



La Vista Visions

A NEWSLETTER ON THE INTEGRITY OF CREATION

Published by the Oblate Ecological Initiative

618.466.5004 • 4300 Levis Lane, Godfrey, IL 62035 • lange@omiusa.org

Summer 2008
Volume 7, Issue 26

Living Water

A glimpse at the nature and sacredness of water-source and sustainer of all life

by Heather Eaton

Water, source of life. If we could ponder, even briefly, the nature and story of water, we gain some appreciation for the elegance of water systems and the genius within Earth's systems. If we could ponder, even for a few seconds, the Earth within its time frames - four billion, hundreds of millions of years - we gain a perspective and some needed humility.

Think of all the ways we use water in one day. We depend on water for cleansing, nourishment, recreation, entertainment, agriculture, industry, transportation, religious rituals and inspiration. Our relationship to water is daily, often and multiple, but there are dimensions of water to be explored beyond our use of it. In examining the nature and sacredness of water, we begin to understand water within a new context in which humans are not the sole reference point, but rather part of the whole web of creation.

The nature of water

What is water? To answer this question, we need to look back to the Earth's creation and evolution beginning more than four billion years ago. Over hundreds of millions of years the Earth developed from dust particles into a large, hot, molten planet with a thin rocky crust. The climate was sulphuric, toxic to life as we know it, and at boiling temperatures for millions of years. As steam condensed, the miracle of rain and weather cycles began. The first rains fell, followed by torrential rains, until rivers ran over the Earth's surface and pooled into great seas. For 300 million years it rained day and night, cooling the surface.

Thus began a continuous circulation of water known as the hydrologic cycle. In this delicately balanced cycle, the sun causes water to rise as vapour from the oceans, cool, fall back on the Earth as fresh water, and return to the oceans. It is a cycle that nourishes, purifies and cleanses.



Another example of the stunning gracefulness of the Earth's systems is the relationship between water and forests. Rain falls onto the trees and descends into the root systems, soil and organisms. From there it is taken up into the trunks and leaves. This sophisticated process - that took the Earth two billion years to fine-tune - releases oxygen and excess water vapour, now purified. Large forests are their own ecosystems,

demonstrating the purification systems, lifecycles and wizardry of water. This is one reason why deforestation has a major impact on water availability, soil erosion, pollution in rivers and ground water, and an overall loss of available freshwater.

Earth is often called the blue planet because of the abundance of water on its surface. However, 97.2% of that is ocean. Only 2.8% is freshwater, most of which is frozen in glaciers and ice sheets. That leaves less than 1% of freshwater resources available, and that is all there ever will be. The waters of the Earth exist in a closed system and no more freshwater can be added to the cycle.

(continued on page 4)

Letter from the Director



Fr. Maurice introducing Jan Novotka on Earth Day

Summer!

Visions of abundant harvests, long days, and time to be outside come to my imagination when I ponder this season. What do you associate with Summer?

I would be remiss not to mention the element of **water** when it comes to Summers of my life. As a boy I spent nearly every Summer afternoon swimming in a pond or pool or getting drenched with the backyard water hose. Was I only cooling off? Or did I somehow intuit a mystical sense of water and wished to be in communion with it? Snorkeling in farm ponds brought me into contact with a whole new mysterious below-ground realm! I still enjoy opening my eyes while swimming underwater. Kayaking and wade fishing have been favorite pastimes as well. How have you found meaning at the intersection of Summer and water?

Summer Solstice, 2008

Heather Eaton has graced us with the lead article writing on the nature and sacredness of water. Heather teaches at the Oblate sponsored theological school St. Paul University in Ottawa, Canada, and we are grateful for her contribution and for her ministry.

We are coming off of a very wet Spring here at *La Vista*! Unlike last year's drought and Easter freeze which made for a dull April and May, this year's Spring show was the most radiant I've seen. What a perfect compliment to the extra-special observance of Earth Day we celebrated here! Sr. Maxine Pohlman has been as excited as I and has reflected for you on a Spring we'll not soon forget.

Dogwood and Red-Bud blossoms lasted well into May. And the abundant moisture in the soil should make for some great harvests! The **Community Supported Garden at La Vista** (www.lavistacsa.org) is now into it's 6th season after selling out all available shares back on April 30th. The first Summer tomatoes (Heather reminds us that these are 95% water!) should be coming along soon.

