
Be the Water

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Abstract

What we do to the water, we do to ourselves. Be the water. This paper discusses, from an Anishinaabekwe perspective, the physical and spiritual interconnectedness, the sacredness of water and our responsibilities particularly as women to help Mother Earth continue to do her work by protecting and speaking for the water.

Connecting to Water

My English name comes is Debby Wilson Danard, and I am from Rainy River First Nation in Northwestern Ontario. I have accepted the responsibility of carrying the life teachings of the Ojibway Anishinaabe as they have been share with me through my family, my community, the Three Fires Teaching Lodge and my personal connection to Spirit, the sacred space of creation. From the Three Fires Lodge, I have accepted the role and responsibility of protecting and ensuring that the water's teachings, songs and ceremonies are remembered for the next seven generations.

As Anishinaabekwe I understand my full responsibility to protect the life of water, the life blood of Mother Earth. Through our teachings, Earth is our Mother as she gives us everything we need to live. My Anishinaabe name, Niogwanaybiik comes from the Thunderbirds: from our oral histories and teachings, they are the protectors of the water that is held in the sky realm. The water is kept clean through the balance of the Thunder-birds (thunder) and the Snakes (lightening). The connection between the physical water and the sky realm water is made through water ceremony. Women, as the protectors of the water, conduct the water ceremony with gratitude to the water that sustains all of life. The women hold a copper vessel of water, speak to the water, sing to the water...

*Ne-be Gee Zah- gay- e- goo
Gee Me-gwetch -wayn ne- me – goo
Gee Zah Wayn ne- me- goo¹*

¹ This song was gifted by Doreen Day at the request of her grandson. English translation: "Water, we love you. We thank you. We respect you."

The petition to the water through prayer and song acknowledges with humble gratitude the life-blood of Mother Earth. From Mother Earth's continuous giving we have been sustained, are sustained, and will be sustained for future generations.

I travelled to Machiasport, ME, to sit at the ocean where the grandfathers and grandmothers called me. I open my heart to hear the Anishinaabe creation story through the sound of the water moving to the rhythm of the universe. Turtle Island shifts to awaken the ancestors..."she is here, she is listening"...I look as far as I can...Waynaboozhoo on the back of a whale...the water helps petition for strength...the water needs our help. I sing to the water...I offer my tobacco and receive the gifts of this eastern doorway, a renewal of knowledge and understanding of my connection to the spirit of creation.

Owidi waubunong buh-onji-wausay-yawbung...anduso geezhig (there in the eastern direction from whence the dawn emerges each day). From this direction we are gifted with kendassiwinn meenwa sitwin (knowledge and understanding). It is from this direction we understand the past, present and future at once through biidaaban (brings light at dawn). We are told all of life comes through this direction; this is the place where the life journey begins.

I place my tobacco offering in the water
"What are you asking of me?"
We do not govern mother earth
She governs us
She teaches us how to care for her
When She is sick we must take care of her

Unconditional in her love for all of Creation
We must also be unconditional in our love for her

What we do to the water, we do to ourselves
We see our reflection in the water.

Water is a warrior

Life brought forth from the waters
of mother earth
of birth
the first tears

'Man'-made dams and structures
stagnates her life-blood
Throws her off-balance
straining under the pressure.

We thirst from 'Man'-made promises
of a good-life rooted in greed and economy
We destroy our past, our present and our future
Leaves us Thirsty

False promises replace
Creators promise
That water would always companion
To bring life

Be thankful
Be grateful

The way of the water teaches us

Love unconditional for all of life
For ourselves, for each other

The water inside of us
Speaks to the water outside of us
Reflects itself outward
What we do to the Water
We do to ourselves
Be the water...

Women Govern the Water

Women govern the water; this role as our inherent right has never been relinquished, as women we must stand up for the water, as Elder Josephine Mandamin instructs: "The water is sick...And people need to really fight for that water, to speak for that water, to love that water" (qtd. in McMahon). The men's responsibility is to support the women in a manner for the women to do their work.

Women govern the water as caretakers; as women are gifted to carry and bring forth life through birth, so women are considered to be like Mother Earth who sustains life through her continual creation. Each child is born through the water, and nourished within the sacred space of creation. With the help of the men, the balance is to protect the future generations. The role of men is to understand their relationship to the fire (vision) and keep the sacred fire burning strong. The fire is at the heart of Mother Earth and represents the vision to see ahead seven generations. Working together, the male and female human beings ensure Mother Earth is taken care of. How we take care of the water and Mother Earth is how we will be taken care of. The human beings were entrusted to ensure the rights of Mother Earth are protected and respected. As Anishinaabeg this was understood from our culture, governance, and way of life. Through our teachings, Anishinaabeg followed the natural laws and lived mino-bimaadiziwin (good life) in balance with all of creation.

