Perceiving Water: Beyond a Critical Resource

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Abstract

Generally recognized as the single most critical resource of the twenty-first century, water is one of the most essential and coveted resources on the planet. As we embark on a decision-making process dominated by politics and economics, perhaps it is time to reassess our underlying perception of water—both individually and collectively. A shift in perception may be the best hope for our meeting the critical challenges with water.

Introduction

It is 8:30 AM on an almost perfect morning along the north shore of the Kaua`i. The Sun is warm but not hot, a few puffy white clouds are blown along by the light trade winds, and the remnants of last week's torrential rains are evident as waterfalls on the distant mountainsides. I sit motionless on my surfboard in anticipation of a wave, which was generated two days earlier by a North Pacific storm, to break upon this shallow coral reef beneath me. The reef is a quarter of a mile from the shoreline; hence, I can hear nothing except the distant breaking waves and my own breathing. A few other surfers, who were out with me this morning, have long since paddled into shore so that they could get to work on time. I was supposed to have participated in a conference call a half hour ago, but I have not yet entertained the notion of leaving the water. As I run my hands along the silky smooth surface of the ocean and peer through the crystal clear water to the colorful reef below, I know that I am exactly where I must be. This is an aspect of the human journey that I truly enjoy and with which I am oddly familiar—not as a result of my reading books or listening to stories, but rather from an inexplicable experience. As I strive to make logical sense of what I am experiencing, I lose it altogether.

Finally emerging from the ocean at nearly 10:00 AM, I turn around and look behind me — realizing that this morning's encounter was yet another in a never-ending series of memorable experiences with water. I am left with the frustrating, but all too familiar, feeling that if my mind could have just remained silent for a bit longer, I could have experienced even more. It is as if the ocean were constantly communicating, but on a faint channel that I can barely hear over the noisy channels of the postmodern world. I will return tomorrow morning, and for as many mornings as I am able in my lifetime, because this is a gateway to my connection with water. Sitting in my office later that afternoon, I think back on the morning's encounter. My feeling of connectedness makes little sense to me—perhaps because when I'm in the water, there is no need for making sense. Experience is neither logical nor illogical, it just is.

Our Prevailing View of Water

At the dawn of the twenty-first century, we find ourselves in the position of having to collectively make some far-reaching decisions on a wide range of water-related issues (e.g., those involving quality, quantity, ownership, and distribution) that will affect the future of our and many other species on the planet. Much has been and will be written about the upcoming decision-making process and the factors that are most relevant to our arriving at those decisions. There exist a limited, but ever growing, number of people who believe that we will not be able to meet our current water-related challenges from essentially the same collective perception of water that gave rise to those challenges in the first place. As has been repeatedly observed over the course of human history, it is very difficult to "solve a problem at the level of the problem" because the seed of the problem is always inherent in the solutions. According to this worldview, a fundamental shift in our perception of water will be required for our addressing the current challenges that face us. How do we alter our collective perception of water? In order to answer this question, we need to take a closer look at our postmodern perception of water—at least that commonly held by people in the industrialized Western world.

As consequence of worsening water quality and quantity problems around the world, a variety of transnational entities (e.g., governmental consortia, private corporations, resource management cooperatives) are currently scrambling to assume ownership of and/or distribution rights for the world's freshwater resources. Actually, the recent interest in water is related more to quantity than to quality, the latter of which has been recognized for a very long time. There are number of compelling economic and political arguments for consolidating the control of water under such transnational entities and, barring a shift in people's perception of water, it is likely that global water schemes consistent with these arguments will be implemented. There are countless articles that have been written to support or refute the political and economic arguments underlying such water schemes, as well as to forecast changes that will accompany their implementation. I will defer to water policy experts on the relative merits of such arguments and, instead, focus on the relationship between humans and water.

In my view, the relationship between humans and water is not ultimately related to government regulations, corporate investments, water management plans, or even technological breakthroughs. Such organizations and activities simply reflect our collective perception of water. In other words, our self-imposed difficulties with water arise primarily out of our underlying perception of water and only secondarily out of the institutions that seek to exploit such a perception. Our lashing out at corporations for attempting to control and sell a natural resource is puzzling inasmuch as our very perception of water (as a financial commodity) necessarily invites such actions. One consequence of a society that measures its "quality of life" predominantly in financial terms (e.g., economic prosperity, material possessions, job security, pensions) is that everything is valued according to this same yardstick. So, why are some of us outraged by the prospect of the planet's water resources being privately owned and distributed according to the highest financial gain? After all, many other natural resources (e.g., petroleum, minerals, forests) are managed similarly.

