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Water in Native American Spirituality: Liquid Life—Blood of the Earth and Life of the Community

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Water: The life force of all creation, the generative dynamism of existence. Long before scientific experimentation and quantifiable instrumentation verified the facts, human beings have perceived and understood water to be the essence of all life, both material and spiritual. From the beginnings of recorded history and even before, across the expanse of human settlement and migration, indigenous as well as extraneous religions and spiritual traditions have celebrated water as the primordial source: water was sacred before it was material and water took on for multitudes of generations until even today an expansive inclusivity that scanned the literal to the metaphoric. Human civilizations began and flourished along waterways and all first peoples identified both the miraculous life-giving but also the concomitant life-ending power of water: water falls and streams, longitudinal and lateral water-ways, rivers and other bodies of water, have been from earliest times demarcated as sacred topography.¹ The Cherokee of the southern Appalachians mountain range in southern Tennessee know the river in their midst as *Yunwi Gamabida* or “the Long Man,” an abiding, benevolent spiritual entity whose waters were believed to be the source of wisdom and curative of all ills and whose “hands” nurtured all Cherokee lives (Nabokov 53-57).² Across the geographical landscape, the Taos Pueblo people have always considered all lakes and ponds in the neighboring high mountains as sacred sites but they hold in especial regard the mystical Blue Lake (*Ba Whyea*) as the source of all creation

(Nickens and Nickens 23; see also Nabokov 73-78). Blue Lake is the bountiful center of all existence, the liminal place of both birth and death, the eternal source from which living spirits emerge to animate all creation and to which the spirits return upon the cessation of physical life.

However, not only have the actual bodies of water fired the imaginations and ignited the spirits of humans: the lore of indigenous peoples has often recounted sacred and otherwise supernatural entities that have inhabited water sources, thus endowing the waters with additional spiritual and supernatural powers. The ancient Aztecs sang and then wrote of their formidable water goddess Chalchiuhtlicute who, among other myths, is said to have blessed the only surviving human man and woman after the Ancient One destroyed the earth in a great flood (or some myths credit her with the flooding and allowing only certain humans to survive, transforming others into fish) (Altman 36). The Washoe believe that magical, quixotic little creatures known as “Water Babies” inhabit all bodies of water in their homeland of the eastern Sierra Nevada mountains; however, the Babies are not spiritual forces of benevolence and placidity but are, in fact, more evocative of the great power of the Great Mystery, thus possessing simultaneously both fearsome and enchanting capacities (Downs 8-13). A Washoe myth about the Water Babies who populated the most sacred of all lakes, Lake Tahoe, suggests that the people understood to regard the Babies with a degree of ambivalence as well as anxiety:

Lake Tahoe is the home of the Me-tsung or Water Babies... If (the Washoe people) wanted to cross the lake or fish in the lake, they had to prepare by making a basket sealed well with pitch. In it, they put cedar and sage, acorns, bread, and pine nuts.

After each basket was full, the owners would put the cover on it and sink it in the lake. By doing this, they believed that the Water babies would help them to get across safely and give them luck while fishing. But if they didn't bring a basket of food, they believed that the Me-tsung would become very angry. Sometimes people did not return from their trips because they were drowned by the will of the Water Babies. (*Native American Stories of the Sacred* 171)

The Washoe narrative of the Water Babies manifests the resolute acknowledge by the Washoe of the autonomous strength and potency of the natural world. Not only do humans not have any special authority or control over nature but humans are enjoined to recognize the sovereignty of natural forces in their own domain and request—not demand—their assistance.

