“Whose Water is it?*”*

Worship Service for

The Unitarian Universalist Church of Tippecanoe County

West Lafayette, Indiana

November 26, 2023 – 10:30 a.m.

The Rev. Jennie Barrington, Settled Minister

Recorded music played by Richard Maddux and Sharon McKnight

Worship Associate: Don Gresham

Producer: Noemi Ybarra; Sound Technician: Larry Guentert

**Opening Words** by Thich Nhat Hahn [Rev. Jennie]

“Water flows from high in the mountains.

Water runs deep in the Earth.

Miraculously, water comes to us,

And sustains all life.

Water and sun green these plants.

When the rain of compassion falls,

even a desert becomes an immense, green ocean.”

**Chalice Lighting Words** by the Rev. Mel Hoover and Rose Edington [Don Gresham]

“Water unites us. All water is one water, shape-shifting as it goes on and on in its unending cycle. The stream we gather by unites us with all the waters of the world, for all of life depends on water.   
That's why this common, everyday element on which our very lives depend is sacred. In our thankfulness for water, let us remember to honor, cherish, and care for it—for our own lives, for all life touched by water, and for those who come after us.”

**Our Covenant** [Don Gresham]

Love is the Spirit of this Church,

And Service is its Law. This is our Covenant:

To Dwell Together in Peace,

To Seek the Truth in Love,

And to Help One Another.

**First Reading from, a letter from Norman “Pete” Tandy, a former resident of the Swift River Valley town of North Dana, one of the “lost towns” under the Quabbin Reservoir [Rev. Jennie]**

A former resident of the Swift River Valley town of North Dana named Norman “Pete” Tandy, wrote a letter to the Metropolitan District Commission. His views are shared by many former residents of those lost towns. Tandy wrote:

“At least, painful as it was, our banishment has served to keep our memories inviolate, preserved as flies in amber– However it was, that is how it will, unchangeable, forever be. That at least major portions of the Quabbin watershed have been allowed to flourish as a great reservoir, not just of water, but of a complex inter-relationship of undisturbed ecosystem, is a healing epitaph for the wrenching dislocations of the past. I am content with the bargain [Tandy wrote]. The ultimate insult, the final irony, would be if this magnificent preserve should fall prey to pressure groups or political expediency and be opened up to any use inconsistent with its continuing existence as a place of sanctuary against turmoil and the pollution of the outside world.

In such continuance is the only real and fitting memorial for all the rude uprootings of the past. I find, after all these years, there lives within me still some special sense that here, in this sweet water valley, here, was home.”

**Second Reading from, *A River Runs Through It,* by Norman Maclean [Don Gresham]**

“Now nearly all those I loved and did not understand when I was young are [gone,] but I still reach out to them. Of course, now I am too old to be much of a fisherman, and now of course I usually fish the big waters alone, although some friends think I shouldn't. Like many fly fishermen in western Montana where the summer days are almost Arctic in length, I often do not start fishing until the cool of the evening. Then in the Arctic half-light of the canyon, all existence fades to a being with my soul and memories and the sounds of the Big Blackfoot River and a four-count rhythm and the hope that a fish will rise. Eventually, all things merge into one, and a river runs through it. The river was cut by the world's great flood and runs over rocks from the basement of time. On some of the rocks are timeless raindrops. [Beneath] the rocks are the words, and some of the words are theirs. I am haunted by waters.”

**Sermon “Whose Water is it?” [Rev. Jennie]**

When I was growing up, in South Suburban Boston, even from when I was a very young child in the 1960s, I heard about the Quabbin Reservoir, in the Swift River Valley of Central Massachusetts. I knew that people in the towns near me drank that fresh clear water, and that it was a miracle of modern engineering that they were privileged to do so. Some of why I heard about the Quabbin was from my father. He was ahead of his time as a Conservationist and in his concern for the preservation of natural resources. In our part of Massachusetts, we didn’t drink water from the Quabbin. The towns of Westwood and Dedham had their own wells. But I still heard people talking about how far Bostonians’ water had had to travel in order for them to be able to drink it from their kitchen taps. And that fascinated me.

And before I moved to Indiana in the summer of 2008, I had been serving, for seven years, a Unitarian Universalist church in Worcester County, Massachusetts, a short drive from the Quabbin Reservoir. But the people who live around the Quabbin do not have access to it as drinking water. Approximately a hundred years ago, the Metropolitan Water and Sewer Board in Boston proposed creating a reservoir in the Swift River Valley to provide drinking water for residents of the Greater Boston Area. The geography of the Swift River Valley forms an enormous natural basin. In that basin, over two thousand people lived. There were four towns, and parts of several other towns. There were farms, churches, schoolhouses, and mills. In North Dana, they made hats, including the very popular Shaker Bonnets. And they sold soapstone. All that was those towns was destroyed, flooded, washed away, so that water from the reservoir could be piped to Bostonians. Yet the Quabbin today, with its forests and wildlife, is hauntingly beautiful. So for me, and for countless other people who know its history, it raises the perplexing ethical conundrum: Was the creation of the Quabbin Reservoir a good thing?