The answer to this paradoxical question seems to be that water constitutes a natural resource quite unlike most others. Why so? Well, people just seem to have a feeling that water is somehow different. Similar to air and sunlight, access to water is considered by most postmodern Westerners to constitute a "human right." In other words, access to useable water is a privilege derived from our being born on Earth. We postmodern Westerners certainly have no problems in proclaiming our perceived rights; however, the same cannot be said for our genuinely embracing humility and responsibility when it comes to exercising those rights. By contrast, ancient and indigenous cultures considered water to be a sacred gift. As such, water was neither assumed to be a birthright (let alone an exclusive birthright of humans) nor relegated to the stature of a commodity or private property. In fact, the concept of owning water is absurd according to most indigenous and ancient cultures. Why would one species purport to own and control a gift from Nature that has always been shared among all earthly life forms? In order to answer this question, we need to take a brief look at the historic road leading to our current perception of water.

The Ancients

Water was considered to be sacred by most ancient and many modern indigenous peoples, not only because it was required to maintain their physical bodies, but also because it was a link to the divine. They intuited that water was somehow connected with the process of manifesting the material world or, at the very least, the life forms on this planet. Water was a tangible link between the manifested realm they perceived with their gross senses and the realm of Spirit that they perceived with their hearts. Their knowing was based neither on an intellectual understanding of water's physical properties nor on its value as a commodity, but instead on an intimate relationship with water's essence. Most of us postmodern Westerners have an admittedly difficult time even fathoming what is to "know water's essence." We acknowledge (intellectually) that water is essential for biological life and is aesthetically pleasing in both natural and man-made settings; however, this is a far cry from relating to water as animate or sentient or truly sacred. Why was water so often characterized as sacred by ancient peoples?

A possible answer to this question dates back at least 5,000 years (and probably much earlier) to some of the first human writings. The Sumerian civilization of ancient Mesopotamia tells us that *waters of chaos* represent the formless matter and infinite potential from which everything in our recognizable world emerged. Water was used as a metaphor for the boundless expanse that existed before the universe was divided into the realms of heaven and earth. The understanding that primordial waters, cosmic seas, or misty vapors preceded the material world is ubiquitous among ancient creational myths. Why was water such a favored metaphor for this pre-creational chaos? While the answer is not known for certain, most scholars believe that water best symbolizes the boundlessness, infinity, and fluidity that was presumed to have characterized our universe's sacred beginnings (i.e., the Absolute). It is also possible that ancient peoples understood something about the physical substance of water that we in the modern world have forgotten or do not fully grasp.

Transitioning from the metaphoric waters of chaos to the physical substance of water, we encounter the curious insight that water both imparts life to earthly life forms and is, itself, a living entity. This ancient understanding confounds both our (postmodern) common sense and the mechanistic tenets of contemporary science. It is generally believed that water's designation as "living" stems from the ancient belief that the four fundamental elements (i.e., earth, air, fire, and water) were often considered to be animate. According to many ancient myths, our world was created from differing combinations of these four elements and a fifth mysterious substance that the ancient Greeks referred to as *aether*. The association between water and aether in many ancient traditions may have actually represented a link between the seen and unseen worlds. Whether or not water was considered to be a living entity, it was definitely perceived as the physical substance that imparted life to the world.

There are several seemingly important, yet undeniably puzzling, insights that ancient cultures left us regarding the physical substance of water. First, it is a sacred gift (usually bestowed by the "Creator" of our universe) that imparts life to the world and, in doing so, mediates an essential exchange of energy and information between the observable and unobservable worlds. It was often proclaimed that all worldly forms emerge from the primordial waters through the substance of water and eventually return to the primordial waters through the substance of water. Second, this life-imparting process is inherent in a type of water that was generally known as *living water* or the *water of life*, which was perceived to be distinct from the more plentiful ordinary water that is required to sustain life. The processes or energies responsible for the transition from ordinary to living water remain a mystery; however, most of the so-called holy water used for ceremonial purposes is merely a surrogate for this living water. Third, water was a substance of untold wisdom (often possessing the attributes of memory and discernment) that should be honored and respected for both its life-giving and life-taking attributes. Many cultures considered water to be a communicative entity, not unlike the myriad life forms that owed their very physical existence to it. Based on these ancient insights, it is not difficult to understand why water was almost universally considered to be sacred.

