



Water: Lifeblood of Mother Earth

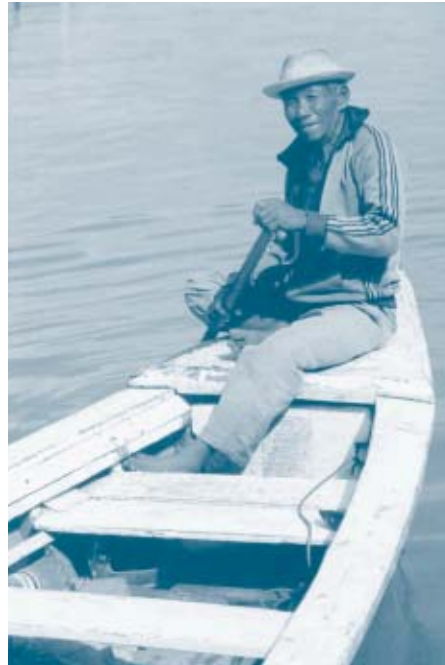
By **Priscilla Solomon**, an Anishinabeque (an Ojibway woman) and a Sister of St. Joseph of Sault Ste. Marie, Ontario

In the testament of our Hebrew ancestors, water images appear like a life-giving stream throughout the history of God's people. Water quenches both physical and spiritual thirst, cleansing, purifying, transforming, and bearing life. In Genesis, God's creative word results in "every kind of living creature with which the waters teem" (Gen. 1:21). "A flood was rising from the earth and watering all the surface of the soil." (Gen. 2:6) Out of this watered soil, life is brought forth. "A river flowed from Eden to water the garden and from there it divided into four streams." (Gen. 2:10)

For me as an Aboriginal person, the image of four streams is enriched by our teaching of the four sacred directions and the four symbolic races. If one faces the four cardinal directions consecutively one has completed a circle. It is immediately clear to me that water is meant for all of creation and for all humankind. But such is not the common understanding of our time. As water is threatened and becomes scarce in more parts of the earth, individuals and corporations are capitalizing on human need, commodifying water for their own profit.

What is water? It is a natural and essential element without which no

one can long survive, and is the birthright of every living creature. Precious, sacred rivers flow through highlands and lowlands, bush lands, deserts and cities, cultures and spiritualities, quenching both physical and spiritual thirst. People of all cultures recognize the necessity and symbolic nature of water. Indigenous people, because of our holistic world views, have a rich relationship with water that is particularly needed in our contemporary world.



"Each of us has a role to play in shaping the creation story of the future."

Vandana Shiva

Life before Profit!

The Sacred Water Pot

"Sacred waters carry us beyond the marketplace into a world charged with myths and stories, beliefs and devotion, culture and celebration," says Indian environmental thinker and activist Vandana Shiva.

"These are the worlds that enable us to save and share water, and convert scarcity into abundance. We are all ... thirsting for waters that liberate and give us life – organically and spiritually. The struggle ... between those who protect and those who destroy, between those who nurture and those who exploit, is ongoing. Each of us has a role in shaping the creation story of the future. Each of us is responsible for the *kumbh* – the sacred water pot."

Vandana Shiva, *Water Wars: Privatization, Pollution, and Profit, Between the Lines*, Toronto, 2002

Life before
profit!



From what waters do you come?

At an Indigenous Conference in Australia I heard an Aborigine say: "We don't ask 'What is your name and what do you do?' We ask: 'What is your name? What is your mother's name? And from what waters do you come?'" What stays with me is the soul-stirring sense that the very identity of these people is intimately bound up with water – and they know it! How different from people whose

identity is bolstered by material possessions, and who so value market-driven economies that water is managed essentially as a commodity!

The veins of Mother Earth

Anishinabe people think of rivers, especially the underground rivers, as the veins of Mother Earth carrying her life-blood to all her children. Many of our elders are deeply concerned that her life-blood is being polluted, contaminated and depleted wilfully,

thoughtlessly, and extensively by people of our times. How does one who is sickened by such pollution survive? How do her children survive? I believe neither I, nor you, are exempt from examining the part we play in this destruction. These elders share the concerns of DEVELOPMENT AND PEACE, and many others, that recognize the urgency of a transformation of consciousness and human behaviour toward water, the lifeblood and the birthright of every being in the web of life on Mother Earth.

Water is wealth

Recently I asked an Indigenous friend, Sara Sanders, what water means in the Hawaiian culture. She responded: "In the old tradition they recognized a



trinity of gods: Lono, Kane and Ku. They had, as well, a trinity of nature: Ai (Mountain); Aina (Land that provides food) and Kai (Sea)." She continued: "Water means wealth. If

you have water to grow food, you are wealthy!" When asked "What is the key issue about water in Hawaii?" she quickly answered: "It's the privatization and commercialization of water. And the destruction of fish species is close behind." Does this sound familiar to you as a Canadian?

From Reflection to Action

Use the following suggested questions to guide yourself or a small group through a discussion on the ideas in this paper. Feel free to add your own questions!

- 1 How do you relate to these reflections? Which images do you connect with, and why?
- 2 What meaning does water have for you?
- 3 An important principle of Catholic social teaching is the stewardship of God's creation. The goods of the earth are gifts from God, intended by God for the benefit of all. How we treat the environment is a measure of our stewardship. What can we learn from other world traditions about being good stewards of water? Are such values consistent with the privatization and commodification of water?

- 4 In what way could you and your community "play a role in shaping the creation story of the future," as Vandana Shiva says?

- 5 Read the following Scripture and discuss your impressions.

"At the time when Yahweh God made earth and heaven there was as yet no wild bush on the earth nor had any wild plant yet sprung up, for Yahweh God had not sent rain on the earth, nor was there any one to till the soil. However, a flood was rising from the earth and watering all the surface of the soil. Yahweh God fashioned a human of dust from the soil. Then he breathed into their nostrils a breath of life, and thus they became a living being." [Genesis 2:5-7]

Do the Aboriginal perspectives presented in Priscilla Solomon's reflection affect your understanding of this Biblical text?



10 St. Mary St., Suite 420
Toronto, ON M4Y 1P9

1-800-494-1401
(416) 922-1592
www.devpo.org

