A DIFFERENT VEIW ON WATER

The Haudenesaune (Iroquois) people have a tradition of greeting the dawn with the “words before all others”. It is the prayer that is commonly known as the “Thanksgiving Address”.

In this greeting of the day, we turn our attention to, acknowledge, and give thanks to all of Creation. We begin by saying that it is an honor to be a human being, entrusted with the preservation and protection of all that is sacred and given us. We also say “now our minds are one”. This goes beyond saying “we are in agreement”. It means that we are, all of us, putting our minds “on the table” so we can share all the knowledge and wisdom that is in the community.

Part of this greeting at dawn is giving thanks to the waters.

In our tradition it is not only the waters of the rivers, lakes, streams or even the water we drink. We acknowledge that it is also the water underground that we consider the veins and arteries of our Mother the Earth. It is the waters that fall from the sky that cleanses her. It is the dew that falls on Creation to renew and refresh the ground. Water in the form of snow is the blanket that covers Mother Earth and allows her to rest and renew over the long winter.

In many Indigenous traditions the people “go down to the water”. Not just to wash their body clean, but to wash their spirit clean too. The water refreshes the body and renews the spirit. It allows the person to see the world anew.

Water is a gift from our God that has been denied to many people because of human intervention. Rivers have been diverted, lakes and streams polluted, and springs have been claimed by greed. Water has become a commodity rather than a gift given to all by our Creator.

Water is also a sign of security for the Indigenous people of North America. Many of the treaties were worded “as long as the grass grows and the water flows”. What is to become of us when the water stops flowing? What happens to us when once mighty rivers have been reduced to hardly a trickle?

Even before the pandemic Indigenous peoples around the globe were in crisis. Access to clean water is in the forefront. We often think of lack of clean water as a problem that exists outside of the United States but Indigenous People are in crisis, Right here in our own backyard people are sickened by drinking the water available to them. Some Nations cannot even bathe infants in the available water because it could lead to grave illnesses and even death. On my own reservation you can’t drink the water because it makes you violently ill. Cancer cases have risen exponentially because of the contamination of the water.

Even before the pandemic many of the Nations in the Southwest had water scarcity. When Covid hit not only did they not have drinking water but they had no available water to wash their hands with or even to sooth those who had gotten sick. Think of it. Your loved one is burning up with fever, any health care is 50 or 60 miles away and you don’t have access to clean, uncontaminated water. After caring for them you can’t even wash your hands so you won’t spread the virus.

This gift of water is so much more than an ecological talking point. It is life, and should be a human right for everyone. It should be a gift that we turn our attention to, acknowledge and give thanks for.

And now our minds are one.