

Water Wealth, Water Justice  
A sermon by the Reverend Diane D. Teichert  
Paint Branch Unitarian Universalist Church  
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Buried deep in the website of the Unitarian Universalist Service Committee, is a photo of yours truly wearing an over-sized blue t-shirt proclaiming "Defend the Right to Water." I've got my thumb in the air, a smile on my face and, in my hand, one of the beautiful richly colored baskets hand-woven by women living in refugee camps in Darfur, Sudan now for sale on the Unitarian Universalist Service Committee's website. In the basket are brochures about the Service Committee's Right to Water Campaign, which I was distributing.

The focus of the photo is not me, however; it's what's next to me: someone in a costume shaped like a large, smiley-faced bright blue water drop with waving gloved hands and feet with booties. Inside this very hot fleece costume is the colleague with whom I served last year at the First Parish in Bedford, Massachusetts, John Gibbons. He had just been elected chair of the board of the Service Committee. We were troubadouring for water justice in the exhibit hall at last year's General Assembly, the annual business meeting and conference of the Unitarian Universalist Association of Congregations, of which PBUUC is a member.

And where in the world did we get that water drop costume? It's called "La Gotita" (for "droplet" in Spanish) and it belongs to the Federation of Unions of Water Workers of Peru (FENTAP). They loaned La Gotita to the UUSC for its Right to Water Campaign.

Why would a Peruvian union loan its mascot to the UUSC? I shouldn't have been surprised: that's how the UUSC works: they partner with local, community-based organizations working for UU principles around the world and, as in all good relationships, it's a two way street: each gives, each gets. And in this case, FENTAP got funding and UUSC got a mascot for its campaign.

Across Peru, water advocates are raising their voices against the privatization of water with the help of La Gotita. This type of community organizing has been necessary in Peru since 2003, when the Peruvian government began instituting water privatization. Let me tell you what I learned about water in Peru from the UU Service Committee.  
([http://www.uusc.org/content/water\\_life](http://www.uusc.org/content/water_life))

Like many countries, Peru turned to international financial institutions and foreign aid to modernize and extend its water services. But the funding it received from the Inter-American Development Bank came with a condition: Peru must privatize its publicly owned water services.

When Peru's loan was finalized, privatizations in Argentina and Bolivia had already caused social unrest in major urban areas as ordinary people faced a deterioration of services and cost increases. To prevent similar unrest, the Peruvian government decided to roll out privatization in phases, in smaller municipalities.

But local governments that signed contracts with the central government and private

operators ran into trouble immediately. One of the policies they put into place was to decertify the union that represents public workers, the Federation of Water and Sanitation Workers of Peru (FENTAP). The water utilities fired FENTAP members and organizers and hired unskilled laborers to replace workers who had served their communities for decades.

In response, FENTAP organized a grassroots campaign made up of Agua y Vida (Water and Life) coalitions, which include environmental groups, union members, consumers, and faith communities. It also printed a comic book and a magazine to inform people of the importance of protecting water as a public good.

Then, FENTAP went a step further. It developed a new model for modernizing the water and sanitation sector, which integrates the sustainable use of natural resources, public control, and citizen participation - all based on implementing the human right to water. FENTAP also proposed national legislation to implement the human right to water and ran union recertification campaigns.

Said Luis Isarra Delgado, sub-secretary general of FENTAP, "People now know FENTAP is a workers' organization that is not just defending labor rights, but also working so that the laws of Peru will have water as a human right."

FENTAP's women members have been at the forefront of these efforts. While making up just 25 percent of the membership, women represent most of the governing board and on-the-ground organizers.

The UUSC's Water Justice campaign provided FENTAP with funding to hold workshops for Agua y Vida coalitions and local governments on the human right to water and FENTAP's proposal for responsible modernization.

FENTAP's work has begun to pay off. In the only municipality to be privatized, an Agua y Vida coalition partner challenged the privatization in court. It argued that the contract was illegal, citing the constitutional protection of water resources from the local river which is protected because it is an international river, shared by both Peru and Ecuador. The judge agreed, returning his decision in July 2008; though, with appeals, the final decision is still pending.

But even before the judge's ruling, the mayors had withdrawn from the privatization proposal, stating that they had been misinformed by the central government and the private contractor. And in a victory for labor rights, workers in that municipality recertified the local FENTAP union.

UUSC's support has been critical to all of these efforts. And *our* support, through the Guest at Your Table fund drive we are launching today, is critical to the UUSC. FENTAP says that funding from the UUSC—that would be us—has made the campaign possible.

But organizing for water justice is not just a third world effort. It's taking place in the United States, too.

For example, the small town of Bamstead, NH twenty miles from Concord, took on a

large corporation that planned to siphon off Bamstead ground water for bottling. It took several years of community education and organizing, but in 2006 the town meeting voted 136 to one in favor of a law that made Bamstead the first municipal government in the United States to ban corporations from pumping out water for sale elsewhere.

