

Sweet Water

Keynote for RiverRunning (excerpt), November 2009, University of Winnipeg
Stan McKay

It's very clear that there are cultural gifts to be shared across community, among peoples. Throughout our history, riversides, lakeshores, and coastal locations have been the places of human habitation. These are places of life, where we witness clearly the bounty of creation, the goodness of Creator.

So it was from the beginning that ancient cultures, ancient cities began in areas where water sustained life and allowed for easy transportation, especially in arid settings where there was a need for irrigation, which is true of many of the biblical stories. Concepts of salvation are intimate, connected with the availability of water. So it is not surprising that this gathering is brought together around a theme that metaphorically expresses our concept of salvation as being by streams of living water.

But I think it is even more fundamental than that. Because our connection, brothers and sisters, is as human beings, not as objects but as humans, but "all my relations," gathered together. We say that in Cree ceremonies, our rootedness, our very life is in water. From the womb we have come; we have all emerged, carried by our mothers, into this world and so we are born as sacred beings. And last night I was impressed by what we heard from Katalina [Tahaafe-Williams]. She is obviously very aware of some of the issues in Canada around water, when she spoke of reformation.

And I want to move with that concept of reformation by lifting up the concept of rebirth. I think for intercultural possibilities to be realized there is a need for rebirthing within our lives individually, as families, as communities, as nations, as global humans. We are about recognizing our birthing as linking us to one another and so we can be reborn, as was the possibility for John the Baptizer to share by the River Jordan. As we comprehend something of the conversation between Jesus and Nicodemus: you must be born again. So this morning I come to suggest to all of you, we will now move to the sweatbox.

But that's one option, to find the traditions within our cultures that teach us about how we can make new beginnings. And again Katalina mentioned last night the baptism as part of the ceremony of community, whatever form that may take in various cultures. Whatever traditions are there, the need for new beginnings is obvious in the global communities and in this city in which we meet.

I'm reminded of a number of years ago, going to a movie called *O Brother, Where Art Thou*, or as one of my friends, who was trying to recall the name of the movie, said, "Where the hell are the boys?" As I sat in that movie I was mindful of living by Fisher River on the reservation about two-and-a-half hours north of here, and one of my first memories in the village was a visit paid to us by some evangelists who found us when there was no road into our village, but they came somehow with the purpose of baptizing people in our village. So they held their services, and then on the Sunday morning after two nights of intensive evangelical gatherings, they were baptizing people in Fisher River; immersion in the river where I grew up and the river that brought life to our community.

There was a process being brought to us about rebirth. And I have never resolved in my own mind what that was about, what that did to our culture, what impact it had on us and our self-worth. Because there seemed to be in my mind, as I observed the process and tried to understand it, a fairly high level of judgment and imposed guilt in the process of taking people down to the river to pray.

I wish I could sing like Katalina sings. Oh, brother. Fortunately for you, I could try. What I'd like to do now is just take a couple of minutes and share some memories of growing up by a river, and I do this

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because I want you to make your own journey. So I may lose you after the first memory because you'll be on your trip—that's okay. Or you may be sleeping because some of you were partying last night. Whatever the case, I share some memories of growing up along the river, Fisher River.

The earth and the water are sacred.

It was a few kilometres from Lake Winnipeg. As a child we spent a lot of time in my village in boats, because that was the mode of transportation and it was the lake that gave us fish to eat. And one of my earliest memories was going out in the winter with my grandmother. She led me across the river, I think I was about six years old at the time, and she took me across the frozen river and on the far side of the river she knelt down and there on the bank of the river was open water on the edge and I could see the water of a spring flowing slowly into the river. And she took a dipper, a small saucepan, and she scooped the water from that spring into two pails and she carried it back to the house for the life of the family. And as I think about that memory, it describes for me something of the love I have for the expression "sweet water." Ice-cold spring water for us to live.

When I started school in Fisher River, in the Indian Day School, our school was right beside the river, and we had very strict rules from the teachers to stay away from the river. But after a warm game of soccer on a September afternoon, we would slip through the fence and down to the rocks on the shore of the river and we would cup our hands, and take some water and drink from that river of life. Sweet water.

A bit later in my growing up, one summer friends took us out, my sister and I, in a boat over to Moose Island on Lake Winnipeg to pick some berries. After we had travelled a distance out on the lake, someone passed around a tin cup in the boat and each of us leaned over the boat and lifted up a cup of water from Lake Winnipeg and drank from that lake. Sweet water.

