

Rivers across the religious landscape



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Reading the latest issue of Nature Conservancy magazine, I turned a page to a stunning graphic. The image shows the major watersheds of the United States. Displayed in vibrant colors, the land appears alive, like arteries lacing across continental skin — a living creature pulsating with life.

As I stared at this picture, it brought a smile to my face. When we see the country, or the world, undivided by states and borders, highways and cities, it's not hard to see the very real interconnections that weave us together.

Springs, creeks, streams, rivers. The flow of water ought to be a continual reminder we are watery beings swimming in currents of air on a saturated sphere in space. Whatever the extremes — floods and droughts, thunderstorms or blue skies — the constant is liquid life or lack of it.

Growing up in the Pacific Northwest along the shores of the Puget Sound, salt water ran in my veins. With both the Cascade and Olympic mountain ranges in view every day, we were aware that all the soaking rain kept an endless supply of fresh water literally flowing down into our faucets. It was obvious why Washington (washing-aton) was called the "Evergreen State."

The Conservancy magazine startled me again with a less dramatic image: a glass of water. Below it, these words poured into my eyes: "Hydrologists estimate that if all the water on Earth filled a 5-gallon bucket, just one drop of it would represent the clean, fresh water accessible to humans." One drop. That should be a cold splash in the face to wake up every community on the big blue-green globe.

Speaking of waking up ... what do



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The James River near the Blue Ridge Parkway in Virginia.

religion and faith have to say about the precious gift of H₂O? Traditions talk of rivers (Jordan, Ganges, Nile, etc), of "raining blessings" and purifying baptism. Jesus spoke of "living water" and one story says he even walked on a lake.

The biblical view of heaven is not merely an eternal megachurch service in a golden city in the sky. A river runs right through with the roots of the Tree of Life stretching into the celestial waters. I would choose the river instead of the service, but that's just me.

Water has been a central symbol in religion for good reason. The magazine articles make it crystal clear: we are made of water; we depend on water and, there isn't much of it to share —

yet, share we must.

I can't really believe this needs to be said in 2017, but there is no such thing as a Sufi spring, a Christian creek, a Jewish stream or an atheist river. You need fresh clean water; I need fresh clean water. Believer or nonbeliever, God or no God, water truly is life.

In one sense, Jesus was right: There is living water, but it doesn't have to be spiritual or miraculous. Hindus in India worship rivers as gods and goddesses — but the rivers aren't Hindu rivers.

Here in WNC we have beautiful watersheds — gifts of the wild green mountains. These vital lands are fed by the French Broad and the Swannanoa, the Pigeon, Little Tennessee and Tuckasegee. Where I grew up, even as a child

I could pronounce the names of rivers in the language of the First Nations: Snohomish, Stillaguamish, Skykomish, Skagit.

Later in life I crossed the mighty Columbia to discover the pure streams of the Sierras: the Sacramento, the American, the Merced, Tuolumne and many others.

Recently I drove across a network of rivers including the Catawba to visit the International Civil Rights Museum in Greensboro with my wife, her sister and mother. If you haven't been, I highly recommend it. The museum is on the site of the Woolworth store where four African-American young men sat at the lunch counter in 1960 igniting a movement to integrate lunchrooms across the nation.

Like a flood of freedom, a relentless river of human rights flowed through communities where dams of bigotry held back many from simply sitting on a stool to order a glass of water.

One drop. A drop in a bucket. But how great a value is that drop.

Rivers — of the land and of the mind — make us who we are. We all live in one watershed, so to speak, nourished by many rivers.

Once in a while it might be good for us to think of the nation, or the world, as One Watershed or One River or maybe just One Drop. How will we draw from that limited supply? Who controls it and who will have access? Forget arguing over "global warming" and "climate change" — our rallying cry should be: "Save the drop."

Makes me a little thirsty. How about you?

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