This way of understanding the relationship with Mother Earth has been acknowledged recently through the Universal Declaration of the Rights of Mother Earth submitted by Bolivia to the United Nations. The Declaration articulates the relationship between the many Nations of Earth as “indivisible...interrelated and interdependent with a common destiny.” It acknowledges Mother Earth as the source of life for all living beings. It states, it is our human right to ensure that Mother Earth is recognized as having inherent rights that include “the right to life and to exist; the right to be respected...the right to water as a source of life...and clean air...” As human beings we are obligated to ensure these inherent rights of Mother Earth are respected and recognized...in accordance with their own cultures, traditions and customs...” It is impressive that the people of Bolivia took this lead, following their “water war” in the beginning of the twenty-first century, as detailed by Vandana Shiva. The World Bank’s involvement in water privatization is well-documented (see for example, Barlow and Clarke) with worldwide implications that water as commodity results in huge profits at the expense of human beings and Mother Earth’s right to water as a source of life.

Significantly, uniting South America and North America to raise awareness of the cry for Mother Earth to help heal the water was Josephine Mandamin, Ojibway from Manitoulin Island, Ontario. Along with a small group of women, men, and often children this Grandmother lead the water walks around the perimeter of the Great Lakes, beginning in 2003 with Lake Superior. The water walkers proceeded around (upper) Lake Michigan in 2004, Lake Huron in 2005, Lake Ontario in 2006, Lake Erie in 2007 and (lower) Lake Michigan in 2008. Women alone carried a copper vessel of water, accompanied by an Eagle Staff primarily carried by the men.

Rising before sunrise every morning for several weeks, the water walkers raised awareness of the pollution by chemicals, vehicle emissions, motor boats, sewage disposal, agricultural pollution, leaking landfill sites, and residential usage taking a toll on our water quality. Even when she believed she was finished her mission, Grandmother Josephine was reminded that the Great Lakes flowed into the ocean, and so in 2009, and she led the water walkers from Kingston, Ontario to Gaspé Peninsula along the St. Lawrence River. The commitment of Grandmother Josephine Mandamin is admired and honoured, and her work to raise awareness of the water has led to a great rebirth in communities to take action and to work to protect the water in their surrounding environment.

I am grateful to have participated as a water walker around Lake Ontario (2006) and briefly Lake Erie when I was carrying the life of my soon to be born daughter in 2007. In 2009, my then 17-months old daughter joined in the water walk along the St. Lawrence River. The blessing of this journey was watching my daughter and Grandmother Josephine sitting at the ocean at the end of the walk. Grandmother Josephine handed my daughter the copper vessel, entrusting my daughter to continue to work for the water, protect the water and love the water. In 2011, we continued our work for the water participating in the Four Directions Water Walk.² This walk united all the waters of Mother Earth. Waters from the Pacific Ocean, the Gulf of Mexico, the Atlantic Ocean and Hudson Bay were gathered in copper vessels and walked to Bad River, WI, on Lake Superior where the first water walk began. Through this ceremony, the waters were united to bring the message from the four directions of Turtle Island that the water needs our help, it needs the human beings to continue to care for the water, to care for each other and respect all of life as it was placed here from the beginning of creation.

Like walking for the water, one step at a time...there has been demonstrated movement towards support for women's role in "governance" and water including policy and governance. The Assembly of First Nations Women's Council is one such supporter, as is the Anishinabek Nation (Union of Ontario Indians), which announced the creation of a Women's Water Commission aimed in part at providing input to the Ontario government on Great Lakes water issues in 2007. Since the first water walk, communities from all over the world have shown their support to Grandmother Josephine through social media, and many groups of first time water walkers are being raised up to continue the work inspired and awakened through Grandmother Josephine's commitment.³

² *The journey of this Four Directions walk is documented in the film, Water Journey, 2011 directed by Jeff Bear and Marianne Jones.*

³ *More information of Elder Josephine Mandamin can be found at (www.motherearthwaterwalk.com)*

“Man” governs Water

Water is a human right and should be guaranteed to all people regardless of their ability to pay.

