

## **The Stories We Share**

**By Rev. Jane Smith, Channing Memorial Church, UU, Ellicott City, MD September 8, 2024**

The women, arriving either from the East or the South, the West or the North, “joined to share a moment of sacredness,” offers our Story for All Ages. The four women gathered in curiosity and wonder, inquisitiveness and awe. For they gathered to share, each of them, water emblematic of what they held deep in their hearts, each adding their symbolic joys and woes into one shared vessel. A vessel holding, respectively, “joy and happiness, change and transition, grief and loss, and rest and renewal.” Each of these, mingling in harmony, yes, blessed by these four women. Their stories mixed and merged and in this sacred space of sharing and vulnerability, in the deep love they held for one another, they created a vessel of compassion. Compassion that, I imagine, spread widely beyond this small gathering, as the women offered empathy for the plights and journeys and deeply held secrets and mysteries of others knowing that others also carried these delights and these heartaches buried deep within. By sharing these narratives – these stories – by sharing what was held deeply in their hearts, souls, and minds, by sacred vulnerability, they were overcome with not just compassion, but with reverence and love for one another. May we do the same.<sup>1</sup>

Today we celebrate Water Communion, sharing story, yes, and honoring the sacred art of invitation – inviting one another into the deepest crevices of our being through the narratives we offer. I invite you to pause and ingest these words and reflections. We join together in community to both share and accept one another’s stories, a reciprocal act of giving and receiving that strengthens our bonds while bringing wisdom and compassion to the soul. In this shared and holy space, on this special day of celebration, let us invite one another into a sacred community, to a web of stories, to a faith of love, to a gathering of open hearts, minds, and souls. Together we strengthen the bonds we already have, yes, and in sacred and intimate ways we invite newcomers into these consecrated walls and to the deepest places of our

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<sup>1</sup> “The Vessel of Compassion: A Water Communion Story” By Katie Sivani Gelfand

hearts. Again, what I hold deeply sacred in this hallowed day is the invitation to reciprocity. May you impress upon me your insights and stories, and may I, in return, offer gratitude, reverence, wonder, and compassion. I lift this up not simply to embody Water Communion, but as a model for bringing the sacred art and spiritual practice of storytelling into each of our days, sharing and receiving tales and narratives in sacred and holy ways. May we at once offer vulnerability and all of that which we hold deep within as a treasured gift and receive gratitude and love and reverence in return.

In the newly articulated values of our Unitarian Universalist faith, love is at the center. As a faith we hold love at the center. Love is story telling. Love is the compassion it fosters. Love is an invitation to healing through shared vulnerability. It is a sense of selflessness as we release our deeply held narratives to the world, and likewise it is a genuine eagerness to hear what kindred souls have to say. What is more beautiful than shared love? What seeds does shared love nurture? Compassion, reverence, awe, gratitude, companionship.

My sister and I do just this – sharing love. We live far apart – Annie in Maine and I in Maryland. Annie previously lived in Costa Rica and Germany and Nova Scotia – a blessed woman who spreads her wings and soars! And so, we have that physical distance that separates us, and yet we have bonds of the spirit that allows her to infiltrate my heart no matter where we are. For it is that art of storytelling and that craft of reciprocal invitation that binds us together in a way blood alone never could. It is those moments together, whether seated around a small wooden table in my mother’s backyard, sipping coffee in Annie’s apartment in Maine, or sitting in a field of wildflowers, it is those moments when our hearts open and pour out – gush out, really – that which we hold tenderly within, it is then when our souls and our spirits receive the story of another and offer compassion and awe and gratitude in return, inviting one another into a space of “Joy and happiness, change and transition, grief and loss, and rest and renewal.”<sup>2</sup> Who do you love? Who broke your heart? What pain do you hold within? We share tears, we share laughter, we invite the vulnerability and the healing that this evokes as we offer true, deep,

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<sup>2</sup> “The Vessel of Compassion: A Water Communion Story” By Katie Sivani Gelfand

unconditional, sisterly love. Reciprocity, love – this is the center. Vulnerability, compassion – this binds us intimately together by sharing all of that of which we hold within, giving and receiving and becoming kinder and wiser for it. I share my own private and intimate stories with Annie, and in response she offers me hers. And what often forms the deepest bonds is not reiterating that which is seemingly perfect or ideal, although the sharing of joy and delight and wonder and awe is key to any relationship. What stands out as creating and fostering deep and powerful bonds is when we guide one another through that which is fundamentally imperfect, making, as they say, lemons into lemonade. As such, I want to share with you a wisdom tale of ancient India.

