

“A Sacred Trust”

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First Unitarian Congregation of Toronto
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N.B. – These sermons are made available with a request: that the reader appreciate that, ideally, a sermon is an oral/aural experience that takes place in the context of worship – supported and reinforced by readings, contemplative music, rousing hymns, silence, and prayer – and that it is but one part of an extended conversation that occurs over time between a minister and a covenanted congregation.

Reading

“Her Head” – Joan Murray

Near Ekuvukeni,
in Natal, South Africa,
a woman carries water on her head.
After a year of drought,
when one child in three is at risk of death,
she returns from a distant well,
carrying water on her head.

The pumpkins are gone,
the tomatoes withered,
yet the woman carries water on her head.
The cattle kraals are empty,
the goats gaunt—
no milk now for children,
but she is carrying water on her head.

The engineers have reversed the river:
those with power can keep their power,
but *one* woman is carrying water on her head.
In the homelands, where the dusty crowds
watch the empty roads for water trucks,
one woman trusts herself with treasure,
and carries water on her head.

The sun does not dissuade her,
not the dried earth that blows against her,
as she carries the water on her head.
In a huge and dirty pail,
with an idle handle,

resting on a narrow can,
this *woman* is carrying water on her head.

This woman, who girds her neck
with safety pins, this one
who carries water on her head,
trusts her *own* head to bring to her people
what they need now
between life and death:
She is carrying them water on her head.

“A Sacred Trust”

I’ve been back from Africa for a couple of weeks now.

I’ve been fortunate to travel quite a bit in my life,
and I can say that Kenya is the most photogenic place I’ve ever been.

From the sweep of the vast, dry savannahs
to the lush green crops of tea clinging to the hillsides,
from the cows strolling through the crowded slums of Nairobi,
to the herds of elephants or giraffes or zebras or water buffalo or gazelles or . . . ,
well, you get the picture.

The most enduring images, though, were, of course, of people.

I will long remember seeing the tall, lanky teenager,
draped in scarlet Masai warrior robes,
herding cattle with a stick in one hand,
while in the other, he carried his cell phone
and was texting as he walked along, seemingly oblivious
to where he or his herd was going.

And I will always chuckle thinking of the woman selling sugar cane by the road,
who had clearly been shopping in the street markets that trade
in the massive industry of second-hand clothing from the West.

There in the middle of the African winter,
in the centre of the Rift Valley, the cradle of human life on this planet,
she was wearing a red toque, complete with white maple leaves.

It was a hat that may have once belonged to one of you.

And, yet, the image that most often caught my attention
was of people moving about with their stuff,
very often the obvious stuff of life.

It seemed everywhere I turned in Kenya,
there were people carrying things on their head.

I say people, though it was almost always women.

Bags of vegetables for sale.
Bundles of sticks for a fire.

And very often, enormous jugs of water, for survival.

I don't know how they do it—
how they carry such heavy cargo on their head.

I was struck by the sheer strength required for this feat,
this delicate art of balancing precious goods on their head as they go.

I was stunned by how many women
would use their free hands to hold a child or carry additional bags.

It was a sight that routinely took my breath away.
That reminded me of the tremendous privileges we know here at home.
And that brought to mind, over and over,
the words of Joan Murray's poem, which I've shared with you before.
There, in the flesh, moving with all deliberate speed, again and again,
I saw the visual embodiment of the poem's refrain:
a woman carrying water on her head—
a woman who "trusts her *own* head to bring to her people
what they need now
between life and death..."

Each woman was a reminder of how much I take for granted
the ability to simply turn on the tap to fill the kettle or brush my teeth.

Each woman a mirror helping me to see

the relative ease with which we are so privileged to live.

And in a land where this year the rainy season was too short
and the crops failing as a result, life's complete dependence on water
was everywhere to be seen.

But so was life's resilience, its drive, its undying determination.

The will to survive could be seen in every step
of each woman with water on her head.

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In this life, each of us is called to carry water.

Though we may not face the same hardships as people half a world away,
we are routinely required to take up the chores that come with our living,
to take on the hard work of sustaining life itself.

At times, the work of this sacred trust is more than we can bear.

To carry water in this life is, at times, a bittersweet bargain at best.

For it involves coming to see and know
that to everything there is a season—
that celebration and struggle are always in the mix.
That happiness is so often intertwined with sorrow and grief.
That "Joy and woe are woven fine,"
as William Blake so succinctly put it three centuries ago.

And, yet, the real task at the heart of the human experience
is summoning the strength to walk on, to keep going,
to carry the precious stuff of life that is within us, even when it's hard,
that it may be of use not only to ourselves, but others.

That through our efforts, we may offer to people
something of what they need here and now, between life and death.

That is what it means to serve life—a promise we keep
with all who've gone before and with all who will follow after.

This morning, as we bring forward water
from the journeys we've made this summer,
I encourage you to consider the deeper meaning of the water you carry.

Is it the water of rest and renewal, or water that speaks of change or loss?

Is it the water of sadness and grief, or happiness and joy?
Or is it a complicated blend of both? Or all of the above?

Whatever the water you bring, the water you carry,
can you find within it the strength that sustains you?
The vital element that allows you to endure, against the odds?
To keep the promise that is your life?

I'll admit that power is not always easy to find.
Sometimes we just keep walking,
with a determination we scarcely understand,
uncertain of what to call this force that compels us forward.

Survival is one of its names.
But it could also just as easily be called love.

How else could we describe the work of the women carrying water
than as a beautiful labour of love?

A love for their people.
A love for themselves.
A deep love for life itself.

No matter the water we carry in this particular season—
be it joyful or be it burdened with sorrow—
may we strive on to be of service
to the life that is both within and beyond us.

And may we be sustained with every step
by an abiding awareness
that our work in life's service
is ultimately and always a labour of love.

Amen.