

# Water: A Blessing and a Responsibility

**Sermon by Reverend Rebecca M. Bryan**

*April 30, 2023*

I met Mary Oliver when I was twenty-two years old. Well, I didn't literally meet her, though I might as well have. I picked up a volume of her poetry in a small bookstore in Westport, Connecticut, near where I was working at the time. Her words drew me in immediately and began to quench a thirst for poetry I didn't even realize I had. This love of poetry has only deepened over the years.

When I began reading her, I had no idea that she too was a Unitarian Universalist or that she had an abusive childhood and lived on Cape Cod, the home of my heart. (This was before the internet made knowing all those facts as easy as a Google search.)

The lesbian poet was remarkable in her use and turn of words. She put words to the elements of water, earth, and air, with a sophisticated simplicity and ease. She looked to nonhuman animals for meaning, though in her later years she was more open about her theology and her love for her partner, M.

Born and raised in a small town in Ohio, Mary Oliver spent more than fifty years living on the Province Lands of Cape Cod before moving to Florida for the final few years of her life. She spent countless hours walking and observing the woods, waters, and shores of her beloved Provincetown at all hours of the morning and night, and she shared the stirrings of her mind and heart with readers of all ages. And she loved water!

Blackwater Pond was a frequent source of inspiration for her poetry. We heard two examples: "In Blackwater Woods," our pastoral prayer this morning, and "At Blackwater Pond," our reading this morning.

*...the long tapers of cattails are bursting and floating away over the blue shoulders of the ponds*

*I dip my cupped hands. I drink a long time. It falls cold into my body, waking the bones. I hear them deep inside me, whispering oh what is that beautiful thing that just happened?*

Mary Oliver's love of water is why I am bringing her into this sermon. It is also close to my soul since I have just spent a week in Provincetown. I hope to bring a group there next spring. Let me know if you are interested.

"People protect what they love," said Jacques Cousteau. "It is essential for ocean life and our own that we transform ourselves from being a specifies that uses up its resources to one that cherishes and nurtures them," writes biologist Callum Roberts.<sup>1</sup>

We must care for water and the Earth, and to do so, we must have a relationship with them. This is the premise of this sermon.

What is your relationship with water? I invite you to connect or reconnect with your love of water and, if you don't feel that connection, to create it.

"One of the many possible ways to describe a life would be as a series of encounters with various bodies of water," writes marine biologist, activist, and author, Dr. Wallace J. Nichols.

What do you think of when I say water? Close your eyes for a minute and bring to mind a body of water you care deeply about. It may be an ocean, a river, or a lake. It may be rainwater in the form of puddles, droplets on an umbrella, or a pattering on a roof.

This water may be an arm's throw from where you are seated, in another state, or across the globe. You may have been there once or many times. What does the water feel like? Is it cool? Is the water still or is it moving? Are you there with someone or alone? Are you the age you are today, or are you much younger, or both? When did you first come to know this water?

Water has been considered holy by religious traditions across the ages. Think only of Holy Water, the Dead Sea, and the Ganges River. Water has been used for blessings and rituals including baptism and cleansing since time immemorial.

My holy waters include Blackwater Pond, where

1 Wallace J. Nichols, *Blue Mind* (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2014), xvi.

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Mary Oliver walked and wrote, the marsh close to our home, and the memory of the water splashed by my children in the evening baths. What are yours?

Water has been our ministry theme this month. We opened the month hearing FRS member Brent Mitchell share his extensive experience with water. In addition to regaling us with images of a Baptist baptismal water tank in the church of his youth in central Illinois and disclosing his bias toward the use of water in wine, Brent taught us about some of the devastating changes in the world's waterways and their rapid disappearance due to human intervention and use.

Brent also acquainted us with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goal Number 6, to "Ensure access to water and sanitation for all." Twenty-six percent of the world's population, approximately two billion people, have no access to safe drinking water, and 3.6 billion lack access to safe sanitation. Water scarcity is expected to worsen.<sup>2</sup> This is especially true for poor and marginalized communities, though we know that soon it will affect everyone, regardless of economic status or geographic location. Yes, even here.