The tale begins with the introduction of a humble water bearer carrying two heavy pots from stream to home each day, holding the water in these pots carried across her neck. One of these pots was whole and seemingly perfect, the other suffered a substantial crack stretching from bottom to top. For two years, the water bearer traversed the same path from creek to home, and each time the broken pot arrived at the destination only half full. The pot was ashamed of this, thinking he was a bitter failure. One day the pot humbly and sorrowfully apologized to the water bearer for wasting so much precious water. Listening to this lament, the water bearer’s heart filled with compassion. She offered the pot this: as we return, notice the flowers planted along this path. So, on their journey home, the pot saw beautiful blossoms fostering wonder and awe as they created an alluring array of colors and scents. Do you notice, offered the water bearer, that these flowers line only one side of the path? I knew your flaw, so I planted seeds along the path. You have watered each of these seeds every day. Look at the beauty you have created! Tulips and roses and peonies and lavender. What is the moral of this story? “Each of us has our own unique flaws. We're all cracked pots.”<sup>3</sup>

The pot shared its story with the water bearer and the water bearer reciprocated with love – love at the center. In offering a genuine invitation to intimate storytelling one must be ready to receive flaws and vulnerabilities, especially throughout those stories where we share those

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<sup>3</sup> <https://amazingwomenrock.com/the-story-of-the-cracked-pot-for-anyone-whos-not-quite-perfect>

pieces of ourselves that we believe are broken – like the pot. In the act of reciprocity, one shares vulnerable stories and receives compassion and love and kindness in return. Yes, I am flawed, offered the pot. And yes, I am beautiful. We are receptive when we hear that crack is what makes us whole; that crack makes the world a better place. Again, offering vulnerability and receiving an affirmation of beauty in return; just as did that pot received from the water bearer. This offers a sacred invitation to change the narrative one tells oneself, arriving in sorrow and leaving cloaked in affirmation. There is a second blessing we can derive from this story. Acknowledging one's own cracks is a way of inviting the imperfections of others. May we offer one another our deepest insecurities; I am not perfect, and neither are you. I am insecure. I am anxious. I am a people pleaser. And this makes me compassionate and strong; as it can with you. May we articulate, this is part of my story. And, in this moment, I invite you to tell me yours in return, in a place where no judgment resides. That is but one small example of the common vessel we share, mixing our unique tales into a concoction of joy and hardship, of delight and sorrow. Of pain and healing, of heartbreak and love – a brew of stories that produces compassion – that vessel of compassion those women created – for ourselves and for our world. So let us join together in this love and in this compassion as we tend to the flowers created by that which we held imperfect.

May we together return to the metaphor of the day – water. Those of us traveling from the East, South, West, or North to gather here in this sacred community to pour into a common vessel the water holding the stories of our hearts, minds, and souls. And so, it is this water we celebrate today. “Water flows from high in the mountains,” wrote Thich Nhat Hanh. “Water runs deep in the earth. Miraculously, water comes to us, and sustains all life.”<sup>4</sup> To Hanh, the water in his narrative is that of the life-giving miracle of compassion sustaining all life, which we hold as well, offered through the power of story. It is a miracle, yes, this water and these stories we share. And it is stories – and, as Hanh would offer, compassion – that sustain relationships, communities, and even nations as we practice the sacred art of invitation,

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<sup>4</sup> Thich Nhat Hanh, *Singing the Living Tradition* #554

welcoming others to share with us what is held most intimately within. We learn, we love, we change. What wealth of insights and strength do we garner when we invite others to share their stories with us? Think of stories one hears of a tragic, deadly car crash that teaches us to cherish those we love. Think of stories of heroism that elicit an awe of the human spirit. Tales of children planting trees giving us hope for the future of this ailing planet. Narratives of overcoming illness of the body or the mind that produce the strength in us to do the same. It is the experiences of others and that humble act of storytelling that provides us with love, awe, hope, and perseverance. It is this water, both metaphorically and literally, that sustains all life.

And it is this water of our shared narratives that Mary Oliver drank in her poem, tasting of “stones, leaves, and fire.” Tasting of compassion and love and strength and vulnerability and wisdom and generosity. Water, drunk and ingested, waking her bones as they whispered “oh, what is that beautiful thing that just happened?”<sup>5</sup> What is that beautiful thing?/ It is the spiritual practice of storytelling, and this is what I leave you with. The spiritual practice of storytelling. May we reflect, what stories of mine do I share to relinquish my own pain, and what stories do I offer to impart my insights, wisdom, and tales of perseverance to others? For both are needed; both are sacred. What can we receive from others to heal the wounds that each life inevitably offers us, and what can we generously offer from our own wealth of insights and experiences? For if storytelling to be life giving, it is to be reciprocal. Let me bless you with the deepest pieces of my heart, and may I invite you to share your spirit with me in return. May you receive my vulnerability and may you offer yours in return. It is an invitation to heal one another through story; and likewise, an opportunity to highlight joys and wonder and awe – for life is joyous just as it hurts! These practices form bonds that not even the span of the Atlantic Ocean can separate. I love you, my dear sister. When you reach out, a vulnerable cracked pot, may I return with a balm to tend the wound as I highlight the beauty your imperfection inevitably produced. We are beautiful, kindred souls, each and every one of us, held together in this space by shared faith, love, friendship, compassion, and meaning making. Stories come to

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<sup>5</sup> “At Blackwater Pond” by Mary Oliver

us and stories sustain all life just as does a bubbling creek, a flowing stream. So may we give.  
May we receive. May we share our vessel of compassion with one another and with the world.

May it be so, and Amen.