

Ablutions

Unitarian Universalist Church of Olinda

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Yesterday was Global Handwashing Day, and an awareness day like this reminds us that it is worth taking stock of what this simple act means for us. Where and when does it come from? And why is it still important for us to recognize this act even as handwashing is commonplace the world over?

Most – perhaps all – spiritual traditions have rituals that revolve around water, and particularly, washing.

Of course, when it comes to things spiritual, we like to use fancier words than just “washing”. So, when describing many of the spiritual washing rituals there are, we often use the word *ablution* (or *ablutions* for the collection of these rituals).

Unitarian Universalism’s ancestry includes the Protestant tradition, which in turn means that we have some spiritual ancestry in Christian and Jewish teachings and writings. Jewish scriptures laid out many forms of ritual purification by washing after certain activities or situations. Many of these include bodily functions, though it also involves washing before special events, such as entering a worship space, initiating a ritual, or preparing for prayer. Different Jewish traditions carry out versions of these practices.

There is also carryover into Christianity, and priests in particular may carry out a number of purification practices when preparing for certain spiritual activities. The specifics vary in the many Christian traditions, but they are there. And of course, the act of baptism is a near universal part of membership in Christian faiths, signifying entrance into a new kind of spiritual life.

The related Muslim tradition also includes purification rites with water, including washing the hands and face, and sometimes the feet or other parts of the body, depending on circumstance. These are often done before prayer, as well as other everyday activities. Many devout Muslims might include purification with water before handling the text of the Quran.

Beyond these – the Abrahamic traditions – the preponderance of using water as spiritual preparation does not disappear. On the contrary, it is quite present in virtually any major religion you might encounter.

Hinduism, Buddhism, Baha'i faith, Shinto, and so many others we could name, will have some form of use of water as a spiritual element. Sometimes, these have intuitive hygienic sense, but they are more readily recognized as spiritual practice.

It is worth noting that purification rituals don't need to include water. For instance, while many indigenous spiritual practices do involve washing rituals, many of you have observed the very common practice of *smudging* with smoke from a medicine plant, such as sage or sweetgrass, as a way to ready one's mind and spirit for a sacred time and space.

In our tradition, the use of water in ritual is relatively limited, but we still do it. Often, we use it in child dedications or baby naming ceremonies. Although this isn't a baptism in the way other churches might recognize it, it is still a rite of passage to mark an important occasion and bring us together as a community with a common goal for the formation of a child.

We also have our annual Water Ceremony, as we did in September. And although we don't usually use this water for washing. The ritual does, in a sense, allow us to flow from the summer season, into our dawning program year.

For us, and most places around the world, washing has also increasingly taken a primarily practical significance, especially as global understanding of infection, and the role of germs in it, has become well established over the past few centuries. But just because washing may be increasingly viewed in mundane terms of hygienic or medical value, it does not mean that this everyday practice needs to lose spiritual value.

For one thing, washing for practical purposes is a practice of celebration and preservation of life. It is a way to continue being connected with those around us, while reducing the risk of harm to others.

Over the past couple of years, the value of simple handwashing has taken a renewed place in our consciousness. Pandemic season has also been a reminder that, although we may have grown up with this practice, it pays off to take the time to remember to do it properly for the best results – a quick rinse with a token amount of soap is not quite the same as a proper scrubbing for a pre-set minimal amount of time (such as 20 seconds), with a healthy dose of soap and intentionally reaching all the appropriate places.

There is a lesson there around the need to constantly re-evaluate where we are at, examining whether we are where we want to be, and pledging to do better, even when we've fallen by the wayside.

But even though we've had this reminder, it may already be falling by the wayside. Many of us took a more diligent approach to handwashing when it seemed that Covid might be readily transmitted through touch. And while it is now more likely that infection happens through airborne transmission, it still pays off to observe proper handwashing technique – not just to minimize one other vector of transmission, but also because there are *other* diseases that are, and have always been, prone to pose a risk through touch.

This is why taking some time to recognize relatively obscure “global holidays” such as Global Handwashing Day, is still relevant to us. Even

when we think we know what we're doing, it is worth pausing to consider whether we could be doing better.

I have previously spoken about the story of Ignaz Semmelweis, the Hungarian physician who advocated for handwashing for surgeons in maternity wards in the mid-19th century. He is sometimes offhandedly credited with “inventing” handwashing, though this, of course, is not accurate, as witnessed by the many ancient traditions that include handwashing and other cleansing rituals with water. But he did make a methodical and intentional evidence-based case as to why it was necessary, especially in a setting where it wasn't being done (such as the maternity ward of the Vienna General Hospital).

The magic of recognizing handwashing is that it is a simple practice, especially when the adequate infrastructure has been set in place. Yet, in its simplicity, it can bring immense rewards, including a longer life expectancy and quality of life.

The same goes for spiritual ablution. It's a simple act that, in addition to any physical purification, it may also offer mental purification, helping to focus the mind into a more worshipful space.

My friends, in our daily lives there are many simple acts we carry out for what may seem purely practical reasons... mundane reasons. And these mundane actions can take a spiritual dimension, if we let them. Take the act of breathing, for instance... we do it all the time. But when we allow ourselves some time and space to do it intentionally, it may offer a place for peace, or mental preparation, a rite of settlement into a spiritual home. It can be an air ablution, a ritual washing with breath.

Perhaps meditation in stillness is not how your mind has come to find these sacred spaces. That's OK, for I suspect you can find something else that may lead you in that direction – something mundane, yet sacred, that helps you wash your mind. My friends, it may be

something simple, such as getting outside if it's feasible for you (if you're able to walk, that is one option); if sounds are accessible to you, music may be that place, perhaps singing or dancing, if that is within your ability. Reading books or listening to audio books may also be options of this kind. Perhaps cooking, or enjoying a meal might offer you this kind of opportunity. Some of these may not apply to you, and you might likely have found something else that I wouldn't even have thought of. Yet a mundane activity may still hold holy value.

My friends, in a couple weeks, we'll be honouring some of our ancestors in our annual Day of the Dead commemoration. It will involve a simple setting of a table, with photos and everyday items from some of those who have gone before us. These may be things that are not all that extraordinary in the grand scheme of things, but which we know to be special for the memories we intentionally hold alongside them. And with these, we may transform a casual table into a shrine. And with this ritual, we may do a spiritual ablution, as we recognize past lives into beloved ancestors.

My friends, every casual corner may be a shrine if we allow a simple, intentional ritual, to wash over us.

So may it be,
Amen

*Suggested Hymns:***Opening #27 I Am That Great and Fiery Force**

Words: Hildegard of Bingen, 1098-1179

Music: Music Josquin Desprez, 1445-1521, adapt. by Anthony Petti, b. 1932

AVE VERA VIRGINITAS

Hymn #134 Our World Is One World

Words & Music: Cecily Taylor, 1930- , © 1988 Stainer & Bell, Ltd., all rights reserved, used by perm. Of Galaxy Music Corporation

Music arr. by Richard Graves, 1926- , © 1988 Stainer & Bell, Ltd.

CHERNOBYL

Closing #100 I've Got Peace Like a River

Words: vs. 1-3 Marvin V. Frey, 1918(?) -1992, © 1974 Marvin V. Frey,
vs. 4-6 Anonymous

Music: Marvin V. Frey, © 1974 Marvin V. Frey

WHITNEY 7.7.10.D.