Here at the *La Vista Ecological Learning Center* we try and continually deepen our awareness. This effort shows itself in a new discussion series we are offering this month called "Menu for the Future". We also look forward to our Earth Literacy graduates returning in July and then...our annual Earth Literacy program this August 3-10. We also deepen our gratitude to both water and trees, without which this newsletter would not come to you. In an effort to reduce, beginning with this issue, *La Vista Visions* is now printed on recycled paper (30% post-consumer waste).

We still have a long way to go, as does our Western culture. Let's all make steps this season to recognize the *Mystery* before us. Sometimes that requires slowing down, opening one's eyes.....or just jumping in and being drenched by it! Happy Summer!

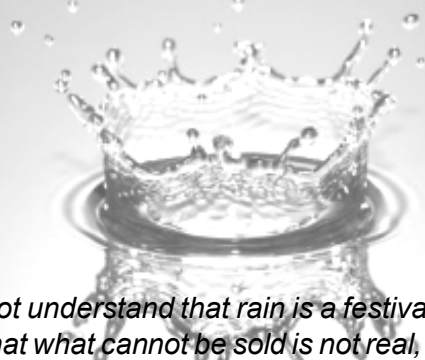
-Maurice Lange, OMI

Creating a Mutually Enhancing Human / Earth Relationship

"I have always been a big advocate of tap water—not because I think it harmless but because the idea of purchasing water extracted from some remote watershed and then hauled halfway round the world bothers me. Drinking bottled water relieves people of their concern about ecological threats to the river they live by or to the basins of groundwater they live over. It's the same kind of thinking that leads some to the complacent conclusion that if things on earth get bad enough, well,

we'll just blast off to a space station somewhere else."

-Sandra Steingraber,
Having Faith, 2001



By 'they' I mean the people who cannot understand that rain is a festival, who do not appreciate its gratuity, who think that what has no price has no value, that what cannot be sold is not real, so that the only way to make something actual is to place it on the market. The time will come when they will sell you even your rain. At the moment it is still free, and I am in it. I celebrate its gratuity and its meaninglessness."

*"Let me say this
before rain becomes a utility
that they can plan and distribute for money.*

-Thomas Merton (1915 - 1968)

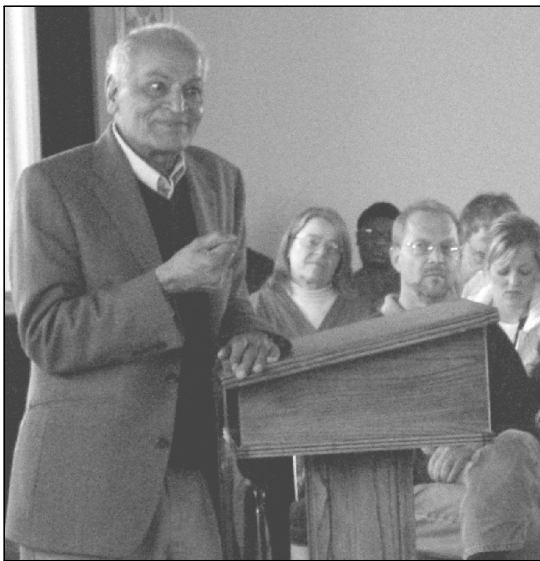
"Rain and the Rhinoceros" from Raids on the Unspeakable, 1965

Wistful Reflections on a Memorable Spring

by Maxine Pohlman, SSND

Maybe we were so blessed to have a particularly colorful, rich, absolutely mesmerizing Spring because last year's Spring brought hard frosts that severely affected all that was freshly growing. Or maybe it was this year's challenging weather - cold, warm, hot, then cold again. For whatever reason or whim of nature - we have been so grateful for the glories of this past Spring.

However, we also experienced an unusually vibrant Spring at *La Vista* for other, clearer reasons.