For Native American, then, as for most indigenous spirituality, water retains an honored and indispensable place, an actual force as well as symbolic image of life and death, creation and destruction, nourishment and deprivation: water exists as an autonomous and primeval element to be encountered with humility, respect, joy and caution. Water, bodies of water and places of water, occur as characters and settings in many Native American mythologies and such sacred narratives remain for Native Americans fundamental to an understanding of the world. Water is of course portrayed as functional for physical survival and the source of much life-giving sustenance; however, in their life-giving capacities and maintenance of living forms, bodies and forms of water—rain, lakes, streams, ponds, rivers, oceans and seas— and many of the animal and plant life associated with those aquatic reservoirs have sustained prominence as sacred signifiers for Native American nations. Water, as an aspect of the natural world, is itself an hierophany, a “sounding” of holy and numinous potency, both awe-inspiring and terrible, for just as water is rightfully accepted as both a source of life and an essential component of all creation,

an element without which all organic life cannot safely (and spiritually) survive, so also is water recognized as a potential cause of material destruction, a relentless force of enormous power that must be identified as well as an instrument of purging and cleansing and thus renewal. The mythic narratives of some Native American nations speak of water creatures from the earth's liquid *loci* as inestimable forces of nature that will benefit or damage humans: such tales also suggest that other natural consequences of water, such as sky- rainbows or liquid pools of remaining rain water, can relieve or injure humankind which has no final ability to resist the intense flow of water. In either and in both instances, water remains a sacred power, certainly beyond the scale of human direction. However, that water can effect good or ill (and so can be understood as either) is, of course, not surprising, for the sacredness attached to water does not imply that water is completely positive or good: like Rudolph Otto's description of the sacred in *The Idea of the Holy*, water is a *mysterium tremendum et fascinans*, an ultimately preternatural mystery that can evoke fear as well as rapture. Water symbolizes the origin of life, the assurance of fertility, and the promise of sustenance, but water can also be a quixotic agent of hardship and death.

This paper does not purport to be either an exhaustive study or even a definitive examination of water spirituality in Native American religious traditions: each nation has its own set of sacred narratives and intergenerational tales and thus each nation has its own unique encounter with the presence and legacy of water and water-related occasions. However, as water is so fundamental to indigenous—really, all spiritual and religious—mythology, so much so that in some instances the presence of water goes almost unremarked, as if it is always been there and always will, an assumed vitality in the natural world, it does seem fitting to consider even briefly

some of the indigenous sacred narratives and mythic tales that involve water. To do so will afford greater and more informed appreciation for the value of water, waterways and bodies of water in Native American life and clarify exactly what kind of spiritual, cultural and historical injuries Native American societies have endured when they are or have been denied access to their sacred pools or streams, when their holy waters and liquid spiritual centers are damaged or destroyed, or when they have been restored to their native habitants, such as regions around lakes and streams, only to discover such areas now depleted of all irrigation and water and unable to be restored to the original conditions. A consideration of Native American spirituality must incorporate the urgency in the indigenous struggle to reclaim or restore or validate what was and is rightfully theirs, not merely as territorial privileges or environmental space but as concrete signifiers of their own identity. It is not merely a tract of land or a space of woods or a stretch of river *qua* land or woods or river that becomes the focus of contention, nor are such engagements only political or even socially constructed cultural battles; rather, the disputes and territorial wrangling over bodies of water and places of waterways are rather embattled contests over sacred spaces and holy sites, the very ground of being, the soul of a people, as articulated in their lore and sacred tales. The mythic stories of a people and the distinctive ideas about water and aqueous related themes in sacred narratives intimate aspects of signification and attributes of meaning for indigenous peoples, and even if time and events have altered external dimensions of a people's culture, the internal and inherent truths remain, the stories remain vibrant and vigorous in the spiritual life of the people.

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Briefly, Spirituality

It is perhaps advisable to pause for a moment of clarity and assess the use (and usefulness) of the concept of *spirituality*, for it has become a word too easily bantered about and deceptively bartered for meaning. In general, the term *spirituality* does articulate a distinct and distinctly profound dimension of any religious tradition and is more than the contrary to dogmatic adherence. To speak of spirituality is to speak of the layers of interconnectivity believers experience between intuition and experience, transcendence and immanence, and how that experience dismantles the barriers to such interconnectivity that religious doctrine too often erects and at which religious ritual and symbology can only hint. *Spirituality* allows, then, the individual voices of multiple communities to speak and be heard concerning intimate and perhaps ineffable encounters, and so enriches religious discourse with transformational and emotive witness.

