

# Water Communion

Julia Older

Delivered at UUFRC on Sunday September 7, 2003

Unitarian Universalism, the UN-common denomination!

Where did we start, do you suppose? Well, it depends on how we tell the story. Since I get to tell the story this morning, I say we started in the first century of the Common Era with the apostle Thomas, who said, "Wait, wait: How can I be sure?" You remember Thomas, the one who doubted. Doesn't that sound just like us? He was the apostle, according to the Gospel of John, chapter 20, who saw Jesus after his resurrection and didn't recognize him and asked: "How can I be sure?" And Jesus, in a somewhat uncharacteristic gesture, seems to have understood his disbelief and invited him to touch his wounded side.

In the next century, there was a man named Origen who may have been the greatest Christian theologian until the fourth century. The Catholics claim him, but I say we have a better claim. The conversation back about the turn of the second century was about who Jesus was, and Origen, a devout lay person, believed that Jesus was not quite of the same substance as God. He was God but — this is *my* language here — was tainted with humanness. This conversation about who Jesus was, was the burning conversation for nearly four centuries within the group that became the orthodox group. Of course it is still alive today.

Origen also believed in universal salvation. He believed that all people would be reconciled to God . . . eventually. Surely a loving God would not torture anyone forever. That is the guiding principle of our Universalist roots. So, many of us claim Origen as an incipient UU. He stands with those who stand and say, Wait, wait . . . why would that be true?

By the fourth century, the time of the great council, our man in Nicea was Arius. He led what is now known as the Arian controversy. That's "Arian", not "Aryan". Constantine had won the battle of Milvia Bridge and the Roman world was becoming Christian. Creeds were being written and the Church was being pushed into a structure.

Athanasius won the day. His long creed is still recited on special occasions in the Lutheran and the Episcopal Churches, I know from experience. But our man Arius kept saying Wait! No, Wait Wait Wait!!! That can't be right! Where did you find these ideas in the scripture? (You see, most of us have always been readers!) Where are you getting these ideas about the Trinity? There is no evidence of a Trinity in the scriptures.

Actually, looking back, we would say that Arius was a Trinitarian because he did believe that Jesus and the Holy Spirit were part of God, but not of the same substance as the Father. And maybe created later by God, rather than existing since "the beginning." The creed I learned in church describes the Trinity as being "of one substance with the Father by whom all things were made." This discussion did not go away.

Now jump forward to the time of the Reformation. Our people were popping up all over the place. One of the earliest and now most famous was a Spaniard named Miguel Serveto, or as we Anglicize his name, Michael Servetus. (Why do we do that? Anglicize names? Is it a reflection of our imperialism?) Calvin burned him at the stake for his views on the Trinity.

In the early 1800s here in this country, William Ellery Channing, after being part of the large conversation about who Jesus was in relationship to God the Father, finally said, Wait, Wait Wait, in fact we ARE Unitarians. The term had been one of derision. But with Channing, we claimed it as being more descriptive of who we really were.

In 1841, Theodore Parker delivered a sermon entitled, "The Transient and Permanent in Christianity" in which he asserted that even if Jesus had never lived, there would still be Christianity. As the great laws of nature lie behind our imperfect theories, so what is most true about Christianity lies outside our creeds and sects and catechisms. Imagine how that sounded to the institutional church! His idea of what it meant to be Christian was getting very, very large.

Now jump ahead twenty more years to Ralph Waldo Emerson. Emerson was driven to what he could know by his own experience. His own unmitigated experience. He is credited with founding Transcendentalism, but of course it was a conversation that grew out of his community. For all that we think of him as an original thinker and a maverick philosophically,

---

Emerson was a joiner and convened many conversations and groups himself. He seems to have figured out who he was and what he believed within those communities.

Ah Ha. Notice the benefit of community.

Maybe that comes close to a definition of why most of us are here right now. The need for conversation within a community, to figure out who we are, what we believe, and what our ethics are, and to define a moral life.

Now we individually identify as Christian and Atheist and Buddhist and Agnostic and Jewish and Hindu and Wiccan and many other identifications which form us individually in some elemental way, but to which we cannot quite belong for all of our personal and varied reasons.

Are we still and always the dissenters?

Is Unitarian Universalism always sculpted by what it is not? By the way in which we stand against the prevailing conversation? Or is there a way that we can define ourselves which says who we are? Can we be a statue and not just what is chipped away?

I hope that we are both. I want us to have ways of talking about who we are that are not just marble chips around the Great Question Mark. I'm proud of our Principles and Purposes. But I am also proud that we are part of the critical conversations that say, "Wait, Wait, Wait, are we sure that this is right? On what basis do we say those things?" And, perhaps most important for healing the world, "Isn't the conversation large enough for all of us? Can't we create bridges between us?"

We choose now to belong here. We have a need for belonging. This is a deeply felt, profoundly worthy human need. To belong.

Some even say that we are not a denomination — because we do not have a creed that tells us what we believe. We do not have a governance that tells us what is and what is not orthodoxy, what is and what is not part of our Doctrine. It is a particular challenge to shape an institution that doesn't have these things.

But we choose nevertheless to be here. And we choose to belong to the Pacific Central District of Unitarian Universalists, which includes Northern California, Hawaii and some of Nevada. And we choose to belong to our national organization, the Unitarian Universalist Association, still located primarily in Boston. And we choose to belong to this ongoing conversation that says, Wait! Wait! Wait ! . . . Why? Why? Why?

And we are developing our own rituals.

One ritual that almost every Unitarian Universalist service shares is the lighting of the chalice. Almost all of our official gatherings begin with lighting a chalice. Only a few other rituals are common among us. One other is the Water Communion. The Water Communion is relatively new. It began in 1980 at a Women and Religion convocation in East Lansing, Michigan, and it has caught on, through this continent at least. All over this country this morning, our churches are celebrating the Water Communion.

Water is the very river of life. We instinctively know that. We are drawn to water. As I looked at places where I might take up a ministry, I admit my desire to be either on the East Coast or the West Coast, near the great waters. Water evokes in each of us, poetic images of life and fluidity, and growth, and diving in and being washed clean and finding renewal.

Let us ritualize our coming together this morning by pouring our individual bits of water into a great bowl. When we do so, our individual drops will become indivisible.

As we tell our stories and begin a year together, it will be impossible for us to remain unchanged. Our web of stories will be recast and we will again belong to one another.

The water in the pitcher is from last year's Communion, what was left after baby dedications and other special blessings. We bring those older stories too into our communal bowl.

I invite everyone here to participate, to come forward with your vials and stories. Or if you didn't remember to bring water or you are a visitor and are willing to participate, you may use the water here in the pitcher. Pour a drop or two into the bowl.

---

Then share just a sentence or two so that there is time for everyone. By the way, not all great journeys involve travel at all.

We want to hear from everyone who is willing to share, so please name only the essence of your journey and leave time for the rest of us.

Please begin to line up, and please tell us your name as you begin to speak.

\*\*\*\*\*

My name is Julia Older and my water is from the Bay. Although I crossed the country fourteen times this year, my greatest journey was crossing the Bay — leaving Berkeley and the community of Starr King School to join you here and become your minister.