Over several decades the concern for water quality and unsanitary conditions has been an issue for First Nation communities. Sustainable water management and governance continues to be of concern for the present and future generation. As of February 2015, 92 First Nations on “boil water advisory” (Health Canada). This includes First Nations who have been on long-term advisory. In 2011, The Council of Canadians continued to advocate for drinking water and sanitation on First Nations, including concerns for the Safe Drinking Water For First Nations Act (Bill S-11).

Currently, First Nations are under the federal jurisdiction of the Ministry of Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development Canada (AANDC, formerly INAC), and therefore provincial regulatory water standards do not apply on reserves. First Nations are responsible for the construction, design, operation and maintenance of their water systems, and 20% of the cost. They are also responsible for ensuring that water systems are operated by trained operators as well as for monitoring drinking water quality through effective sampling and testing. However, both the 2006 Report of the Expert Panel on Safe Drinking Water for First Nations (19) and a 2008 report prepared by the Polaris Institute, in collaboration with the Assembly of First Nations (Harden and 7), identified lack of sufficient financial resources as a cause of inadequate water treatment systems on some reserves.⁴ AANDC (one of 34 federal departments and agencies involved in Aboriginal and northern programs and services) provides partial (80%) funding for water provision subject to the appropriate technical review and funding approval process. It then oversees the design, construction and maintenance of water facilities and is responsible for water system technicians training dollars. Unfortunately, to meet the training criteria, the water system infrastructure must be classified, and potential technicians must have a minimum grade 12 education, and when they do qualify First Nation technicians get paid significantly less than mainstream technicians;⁵

⁴ *The Commissioner of the Environment and Sustainable Development also recognized the issue of First Nations’ financial capability to cover the 20 percent of operating costs not funded by the Department of Indian Affairs and Northern Development.*

⁵ *...It appears that while the Canada Labour Code (at minimum) may apply to workers on reserves, there does not seem to be a program of regular inspection and enforcement” (Expert Panel on Safe Drinking Water). For additional information on jurisdictional issues see Tonina Simeone’s Federal-Provincial Jurisdiction and Aboriginal Peoples. Additional resource information can be found at (<http://www.great-lakes.net/humanhealth/drink/regulation.html>)*

...it appears that while the Canada Labour Code (at a minimum) may apply to workers on reserves, there does not seem to be a program of regular inspection and enforcement.” (Expert Panel 42)

Health Canada ensures the delivery of drinking water monitoring programs on reserves located south of the 60th parallel, either directly or indirectly through third party quality monitoring. Although Health Canada is responsible for providing Water Quality Data there seems to be gaps, with information not being directed to AANDC, and there is little or no funding for First Nations to take samples of their water (including source waters) for testing. This is a significant shortcoming, as many First Nations access water directly for recreational and traditional purposes.

Environment Canada is involved in source water protection through its powers to regulate wastewater discharge into federal waters or into water generally where water quality has become a matter of national concern, and its powers to enforce effluent discharge standards into water throughout Canada. The Clean Water Act in Ontario is the only Canadian model for a comprehensive watershed management system for source protection (Expert Panel 38). Distribution systems on reserve are sized to deliver about half the water per capital available to other Ontarians.

Unclear coordination of water management and governance, which is divided among different sectors within the three departments or four departments (i.e. source water protection, water management training, infrastructure, water quality, design and construction, maintenance and monitoring) continues to demonstrate systemic barriers for First Nations social, political and traditional knowledge positions and inherent rights to water governance. As Tonina Simeone suggests:

Section 91(24) of the Constitution Act, 1867, grants to the federal government exclusive jurisdiction over “Indians and lands reserved for the Indians.” As a result, legislative authority for the provision of drinking water to on-reserve First Nations communities vests with the federal government. (Drinking Water 1) In the Federal Government’s jurisdictional relationships within their own structures of management, First Nations inclusion in primary discussions at the community level and a Nation to Nation basis is absolutely necessary to develop alliances that ensure Treaty rights and inherent rights are recognized and protected. Traditional knowledge and practices challenge technical aspects with the social aspects of water management and governance including source water protection where industries such as mining, and forestry impact First Nation communities overall health and access to safe drinking water.

A major concern is that federal government will continue to promote privatization through facilitating public-private partnerships (P3s) on First Nations. Unfortunately, this solution continues to take community accountability, management and economy (local community employment) out of First Nations into the mainstream private sector.