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Native American Spirituality in Myth

For indigenous populations, spiritual traditions and narratives are often the extant discourse of a people's encounter with spirit-force and divinity since, until very recently indigenous religious experiences and beliefs were not systematically codified or structured in written form. Rather, for countless generations, a reliance upon the oral transmission of beliefs and of faith practices formed the religious legacy of most indigenous peoples, affirming a predisposition among the people to regard the sacred or sacredness as endowed with a reality that need not find expression in the typically inscribed patterns of speech or the written word. Of course today, many aspects of Native American cultures, including religious customs and spiritual beliefs, have found their way into written form, and yet the legacy of the oral convention

significant and persuasive. As scholar Joseph Epes Brown has explains, a consciousness of the sacred has always permeated the Native American worldview because of the tradition of orality, the special nature of Native American languages, which contrasts with our (i.e., European hegemonist) understanding of language and our use of words. In Native languages the understanding is that the meaning *is* in the sound, it *is* in the word; the word is not a symbol for a meaning which has been abstracted out, word and meaning are together in one experience. Thus, to name a being, for example, an animal, is actually to conjure up the powers latent in that animal . . . when we create words we use our breath, and for . . . (Native Americans) breath is associated with the principle of life; breath is life itself. . . . this sacred principle of breath . . . lends an added sacred dimension to the spoken word. (13, interpolation mine, original emphasis)

The orality of the foundation of Native American spirituality is in fact a dimension of its spiritual calculus: to speak of sacred beings or holy places or devotional practices is a spiritual act, an action of the spirit, itself. Native spirituality argues for the intuition of the sacred, an expansive openness to the abiding reality of sacredness or spirit in everything and everywhere and all the time: the world, material and nonmaterial, vibrates with sacral energy. Such a process of belief challenges any believer into a recognition of the relational foundation of all existence, out of time and in spite of space: the human necessarily correlates to the non-human since spirit infuses them both, there is nothing that is not spirit driven and therefore ultimately beyond temporal definition, and everything and every moment is imbued with meaning and purpose and all things—human and other-than-human, organic and inorganic, visible and invisible, animate and inanimate—exist in relation to each other. There are no empty spaces in indigenous

spirituality, there are no random habitations or inconsequential objects: each item, every being—rock, cloud, leaf, fox, apple, breath, color, lake, stream, pond or ocean—is endowed with definition and rationale, replete with sacredness, and never to exist in isolation. As one spiritual teacher has explained:

There is a saying used by many Native Americans when they are finishing a prayer a ceremony or a serious talk. This saying is spoken in many different languages and dialects . . . ‘we are all related.’ It remind sus that we two-leggeds share one Creator with the four-leggeds, the winged ones, the crawling people, the plants and ‘standing people,’ or trees—even the ‘stone people,’ the rocks and minerals. We are all one family. We are all of the earth . . . we are all part of one Circle of Life and our individual well-being relies on the health of the Whole.

(Wa’na’nee’chee and Freke 37-38)

The interconnectivity throughout the universe is neither happenstance nor insignificant: each item, each object, has substantive reason and historical rationale to be in the place it is found, and not just in present time but as an expression of its historical legacy. Thus, a body of water, for example, is meant to be where it is but it is believed to exists on more than a simple axis of space and time: that body of water, in indigenous spirituality, embodies the stories and narratives of the history of that place, not interchangeable with any other place, and evokes the real and mythic accounts of whomever or whatever has encountered that place. This That is of course a way of not just thinking but of being in the world that stands in complete opposition to contemporary systems of linearity, deconstruction of meaning and value, hyper-relativism and a presentism that rejects permanence or the interrelation among all dimensions of existence.³ Thus,

