



High Country Unitarian Universalist Fellowship

Summit County, Colorado

Celebrating life in community
in the beautiful mountains of Colorado!

February 18, 2018
Monthly Touchstones Theme
Love
Service Leader: Don Parsons

Sunday Services, 4:00 pm weekly
Fellowship Hall
Lord of the Mountains
Lutheran Church
56 Highway 6, Dillon, CO 80435
(Services are not held in the months of October and May)

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We Drink from Wells We did not Dig

Rev. Kirk Loadman-Copeland

The water had a funny taste, metallic. For a city boy used to water from a tap that tasted "right," I struggled to get used to it. While I would have preferred milk, that tasted funny too. It was raw milk, straight from the cow.

That was the situation on the farm where my cousins, Samuel and Coulbourne, lived in Marion Station, Maryland. The farmhouse they lived in was old, with few amenities. We would visit for a week each summer. It was always an adventure, and by the end of the week I got used to the taste of the water from the well.

I think we skipped visiting one summer, and when we went the following year the old farmhouse had been replaced by a new house and a new well, and the water tasted much better. The out-house had also been replaced by an indoor bathroom, which was a relief to me.

Without that well with the funny-tasting water, there would have been no farm. While my cousin Coulbourne still farms the property, I'm not sure who settled that farm first, who dug the first well and built the original farmhouse, but I do know that we drink from wells that we did not dig. The realization that "we drink from wells we

did not dig" is not new; the phrase comes from chapter 6 of the book of *Deuteronomy*.

Ancient civilizations first grew up along rivers, and, in a sense, the river was



the mother of civilization, which is why rivers like the Nile and the Ganges are considered sacred, which is why all rivers should be considered sacred. Slowly, the ancients moved further and further away from rivers and streams to the extent that they were able to dig wells and have access to water. The earliest known well, about 20 feet deep, was found at the Alit Yam settlement in Israel and is thought to be about 10,000 years old.



I wonder who dug the first well and why they thought that they would find water. Still, humans quickly learned that there was water in the ground and by

Our Mission: It is the purpose of the High Country Unitarian Universalist Fellowship [HCUUF] to be a community filled with love, beauty, and compassion. We are committed to freedom of opinion, expression, and spirituality. We seek to be of service to each other, our families, our larger community, and our natural environment.

digging down to the top of the water table or into an aquifer, you could find it.

For thousands of years, wells were not privately owned like the one on my cousin's farm, they were communal. In the way that the hearth was the sacred center of a home, the well was the sacred center of the community. If the well ran dry and other wells dug nearby to replace it did not yield water, the people would have to move to a new location where a viable well could be dug.

From some of the western movies of the 1950s, we have the image of a person, perhaps just a little crazy, in the middle of nowhere with a divining rod seeking a source of water, and then triumphantly declaring that he had found it. The declaration was easy, but the digging was hard, backbreaking work. Down, down, down with the hope that all of this labor would be rewarded with life-giving water. The implements for digging a well evolved over the millennia, but faith in the outcome has always been required.

The well was communal, as was the creation of the well. Once the well was dug, it was lined with wood or later stone. Someone had to fashion the wooden slats or quarry and finish the stone, and then install the well lining. Someone had to make the wooden bucket that would be used for the well and the rope required to lower and raise the bucket. And more buckets or dried gourds or tightly woven baskets were required so people, almost always women, could take the water from the well to their home for drinking, cooking, washing, and irrigation of crops. Imagine the elation, when all of the work yielded that first cup of thirst quenching, living sustaining, clear, cold water.

We cannot create a beloved community until we have created a community, and we cannot create a community, which is larger than the circle of a family or an extended kinship network, which is larger than a tribe, until people emerge

➤ who have some notion of the common good and work to broaden and

deepen that goodness;

- who have learned how to engage the stranger as a neighbor, realizing that absolutely everyone is at first a stranger;
- who have learned how to love their neighbor as themselves;
- who have learned how to live beyond themselves, and
- who invite others to live beyond themselves.

We drink from wells we did not dig because others lived beyond themselves.

In the book, *Dare to Live Now*, Bruce Larson recounts the following, which was also featured in a 1963 song, *Desert Pete*, by the Kingston Trio: "Travelers across a long and seldom used trail in the Amargosa Desert would pass an old



pump that offered the only hope of fresh drinking water along their journey. Wired to the pump handle was a baking powder can and inside the can was a handwritten note: 'This pump is all right as of June, 1932. I put a new sucker washer into it and it ought to last five years. But the washer dries out and the pump has got to be primed. Under the white rock I buried a bottle of water out of the sun, the cork end up. There's enough water in it to prime the pump, but not if you drink some first. Pour about one fourth and let her soak to wet the leather. Then pour in the rest medium fast and pump like crazy. You'll git water. The well has never run dry. Have faith. When you git watered up, fill the bottle and put it back like you found it for the next feller.' (signed) Desert Pete. 'p.s. Don't go drinking up the water first. Prime the pump with it and you'll git all you can hold.'"