From our postmodern Western perspective, the most obvious question relates to how ancient people arrived at these rather perplexing and grandiose insights about water. While we obviously do not know for sure, modern-day hypotheses attribute the insights to everything from simple fantasy and imagination to profound intuition and experience. The word "experience" in this context indicates a connection to or a direct apprehension of water *without* first judging and qualifying the process through our logical mind. Writer Dirk Dunbar recently defined this intuitional process as engaging the immediacy of experience with the whole being, which may involve instinct, somatic (body) awareness, empathy, and transpersonal perceptions.[1] This intuitional process may be contrasted with intellectual processes, whereby inductive or deductive reasoning are routinely employed to formulate projections that corroborate our observations and currently-accepted understandings about water. People living in today's intellectually based societies are sometimes considered to perceive the world in the way that they are taught to perceive the world—without necessarily experiencing the world for themselves.

In other words, we tend to project our understandings on water to a greater extent than we actually experience water.[2]

Naturalism and Science

With the dawning of Renaissance era, humans began to look at water in a number of heretofore-novel ways. While losing little of its mystique as a symbol of the "non-stuff" from which everything is created, water caught the attention of artists and naturalists who were intently focused on its intricate movements in the natural world. Leonardo da Vinci is perhaps the best known of the Renaissance artists who was fascinated with water's vortices and other recognizable flowforms. Similar to ancient peoples, da Vinci was convinced that water and, in particular, its vortical motion held the key to understanding and utilizing the power of the universe. At the same time, a new breed of naturalists began to study nature in terms of aesthetic attributes that could be quantified using simple mathematics. As such, the naturalists' path was more similar to that of ancient peoples' than to the path of the subsequent scientists, who would soon set out in search of the physical basis for water's uniqueness by studying its component particles and processes.

During the Renaissance period, early scientists played with rudimentary experiments, which were designed to demonstrate that the four elements (fire, air, water, and earth) could be created from one another and that everything was composed of differing mixtures of these four. As such, this very early science was built upon the ancient understanding of water as one of these fundamental elements. During the seventeenth century, the British scientist Robert Boyle began to question the physical validity of this ancient dogma, thus paving the way for a host of eighteenth century European chemists to experimentally demonstrate that water was not fundamental (at least not in a scientific sense), but instead was composed of oxygen and hydrogen gases.[3] This discovery marked the beginning of the great age of water-related scientific research and essentially extricated this common substance from its ancient perceptions, which were henceforth understood to be wrong. Science had correctly shown that ancient wisdom was a rather poor (or at least a grossly oversimplified) descriptor of water. This discovery marked the inauguration of empirical science as our "verifiable" link to water and, simultaneously, consigned the remnants of our intuitive link with water to mere fantasy.

As the Western world moved into the nineteenth century, we understood that water was a simple molecule composed of two very common atoms: hydrogen and oxygen in a 2 to 1 ratio. During this century, there was a flurry of experiments performed on water in an attempt to explain its bizarre physical properties—at least "bizarre" compared to other simple molecules that had been discovered. Despite the scientific interest in solving the riddle of water's anomalous behavior, scientists' first real glimpse into the magical workings of water would have to wait for the sophisticated investigative technologies of the mid-twentieth century. It is this glimpse that would dispel the notion of water's simplicity, which had been interpreted from the earliest scientific investigations. Water's representation as a simple collection of random H_2O molecules, forming an amorphous liquid and a crystalline solid, ended abruptly with the discovery of vast interconnected networks and clusters of molecules. In essence, liquid water is vast network that is

constantly rearranging its molecular geometries (as connections between neighboring water molecules are shuffled) in order to dissolve substances, to facilitate chemical reactions, and to mediate processes that are seemingly unrelated to water. The success of science in explaining the anomalous behavior of water has been truly astonishing. Moreover, science has offered both empirical evidence and verifiable mechanisms for natural phenomena—something that has long eluded naturalism. So, of what possible value is naturalism in the scientific age? It has been suggested that modern naturalism preserves the last vestiges of our experiential link to water.

Spiritual Transitions

Over an even longer period than was required for science to supplant naturalism as the predominant modality for studying Nature, an equally monumental shift was occurring on the spiritual front. It is generally recognized that most ancient spiritual traditions were built upon a reverence for the physical world, including the Earth herself and the many components of her planetary body (e.g., animals, plants, water, rocks). Not only did many of these ancient spiritual traditions place enormous import on recognizing, respecting, and thanking these earthly components (which were understood to be every bit as sentient and communicative as are humans), they encouraged people to commune with and experience their own personal connection to these fellow aspects of creation. Humans were no more or less important than any other aspect of the universal whole. From a postmodern perspective, the animistic view of water and teleological view of Earth are generally considered fanciful at best and stupid at worst. Moreover, many ancient cultures, such as the Native Americans, considered Earth to be their permanent home and not simply a temporary stomping ground en route to heaven or hell.[4] Finally, there appears to have been no ancient understanding that the certainty of future technological breakthroughs essentially liberates us from taking responsibility for our present actions regarding water.

