



**NEIGHBORHOOD UNITARIAN  
UNIVERSALIST CHURCH**

**The Secret Knowledge  
of Water**

Rev. Dr. Jim Nelson

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301 N. Orange Grove Blvd. Pasadena, CA 91103 (626) 449-3470 [information@uuneighborhood.org](mailto:information@uuneighborhood.org)

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If you are convinced that there is no God, then this sermon will probably not convince you to think otherwise, and if you do believe in God, it might leave you wondering. Because the sermon is not about God, after all, even though I think every sermon ever preached is really only about God – or, to put it in terms that you might not rebel against, it is about finding meaning and hope in life, about coming to a place in your life where things seem worthwhile, where you understand that you have a place to be, where there are connections that bind the whole ball of wax together, where the spiritual meets the material, where infinity and eternity reside. So it is about God, and remember, as Forest Church liked to claim: God is not God's name but simply that word we use for that which is greater than all and present in each.

Every sermon, I believe, is about finding what is often called a wellspring - a source of life and hope and meaning and courage that exists within each of us and in all of us. God has merely been one of the most common words to designate that. These wellsprings do exist, but we often need help or support or guidance in finding them. So it is about God after all. A wonderful poem by Denise Levertov goes:

*Don't say, don't say there is no water  
to solace the dryness at our hearts.  
I have seen*

*the fountain springing out of the rock wall  
and you drinking there. And I too  
before your eyes*

*found footholds and climbed  
to drink the cool water.*

*Don't say, don't say there is no water.  
That fountain is there among its scalloped  
green and gray stones,*

*it is still there and always there  
with its quiet song and strange power  
to spring in us,*

*up and out through the rock.*

No doubt this was inspired by the New Testament story in the Gospel of John of Jesus meeting the woman by the well and offering living water. [In looking this up via Google I came across a reference to international Blasphemy Day. just two weeks after Talk Like a Pirate Day. It was on September 30 this year. September gets all the good holidays! International Blasphemy Day – now there is one for us!].

Living water, well springs, the sources of faith and courage and strength. What are they for you? Is this faith and this community a wellspring for you? Does it provide the living water for you? I thought of this this past week as week we had rain – touched with fear at first because of the possibility this year of mud and debris slides, still the rain was beautiful and life giving – cleared the air and cleaned the plants – beautiful rain. Already things are sprouting up in the mountains after the recent fire and will so faster now with the rain – amazing.

Wellsprings – the water that brings things to life. I have been a reader my whole life and have always believe in the power of words – even more than reason or fact or logic, I have believed in the power of words to heal or to curse, to challenge and inspire – I have thought that words could give expression to our dreams and our hope, and help prepare the paths to them.

So as I began to write this sermon, I looked at the books on my shelf at home where I write – some titles from one shelf [try and figure out my arrangement – I can't] – The Human Touch, Soul of Nowhere, The Audacity of Hope, God: Stories, Mountains of the Mind, Angles and Ages, Leading Change, Anger, The Ground We Share, One Bowl, The Cloud of Unknowing, Milosz: Collected Poems, Leaves from the Notebook of a Tamed Cynic, The Bible, Lifelines, Prairie Soul, Field Notes, Artic Dreams, The Policy Governance Fieldbook, The Secret Knowledge of Water - from all them I hope for the right words.

Excuse me if I am in a melancholy mood but I am – maybe reflective is the better term – but it has been an intense Fall, a good one, but an intense one, and after all these sermons in a row, I was feeling dry and needing some water for my spirit.

When Steve first proposed that he and Chad do the music one Sunday this Fall, he sent me a song he had written, and it had to do with dreams. Not the kind you have at night, but the kind you create out of your hopes. The kind of dream in Hughes' poem – the dream of finding water in dry places that Greg Childs writes about.

Dreams – we all have them. Some realistic and some fanciful. They change as we age certainly, become smaller usually. But dreams remain. Langston Hughes wonders what happens when dreams are deferred – he was certainly thinking about the experience of people of color in the US and how their dream of equality and freedom was [and still is] deferred – do the dreams die or wither or perhaps explode?

But what if our dreams die? In another poem Hughes writes:

*Hold fast to dreams  
For if dreams die  
Life is a broken-winged bird  
That cannot fly.*

*Hold fast to dreams  
For when dreams go  
Life is a barren field  
Frozen with snow.*

Ever felt this? Life as a barren field, parched and dry?

The title of this sermon is Craig Childs' book The Secret Knowledge of Water. I recommend it to all of you not just for the beauty of its writing, and not because it is about the desert Southwest, but as a metaphor for our lives. Childs can walk from El Paso Texas to Los Angeles and not carry water. He has learned the dangers of too little water and too much water. He has followed bees in the desert to find a hidden pocket of water in rocks, and gone swimming in deep pools on the Arizona-Utah border where rain falls only rarely. He has barely escaped flash floods and described their terrible and deadly power.

He reminds the reader again and again that people have lived in the desert for centuries, and survived, and that the only way they could survive was to understand the land they lived in and be realistic about what it could give and what it could not.

There is always water, Childs suggests, but only if we know where to look for it. People who lived closer to the land knew where water was; they knew how to live within limits and so survived. Those who do not know the land run the real risk of death.