in terms of water sites, for example, the persistent intrusion of the US government into Native American lands and spaces connected to waters and waterways, such as the free access and just use of water, the issue of water rights, was and is not simply a problem of political hegemony or a concern of environmental and economic equity. Rather, those activist policies and mechanical practices of the US government in the usurpation of waterways and the re-routing and the desiccation of riverbeds and the depletion of ancient ponds and streams have been horrific violations of natural resources, indeed; more tragically, however, they have been as well incursions against the spiritual life and spiritual legacy of a people, pervasively destructive in willful ignorance and arrogance. Government and corporate blockage to water access and wholesale usurpation and destruction of areas and bodies of water have been not only acts of racism and dominion but have been as well acts of desecration of spiritual landscapes: what had been or was being devastated were not just material structures or physical formations but spiritual connections to ancestors, to members of the community, to self-identity. Gail Small, a Northern Cheyenne activist, offers an example of this still prevalent understanding:

Water . . . is the lifeblood of the people. I recall taking a draft tribal water code for public input into five villages on my reservation when I was a tribal sociologist. Protection of the water spirits was a major concern throughout the reservation. And the water spirits varied depending on the water source being a river, lake or spring. I reported back to the attorneys and they laughed at my findings. However, it was no laughing matter a few years later when an elderly Cheyenne man held off the drilling team of ARCO from crossing his water spring... he told me how the water spirits sometimes came out and danced at his spring... there is

a profound spiritual dimension to our natural environment and without (that spiritual dimension), the war would not be worth fighting. (LaDuke 88-89)

The land, the air, the waters, all of nature is as 'alive' with invisible energy and mystical presence and so for the native peoples items as elementary as stones and shells and natural formations like springs and lakes are worth defending, even at the risk of imprisonment, against arrogant disregard. The indigenous lifeway, its spiritual calculus, is a passionate circularity of relationships, corporeal and transcendent.

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Indigenous Narratives about Water: Creation Myths

Water spirituality, however, is not merely about the mystical dimensions of the physical entity. In fact, native peoples expressed some of their most profound insights in their articulation of mythic narratives, sacred stories, the sacred narratives of creation, those fundamental stories of origins and beginnings. Scholars of mythopoesis and anthropologists of religion have long since abandoned the (some would say classicist/ racist/ elitist/ social Darwinian/ colonialist) explanation of myths, especially creation myths, as little more than the pathetic attempts by semi-illiterate/ primitive and unenlightened peoples to make sense of their circumscribed, unfashionable and crude origins. In fact, more recent experts in the scholarship of mythology like the great Romanian phenomenologist Mircea Eliade re-envisioned the function and meaning of creation myths and other cosmogonies and ushered in a new consideration for the role and purpose of cosmogonic narratives (*passim*, notably 1-20). Eliade argued that creation myths are symbolic articulations that contextualize humanity within reflections of value and

worth: about kinds and levels of reality, about non-being and then being, about social interconnections and points of coincidence, places of separation and sites of convergence, about what is significant and what is subordinate, about disposition and comportment. Creation myths are, in a word, not bad science but are symbolic inquiries into the deepest questions of the human condition, narrative musings on questions about mortal reflections and quotidian circumstance embedded within the greater sweep of transcendence. Creation myths rattle around considerations of reality and imagination but their own origins emerge from a distinctive way of thinking, a manner of regard that diverges from the more familiar attitude about the mind and its functional capacity. The philosopher and comparativist of religion, Huston Smith, has argued that in order to appreciate the deeper implications of myth and mythic narrative is to think in a new way since:

the most important single feature of living primal spirituality (is) what has been called its symbolist mentality. The symbolist vision sees things of the world as transparent to their divine source. Whether that source is specified or not, the world's objects are open to its light. Physical sight presents the water in a lake in existential isolation, for as far as the eye reports, the body of water exists in a reality in its own . . . modernity recognizes no ontological connection between material things and their metaphysical, spiritual roots . . . (for the indigenous mind) appearances (the literal) never exist entirely on their own . . . (378-79)