The tenets of Western religion are frequently cited as contradicting those of ancient spirituality. Mythologist and historian Joseph Campbell suggested that ancient spirituality focused on putting people in accord with their own human nature and the natural world, while today's Western religions advocate subduing one's human nature and controlling the natural world.[5] In the former, man is perceived as only one aspect of an integrated world; while in the latter, man is perceived as separate from and dominant over a segregated world. Campbell suspects that difference between nature-oriented and human-oriented belief systems may have developed out of agrarian and nomadic lifestyles, respectively. Whatever the genesis of this dichotomy, we appear to have transitioned from a nature-oriented perspective whereby water, humans, plants, and the Earth were honored as aspects of Spirit to an anthropocentric perspective whereby humans are demonstrably separate from water, other species, the Earth, and Spirit. While this transition is neither good nor bad in and of itself, it behooves us to be cognizant of how such a perspective affects our actions toward and decisions regarding water.

Just as we seem to have substituted our personal experience for a scientific understanding of water, we may have substituted our personal kinship with water for the ceremonies

that were meant to honor that kinship and connection. As such, the difficulty lies not with the rituals themselves, but rather with a lack of any heartfelt connection underlying those rituals. Even in the midst of today's postmodern materialism, we humans still seem to know somewhere deep within our psyche that water is more than we acknowledge it to be. Unfortunately, except for glibly quoting biblical passages or parroting the latest New Age rhetoric, we collectively have no clue as to why it is sacred. We have either lost or abandoned the connection that actually put feeling behind these well-intentioned (but unmistakably hollow) words; hence, people like me are left to rummage around through ancient insights in an attempt to ascertain what exactly has been lost. What we are searching for in ancient insights is not a return to the "good old days" of ancient times, but rather a clue as to how our ancestors understood the role of water in their world and, more importantly, the nature of their deep connection to this most common of substances.

A Postmodern Combination

We postmodern Westerners are incredibly fortunate in our having access to the best of all possible worlds when formulating (or reformulating) our perception of water. The natural sciences provide us with the most powerful tool for intellectually understanding water that humans have ever known. Moreover, we have access to the insights of modern naturalists and, through their teachings, to methods of accessing and understanding Nature that date back to the Renaissance era. Through many different spiritual and religious traditions, we have access the rituals and passages that explain, in non-technical jargon, the role of water in our world. Anthropological studies provide us with some inkling of how ancient peoples perceived and revered water. Finally, we have access to a wide range of meditation and other introspective techniques that were almost unheard of in the Western world even fifty years ago. Although we face some challenging decisions regarding water, we postmoderners arguably possess more tools at our disposal than we ever have for meeting these challenges. The question is how to transform these sundry techniques and diverse understandings into a twenty-first century perception of water—assuming, of course, that we have the desire to do so.

Whether we postmodern Westerners ever perceive water as a communicative and sentient entity is, quite probably, a moot point. The important point is that we find our own unique connection that will supplement our predominantly intellectual knowledge of water. Cosmologist Brian Swimme suggests that our transitioning into a new postmodern era might include acquiring an experience of the universe at the same time that we learn scientific facts (or theories) about it.[6] Dirk Dunbar refers to this combination of intellect and intuition/experience as *integrative knowing*, which he defines as an understanding or knowing that is rationally based, insightfully perceived, and experientially verifiable.[3] Our balancing between the two major ways of knowing water may grant us a perspective that is more valuable than either one alone. Whether or not we eventually embrace an integrative knowing of water, we could move beyond our presently held perceptions that are dominated by socioeconomics and science.

As an intellectual tool for providing us with an appreciation of the natural world, science is unrivaled in human history. Most of us postmodern Westerners depend heavily on

science to validate, or sanction, our perception of water. So, why bother trying to revive a seemingly outdated experiential or intuitive connection to water? The most compelling answer relates not to what we know about water, but instead to what we don't know. Although ancient people knew far less than we do about water, they intuited that it was so integral to the world around them that they treated it as sacred. Water and the Earth were perceived to operate according to a larger and more complex design (i.e., Nature) than they understood with their minds or interpreted from their five senses. Lacking such humility, we postmodern humans think nothing of damming or changing the course of rivers, pumping liquid carbon dioxide into the oceans, altering local precipitation patterns, and draining wetlands—all done under the belief that we can forecast and/or assess the consequences of our actions. Yet this modern belief is based on an intellectual understanding of water that will likely appear rudimentary at the end of the next century. Although many of us postmodern Westerners recognize the limitations of our intellectual understanding of water, we often act in ways that seem to ignore this recognition.