The date that those four “lost towns,” which were called, Enfield, Dana, Greenwich, and Prescott, were disincorporated was April 28th, 1938. On April 27th, 1938, a Farewell Ball was held in the Enfield Town Hall. So I was going to preach about the Quabbin this spring. But my brother gave me this beautifully compelling new book about the Quabbin. It’s by Elisabeth C. Rosenberg, and it’s called, *Before the Flood – Destruction, Community, and Survival in the Drowned Towns of the Quabbin.* Her research and writing gift to us impressive original thought about the conundrum of that reservoir. As no one else has before, she tells us about the engineers who moved to the Swift River Valley and lived among the people who their work would be displacing. Of course there was some conflict and divisiveness, especially at first. But as the work progressed and time passed, the townspeople and the engineers came to abide peaceably with each other and some even married each other. And even more impressively, Ms. Rosenberg applies the conundrum of the Quabbin to our current need to address the climate crisis today. In her introduction to the book she writes:

“Climate change increasingly will affect how humans interact with their water supplies. Federal and state governments should expect and plan for more water-based human displacement, either from drought or flooding… On a community level, that Swift River Valley society functioned for as long as it did is a testament to disparate groups compelled to rise above suspicion and prejudice to create a community of necessity. American, and global, society must learn these lessons before we face the inevitable extreme economic and cultural challenges created by environmental changes and devastation.”

And the other reason I’m not waiting another week to preach about the Quabbin is the proposed LEAP Project. I’m sure you’ve heard that the IEDC [The Indiana Economic Development Corporation] wants to pipe millions of gallons of water from Tippecanoe County to Boone County, near Lebanon. If you, as I do, subscribe to journalist Dave Bangert’s newsletter, “Based in Lafayette,” you have seen that objections to that proposal have been fast and furious—and when I say furious, I mean that literally. People in Tippecanoe County understand wells, aquifers, droughts, and beginning now to plan for future years. They are saying that not enough research was done before the first steps of this project were taken, and I agree. The biggest thing my research on the Quabbin Reservoir taught me is that people must think through what the implications of an undertaking will be on the generations that will live here after we do. I have been reading the developing news about the LEAP project. And I attended an open meeting at the library led by “Stop the Water Steal.” I went because I wanted to hear what my neighbors think and feel. One strong sentiment in the room was that if a pipeline were proposed for drinking water for other Hoosiers, that would be different. We have it in our hearts to help meet that need. But the LEAP project is so that a business can make money. And that business chose an area that does not have enough water supply for that enterprise. Some of our church members have stepped up as leaders in the effort to pause the LEAP project. And I am proud of them for the time, research, and work they are giving to educating and organizing people.

I think that’s the biggest difference between we who object to the LEAP project today and the former residents of the Swift River Valley: they did not have the knowledge and ability to organize and fight back against the deciders in Boston. But we do, and that has already had a positive effect. In his post on Tuesday, Dave Bangert wrote that our local lawmakers have been assured by the General Assembly that LEAP pipeline funding decisions are on hold until 2025, and that a bill to regulate large water transfers has the green light for the 2024 General Assembly session. Opposition to the pipeline has grown far beyond the Greater Lafayette Area and it looks like it will keep growing.

The residents of the lost towns of the Swift River Valley were paid for their land. But they weren’t compensated for their businesses and farms. And though the creation of the Quabbin created jobs temporarily, those jobs went to Boston area contractors and laborers, not to the people who were to become displaced. The residents of the Swift River Valley did try to fight the decision– all the way up to the Massachusetts Supreme Judicial Court. But they lost. They did not have sufficient money, organization, nor even easy access to the courtrooms where decisions were being made against them. Some dwellings were moved– Their cellars are still intact under that water. Oh! And there was a railroad! It was called The Rabbit Train– We’re not sure why– either because when it started up it hopped, like a rabbit– or because it stopped frequently, like a rabbit– or because when it stopped, it stopped for so long you had time to hunt rabbits. And so the Rabbit Train became a thing of the past. Most chillingly, seven thousand five hundred graves were moved to a new cemetery which is now just off Route 9 in the town of Ware. Was enough care taken with those headstones and plots? So unjust– Such a crying shame– People’s homesteads, livelihoods, and connections to their homeland were all sacrificed– Could a reservoir ever possibly be worth such a sacrifice?