"This Ordinance," said an elected official there, "is not a typical ordinance. This is not about land use, but about something much more fundamental." After watching the townspeople deliberate and vote, he declared "Success will be gauged by how far we can spread this to other communities. If this incredible example of democracy remains just in Bamstead, then that's fine for our community. But without similar efforts and laws in neighboring towns, we'll all still be vulnerable to the corporate water bottlers who so easily claim our water for their own." (July 13, 2006 issue of *Rachel's Democracy & Health News*--[http://www.precaution.org/lib/06/prn\\_barnstead.htm](http://www.precaution.org/lib/06/prn_barnstead.htm))

The UUSC didn't contribute to that victory in NH, but I mention it to show that people like us in places like ours have stood up against bottled water, the form of water privatization most common in our country. The irony is, of course, well known by now: most bottled water comes from public water sources and the rest is of unknown quality because the industry is not well-regulated.

So, next time you buy a bottle of water, thinking it's safer than the tap water that comes from the Patuxent and/or Potomac Rivers, runs through the aging water mains of the Washington Suburban Sanitary Commission and out through your kitchen faucet, think again! Likely it's not!

And if you trust corporations more than government agencies, and don't believe the WSSC is supplying you with clean water, see what you can find out about the bottled water you drink. According to a Congressional hearing last July, only 2 out of the nation's 188 bottled water companies report the water's source, manner of treatment, and quality test results. On the other hand, the WSSC reports on water quality every year. In 2008, Americans drank 8.6 billion gallons of bottled water, double the amount of a decade ago. (The New York Times - Quality of bottled water questioned in Congress, Jul /10/2009).

So, last year, at First Parish in Bedford, the UU congregation where I served as one of two ministers, we got involved in the movement in favor of tap water. We purchased fair-traded stainless steel water bottles like this and arranged to print slogans on them. It says: "Think outside the bottle" in bold capital letters, the cute slogan we borrowed from the non-profit organization Corporate Accountability International. Under that it says: "Bottled water is a corporate boondoggle! Please fill this from your tap—which has perfectly good water—for less than a penny a gallon!" And under that, in smaller typeface: "Support the human right to safe affordable water. Visit the Unitarian Universalist Service Committee at [www.uusc.org](http://www.uusc.org)."

That's the back of the bottle. On the front, is a logo designed by a church member showing wavy water and a rising sun, to represent the Quabbin Reservoir, the source of Boston area water and around the logo it proudly says Quabbin Clear—MWRA Tap Water. Alongside, it says "Produced by the First Parish in Bedford, MA." How cool, our own reusable water bottle!

If UU's around here were to design such a bottle, the logo would have to depict a river and around the edge it would proudly say: Patuxent & Potomac Pure – WSSC Tap Water!

In preparing for this sermon, I contacted the Washington Suburban Sanitary Commission, to learn about our local water supply. The staff there was happy to be very helpful.

I learned: one dollar's worth of WSSC water will fill about 2,000 of those 20 ounce bottles we buy at the convenience store or stock up at Costco! For one dollar, we could fill a daily bottle of water for nearly six years?! So, *why* are we buying so much bottled water?

And, guess how many gallons an average WSSC customer uses each day? How many gallons do you think YOU use, per person, per day??? Just guess. Call it out...

The correct answer is that residents of Montgomery and Prince Georges Counties use 70 gallons per day! Think about that... you'll never again let the water run while you brush your teeth! Or, water your lawn to try to keep it as green as if we lived in a rain forest!

We are fortunate that our local water is relatively clean. That's not the case for all Americans, so the UUSC is partnered with the Community Water Center in California to improve drinking water in places like the small agricultural town of Tonyville, where residents couldn't drink their tap water—it sometimes tasted like metal! With the help of the Community Water Center, they organized to get their water tested, and found it contaminated with nitrate, which is used in fertilizers and found in livestock and animal wastes. Then they got the state of California to issue an order requiring their water company to provide clean drinking water all twelve months of the year.

Since then, the Community Water Center, UUSC and hundreds of friends headed to the state capitol to help pass a new law called the Human Right to Water Act of 2009. And guess who showed up with them at the capitol—La Gotita, the water drop on loan from the Peruvian Water Workers! The good news is that the Act passed with bipartisan support, the first Human Right to Water Act in the country, but on October 11<sup>th</sup>, Governor California Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger vetoed it. The work goes on! La Gotita has not given up!

The UUSC website offers lots of great ideas for how we can get involved in the Human Right to Water campaign, in our own community and state, nationally, and internationally. UU's are working on conservation and local water quality and they are challenging inequities in whose water gets shut off for delinquent accounts by their water utilities. And, through the UUSC, all of us who contribute are working to extend the availability and affordability of clean drinking water in countries just now beginning to lay water mains and sewer lines. Let's join these contributors for water justice as best we can!