenges and the delights that come from our so very human sense of separateness. May we enjoy our uniqueness and also understand the so many ways that we are connected with one another and with all of existence.

In awareness of our shared humanity let us focus our attention on places in the world where there are difficulties, on places that are in the news such as Iraq, Afghanistan, Lebanon, Palestine, - may peace prevail in these places and replace suffering and struggle. Let us think of places that are not in the news so much but where we know that life is hard, places where disease, lack of adequate water and food, injustice and hatred – make life a constant struggle. Imagine if you wish a connection between us here and people in these troubled spots and send peace and love to them.

There may be people in your own lives, individuals who you know are finding life difficult right now – let us think of those people with love, that they may find some light to brighten the darkness.

There may be issues in your own lives that are perplexing you. May love lead us and guide on our way, may that love be strong and help us to find the way forward through life’s inevitable problems to a place of peace and acceptance for all that has been and all that is and all that shall be, for the greater good of all, amen.

## Reflection One: Gathering the Waters

Every time I have taken part in a gathering the waters ceremony such as ours earlier I have found it incredibly moving – I'm not sure where the ceremony originated but I've always known it as something done in Unitarian communities to reconnect people after the summer holidays and to give people space to talk about where they have travelled to. But always for me there is something deeper being expressed. Now call me simple but it's only been in the last decade of my life that I found out something that the rest of you probably knew from the day you were born. But I'm not ashamed to say that I had one of those 'oh my goodness moments!' when someone told me that all the water in the world, in our biosphere as they say now, already exists. No new water is going to be made, it's already here with us, in the seas, in the rivers and streams, hidden perhaps under ground, in the clouds and in the rain, and in our bodies. And all that happens is that the water keeps getting recycled.

All the world's sacred scriptures make reference to this connectedness of water and life.

In the Qu'ran it is written *"and with water we have made all living things"*.

In the Hindu Rig Veda:

*"Oh waters of life! Full of noble virtues. You are the beacon of light, divine and pure, envelope me in you're your majestic tides and hold me secure."*

Ancient people knew this and scientists today re-affirm it – to have life you must have water – Russian scientist Vladimir Vernadsky describes life as 'animated water' – what a beautiful description of us all – here we are, animated water, sitting and singing together here in church today.

So when we gather our waters together in this bowl, we are gathering the stuff of life itself. And wasn't the spiritual truth that we are indeed all one so well expressed in that Sufi story about the three raindrops hanging on a branch above a stream in a valley. That could describe life itself as we each live our individual raindrop lives yet always part of something greater, part of the animated waters of life itself. When we are living our individual lives we are off on a journey but ultimately it is the stream and the river and eventually the sea to which we return - for the great seas and oceans covering 70% of our planet are the homes of all water, to which all water makes its way back someday. We are all heading home.

And as we journey through life we are touched by those we meet and by the experiences we share together. We may be individual raindrops but we are influenced and changed by one another and by life itself and we have the power to make a difference in the lives of others. One small example - here at Essex Church we have been supporting the charity Water Aid this year, a charity that works with communities around the world to provide easy access to clean drinking water. The money we have raised so far, just under a thousand pounds may help to dig a well for a village in Mali in central Africa so that people no longer have to walk miles each day to reach water that is contaminated with diseases.

So as we gather the waters of our shared community today let us dedicate ourselves to finding creative ways to share more fairly the world's resources so that all people may have easy access to clean drinking water.

## Reflection Two: Going with the Flow

I know it's wrong to celebrate disasters of any kind but the particular one I'm going to mention did not involve loss of life and it makes a great story, one of which you might have read about in the newspapers. It happened one terrible stormy night back in 1992 when a container ship carrying cargo from China to the United States lost one of its containers overboard. Apparently this happens from time to time – the container breaks apart and whatever is inside floats out into the sea or sinks. The container on this occasion contained nearly 30,000 bath toys – I thought they were just yellow rubber ducks but I've since been told that they were in packs of four – a yellow duck, a red beaver, a green frog and a blue turtle. Anyway this has proved to be a gift for oceanographers because some of these plastic toys are still floating around the oceans of the world and giving invaluable information about how currents flow. Many of the toys landed a year or so later in Alaska and Canada and California and Hawaii but some of them, 14 years later are still 'going with the flow' as they say – and apparently are heading our way – having reached Iceland they are likely to head down into the North Sea, washed by the ocean currents – so worth looking out for them on the salubrious British beaches of Skegness and Southend!

I used to teach troubled teenagers and my job was to guide them through public examinations which involved completing large amounts of course work. I'll never forget Darren who, whenever I mentioned the impending deadline for completing the work, – would smile a lazy smile and say 'chill out Tinks – just go with the flow – if it happens it happens', - totally infuriating! But I knew on some level that Darren was speaking a great truth - I cared about his English course work because it was my job to care but I knew as he knew that it didn't matter that much – that in the greater scheme of things it probably mattered not one

jot. And funnily enough I bumped into Darren this summer – I hadn't seen him for fifteen years – we were so pleased to see each other and he's now 30 and was proud to tell me that he was a dad, had his own house and was running his own business as a builder - and neither of us could remember if he'd ever finished that course work.

Of all the world's spiritual traditions it is Taoism that best expresses the value of going with the flow, of behaving as water. Listen to these words from Lao Tzu, the Chinese philosopher who lived around 600 BCE, credited as the founder of Taoism and as author of the Tao Te Ching – which translates as 'the book of the way' that has become so popular in the west.

"Nothing in this world is more flexible and yielding than water. Yet when it attacks the firm and the strong, none can withstand it because they have no way to change it. So the flexible overcome the adamant, the yielding overcome the forceful. Everyone knows this, yet few can achieve it".

Lao Tzu acknowledges here that going with the flow is not easy. If you are a plastic duck it's clear that you have no choice but to let the currents of the oceans and of life itself take you where they will. Those ducks have no flippers and wings and webbed feet with which to set their own course. But we humans have many methods of self-propulsion – our free will is our gift and our challenge – in the weeks ahead, in our own lives and in the life of our world community, may we find ways to go with the flow, influenced by a current that seeks always the best path for all – and may that be so.

Amen.