

The King's Fountain: Reflections on a Fable

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Opening Words

From Dennis Hamilton

We bring our waters, which have touched the west, the north, the south and the east, which come from the sky and from the earth.

We bring water that belongs to lakes and streams, reservoirs of fresh waters that quench our thirst.

We bring water that is a part of the great oceans and the seas that circle the globe, teeming with life, the source of all life.

We bring water to this place of meeting and sharing.

In this water there is new water, formed in the atmosphere daily, and there is old water, water as old as the earth, water from which life has evolved over the eons. This is the stream of life from which all life flows.

All people are connected by this stream, for it runs through our veins and courses through the stems and leaves of plants.

It is the symbol of the cleansing power of forgiveness and the faithful promise of healing love.

It is the symbol and the reality of the oneness that unites humankind and all life.

May our separate waters join into one sacred stream as we add our lives into the stream of living souls who live out love, work for justice, and hunger for peace.

Reflections

(Adapted from a story by Lloyd Alexander)

A king once planned to build a magnificent fountain in his palace gardens, for the splendor of his kingdom and the glory of his name. It would be a truly *huge* fountain requiring a great deal of water—so much, in fact, that it would greatly reduce the amount of water flowing to the city below the King's great palace.

When one of the poor residents of the city heard about the King's plan, he was very upset. "Soon our children will cry for water and our animals will get sick," he said to his wife. "Our crops will dry up as well, and all of us will die of thirst and hunger."

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Although our own world isn't ruled by an almighty king like this one, we face much the same problem as his subjects. Water is becoming scarcer and more

precious every year. It may not seem that way because the oceans are full of water. But for you and me and pretty much all life on dry land, it's clean, fresh, unfrozen water that matters. And that represents less than 1 percent of planet earth's total water supply.

When I was a child, no one could possibly have imagined a time when we might worry about such a thing. But like the King, we've not been very smart about the way we've used and managed water. The city of Las Vegas aside, we haven't exactly squandered it on huge fountains, but we've been using fresh water up so fast that we now face a future of severe water shortages.

Consider: a human being only needs four liters of drinking water a day to survive. But the food we eat each day requires another 2000 liters to produce. It takes more water to produce certain foods than others: 49 liters of water to grow one orange; 35 for a pound of flour, but 600 liters for the all-beef patty in a McDonald's quarter pounder.

If there is to be enough fresh water to supply future generations with more than their bare necessities, we—like the King in this story—need to begin making more sensible choices about what we eat and what we buy. One extra large cotton T-shirt, available at Penney's for ten bucks, costs 7,000 gallons of precious water.

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So the poor man went throughout the city until he reached the home of its greatest scholar. Knocking at his door, the poor man begged him to talk to the King on behalf of the residents of the city. But the scholar, deep in his own thoughts, barely listened. He was only interested in lofty abstractions and technical theories. He had no interest in practical matters like the city's water supply.

The scholar spoke in such a confusing way that the poor man could only shake his head and walk away. "Alas, the grandest ideas quench no thirst," he said to himself. "Besides, what good is all this learning if it doesn't help to make the world a better place?"

He realized that he must find someone else who could present the people's cause clearly and convincingly—with a golden tongue, so that the King would change his mind.

So the poor man went to the marketplace, to listen to the merchants who were so effective at selling their wares to passersby. Perhaps he would find someone

here who could get the King to alter his plan.

But when these merchants heard what the poor man wanted, they vigorously shook their heads. "We will tell you what to say," they told the poor man, but we would not dare speak to the king face to face. The poor man left the marketplace deeply discouraged, saying to himself,

"Alas, what good is the ability to turn a fine phrase unless one is also willing to act? What good is a golden tongue without a brave heart?"

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In many countries, competition for water is already intense. A few years ago, 120,000 poor Chinese farmers awoke one day to discover that the Juma River—which they had always relied upon to irrigate their crops—had stopped flowing. Without even consulting them, the Chinese government had dammed up and diverted the river to provide water for a new petrochemical plant. Never mind that the dam would prevent thousands of families from pursuing their traditional way of life. Protests were lodged but to no avail. The battle was lost before it had even begun.

Much the same thing almost happened in our own country. Not long ago a company wanted to draw water from an underground aquifer in northern Wisconsin to sell in bottles to people in other states. The company wanted to pump so much that the residents of nearby communities were worried that the water table would fall and the local streams would dry up—which is what typically happens in such circumstances.

Their story had a happier ending. After battling the citizens for many months, the company threw in the towel and walked away.

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The poor man now realized that a man of strength and courage must go to the king and *force* him to change his plan.

So again he went throughout the city, until he came to the shop of the strongest of all the brave men he knew—a blacksmith who could tie a knot in an iron bar as easily as a shoestring. When he heard the poor man's request, the blacksmith was eager to take on the task. Once inside the palace, he said, he would smash every window, crack every wall, and break the King's throne into firewood. He would *force* the King to see reason.

The poor man shook his head. This was not what he wanted. Violence would only make the King more determined and his guards would strike down the headstrong blacksmith before he had gotten ten feet inside the palace doors. And so, leaving the blacksmith still

pounding his fists, he went away in despair, saying to himself: "Alas, the strongest hand is useless without a wise head to guide it. Besides, what good is all the bravery in the world if it serves no purpose?"

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How will we insure that in the future there is enough fresh water to go around? Already, more than a billion and a half people don't have enough fresh water and millions die each year from dehydration or from drinking contaminated water.

Scientists have been working on technical solutions to this problem. Inexpensive methods for removing salt and other contaminants from seawater are being developed. Some have suggested capturing arctic icebergs and melting them for drinking water. New techniques for recycling and purifying waste water are now being applied.