Thus, heretofore, a non-native audience might have regarded a mythic account as either a weak attempt at explanation or even a celebratory token of entertainment; however, for the native peoples, such stories are connected to greater metaphysical truths as much as they are connected to the physical places and material objects which populate their contents. Creation

myths in particular transpose the idea of an event singularity into and beyond multiple forms of relationships: "... myth defines the purpose of life as a progression from unity, through existential encounters ... toward renewed experience of unity" (Jahner 196; see also Sword et al.). Moreover, whether shared two hundred years ago around a sacred fire or ten years ago in a reservation lodge, the layers of teaching and the levels of understanding are still valid and apparent.

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A Sampling of Water in Creation Myths

The following discussion concerning water in creation myths is not meant to be exhaustive or even widely representative, as was noted previously in this essay. What is offered, however, are some examples of creation myths that include water as a significant dimension within the creation narrative. The "Earth Diver" creation story is clearly a rich resource for understanding something more about the Delaware Lenapes, for example, why the turtle figures so prominently in the symbolism of the nation. From the beginning of the narrative, it is clear that water is the source of all life and has a status not dissimilar from a Divine Creator: "a great, deep water overwhelmed the earth," waters were there enveloping the earth and together earth (the orb) and water pre-exist all other beings ("Earth Diver"). Water thus has a kind of preeminence and enjoys a preferential status, a privileged place, among all elements of the natural world, and is the ground of being for all creation. However, water is at the same time a force of both positive and negative values: the waters covered everything and yet "they were weak and sickly from not being dry," the animals were not happy since there was nothing to balance out the waters, equalize moisture with aridity ("Earth Diver"). That is an important point for the

myth that does not suggest that the waters are curative of some ills or have been made present to purge the earth of any evil or malfeasance; rather, the myth simply articulates that water existed before anything else and is then inherently neutral as a presence until it becomes a matter of imbalance. The myth implies, then, that a kind of physical, and perhaps even metaphysical, balance had to be arranged in order for life to flourish and increase in order for there to be a flourishing life. Water had to be in equilibrium and so had to be balanced with its opposite (earth, dry land, land) and thus exist as part of a harmonious interaction rather than as a single domineering force. The animals' comments advance that idea since each of the animals included in the narrative is primarily a water creature—a duck, a bullfrog, a muskrat and a turtle—with an obvious predilection for the water. Nonetheless, each one seeks to balance out life and in the water with a landed aspect: the duck would like land on which to build a nest, the bullfrog would like land for further activity, and the muskrat asks for land on which he can build his lodge. Each animal typifies the need for moderation and a kind of harmonious symmetry that are in fact values in Native American, including Lenape, spirituality.⁴ After Turtle suggests that they gather mud from under the water and bring it above to construct some land, thus asserting a kind of equilibrium between water and earth, each animal tries but fails to do so until the muskrat, described as humble and thus symbolic of modesty and simplicity, offers to help. The others are not kind to him: they scoff at so lowly and small a creature thinking he would be able to accomplish what others, more capable, could not, but they contemptuously agree to his attempt. As the story explains, little Muskrat did in fact gather some mud but died in the attempt to bring that mud to the surface. Still, the mud that he was able to retrieve was then spread on Turtle's back and land began to emerge from the waters, land that became the ground of human habitation.

Muskrat is of course the hero of the myth, not simply as muskrat but as the modest, self-effacing, innocuous individual who was willing to risk his safety and security for the benefit of the community, to sacrifice himself for his people with an act of bravery and a profile of courage worthy of warm esteem. Muskrat, the water creature who sought to balance the quantity of water with the presence of earth, acted as a kind of bridge between the two entities and with his death linked them forever together. Yet together, the efforts of all the animals personify the Native American belief that all creation joins together in the evolving act of creation. Life is organic and ever new, renewing and reforming all the time, and every living thing, no matter how humble or how small, has a part to play in sustaining and enriching life, here represented by the still, pre-eternal body of water out of the depths of which life was finally able to emerge.