On the day when the Midwest earthquake awoke us from sleep, our dear friend Satish Kumar - Program Director at Shumacher College in Devon, England, and editor of *Resurgence*, England's premier magazine

on alternative living and sustainability - joined an enthusiastic audience for an evening meditation and a "wake-up" lecture. "Spiritual Compass for a Green Journey" was the title of his presentation in which he offered us three ancient ayurvedic qualities that can be used to discern how to live sustainable lives. Are our choices leading us to live "sattvic" lives - in harmony with nature, neither taking too much nor destroying unnecessarily? Or do we make "rajasic" choices, grabbing what looks glitzy and glamorous, also convenient and short-lived? Maybe we slide into negative, "tamasic" choices, leading to waste and war, violence and disregard of the natural world and other humans. His wonderfully compelling way of speaking, along with the integrity of his life, led us to realize that Satish himself is a "spiritual compass for a green journey." For his refreshing life and message, we were particularly thankful on the day when Earth rocked us awake.

Another special friend spent a glorious Spring evening with us on Earth Day itself! Jan Novotka, eco-spiritual singer



and songwriter, presented a concert and sing-along, evoking our love of Earth and our deep sense of the oneness of all. After a morning of hailstorms and heavy rains, the land dried enough that we could be outside in the "bowl" at *La Vista*. Folks brought lawn chairs and blankets and settled in for a delightful and sacred time experiencing Jan's original music. In her uniquely inclusive way, Jan invited the OMI Novices to provide percussion for some of her songs. Full participation was the key for an enchanting evening as tree frogs and birds joined Jan, African drums, tambourine, and shakers as we sang, "In the name of all that is we come together, in the name of the mountains and the trees...."

(continued on page 6)





A view of the Mississippi from the bluffs at La Vista

(continued from page 1)

All life is related to water

Water is a raw material of creation. The emergence of life and the presence of water are intimately bonded. Most life originated in the oceans 3,500 million years ago. The salt in our blood is literally the history of the emergence of life from the salty oceans. All life is related to water. Mammals, including humans, still emerge from water - the embryonic fluids. Water flows through every cell of every life form. It is in every part of us - our memories, cells, blood, spinal fluid and digestive workings. Sophisticated systems in our bodies retain, eliminate or evaporate water. Babies are 75% water, men 64% and women 58%. Even our food contains water: 95% of a tomato, 90% of milk, 85% of an apple and 80% of a potato.

Water has a very simple molecular composition: two hydrogen and one oxygen, yet it is a physical anomaly. Water can exist in all three states - as a liquid, a solid and a vapour - depending on the temperature. It is denser as a liquid than a solid - while most other liquids sink in solid form, solid water (ice) floats and expands. Ice insulates the oceans, prevents evaporation, keeps temperatures stable and enables aquatic life to survive the winter. Snow and ice prevent the Earth from warming too quickly. Even the whiteness of snow, ice (solid water) and white clouds (water vapour) reflects rather than absorbs sunlight and energy, keeping temperatures stable.

Water absorbs large amounts of energy (heat) without evaporating and cools slowly. Within the whole Earth system, it both absorbs heat and transports warm water through huge ocean currents to warm other parts of the Earth. Oceans regulate the Earth's temperature by storing heat in summer and releasing it in winter. The next time you get very cold or very hot, understand that it is the water in your body preventing you from dehydrating, freezing or boiling to death.

The spirituality of water

"If you knew the gift of God, and who it is that is saying to you, 'Give me a drink,' you would have asked him, and he would have given you living water." (John 4:10)

Water is a sacred symbol in all religions and is frequently found in sacred texts. Faith traditions use water in imagery, rituals, prayers and teachings. Each tradition has an awareness of the natural world as a primary place of revelation and religious experience, a place of beauty, elegance and inspiration. Since time immemorial, water - indeed the entire natural world - has revealed the Divine.

Water flows through, sustains and cleanses all. Thus we can speak of "sacred waters" not just as a symbol, because water is the sustainer of life - it is truly living water. Yet, in mainstream culture to consider water as sacred seems superfluous, as if it is only legitimate to view life as a commodity and to discuss ecological ruin in credit and debit terms. This governing economic worldview must be countered with a more powerful and alluring understanding of life where the Earth and its life forms are not a set of resources but modes of Divine presence.

It is imperative that we reawaken to an awareness of a sacred presence active within the Earth's sublime and sophisticated life systems, including water, to which the appropriate response is awe.

