

Culture Splash

Water and the Cultural Commons

by Jan Edwards

If we could step back from our cultural training and see Water as it really is, we would see one complete cycle—one Water—flowing through every living thing on earth and connecting us all to the whole. What should be our proper and true relationship to this Water Commons?

The historical development of the Cultural Commons has changed humans' relationship to Water from one of a gift of nature for all to share—towards a property relationship. In the beginning of life, Water was shared in common by all that depended on it. Plants and animals—including humans—took only what they needed at the moment. But as humans began to settle in one place, Water became a strong ribbon in our common tapestry and human cultural ribbons began to impact how Water was thought of, allocated and used.

As humans developed a common language, they named and categorized Water. Each naming separated the Water into fragments of the whole. With numbers, humans measured and metered Water. Money made it possible to set a monetary value to Water, and when this was done, changing it from a Common to a commodity.

Human knowledge grew and Water irrigated fields and turned wheels to grind grains grown in those fields. Water became less a force of Nature and more a resource for human civilization. Water became a tool and controlling Water an instrument of power.

Wars fought for Water solidified ideas of "ownership" of Water, control of Water, and Water as a border. Development of Water-borne transportation allowed humans to move goods by Water and led to rules about who could navigate this river, fish this

sea, cross this mote. This led to colonization of other lands and, once there, to "enclose" and privatize the Water Commons.

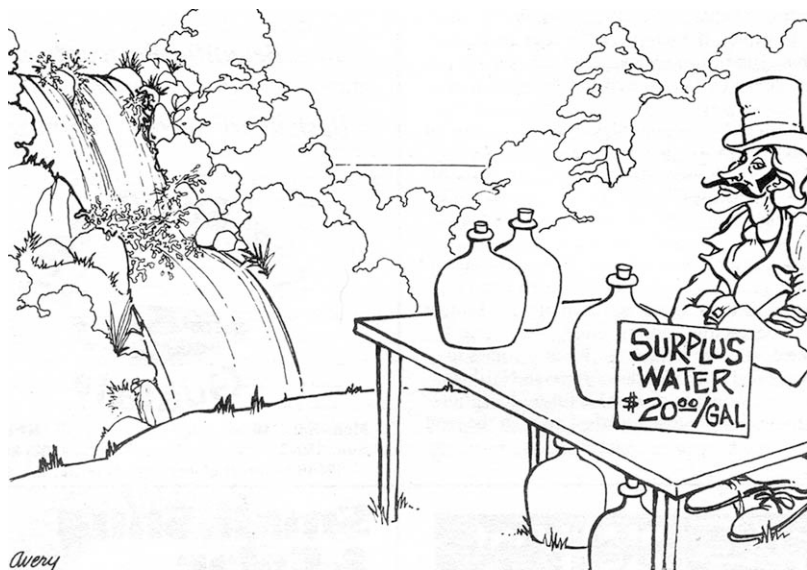
In art and literature, Water was objectified and stereotyped. Water was beautiful and fearful, mysterious, powerful and unknown. There were Water gods and myths of monsters. Water also came to represent purity and is integral to traditions from baptisms to rain dances. Recreation involving Water permeates our culture. We create snow for the purpose of skiing and chlorinate cement pools to swim laps in.

Water has become essential to all sorts of business. Water is big business, being bought and sold by multi-national corporations, which are now trying to push Water into the new trade agreements. But perhaps the ultimate example of the corporate co-option of Water is the branding and selling of bottled Water. Businesses use many aspects of our cultural commons to distort our proper relationship to Water, and Water to us. First there is the language, spring Water; then the numbers, one liter; and money; \$3.99. All the knowledge of how to make the bottle of poisonous plastic that pollutes the very Water we so want pure is an application of scientific cultural commons. How the bottle travels, probably over Water to be filled and then again to be sold is also a cultural development. The Water source is captured and exploited. A bottling plant is built and polluted waste Water from the bottling is dumped into nearby streams. The media advertises and promotes bottled Water's virtues of health and fashion while reminding us of ancient fears of sickness from Water not sealed in plastic. Businesses profit and consumers are fooled into paying a hefty price for something that is priceless and yet free as our birthright.

Our Cultural Commons need not be the enemy of the Natural Commons. Many traditional cultures treated Water as a shared common. Even in the U.S. much of water law is based on the right to "use" not "own" water. We also have public trust doctrine to build on. We can turn our cultural creativity towards an understanding of who we are in relation to nature, and learn to see Water as a giver, and all of us as receivers, of a kind of Grace—Water Grace.

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graphic: Bob Avery