It is imperative that First Nations participate in shaping their own systems and that “man” made structures understand the words of our great uncle Jim Dumont:

We must remember about the traditional ways of community organizing...and we must remember that in our creation stories, the people came together first, and together they create the structures that they need, so that everyone has a voice and everyone contributes to the formation of a shared vision, and a shared plan of how to meet all the needs that the people have. (Personal discussion, 2015)

Traditional Knowledge that recognizes the spiritual and relationship value and includes our basic right to water needs to be addressed nationally, provincially and with First Nations. The future depends on us all.

Water Governs Us

*Where does the water flow through?
Can you not hear it my relatives?
It flows through from that most beautiful place
in the sky realm.*

Water is life.
the foundation
for all of life to
come into Creation.
Water governs us
sustains life
water teaches wisdom
love
courage
truth
respect
humility
honesty
From drought
Floods
Destruction
The power beyond
Human capacity to control
We are governed by
the water.



How we understand ourselves in relation to all of creation, particularly our connection with water, the life-blood of Mother Earth, will determine our future survival. The living web of life, human and otherwise, is interconnected through Mother Earth and her waters. The responsibility must be shared through family and community and the many Nations. Life within ourselves is dependent on the life outside ourselves. The water songs, teachings and ceremonies petition the human being to be remembered for the next seven generations. "Can you hear it my relatives?"

Connecting to the water both inside of me and outside of me, I acknowledge that one-ness. The significance of this understanding and advocacy for the water connected to the development of a youth training curriculum that integrates water teachings and suicide prevention and life promotion (Ontario Federation of Indian Friendship Centres, "Strengthening Life through Water Teachings", 2010). These modules focus on the relationship between caring, respecting and valuing both water and life. Water governs us: if we are listening will can hear the teachings.

The concept of a governance structure by the water for the water may sound impossible. However, it is within this impossibility that there is possibility. Water will continue to demonstrate its creative and destructive form, doing the work that the water was instructed to follow at the beginning of creation, nourish life. As human beings connecting to the water inside and outside of us, we begin to understand governance from the perspective of water. In the spirit of decolonizing thought, connecting to water connects us to the understanding the desire of water to fulfill its teaching to nourish life and our desire as human beings to continue to exist from the blessing of waters generous gift. As with any gift, we are indebted to the water and should attempt to "repay" that debt with love and gratitude. Continued attempts to rigidly and systemically control the power of water demonstrates the limitations of man-made governance as being a centric belief of man in dominion over the natural laws.

The possibility of water governance from the perspective of water can be made possible through accessing and incorporating traditional knowledge and teachings as a method of consultation and participation in decision-making, clarifying roles and responsibilities through consultation and examining water's perspective in relation to stewardship, management and governance. Be the water.

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Author Bio:

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Dr. Debby Wilson Danard (PhD, MEd, BEd) is Anishinaabekwe traditional knowledge practitioner, multi-disciplinary artist, lecturer, writer, water protector, life promotion ambassador and sturgeon clan member from Rainy River First Nation. Growing up, she was raised with her grandmother's love and commitment to sharing traditional Anishinaabek teachings and way of life.

As a Water Protector and Mother Earth Water Walker she has spoken alongside Maude Barlow at the University of Toronto to raise awareness of the spiritual nature of water and rights of water. She has worked with the Women's Human Rights Institute, community organizations, and schools sharing traditional teachings through water ceremony. She gratefully acknowledges the spirit of the water for teaching love as a reflection of life.

Recently awarded a 2019 Provost Postdoctoral Fellowship in the Women and Gender Studies at the University of Toronto, she is writing her first book, that engages both graphic and creative narrative to re-interpret her original doctoral research, "Medicine Wheel Surviving Suicide-Strengthening Life Bundle" (2016). As reciprocity, this revision will challenge dominant colonial interpretations of Indigenous history, identity, culture (languages and land), traditional knowledge and ceremony as archival artifacts.

As a Suicide Prevention Coach at the Ontario Centre of Excellence for Child and Youth Mental Health, she co-founded the Feather Carriers: Leadership for Life Promotion (2015) an aspiring national wise practice for youth mental health and wellness. She also held a postdoctoral fellowship at Waypoint Centre for Mental Health Care (2017), and is owner of Union Star Consulting Life Teachings Lodge. As a leader for change, Debby strengthens life from the heart of Indigenous identity, sovereignty and autonomy as an evolving, creative, and living continuum of knowing and being.