You see, the west shore of Lake Winnipeg, where I grew up, is a limestone area and we have in our territory some artesian wells, where the water flows from underground rivers and gives us pure, sweet water full of minerals that sustains our lives. Well, much of that sweet water that I dream about is no longer available. The river that I grew up beside is still there, but upstream from my village, the wetlands that used to filter the water for our village—the swamps and lowlands—have now been covered with drainage ditches, and the wetlands are now farmlands. And some of those drainage ditches are larger than the river, so what occurs at springtime is that the water rushes out of our territory, through our community into the lake, and then the river becomes very low in the midsummer. It certainly is no longer sweet water.

Lake Winnipeg is now often declared in midsummer unfit for swimming and you wouldn't want to drink it. The effluent from this city, the chemicals on the farmlands down into the USA and into Western Canada, in the watershed, the pollutants from the mills into Northwest Ontario all flow in and empty into Lake Winnipeg. And even the groundwater is suspect, and at times it isn't sweet. So there are wells in my home village that no longer give sweet water.

But despite the passage of time, the fact that I had access to sweet water and sweet people in my village, I still dream of many, many diverse communities learning and risking about trust that we might live with justice and peace.

Maybe to summarize what I am trying to say, you will notice there is much publicity about the upcoming Olympics in British Columbia. I'm not sure about the slogan, I think it's something about faster, higher, farther. Well, I would like to share with you the Cree community understanding which is about slower, lower, closer. I think our pace of life, our competitive individualism draws us further and further away

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from the dreams of our childhood. And I am very happy to tell you that on this campus last year, the students' association initiated action which has now stopped the sale of bottled water on this campus.

The commodification, the sale at outrageous prices of water has meant that good water is unavailable for many people even within this land, but also it is not available in many parts of the world. And yet we have many institutions that are about water management in quotations. And again we heard last evening from Katalina about the huge dams being erected on the water systems of this province.

In 1968, as my partner and I were wrapping up a yearlong honeymoon—well, we didn't last that long, it was quite long—we were in Nelson House. We had taught there for a year in the school, and that June end of the month, end of the school year, we went out for the first week of July in a canoe onto the river from Nelson House and paddled for about two days up the stream of the Burntwood and we discovered a round island at the base of the falls in the river. The bay at the bottom, the widening of the river at the bottom of this falls was almost two kilometres circular shape, and at the very centre was this island about 20 metres across, with green grass and rocks and trees. We camped there for two nights and there were big fish there, and we slept without any presence of insects and the presence of the waterfalls just behind us. It was heaven here and now. We did not realize in 1968 that a year later, a Churchill River diversion undertaken by Manitoba Hydro would put enough water into the Burntwood River that that waterfall would disappear, and the island is now under four metres of water.

So the sacred waters of our territories, of the earth, are being managed and there is an imbalance, so there is a desecration of the earth.

I happen to know that our Moderator is preparing right now to travel with a delegation to Copenhagen in December. I also heard yesterday that the Prime Minister of Canada has decided he will not attend. I've also learned that he is sending the Minister of the Environment, who when he spoke in a radio interview yesterday said he had no hope of any decisions being made around the situation of climate change being addressed in our lifetime. He is unprepared to make any commitment.

So the motivation for intercultural action and solidarity and global activity to bring about change, I believe, is quite urgent. One of the things I learned in the Fisher River Indian Day School, which I haven't been able to forget—I don't know why I can't forget it, I remember very little of the poetry we were taught in school, but I learned this—"Why hurry, little river, / Why hurry to the sea? / There is nothing there to do / But to sink into the blue / And all forgotten be." I think Robert Louis Stevenson¹, I'm not sure, does anybody know? Anyway, it's a poem that I have stuck here somewhere, and I think it's so wrong, because the culture that I come from teaches this.

The scientific understanding about evaporation and condensation is explained in our culture as the tiny, tiny droplets of water are taken to the highest place. But within those tiny droplets of water, there is a teaching about humility and community. And so they naturally join together with other tiny particles of water invisible to the human eye until there is a cloud in the highest place. But the calling to humility and community is strong, and the droplets get bigger and heavier and they soon then return to the earth. They form tiny little puddles and rivulets and streams and rivers, driven by the teaching that community and humility is central to the earth, to the Creator. And they are rushing to the ocean, because our ultimate calling is to make our contribution, retaining our identity and our components that we carry with us but becoming part of the great ocean of life and the cycle continues generation after generation.

So the river has every reason to hurry to the ocean. The river has purpose and I believe the purpose of the river was also intended for us.

¹ "The River," Frederick George Scott (1861–1944)