The Huron (Wendat) also sang a similar myth of creation that involves water (“Sky Woman,” Jensen 7-9). This version of a creation myth echoes the previous creation myth in its depiction of water: there is the sense that water can be the source of life but also death since the eternal water that is the source of all life is not favorable to the divine woman, the sky goddess Ataensic, for she fears to fall into the primordial liquid and drown.⁵ In the Huron tale, two creatures of the air, loons, swoop in to save her from drowning and then situate her on the back of Turtle until such a time as a council can determine what would be her fate. As in the Lenape and other tales, the council determined that some earth must be found to prepare for her a place in which she can abide. Turtle then commands the water animals, such as Beaver, Muskrat and Diver, to dive for mud into the depths of the water but they all sacrifice themselves in their attempts to assist her. All the animals drown but their bodies eventually surface and “... Great Turtle looked at the mouth of each one, but could find no trace of earth ...” (Jensen 8). Thus, all

the creatures who had plunged to the bottom of the sea had not been able to extract a remnant of mud which was necessary in order to balance the fluidity of the water world in which they were living. However, Toad proved to be more successful for when he reached the surface of the sea after his long dive, Turtle discovered in Toad's mouth some earthen material that Sky Goddess then used to fashion land and spread out more ground on which life may flourish and prosper, including human life. The myth thus recognizes the value of woman as co-creator of life on earth and deviser of tools and strategies for survival. The image of water is as an autonomous entity, the existence and prominence of which are never questioned and around which all other creation must form and develop itself. The myth also depicts water as the source of both life and death, the embodiment of a circular pattern of creation and destruction that expresses the inherent dynamism of all existence.

The Cherokee narrate a myth of creation in which a mass of land has been floating in the pre-existing, primal waters that flow perpetually, and, in an apocalyptic flourish, during the last days, say the Cherokee, all of the land mass of earth will sink into those great waters:

The earth is a great island floating in a sea of water, and suspended at each of the four cardinal points by a cord hanging down from the sky vault, which is of solid rock. When the world grows old and worn out, the people will die and the cords will break and let the earth sink down into the ocean, and all will be water again.

The Indians are afraid of this. (Mooney 239)

Water thus has been identified as the source of all existence and the deposit of all living things such that once certain forms of life no longer have the capacity to sustain themselves, all will revert back to the primordial pools: water marks both the beginning and the terminus of material life and yet itself persists beyond the realm of the temporal into infinite existence. Water

will survive all existence, even human existence, and “the Indians are afraid of this.” The Cherokee myth also includes an extraordinary detail about water, in this instance water as a liminal entity:

There is another world under this, and it is like ours in everything, animals, plants, and people, save that the seasons are different. The streams that come down from the mountains are the trails by which we reach this underworld, and the springs at their heads are the doorways by which we enter it, but to do this one must fast and go to water and have one of the underground people for a guide. (Mooney 240)

Waterways can act as forms of the liquid portals to the ‘other realm’ or the realms of the ancestral spirits: water is regarded as a magical source of entry, a mutative substance. While water seems to embody spatial and temporal dimensions and as well to have tangibility and materiality, it nonetheless also incorporates unseen potency that will allow, as the myth narrates, for connections between this present world and another ‘underground’ existence. This world is linked to its mirror other, a kind of benign doppelganger universe, and water, specifically streams and springs, are the conduits into the other realms. The mythic narrative is testimony to an authentic interconnectivity that crosses temporal and material barriers: water is linkage throughout all existence, whether or not such connections are visible to waking human consciousness. Water in particular incorporates a liminal, or threshold or portal, potency suggesting a kind of efficacy between and among levels of being and forms of existence. In its transparency water contains deep mystery.

