

FAITHFUL WORDS MEDITATION: ON COVENANT

Habondia's Promise

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Delivered at Unity Church-Unitarian

St. Paul, MN

November 14, 2010

As we prepare for the Thanksgiving meal to come, our seasonal sense of plenty calls to mind the old Celtic goddess Habondia, goddess of the harvest, of prosperity and abundance. However, this annual gathering of gratitude now arrives within a larger context of loss – in these times of continued economic duress and environmental destruction, times when clean land and air and water are all rapidly diminishing. In times of loss like this, what promises can possibly provide protection?

Perhaps we can learn from others who have lived with scarcity for countless generations. In northeastern Arizona, a desert community of Navajo and Hopi marks one of the “longest continuously inhabited settlements on our continent.” No habitat of plenty is their home, though. It is a harsh environment, where definitions of abundance have been carved over millennia from a deeper understanding of life’s sources and prosperity. As Winona LaDuke says, “Only those who heed the limits can survive and thrive there.”¹

So indeed they did, for millennia honoring an ancient covenant between the Hopi and the Creator. According to the Hopi creation story, at the dawn of time, there was only water. And from water came land, and from land and water together all life emerged. This water, the common source shared with all of creation, abides beneath the ground as a living, breathing world the Hopi call *Patuwaqatsi* (*pa-too-wah-KAAT-see*), meaning “water life.” As one Hopi leader said, “I am as much a part of the clouds as they are of me.” In this ancient covenant, all life is connected and all water is sacred, springing from a single water world beneath the land.

Forty five years ago, however, the water came under the power of a new agreement. Peabody Coal Company craftily negotiated contractual rights to the Navajo Aquifer, allowing them to construct the largest coal strip mine complex on the continent and to draw from the Navajo Aquifer to slurry their coal through pipelines into Nevada. Peabody mines eventually sucked up 1.3 billion gallons of water per year, fouling it beyond reclamation and leaving it to evaporate into the Nevada sky. The sacred

¹Based on an account by past tribal chairman Vernon Masayesva as retold by Winona LaDuke, *Recovering the Sacred*, Cambridge, MA: South End Press, 2005, 34-42.

covenant was clearly broken. Sold as a commodity, the water was rapidly depleted, dropping levels in area wells by 100 feet or more and drying up many springs entirely.

Hopi and Navajo leaders, acknowledging this broken sacred covenant, are now working diligently to restore it. Through organizing and legal challenges, this year they won a ruling that rejected Peabody's automatic contract renewal, approved by the federal government in 2008. The tribes have also begun weaning their own communities from both the contract monies and the electrical power provided by coal. They are developing new sources of income and jobs. They are investing in renewable energy. They are remembering the ancient covenant that allowed them to survive and to thrive in millennia past.

We too are called to remember and heed our sacred covenants and life's limits.

*Habondia, the real abundance," says the poet Marge Piercy, "is the power to say yes and to say no, to open and to close, to take or to leave. . . ."*²

Our real abundance is found in our choices. Our choice to say yes and our choice to say no. I ask you, what will we take and what will we leave behind, so as not to be taken ourselves by fear, by poverty, or by our insatiable hunger for more, more, more?

May this be the abundance – the abundance of choice – celebrated among us in this season of harvest and plenty. And may we recall our own sacred covenants with life and remember our own power to say yes and to say no.

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² From the poem "The Sabbath of Mutual Respect" by Marge Piercy, Marilyn Sewell, ed., *Cries of the Spirit*, Boston: Beacon Press, 1991, 227.