This may be just the way it is with dreams and hopes – they are always possible, but only if we know where to look for the water that will bring them to life. If we do not know the ground out of which our dreams come, they are more likely to die.

My daughters went to high school in Fairfax County Virginia, a suburb of Washington, DC. It had an excellent school system, consistently rated among the top ten best public school systems in the US. We noticed the change when we moved from Orange County in CA to there – how much better the schools were. So we were thankful for that opportunity.

The high school was OK – it was diverse: student population is 44 % White, 21% Black, 17 % Hispanic, 12% Asian, and about 6% other. The school building was awful; it had been constructed in the late 1970s and designed by a firm that specialized in prison design and build – most classrooms had no exterior windows.

Its motto was ‘Every dream a reality; every student a success.’ I thought it was one of the most stupid mottos I had ever heard. Somewhat remembering what I was like as a high schooler, it is lucky that not every dream of mine became a reality. We know this is just silly – not every dream should or can become a reality.

And we know that not everyone can be or will be a success. Barbara Ehrenreich has a new book out titled *Bright-Sided* about the obsession in the US with positive thinking – every dream a reality, every student a success. When you wish upon a star your dreams come true – and on and on. The motto for Unitarians in the 19th century was ‘the progress of humankind, onward and upward forever.’ Forever! As if there were no limits, as if we could have all things, as if there would always be water available in the desert when and where we wanted it.

The most popular preacher in America these days is Joel Osteen – his church is Lakewood Church in Houston and their motto is ‘Discover the champion in you.’ About 44,000 people attend each Sunday to hear his positive message. Like Robert Schuller at the Crystal Cathedral, Osteen, and many of the megapastors, as they are now known, preach what is known as a ‘prosperity gospel’ affirming that God intends all of us to be successful, and that if we just believe in ourselves and let God be God, then all good things will come to pass.

Well, sometimes they do and sometimes they don’t. The rain, as the Bible famously says, falls on the just and the unjust, sometimes our dreams die; tragedy is a part of life; in some things there is no good.

But dreams? We all have them, and I imagine we need them to be fully human. But what kinds of dreams? I had dreams as a young man – that I would become a famous scientist, that I would climb a 25,000-foot mountain, that my life would pass by without sorrow and tragedy. Not bad dreams, but none has come true, and one never could have.

Like Childs searching for water – the dreams we have; our deepest hopes, they must be grounded in reality, in what is actually possible. It is a middle ground between Barbara Ehrenreich and Joel Osteen – push Ehrenreich too far and you become a cynic; push Osteen too far and you become a fool – and neither are good outcomes.

Dreams change – when young they are probably grander than what they become as we age. My dreams have narrowed to be sure. In the *New York Times* Judith Warner writes: ‘It’s just that urgency that goes, in early middle age. “All that yearning and anguish and passion had been replaced by a steady pulse of pleasure and satisfaction and occasional irritation, and this seemed to be a happy exchange; if there had been times in her life when she had been more elated, there had never been a time when things had been more constant,” Emma Morley, one of the two narrators of the British writer David Nicholls’s recent novel, “One Day,” reflects, as life and love come together for her at age 38. “What is there to care so much about?” she continues, “... everything had evened out and settled down and life was lived against a general background of comfort, satisfaction and familiarity.”’

But dreams do not wholly die – nor should they, really, just become more realistic. Even if our dreams are large – for example adequate health care for everyone in this country or truly reducing our carbon footprint – they are possible, like finding adequate water in the desert.

You might wonder where I am going with all of this – it seems even to me to be wandering. But I have been taken with Childs' description of water in the desert as a metaphor for our lives, and being in a sort of a spiritual desert, please bear with me.

The desert, he says, is a picture of water, not of the absence of water but of the presence of water. Water has sculpted the desert – you can see this clearly from an airplane – next time you fly look out and you can see this easily. Much as our life is sculpted by our dreams and our hopes.

Water usually comes to the desert in dramatic and spectacular forms – the great thunderstorms and flash floods – there are not many sprinkles in the desert. So when we are young our hopes and dreams are dramatic and often changing, looking for fast expression, rushing through the canyons of our youth. But they slow down – as Warner suggests – as our lives even out with work and family and the natural processes of aging, until, finally, they sink into the ground beneath us all.

But if we could look back on our individual or communal lives, we could see where that water – our dreams and our hopes – have flowed and changed the course of life, see where pools still remain and the life they support, some hidden and some obvious, but there.

What happens to a dream deferred – does it dry up, like a raisin in the sun? Well, sometimes it does. All of us, I would wager, have felt as dry as the bones in a desert at times. So hold fast to dreams, Hughes tell us. If we do – hold on to those dreams, however changed, like Childs' holding on to ancient maps and his own experience of where water is, we may discover that it does not always dry up – hidden in pockets, perhaps buried underground, those dreams remain in us as water does in the desert.

So in those times when your life seems to be drying up, know that there is water to be found, there are wellsprings to keep our spirits alive. We find that water by knowing our landscape – our lives that is – and by being patient. It takes work – Childs hikes for miles and miles and takes risks and, well, read the book – we are not just given these wellsprings. We have to work for them and cultivate them.

Dreams, hopes – ah yes ..... don't tell me there is no water for I have seen the fountain springing from the rock ...