Others have suggested that water consumption could be controlled if the law of supply and demand was stringently enforced. Water has been supplied too cheaply, they say. Let it be sold like any other commodity so that the cost to the consumer reflects its real value. If the price of water is controlled by the market, people will be more careful about how much they use.

Many people fear that, in the end, the issue will be settled by force. Like the blacksmith, people will be forced to fight over water—even wage war to secure their right to it. That is why it is so important at this moment in history to have "wiser heads" guiding us. In a war over water—as in most every war—nobody would really win.

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And so the poor man trudged home, hopeless and heavy hearted. He told his family and neighbors that he could find no one to stop the building of the fountain. Surely, everyone in the city would die if the King selfishly proceeded with his misguided plan.

His daughter listened sympathetically and then spoke up. "But father—why don't *you* go to the King yourself?"

The poor man looked stricken. But then, looking into the eyes of his daughter, wife, and neighbors he saw all of creation—all living beings—that needed water to survive. And last, he bowed his head and murmured: "You are right. There is no one else, and I myself must go to the king."

And so the poor man left his home and alone he slowly climbed the steep and seemingly endless hill to the palace. When he finally reached the front gates, he stood outside, fearful and hesitant. When the palace guards saw the poor man, they seized him and threat-

ened his life for trespassing. He was so terrified he could hardly speak. At last, in desperation, he blurted out that he had an important message for the King's ears alone.

The guards marched him to the throne room, where the King angrily demanded why he had come. Knees knocking, teeth chattering, the poor man began to tell as well as he could of the suffering that the fountain would cause.

The King interrupted: "Enough!" he roared. "How dare you question what I do? I am the King!"

At that moment, the poor man desperately wished for the smallest crumb of the scholar's learning, but he could only stammer, "Majesty, do we all not thirst? Do we not all need water? From the tiniest animal to the mightiest oak, do we not all need this nourishment to live? Thirst is thirst, a poor man's no less than a king's."

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The problem with making water into a private commodity and selling it at its "fair market value" is that some will be water-rich, and most will end up being water-poor. Already there is huge inequality in water consumption. For the sole purposes of drinking, washing, and cooking, the average human being uses about 50 liters per day. But it makes a big difference where you live. The typical African uses only 6 liters per day—barely enough to survive. Americans, on the other hand drink, wash, and flush away 270 liters per day—and that's before we even turn on the lawn sprinklers.

Private companies have been hired to manage water in some places. It hasn't worked out very well. In one large Bolivian city, a corporation took over and abruptly tripled and quadrupled residential rates. Poor people ended up spending much of their meager income on water, and tens of thousands rose up in protest. Today at least four South American countries have passed laws against privatized water. If we believe use of this essential element is a basic human right, we will make every effort to ensure universal access and a just means of distribution.

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Then the poor man's tongue dried in his mouth, and he wished for even one of the merchant's golden words. The king looked haughtily down from his high throne. "You come to trouble me about *your* thirst?" he said dismissively. "I need only snap my fingers, and my swordsmen will cut you to pieces and be done with you."

The poor man now wished for one drop of the blacksmith's bravery. With his own last ounce of courage he answered, "You have the power to kill me. But that changes nothing. Your people will still die of thirst. Remember them each time you sit comfortably and

admire your splendid fountain."

The King started up, ready to call his guards. But then something seemed to occur to him and he stopped. He sank back into his throne, deep in thought, his brow furrowed and a frown on his face. At length he replied,

"You are too simple for clever debate with me, but you have a wiser head than any scholar I've met. There is also more truth in your humble words than in the clever tongue of my most persuasive counselor. You are too weak to pound a nail, but you have a braver heart than anyone in my kingdom. I don't really like, it but I will do as you ask. The fountain will not be built."

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One wonders what Jesus would do in such circumstances? Today, in the Holy Land, the Sea of Galilee where he is alleged to have "walked on water" is gradually emptying—over-taxed by the water needs of a growing population. The River Jordan connecting Galilee to the Dead Sea—the very river where Jesus was baptized by John—now runs dry before it even reaches the Dead Sea.

A similar tale can be told of other notable rivers—the Yellow in China, the Nile, the Tigris-Euphrates and the Colorado—once mighty flows that supported lush riparian ecosystems and sustained vital human communities for thousands of years. All are overdrawn and underprotected.

Here in Dane County, many of the streams and creeks that flowed into the Yahara lake system have either disappeared or are only seasonally active. As greater Madison pumps more and more water from its own aquifers, surface waters disappear and with them many species of animal and plant life.

Conservation is the easiest and most sensible remedy for the issues I've raised. It is also a concrete and meaningful way to express genuine love for one's neighbor. The less wasteful we are, the more water there will be to go around.

This is one reason our own congregation decided to erect a "green" building: it saves lots of water. Throughout our property and even in the parking lots there are rain gardens, holding basins, infiltration strips, absorbent roof materials, low-flow and waterless fixtures designed to replenish our aquifers and minimize consumption. It is in our own interest to adopt such measures, but in so doing we also acknowledge our responsibility to those who share the Four Lakes region with us.

Like the King, we are perched here at the top of a hill. But unlike him, we realize that we are part of a vast interconnected web of existence that will reliably sustain us if we help sustain it.

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And so, the King dismissed him, and the poor man ran back down the hill to the city and told the news to all. The scholar wrote a long account of the matter in one of his books, which he then managed to misplace. The merchants never stopped exaggerating the tales they wove of the poor man's great deed. The blacksmith

was so excited that he tossed his anvil in the air and broke one of his own windows.

But the poor man was simply glad to be home with his rejoicing family. He was hardly able to believe what he had done. "A wise head? A golden tongue? A brave heart?" he said to himself. "Well, no matter, at least none of us will go thirsty."

