

Holy Water
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What is holy water? I explored that theological question a few years ago when I was one of a half dozen student chaplains at the University of California – Davis Medical Center in Sacramento. We listened to the cares and concerns of hospital patients and their families. Most of our chaplaincy work took place during the day. However, the chaplains took turns being “on call” overnight about once a week, and we took turns being “on call” on weekends. During “on call” times, a nurse would page us, we would call the nurse to learn the nature of the emergency, and then we returned to the hospital to be with the patient and family. While I normally commuted 60 miles each way to the hospital, during my “on call” times, I stayed with friends who lived in Sacramento because chaplains needed to reach the hospital within 20 minutes if we were paged.

One Sunday evening, the pager went off again, for the third time that weekend. The nurse gave me a “heads up” that I might be called in to baptize a six-month-old boy who was injured in a car accident and who was on life support. The family was Mexican American and Catholic. “I’ll be glad to page the Catholic priest,” I said. “Don’t bother,” the nurse said. “The parents are going to try to reach their own priest. If they can’t reach him, they want *you* to come in,” she said. A few minutes later, she called back. Their own priest was not available. Come to Pediatric Intensive Care and baptize the boy.

I was an infant during my own baptism, but the chaplain’s handbook outlined baptism basics: Touch the forehead with water and say “I baptize you in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit” as you make the sign of the cross. The spare language did not seem adequate to the intensity of the occasion. The clock was ticking. I had been told that families like to see water in a pretty bowl placed on a pretty napkin in the bed next to their loved one’s pillow. “Do you have any nice napkins?” I asked my friend.

My friend rummaged through a drawer and pulled out all her cloth napkins. No, not the red one. No, not a madras plaid napkin tonight. No, not the napkin with daisies. “Here, take this one. It is batik, and my brother got it in Indonesia.” The blue pattern was dignified and strong. “OK, thanks! What about a bowl? Do you have a bowl?” “Here, take this one. The bowl looks nice with the napkin.” On my way out the door, I heard her say, “I use that bowl for soy sauce and wasabi when I eat sushi.” On the drive to the hospital, I remembered the baptismal font in the church of my childhood. Would this little bowl for soy sauce and wasabi contain holy water?

Stopping in the restroom on the way to Pediatric Intensive Care, I turned on the tap and watched the water fill the little bowl. I entered the room and felt the wild distress of the family in contrast to the utter stillness of the boy. Words, silence, tears, water, baptism . . . The boy’s father calmed, his breathing slowed, and his face softened. Over the next few days, I spent time with him. I asked him to review the details that would appear on the baptism certificate: Mother’s name. Father’s name. Place of birth. Date of birth. Place of baptism. Date of baptism.

He stared at my notes for a long time in silence. He looked away and remained silent for a while longer. “Do not use that name!” he said finally, pointing to his own name on the piece of paper. “Use my real name. That name belongs to someone else. I just bought that name so I could work in this country. You do not send the baptism certificate to Immigration, do you?” White hot emotion stunned me and started the tears. “No,” I said. “We do not send the baptism certificate to Immigration.” The water of our tears was holy water.

We hide from each other for many reasons. Some of those reasons are necessary, given the risks that self disclosure brings. Some of the reasons we hide from each other turn out not to be so necessary. The greater our commitment to active participation in congregational life, the greater the odds that someone will be there to help us unwrap the layers and layers of protection around our tender heart. The greater our commitment to active participation in congregational life, the greater the odds that we will be there to help others unwrap the layers and layers of protection around their tender heart. In an atmosphere of mutual trust, we can say, “Do not use that name. Use my real name.”

Some Unitarian Universalists request baptism. Most Unitarian Universalists request a “child dedication.” In Unitarian Universalism, there is no central authority which mandates certain words or rituals in a child dedication. In several congregations, I have seen this: There is a bowl of water and a rose that has had its thorns removed. Water, an essential part of life, stands for the nourishment of the body and the illumination of the heart. The rose with its thorns removed is a symbol of unfolding life. The thorns have been removed in the hope that the child's life will be filled with as few thorns as possible and that when there are thorns, the child will always be surrounded by a caring community.

The rose is dipped in the water and the person leading the ritual gently touches the child and says, “We bless your eyes that you may see the beauty and the ugliness. We bless your ears that you may hear the singing and the sighing. We bless your mouth that you may sing of your pleasures and of your pain. We bless your heart that you may give love and accept love. We bless your hands that you may take pleasure in the work of your hands. We bless your feet that you may walk in the way of peace with a generous spirit toward all. You may now have this flower as a symbol of your unfolding beauty. May you discover your own unique gifts. May you always know that you are loved and that we want for you the best that life can bring.”

Then the congregation may say, "We dedicate ourselves to welcoming this child into the congregation. We pledge ourselves to promote his or her welfare and the welfare of all children in mind, body, and spirit, to the end that they may grow in beauty, truth, and love."

Tears of joy, tears of sorrow, tap water, river water, lake water, ocean water -- they are made holy by our intention, by our longing, and by our reverence as we join together in shared ritual. May we help each other to unwrap and lay aside false names, false selves. May we help each other to learn our real name. May we see our original face in the face of one another. May it be so!