

**Healing the Gulf
August 29, 2010**

So today is my dog Maya's 12th birthday. In dog years that makes her about 84 years old. She's not as fast as she used to be, and the summer heat especially slows her down. But even with her older joints and bones, even with her heavy walk under the sun, Maya still loves a good swim. Whenever I take her to Lady Bird Lake, she leaps out of the car, tail wagging and webbed feet ready to carry her down to the water. I love to watch her swim. There's an ageless grace in her motions, and a look in her eyes that says, "I'm home. I'm in my element."

Admittedly, though, after a swim at the lake, Maya can occasionally emerge a little bit, well, stinky. That's because, you know, a lot of stuff gets into that lake that's not necessarily supposed to. Litter, pollution, sewage... And even if there weren't things like that getting into the lake, there are all the sediments that get stirred up when Maya swims, and plant life, and fish life, which go through their entire life *cycles* right there in the water. So not everything in there is always alive. So, out comes Maya, with all her wet furriness, carrying a whole watery universe of existence with her. A universe that does not always smell fresh.

Consequently, my car and my apartment and my own clothes also end up carrying this “eau de pew.” For the most part, it’s pretty harmless--nothing a washing, a vacuuming, a cleaning can’t cure.

And yet. And yet if I think about it, Maya’s love of water, her swimming in it, and the scents and dirt she sometimes brings with her back onto dry land carry a symbolic significance if I think about the bigger world. Think, if you will, about the various ways we all love and rely on water. How was water a part of your travels this summer? Did you fly over it? Did you swim in it? Did you drive over the Mississippi or the Rio Grande? Did you get chased by waves in the ocean? Did you paddle, canoe, kayak, rubber raft, or splash around? Did you sit by a creek and just listen? What delicious drinks and foods did you indulge in? Sweet juices, cold frozen pops, crisp salads, delicious shrimp or salmon? Water, if you think about it, is everywhere. As Herman Melville says, “Take almost any path you please, and ten to one it carries you down a dale, and leaves you there by a pool in the stream.” And water, so often brings us a sense of calm and healing. As Wendell Berry puts it, “I am a dry man whose thirst is praise of clouds, and whose mind is something of a cup. My sweetness is to wake in the night after days of dry heat, hearing the rain.”

Consequently, just as we thirst for and seek water, just as nearly every path we take leads us to water, we must remember that everywhere

we go, we bring a very human relationship to water. Sometimes we bring joy and gratitude. But sometimes we bring litter and pollution, and imperfectly built human structures. And sometimes, we bring so much of these things, whether accidentally or out of ignorance or greed, that we bring tragedy to the very source of our longed-for happiness. That is what happened this year with the terrible oil spill that has forever changed the lives of so much human-, wild-, and plant-life all along the gulf coast. That is what happened five years ago today, when the levees of New Orleans broke in the wake of Hurricane Katrina, and that beautiful crescent city was swallowed up by the sea and the river and sewage and the scattered belongings of thousands of people's lives.

I think of the words of R.J. Farrer, who warned, "Advice to those about to build a water-garden--DON'T.... Water, like fire," he says, "is a good servant, but is painfully liable to develop into a master." As beautiful and healing and *fun* as water is, it is *not* our servant. Water will go where it needs to go, when it needs to go. Look at the astonishing floods in Pakistan. Water will go where it needs to go.

Water is not our servant. Yes, we contain it, and drink it, and bathe in it, and wash our cars and animals and dishes and clothes with it. But amidst all of our using water, we must remember ours is an *interdependent* relationship. What we do to water, we do to ourselves. If we build oil rigs in

the sea that are mismanaged, if we build levees that are poorly engineered, if we build super dams all over the world for a little more electricity so we can play a few more games on our computers, then we must be prepared for the consequences. We must be prepared to clean up the mess, to come to the aid of those who have suffered the spills, the breaks, the floods. We must be ready to heal the gulf.

And you know that by gulf, I mean both the gulf that lines our shores, and the gulf that lies between us and the stranger, the gulf that lies between utility and sustainability. We must heal the gulf between our thread of the interdependent web and those threads we forget to see-- those ones we like to think of as "over there." To heal the gulf is to see the connection between over there and right here. To heal the gulf is to honor water for the sacred element of life that it is, to give thanks for its live-giving presence. To heal the gulf is to understand that a Louisiana fisherman, an Alabaman brown pelican, a New Orleanian musician, a Pakistani farm woman all rely on fresh, good, pure, *safe* water just as much as we do.

So as we begin our water communion ceremony, let us remember the words we shared earlier together: "We know that in all creation only the human family has strayed from the Sacred Way.... And we are the ones who must come back together to walk in the Sacred Way."

In that spirit, I invite you to form two lines, bringing your water forward for the communion bowl. Be mindful not to pour too much in, as we want to prevent our own flood. As you pour your water, please, briefly, very briefly, share into the microphone where your water is from, and how you would like to help us all come back together to walk in the Sacred Way. At the end of the service, we will return the water to the earth, where it will nourish life once more.

Water Communion.