

9:15am service
Water Ingathering
UU Church of Vancouver
September 10, 2023

Reflection on the Theme by Brett Raunig

Our theme for this month is Vision. This topic took me back to November of 2021. I noticed one day that the vision in my left eye was a little weird. I was seeing extra floaters flying around in my eye and in low light I had flashes of light in the periphery when I looked to one direction. Luckily for me my wife Wendy works for a retina specialist. She told me this could be serious and to get into the eye doctor ASAP. I saw a doctor the same day and they told me my vitreous had fallen. They said I was ok but to watch my vision closely for this pulling can cause a tear in the retina and if not noticed quick enough it could lead to blindness.

A week later, I noticed an explosion of floaters in the form of an ameba show up in my left eye and two days later I was having retinal surgery to fix a detachment in the superior medial area of my left eye. To hold the retina in place they sewed a silicone band around the eye and filled it full of a gas to hold the thin membrane of the retina to the back of my eye.

I never really understood Wendy's job and the seriousness of losing your vision until it was happening to me. My eye was ok, but one of the side effects of the gas bubble they used to repair the eye caused a cataract to form and within a year and a half the vision in my left eye could only be corrected to 20/100.

Two months ago I had cataract surgery and my vision in the left eye one day post op had returned to 20/15 vision. The vision I am describing refers to how we see and take in information related to light and the perception of how that light bounces off the objects around us. The concept we are exploring here today is more related to how we think about or plan for the future with imagination and wisdom. My experience got me thinking about how we sometimes take for granted what we currently have. There was also a period of time where I could not really see much out of my left eye - everything was cloudy and or blurred. How do we move to a clear vision of a future where truth, justice, equality and making the world a better place are everyone's vision?

Wouldn't it be great if everyone could just get a new pair of glasses. No, I realize that's not how it works. I have learned not to take things for granted and that sometimes I need to work

through cloudy times. I have also realized that this place gives me hope. That there is a clear vision out there and I can help by being a part of this community.

Homily - Take me to the water © Rev. Kathryn Bert

I don't know about you, but I always feel better looking at or smelling or just being near water. Whether it be the Columbia River, Salmon Creek, or the Pacific Ocean, it just – as the choir sang – “sets my spirit free.” There's something about looking out over the water, too, that broadens my perspective – helps me imagine the possibilities. Like Brett, I sometimes take for granted what I currently have.

We may feel guilty for the luxury of eyesight when so many have none. Or the benefit of clean water when it is absent in so many households. But it doesn't serve the world to feel badly about a gift because it's not evenly distributed. Gratitude is a healthy response to such a gift.

Plenty of people do lose their vision – the physical eyesight kind – and though I'm grateful Brett did not lose his – it is not necessarily a terrible thing for the millions of people who navigate the world with their other senses. It can be devastating to lose a sense we've previously relied on and, I've learned, it can also open up other ways of knowing that those of us who rely on our eyes may not be aware of.

Vision, our theological theme for September, is about perception – the *many* ways of knowing and the ways we think about and plan the future with imagination or wisdom.

Take me to the water.

Our first person narrator in the story by Indigenous author, Carole Lindstrom, a member of the Turtle Mountain Band of Ojibwe Indians, envisions herself and her people as water protectors. She's learned stories from her people about the sanctity of water, how important and sacred it is. When oil pipes, leaks, and spills threaten the ecosystem, our heroine finds courage to fight for those who cannot fight for themselves, for the life that is related to hers – the winged ones and the four legged and all living things.

Take me to the water.

Each drop of water that was placed into the bowl this morning came with it a story, too – the place it came from and the meaning we make of it – the where and the why. We can use those stories to create a vision of the future we'd like to embody.

Take me to the water.

While serving in the Peace Corps, I lived on the water – on the North Coast of Honduras, the Caribbean Sea of the Atlantic Ocean. I was close enough to hear the waves at night – why do you notice them more at night? Perhaps because you can't see them.... In that village on the

North Coast of Honduras my job was to teach the women of the village to read and write. Men, who worked on ships traveling around the world, had the opportunity to learn to read and write, but often the women in the villages never completed school. So I taught young people in the village to teach their elders how to read and write, mostly in Spanish, as Spanish was the language of writing in this village where everyone's first language, Garífuna, was only *spoken*.

One weekend a group of optometrists came through the village – now I have to admit, that we Peace Corps volunteers tended to look down on the physicians who flew into town to offer cures over a weekend, and then left just as suddenly. They often didn't speak the language and didn't get to know the people or understand the culture. My bias against their impact was directly challenged, however, when one of the elders in my literacy class who couldn't sound out a word the week before, came to class reading sentences fluently. I'm sure you've guessed why: She was the recipient of a new pair of glasses. Turns out she could read. She just couldn't see the words.

Sometimes our vision is blocked by something that can be easily remedied, and sometimes we're telling the wrong story. While it was true that many women in the village didn't finish school or learn to read and write, clearly there was at least one who had, but whose eyesight had failed over the years. I think she was the same woman who addressed me in Spanish and sometimes Garífuna, but when my mother came to visit, said in perfect English to her, "we so love your daughter here." It never occurred to me that she also spoke English. I was telling myself the wrong story about her.

Take me to the water.

Biblical stories were featured in the anthem this morning, especially through the lyrics of African American spirituals that are included. But those Biblical stories have multiple meanings in the songs. The River Jordan, where "God's gonna trouble the water" could refer to the Middle Passage, the voyage that slave ships took across the Atlantic from Africa – including the ship that wrecked on the Island of St. Vincents where the Garífuna people's ancestors landed. Or the Jordan river could be a reference to the Ohio River, the boundary between slave and free states in this country before the Civil War. And, of course, there is the actual Jordan River of the Hebrew scripture that the Israelites were to have crossed into the Promised Land. The multiple meanings obfuscated messages, sometimes on purpose so that white slavers and patrols wouldn't understand, for example, the instruction to runaway slaves to get off the land and into the water. The song could be sung as a warning. So many stories, so many versions.

As we explore vision this month, we will also be exploring stories. The stories we tell ourselves affect our worldview and our vision.

Take me to the water.

Our indigenous heroine in the story for all ages understands how water connects us all. Today's ritual of ingathering is our Unitarian Universalist story that reminds us of our connections through water and with all of life. The ritual began in 1980 at the Women and Religion

Conference and has been adopted by so many UU congregations since that time. Roberta King Mitchell wrote in the forward to a book on feminist theologies, that “it is appropriate to use the metaphor of water in describing the spiritual force among liberal religious feminists. Water is fluid yet purposeful, unbounded yet strong. We cannot always discern its intent or direction. It wanders like a meandering stream. But even a meandering stream defines its own course. There are eddies, lakes and estuaries, but they are all part of the powerful growth of a river. The river etches its own banks, asserts its own rules on the landscape and tells its own story.”

Take me to the water. Take me to the sea. Take me to the river so that my spirit can be free. It is so good to be with all of you here today – to celebrate the beginning of a new church year, with the return to two services each Sunday, a healthy and growing religious education program, and merging of our waters and our stories. “The wide universe is the ocean I travel,” writes singer songwriter Peter Mayer, “and the earth is my blue boat home.” Welcome home. Will you please rise in body or in voice to sing together one more time?