Desert Pete clearly lived beyond himself, as did the people who originally dug the well, and saved others by doing so. As importantly, he instructed others to live beyond themselves. Once you have primed the pump, quenched your thirst, and filled all of your containers so that you can continue on your journey, fill the bottle of water that Desert Pete left, put the cork in it, and bury it again under the white rock so the next person will have the water necessary to prime the pump and live, rather than dying of thirst. As Pete wrote, "Have faith. The well has never run dry."

Have faith in the well.

Have faith in your ability to prime the pump and get the water to flow.

Have faith that the person who came

before you filled the bottle with water to prime the pump and buried it under the white rock where you will find it.

Have faith and then nurture faith by refilling the bottle with water and burying it for the next stranger to find, the next stranger who automatically becomes your neighbor by the simple

act of filling and burying the bottle, the next stranger whose life you save just like the Good Samaritan who lived beyond himself by caring for the injured man lying on the side of the road that others had passed by.

Have faith in your ability to live beyond yourself.

Have gratitude for those who have come ahead of you, the well diggers and the Desert Petes who lived beyond themselves that you might have life more abundant; the villagers who built and sustained the village once the well was completed.

Unitarian Universalist minister Peter Raible paraphrased the passage from *Deuteronomy*



6:10-12. He wrote:

“We build on foundations we did not lay.

We warm ourselves at fires we did not light.

We sit in the shade of trees we did not plant.

We drink from wells we did not dig.

We profit from persons we did not know.

We are ever bound in community.”

We are ever bound in community and called to respond with gratitude to this reality.

Gratitude is a religious response.

Gratitude is an attitude of the heart, a discipline of the mind that invites us to return again and again to thanksgiving, to thanks-living in which we express our gratitude to others with whom we are bound in community.

Gratitude is a song of the soul that sings in us. Through its expression, we are changed as are those to whom we sing.

Gratitude is a way of living beyond our selves, a spiritual practice that encourages others to live beyond themselves. It is a key ingredient in sustaining community; and it is the first step in creating beloved community.

In his 1965 novel, *The Source*, James Michener recounted the 10,000 year history of an archaeological site in northern Israel called Makor, a Hebrew word that



means “source.” Michener unfolded the epic using 15 artifacts recovered from 15 different levels of the “tell,” which is a mound built up over the millennia by the generations of people living there. At the material level, the “source” refers to the well at Makor that sustained human life for generations. At the symbolic level, the source refers to the religious

faith that sustained the human spirit over the centuries.

Those who dig wells and those who explore the depths of the human spirit are searching for the source. They know that most of the time you must go deeper to reach it, whether it is the well-spring that fills the well or the well-spring that nourishes the soul.

If you are digging by hand, it will take a long time to dig a well, a long time to go deep enough to reach the source of the water.

If you are seeking to go deeper in your own life, using your heart and mind as well as your hands as the tools of exploration, it will take time and patience, courage and persistence, companionship and questioning to go deep enough to satisfy the yearnings of your soul, to quench the thirst that water cannot satisfy, to take you far enough beyond yourself that you become a force in creating, deepening, and expanding beloved community for yourself to be sure, but for others as well who will learn by your example, who will benefit by your wisdom, and who will be transformed by your compassion.

If you are looking for a place to begin, High Country Unitarian Universalist Fellowship offers itself to you, and if you are looking for people to accompany you, those that you will find here are worthy companions.

True depth is not accomplished easily, and we need companions who will encourage us, who will “put heart into” us when the going gets tough, when the path becomes unclear, and when our energy is diminished.

Some of those companions we will never know. They came long before us. They dug the wells from which we drink, they fashioned this religious tradition, which sustains us as we seek to go deeper.

Some of those companions are sitting beside us. They are ready to work with you to go deeper, eager to create and expand beloved community, and motivated by a holy discontent to pursue justice with their hearts and hands.

Some of those companions will come

after you, people who you will nourish through the legacy of your life, who will drink from the metaphorical wells that you dig, who will benefit by your commitment of going beyond yourself, which is a wonderful way to define love, who will one day find your note that reads, “Have faith. The well will never go dry.”

The water in the well and the well of love never run dry.

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Old Well, <https://pastorbillholdridge.wordpress.com/2013/01/14/dig-up-the-old-wells/>

Amargosa Desert, photo by Finetooth, November 5, 2009, CC BY-SA 3.0, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Amargosa_desert.jpg

Pump, <http://presbyterianendowment.org/desert-pete-have-faith>

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