That’s hard for me to accept, as I’ve always tended to side with people who are marginalized, oppressed, or called underdogs. But then I drove out to see the Quabbin for myself. To my surprise, I sensed a Great Spirit there. People who come to care about the reservoir don’t say, “The Quabbin;” they call it “Quabbin;” they’ve personified it. It’s not just big; it’s enormous– really several bodies of water interconnected, and dotted with island which were once hilltops. It’s not just pretty; it’s profoundly beautiful, with slanting sunbeams illuminating its gentle waves. I’ve walked along its shores, driven around it, spent hours gazing into it trying to understand its deep mysteries. I keep learning all I can about the Quabbin, yet there’s always more to learn. I had once wanted to do a sabbatical project about the theological questions the creation of the Quabbin raises, including Native American wisdom. The first time I experienced the Quabbin first-hand, I could not help but ask myself, “Did the reservoir want to be there?” Though so much was destroyed to create it, was something new birthed which the land somehow needed to have brought into being? The name, “Quabbin,” is from that of a Native American chief; it means, “place of many waters.” Plant life and wildlife also flourish there now. There are coyote, deer, loons, bobcats, bears, and bald eagles.

Whether the creation of the Quabbin was, ultimately, right or wrong, two lessons for us today are proclaimed loud and clear in every place its story is told. The first is that we must not waste water, nor any of our natural resources, when those who came before us sacrificed so greatly so that we would have so much. The second is that details of the lives of the people who dwelt there have been carefully recorded and preserved. I have some of those stories, in written and oral form. The Metropolitan District Commission took photographs of every house and structure, every chicken coop, even, and noted identifying information. If one of your ancestors had a home in the Swift River Valley, you can see what their dwelling looked like. For a people to be forcibly displaced is spiritually painful. But if relocating a people is ever inevitable, the history of the Quabbin tells us how to record, with great care, how the people dwelt there.

Toward the end of Ms. Rosenberg’s book, she has a section with the heading, “An Alternate Timeline.” She writes that, “inside a CD-ROM with Quabbin-related articles… is a Word document purporting to be the draft of an article from the April 5, 2006, issue of the *Boston Globe.*” It’s called, “The Swift River Valley – Still Here: Western Massachusetts valley celebrates its 75th anniversary of its new lease on life,” by Al Winter. The article is, “an alternate timeline fantasy of how the Swift River Valley could have flourished.” In truth, “Al Winter” is fictional; the author is actually Jon Melick, who is an interpretive Quabbin historian. In the alternate history:

“The Massachusetts State Legislature, prodded by the ‘intense and almost unanimous pressure from the people of central and western Massachusetts,’ refused to continue the study of the valley as the sole source of drinking water for metropolitan Boston. Instead, the story goes, the state created a ‘state-of-the-art system of watershed protection, water filtration and aqueducts which keep the area well supplied with clean drinking water. [it goes on to say that] Some of this water comes from the Swift River, via an extension of the Ware River Aqueduct, since the Valley residents were happy to send the flood flows from the river to help Boston with its water needs, as long as the Valley remained intact.’ Instead, a highway, I-590, was built to include the valley in the state’s prosperity. New factories and office buildings began to appear; a valley-wide public high school was built. The Pioneer Valley Transit Authority extended its bus routes into the valley, and faculty and students from the Five Colleges began to live in Prescott because of its harsh beauty and cheap rents… Bed-and-breakfasts and the antique trade thrived. So did small family farms.” The article describes the valley as, “a symbol of the need to conserve our natural resources, instead of constantly moving out further and further to exploit the natural resources of those who lack the ability to resist effectively.” And Ms. Rosenberg sites an interview with a former resident of the Swift River Valley who said, in 1981, that it could have happened that way, “but of course there was no organization like we have today in cases like that, and of course there was no necessity for environmental impact statements or anything like that. There were no environmental societies to protest it. So the legislature just voted to go ahead with it, and that was that.”

Can you imagine solutions to our water-supply conundrums that result in flourishing local communities, better public education and public transportation, thriving family farms and small businesses, and plentiful potable water? Let us imagine, ethically and with good-neighborliness, a future for Indiana’s water that is a win-win-win-win-win.

[Let us sing. Our closing hymn in the teal hymnal is #1046 Shall We Gather at the River]

**Chalice Extinguishing** by the Rev. Denise Cawley [Don Gresham]

Love our Earth.  
Take action to consume less,   
use less energy, respect water;  
And be cooperative, collaborative   
and creative community –   
like the moss and the mushrooms.  
Our children’s lives depend on us.

**Benediction Philippians 4:8 [Rev. Jennie]**

“Whatsoever things are true,

whatsoever things are honorable,

whatsoever things are just,

whatsoever things are pure,

whatsoever things are lovely,

whatsoever things are of good report;

if there be any virtue,

and if there be any praise,

let us think on these things.”