In addition to the reliance on water for survival that we all share, water has psychological benefits. We are less stressed when we are connected to water. This is true whether we are looking at water, listening to water, imagining water, or, most obviously, swimming in water.

Marine biologist, activist, and author, Dr. Wallace J. Nichols, coined the phrase "Blue Mind" for this human-water connection. Blue Mind is "a mildly meditative state characterized by calm peacefulness, unity, and a sense of general happiness and satisfaction with life in the moment."<sup>3</sup> It happens, Nichols says, when our most complex organ, the brain, meets the world's most prevalent feature, water. Research demonstrates that Blue Mind, and its increased state of equanimity and calm, extends beyond

the time when we are with water. It infiltrates and influences how we feel everywhere.

Scientists label other states of our brain as "Red Mind" and "Gray Mind." In contrast to the peacefulness of Blue Mind, Red Mind is described as "edgy, high, characterized by stress, anxiety, fear, and maybe even a little bit of anger and despair."<sup>4</sup> Gray Mind is described as numbed out depression accompanied by acute jitters.<sup>5</sup> Yogic philosophy connects Gray Mind with extensive screen time and calls it cold depression.

People enjoy water in one, several, or many ways. It is proven to reduce stress and promote wellbeing and physical health. It is essential that we protect the Earth and her water and ensure that all people have access to safe drinking water.

Think of your sacred water places, those bodies or forms of water that make you experience transcendence, wonder, and joy. We are called to protect them, and we want to do so.

Make room for those connections, my friends. Visit them often, in body and mind. Make your screen saver an image of water. Stand and listen to the rain next time it falls.

Make a pilgrimage to your sacred waters and spend intentional time there. It will do wonders for your body, your mind, and your spirit. It will renew you for whatever lies ahead in this day, this month, and these times. Water will help give you the resources you need to do what you can to protect it and protect all you love.

I will now close with a ritual called the Blue Marble Project, inspired by Dr. Wallace J. Nichols of the Blue Mind Project and a photo of the Earth taken by the Apollo 17 crew in 1972 called "Blue Marble." It was the first full photo of the Earth and the only one ever taken by a person. It is said to be the most reproduced image of all time. You can find a replication of it on the back cover of this morning's Order of Service.

Pull out the marble you took when you entered the sanctuary. Hold it out in front of you and look at it. Imagine this is what the Earth looks like

2 Brent Mitchell, "Life on Planet Water," sermon delivered at the FRS on April 2, 2023.

3 Nichols, *Blue Mind*, 6.

4 Ibid, 142.

5 Ibid, 155, 180.

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from a million miles away, "a small, blue, fragile, watery dot."<sup>6</sup>

Hold it closer, and you will see the light through it. Can you see how it looks like you're under water? If it were sea water, it would contain trace amounts of almost every element, "...hundreds of millions of organisms—plankton, larvae, single-celled creatures—in that one spoonful."<sup>7</sup>

Now think of someone you are grateful for. It may be someone who works on behalf of water, or someone who loves to be near or in water, or someone for whom you are grateful for any number of reasons.

When was the last time you told people like this that you are grateful for them? Take this marble with you and give it to them next time you see them. If the person has died, throw the marble into a body of water that speaks to you.

If you do give it to them, tell them the significance of the marble and what it represents. Encourage them to do the same and pass along the marble to someone they are grateful for. To date, more than a million people have received such marbles, including the Dalai Lama, Jane Goodall, and Jean-Michael Cousteau.

May we always remember that we are made of water and surrounded by water. May we honor its life-giving and healing powers for our body, mind, and spirit, and may we do our part in loving and protecting water so that all sentient beings can also be sustained and inspired by its powers.

Amen and blessed be.

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6 Ibid, 270.

7 Ibid.