



According to Thales, a founder of Western philosophy and science, water is the only true element, the original substance of the cosmos. All other elements, all beings, arise from her. Ancient wisdom confirms that water is the measure and source of all things.

Water takes the shape of her surroundings or shapes them for her own purposes. Water flows through everything, braiding together all beings, all places and times. She symbolizes and embodies the indivisible earthly commonweal. The One River.

Water consecrates.

Her function, for John Keats, is sacerdotal. From celestial height, Keats observes "The moving waters at their priestlike task of pure ablution round earth's human shores." This is nature's ceremony of eternal return: the washing away and absolving of all that sullies and obscures the sacred creation.

But we human beings have sullied our "shores" almost beyond water's power to cleanse. We have interrupted and desecrated the cycle of life itself. Through massive intervention, we have created what the Global Commission on the Economics of Water (GCEW) terms "extreme imbalances in the global and local water cycles." Almost everywhere on earth, we have disrupted the natural flow of water through her living systems of rock, soil, and plants.

The degradation of freshwater ecosystems, the GCEW warns, "has become a driver of climate change and biodiversity loss." When we create drylands through development, monocultures, and clear-cutting, we increase the amount of heat coming off the land and retained by green-house gases. And 40% of the earth's surface is now dryland.



Ode to Water: Source of All Things

By Tom Small



It is not the pot lid that causes the pot to boil over; it is the heat in the pot itself, retained and "recycled" by the CO₂ lid.

We have, moreover, removed water from her normal cycles of healing and regeneration of life from decay and dissolution. Nearly half of all surface waters in the U.S. now support little or no aquatic life.

Damming, channeling, diverting, and burying freeflowing waters reduces them to sullen servitude. It also degrades the entire family of more-than-human beings generated by natural ebb and flow. Salmon cannot complete their life cycle nor provide food for bears, oaks, and children. Willow and cottonwood trees cannot cool eddies and embankments, providing habitat for trout, otters, muskrats, cord grass, and elderberries. Rivers cannot spread into vast deltas, rich with the life of sea, shore, sand, and silt: avocets, alligators, oysters, manatees, mangrove crabs.

The water required in the course of most mining becomes little more than toxic waste. Each hydraulic fracking job requires up to 20 million gallons of water. Laced with more than 1000 chemicals, at least 157 of which are reproductive or developmental toxins, the water is pressure-injected deep into the earth and exploded to shatter petroleum-bearing rock. Roughly 80% of the water is returned to the surface, sprayed on farm fields, used to melt ice on highways, and dumped in streams. The remaining 20% remains deep below, moving slowly through silent bedrock, poisoning the "cryptic" water so essential to Earth's circulatory system —there is more dark, fresh water deep beneath than on the green surface of the planet.

In the depths and on the surface, water has become a weapon of mass destruction. Desecrated. Deranged.

But just as the crises are all connected—water crisis, biodiversity crisis, climate crisis—so are the solutions: restore natural flow and cycles of water; revegetate barren and degraded land; recognize water as a local and global commons, shared by all beings; and restore the sacred being of water herself, with the same rights as all persons—to health, autonomy, and integrity.

Less than 1% of our nation's 3 million miles of rivers and streams are truly free-flowing, unobstructed by dams or other human-made barriers. American Rivers estimates that 85% of U.S. dams are unnecessary. Studies show that when free flow is restored, the natural cycles of water, soil, and seed begin almost immediately to lower air and water temperature, reduce methane emission, and restore water quality. Species lost to dams, levees, and culverts—salmon, eastern box turtles, spicebush, sturgeon, nannyberry—find their way back. Many dams are coming down, particularly in the last few years, with funding from the Bipartisan Infrastructure Bill of 2021. Over 75,000 streams, rivers, and their ecosystems are still waiting—to be freed, decolonized, restored.

Slowly dams come down, using nature's own medicine to bring our waters back to health and cool the planet. Slowly, we remember what we forgot: water is life, our ancestor, the source of our being. To the Whanganui Iwi of Aotearoa, who know themselves only as their beloved Whanganui River, she is an "indivisible and living whole." As the GCEW insists, she is a "global common good," sharing herself with all creatures. She knows herself better than we do. Gradually or forcefully, she finds her own way, despite enclosure and obstruction.

With our most advanced technology, we search for water as the sign of possible life on distant planets. Perhaps, from somewhere deep in our blood and ancestral memory, we dimly recall and re-enact an ancient spirit quest, symbolized in Western culture as the search for the Grail. Achievement of the quest, the story tells us, will Free the Waters, returning rivers to their native channels. But our efforts are misguided: the holy grail is not out there but here on earth, the elemental embodiment of Agape and Eros, the attractive, relational, generative force of all life, Linda Hogan's "moon-loved element." The waters of body and spirit. Desecrated. Still awaiting our return to where we began, truly to know and love the place for the first time.



More Resources

Elementals, Vol. 3: Water

Edited by Ingrid Leman Stefanovic et al.

From Ritual to Romance: An Account of the Holy Grail from Ancient Ritual to Christian Symbol

by Jessie L. Weston

Universal Declaration of the Rights of Rivers

by the Earth Law Center

The Economics of Water: Valuing the Hydrological Cycle as a Global Common Good by the Global Commission on the Economics of Water

Protecting Biodiversity From Harmful Financing: Free Flowing Rivers

by International Rivers, Friends of the Earth US, and Rivers without Boundaries

For further information about freeing the waters, more resources, and actions you can take, see 'Water Is Life,' at QuakerEarthcare.org/Publications/WaterIsLife. Or scan this QR code.