Reclaiming a Connection

The question remains, how do we reconnect with water from where we are in today's postmodern world? And what might this reconnection look like? There is certainly no shortage of approaches that have been offered for such a reconnection over the years. Because we postmodern Westerners are so intellectually predisposed, one suggestion has been to entice the mind to temporarily step aside and let the more intuitive aspect of us take the lead. I have tried to use this tactic in my recent book, *Universal Water*, where I touch upon the truly amazing accounts of water that have been provided by ancient peoples, as well as by modern scientists and naturalists.[7] Because this type of intellectual knowledge has spurred me (and presumably others) to explore and experience water in unconventional ways, I am fond of this approach. For many people, however, this approach simply serves to satisfy a hunger for ideas and concepts, rather than to motivate an expansion of their repertoire for exploring water. While there is certainly nothing wrong with satisfying the intellect's hunger, this satiation alone is unlikely to shift the way in which we relate to water.

Another intellectually based approach incorporates the proactive component of activism. Postmodern water "warriors" have carved out their niche in society through boisterously opposing the actions of institutions (e.g., political and financial) to which we have collectively surrendered control of water. Regrettably, the environmentalist's fight for the preservation and conservation of water must be played out in either the political or legal arena, where water is necessarily reduced to the stature of a financial or aesthetic commodity—regardless of whether the fight is won or lost. Water protection laws, international treaties, and court orders are *not* a solution; they are temporary stopgap measures implemented to reduce the collateral damage to water (and the Earth) until we postmodern Westerners are able to restore some balance to our perceptions and actions. The expectation that our challenges with water will be met solely through legislation, regulation, litigation, and economic incentives belongs to the twentieth century.

A strictly experiential approach could include either meditating either in solitude or upon some aspect of Nature (e.g., water). The first type of meditation is designed to quiet the intellect for long enough so that the intuitive part of us may be heard above the constant roar of the logical mind. The second type of meditation is typical of Renaissance-type naturalists, who spend many hours observing water and silently eavesdropping on its secrets through "merging" with it. In many ways, these introspective techniques hold the most promise for a profound and lasting shift in one's perception; however, they require time, patience, persistence, and (in the latter case) access to water in a natural setting. Even the considerably less focused time that I have spent in and around water, both professionally and personally, has served to alter my perception of water. A postmodern world that defines itself according to productivity and consumerism does not reward time spent on this type of personal introspection and nature-oriented observation. Hence, one has to figuratively step out of the "mainstream" in order to achieve a connection to water offered by these unconventional approaches. This is certainly a viable path for some people; however, most people do not regard it as practical.

A combination of the intellectual and experiential approaches includes adopting and living (or attempting to live) according to the beliefs and rituals of ancient or indigenous peoples. This seems to be an extraordinarily difficult task for those of us living in the postmodern Western world; moreover, the adoption of ancient/indigenous belief systems does not necessarily translate into a connection to water. Remember that these beliefs and rituals arose from within peoples who already felt such a connection. Rituals and beliefs alone are generally not sufficient to foster a connection to water—we simply end up "going through the motions." We must move forward from where we are at this point in history; otherwise, we are simply adopting someone else's belief system. We currently have a plethora of belief systems from which to choose—it is a heartfelt connection to water that we lack!

A shift in our perception of water would not preclude our using water to meet basic human needs. Conversely, it should result in more of the world's human and non-human inhabitants having access to the water that has historically been shared among all species. The objective is to utilize the gift of water *and*, at the same time, to know that water is far more than that represented by its mundane uses. How will this "knowing" change the way that water is managed? Perhaps the emphasis will change from managing (i.e., something we do to water) to working in concert with water and its natural cycles. Does this mean that man-made water collection and conveyance systems will be eliminated? No, it means that the design for such systems will be influenced more by a respect for water and the intelligence of Nature than by a need to appease short-term political and financial interests. In our zeal to manage water using the lowest cost and most expedient alternatives, we have consistently made choices that achieve neither. We can choose to proceed down this same road, or we can choose a different perspective from which to make our decisions regarding water. As we ponder these choices, it might be worth our exploring an experiential or intuitive connection to water. By the way, I have a couple of extra surfboards in my garage for anyone who is interested in playing hooky.

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