Awe and wonder

Awareness of the power of wonder and awe is available to anyone who spends time in the natural world. This awareness is returning in a new way in the face of today's ecological crisis. A Taoist insight affirms:

"Those of us who contemplate the world soon come to have a great

sense of wonder. The perfection of the stars, the beauty of mountains and streams, the invigorating quality of clean ocean air fills us with feelings of celebration and reverence. Reverence only comes with experience and care. We must be responsible, and at the same time express the wonder of all that we know as human."

Wonder and awe lead to reverence, and reverence leads to responsibility. Reverence for and responsibility to the natural world are intimately connected to each other, and to authentic religious experience.

To see and know the spirituality of water requires a new way of perceiving, and a confidence that to experience a river or swamp as sacred is not quaint, incidental, irrelevant or even heretical. Even the tiniest caterpillar is a book about God, as noted the Christian mystic Meister Eckhart. Ecologically oriented religious voices affirm that this kind of awareness is not a luxury, but the basis of religious experience and a necessary part of ethical deliberations and political motivation.



*The Confluence of the Mississippi and Missouri Rivers,
just south of La Vista*

Wonder and awe can become a way of seeing and of informing our political visions. Herein lies the terrain of genuine new insights, understandings, ethics, analyses and awareness. From here can emerge a dynamic political orientation and energy.

The primary mode of knowing in Western societies is analytic. Yet analysis has its limits. Analysis sheds light on aspects of a situation, exposes patterns, systems, causes and effects, and unmasks power dynamics.

But it cannot open the door to profound insights, to what can be known beyond all conventional knowing. Awe is also a way of knowing. It is a dimension of life experience and the essence of religious awareness. Its social relevance is often belittled, ignored or dismissed, as if awe is acceptable only as private experience rather than as a moment of revelation; as personal spirituality rather than as a crucial dimension of religious investigation.

The capacity for awe remains omnipresent; a quiet eminence that radiates everywhere. It creates an unflinching and preeminent awareness of the extraordinary, abundant, unique and interconnected array of life. To marvel at the natural world within the large horizon of the cosmic adventure - and to understand to what degree we are embedded within this drama - requires us to return to an appreciation and understanding of life on Earth as being interconnected and Divinely inspired. The whole is greater than the sum of the parts. It all matters.

Tampering with water is a threat to our physical being, a reprehensible moral choice, and a desecration of the sacred. To ruin Earth's water is offensive beyond words. It makes us unworthy of the gift of life. With a reverence for water - its simplicity, its sacredness, its place within the genius of the Earth - comes an awareness that we are held within the beauty and intricate patterns of water. From this position of humility, awe and wonder, we can approach water issues such as the human right to water, privatization of water resources, and pollution, with deeper, more truthful and more effective responses. ©

(Reprinted with permission from Scarboro Missions Magazine, September 2004)

Heather Eaton holds an interdisciplinary Ph.D. in ecology, feminism and theology from the University of St. Michael's College, Toronto School of Theology, and a Master's of Divinity. She is an assistant professor in the Faculty of Theology at St. Paul University, Ottawa.





NON PROFIT ORG.
U.S. POSTAGE
PAID
PERMIT NO. 225
ALTON, IL 62002

***“To understand
WATER
is to understand
the cosmos,
the marvels of na-
ture,
and life itself. “***

*Masaru Emoto in
“The Hidden Messages
in Water”*

Visit us at www.lavistaELC.org & www.lavistaCSA.org

(continued from page 3)

Finally a local friend and homeopathic practitioner, Dr. John Dinkelman, joined us in the lodge overlooking the Mississippi River where he fed us some wisdom for eating a healthful diet. He encouraged participants to get their calcium from greens twice a day, to avoid soy and genetically modified foods, while enjoying an array of whole grains, nuts and vegetables. In the afternoon participants joined Cindy Gelsthorpe, a local garden shareholder chef to practice the morning's message as they learned how to make sweet potato rolls, asparagus mushroom soup, and quinoa pilaf. This vegetarian fare was the main guest at our dinner with the Novitiate community, uniting us with nourishing food and heartwarming camaraderie.

Now as the dogwood and redbud blossoms give way to green leaves and the promise of summer, we go forward renewed and refreshed by our

events and by Spring itself, ready to continue our efforts to live sustainable lives during this challenging time on Earth. ☯



The Oblate Ecological Initiative
is a ministry of the
Missionary Oblates of Mary Immaculate.