As a final example, the Lakota incorporate water in a slightly more familiar way in a creation myth that also incorporates a flood narrative:

A long time ago, a really long time when the world was still freshly made, Unktehi the water monster fought the people and caused a great flood. . . . Everyone was killed, and all the blood jelled, making one big pool. The blood turned to pipestone and created the pipestone quarry, the grave of those ancient ones. That's why the pipe, made of that red rock, is so sacred to us. Its red bowl is the flesh and blood of our ancestors, its stem is the backbone of those people long dead, the smoke rising from it is their breath.

(“How the Sioux Came to Be” 93-94)

The presence of water in this spiritual remembrance is quite familiar: it is the myth of the Great Flood known and recalled by multiple tribes of first peoples across the earth. Flood narratives present water as a curative or remedying instrument of supernatural forces, as the water that is a source of and nourishes all life can be as well a force of destruction and purgation. Yet from that destruction usually emerges life. In this version of the myth, the Lakota explain the origin of their sacred “pipestone quarry” stone: human blood and bone had combined with the flooding waters and hardened together to create the stone formation in the local quarries. It is that stone that the Lakota use to fashion their peace and community pipes. It is well known that the pipe is sacred to Native American peoples for

like all medicine tools, it embodies a profound symbolism that encodes the wisdom of the People. The Bowl represents the female aspect of the Great Spirit, Mother Earth . . . the bowl contains what is burnt to ash, representing all that changes . . . it is the ‘Wheel of Life’ . . . when the smoker draws smoke from the

bowl through the stem, he remembers the Great Mystery which embraces both the ever-changing and the ever-constant . . . (Wa'na'nee'che and Freke 54-55)

The pipe is a numinous artifact and its creation, like its use, is sanctified: as the link between the spirit world and the world of matter, the pipe, like water, is a source of wisdom and spiritual insight just as it is also like water a liminal instrument, a portal vessel that will allow the user transition into the invisible realm of spirit and potentiality, to become cognizant of deeper, more sustained truth and wisdom that underpins all existence. The mythic narrative is mindful that the pipes have been fashioned from a magical mixture of the primordial waters of cleansing and the pieces of bones and filaments of those who had to be cleansed from the earth: from the combination arises new old forms and structures with which to instruct generations of peoples.

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In Closing: The Old Ways as Guidance for the New World

Over a decade ago in the Great Lakes region of the United States, a group of Native American Grandmothers of the Anishinawbe tribe initiated a movement to address the water crisis confronting their people: the movement has become known as the “Mother Earth Water Walk.”⁶ The organization is a form of spiritual activism and it endeavors through peace protest and spiritual education to address the systematic and lethal injury to the earth’s waters that contemporary cultures, notably in the United States, have caused. The Water Walk commenced in the spring of 2003, when a collective of Anishinawbe Grandmothers decided to organize a perpetual program of annual peace-walks around the perimeters of the Great Lakes and other sacred bodies of water in order to educate the greater populations about not only the harm being

done on a daily basis to those sources of life but also ways that such harm might be remedied. Their manifesto reads in part:

We are doing this walk on our own beliefs within our own aboriginal culture and values of the importance of our waters is very precious and sacred to our being, as it is one of the basic elements needed for all life to exist. (“About Us”)⁷

The impetus for the Grandmothers to walk the sacred waters was not just an ecological alertness that appreciated fully the long-term consequences of the systemic and pervasive exploitation and neglect of the earth’s water sources; rather, the Grandmothers were inspired by the ancient spirituality of their people which has long-discerned water as the primordial life-giving ‘blood’ of Mother Earth. Everything on earth consists of water and everything on earth needs water in order to survive and thus it is through water that all creation is connected and thus water exists as the most sacred of elements, the very essence of all life. As one ‘Water-Walker’ Grandmother, Josephine Mandamin, explains:

Science is slowly catching up to our anishinabe thinking about our natural laws as governed to us by Creation/Creator. Our duty and responsibility is to our Mother's care and well being. The common denominator of life is Water. In our Mide Lodge we know all this from the teachings and oral inscriptions left by our ancestors, but we have not been vocal enough to tell the world and science that we know what they are collecting as new science. It is not new knowledge, or new understanding. It's been around as long as our Mide ancestors have been on this Mother earth. Our ancestors knew where water comes from, whence it flows, and how it flows. This is all understood in our waters songs and Lodge creation story. (Mandamin, “Words from the Water,” emphasis mine)

The Grandmother gently chides people of ‘science’—that is, the world outside the parameters of Anishinabe thinking—for their complacent assumption they have discovered anything new or have crafted some new understanding of the ecology in which humanity dwells. As she explains, there is nothing at all new, at least for her people, about the ‘science’ of caring for the earth or being conscious of the delicate balance that has always existed between the needs (and wants) of humanity and the surrounding environment, especially the repositories of water. The spiritual wisdom of her people has taught generations that the waters of creation are the waters that still flow and surge on earth and are the nexus connecting not only people to people and people to Mother Earth, but as well the present time to the sacred past, the infinite return to the Great Spirit. It is a wisdom contemporary secular society would do well to heed.

Notes

1. A good initial source on the sanctity of water and water sites is Nathaniel Altman, *Sacred Water: The Spiritual Source of Life* (Hiddenspring, 2002).
2. For a contemporary account of the persistent importance and significance of water (especially rivers) among the Cherokee, see Barbara Reimensnyder Duncan, "Going to Water: A Cherokee Ritual in its Contemporary Context," *Journal of the Appalachian Studies Association* 5 (1993): 94-99.
3. In fact, there has been much contemporary scholarship about the Native American spiritual awareness of connectivity that has been translated into an ecological construct known as TEK (Traditional Ecological Knowledge) which is believed to be a potentially fruitful approach in addressing the devastation of the natural world that confronts society today. While the rhetoric of TEK suggests to this author another form of a non-indigenous, western appropriation of Native American spirituality, it nonetheless poses a practical model for future indigenous/non-indigenous dialogue. See: Raymond Pierotti and Daniel Wildcat, "Traditional Ecological Knowledge: The Third Alternative" in *Ecological Applications*, Vol. 10, No. 5 (Oct., 2000): 1333-1340, and Deborah McGregor, "Coming Full Circle: Indigenous Knowledge, Environment and Our Future" in *American Indian Quarterly*, Vol. 28, No. 3/4, Special Issue: "The Recovery of Indigenous Knowledge" (Summer - Autumn, 2004): 385-410.
4. A contemporary blog reflection on the spiritual value of harmony and balance in framing a "good" life among Native Americans can be found at:
<http://nativeamericannetroots.net/diary/705>
5. Although not the focus of this paper, water as flood and flood narratives occur in many Native American mythologies thus exploring the ambiguity of water, a cradle of life and a

destroyer of life. See for example “The Voice, the Flood and the Turtle” in *American Indian Myths and Legends*, selected and edited by Richard Erdoes and Alfonso Ortiz (Pantheon Books, 1984): 120- 122.

6. Please see their website at <http://www.motherearthwaterwalk.com> As a note: most Native American tribes have long regarded the elder women, the “Grandmothers,” as sacred treasures, vessels of tribal wisdom and spiritual teachers. A site dedicated to international indigenous grandmother wisdom and spiritual guidance can be found at: <http://www.grandmotherscouncil.org> Also, on that site can also be found the grandmothers’ “prayer for the healing of the waters”: <http://www.grandmotherscouncil.org/statement-from-the-international-council-of-thirteen-indigenous-grandmothers-for-world-water-day-march-22nd-2014>

7. The poignant blog of the first walk for the protection and provision of the sacred waters of the earth can be found at http://www.motherearthwaterwalk.com/?page_id=2174

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