The Wisdom of Water
by Larraine Lauter, OSU

“All praise, my Lord,
for Sister Water,
so useful, humble,
precious and pure.”
~ Francis of Assisi
All praise to the Holy One, who has given us Sister Water. Our first breath of life is not in air, but in the water of our mother’s womb. Before any other essential elements of life touch us, we are children of Sister Water. We sense a deep, desperate and instinctive connection to her, the stuff of our first breath.

Once we draw our first gulp of air, our relationship to our Sister Water makes a radical shift...from breath to thirst. Our lifelong relationship unfolds in ferocious intensity, regardless of our consciousness.

A few hours of separation, and we long for her. A few days of separation, and we die for lack of her. She is indeed a beloved sister. We cannot imagine life without her. Indeed, we have no life without her.

I think and write about water, seated on a friary patio in Honduras, in July, the winter of Central America. Thanks to the loving cultivation of my Franciscan brother-hosts, the garden is beautifully green and flowered: the crepe myrtle spreads low sweet clouds across the blue sky, the new growth pushing out from the earth is pungent and insistent.

But the truth is, we are in terrible drought here. *El Niño, el tremendo*, has again played havoc with the weather for months. The great reservoir that supplies the twin cities of Tegucigalpa and Comayaguela is declared lower than ever seen. The rivers through the city have shrunk to a smelly trickle. There is great anxiety about the anticipated harvest...simply, that in many parts of the country, there will be no harvest. “*No hay cosecha,*” is declared over and over in tones of awe.

The price of red beans, the staple nutrition of the poor, has doubled or more. The country is clouded in fear, shrouded in anxiety. Violence feeds on hunger and thirst, munches on hopeless bones. Talk is consumed by the stories of children escaping to the US border, flinging themselves out of the growing fire that is Honduras. More than I ever recall, in twelve years of frequent and extended visits, daily conversation lurches from one calamity, present or anticipated, to another. “What will the people do? How will they live?,” conclude the friars, troubled as always, yet more troubled than I have ever heard them. “Why should the children not leave? *No hay esperanza por ellos aquí.* There is no hope for them here.”
Here we live in deep awareness of water. The rare brief afternoon shower is greeted with joy and gratitude...and will this sip of rain will bring up the reservoir level? Flowers and the vegetable garden are watered with just a sip, conscious of the great dryness that affects so many. Washing of every kind is conducted with care. We sip the clean water we have with conscious gratitude. *Somos bendecidos.* We are blessed.

Mothers here in Colonia San Francisco, and barrios all around, tell me how the water that was turned on once a week is now rationed out at once a month, for a few hours. They tell me how many children are chronically ill from the effects of dirty water, “*agua sucia.*” How terribly sad, our Sister Water... Would Francis not weep, to see Sister Water; so diseased, so violated, even dangerous, even a source of death? Must we not weep, to see these mothers: so tired, so burdened, weeping for their children, and their children’s children? Fray Ramiro points to a little corner home: “that woman has lost, nine, nine grandsons and nephews *por la violencia.*”

I go out with friends to visit Carmen, a mother in our program: Water With Blessings, *Agua Con Bendiciones.* “*Comprar agua limpia es tener menos para las otras necesidades,*” says Carmen. To buy clean water is to have less for other necessities. “*Y como yo puedo elegir?*” And how can I choose? Who gets to drink the clean water? Twelve, children and adults, sharing *una botella*... five gallons of *Aguazuil* for a week. How much is that? “*Bueno, imaginese, entre 36 y 40 lempiras.*” Between 36 and 40 lempiras...a little less than two dollars, a sizeable amount from Carmen’s carefully folded slips of precious money. Can she allow more for the youngest child, or the weakest child, or the spouse who must stay well for work, so we eat, or *mi mamacita* who suffers from sugar in the blood? Here a sip, there a sip... But, full stop: Carmen is a Water Woman. Water is, amazingly in this barrio, the least of her worries.

What, I ask Carmen, do you do with that money now that you are a Water Woman? Carmen’s face beams in the shadowed front room of her home, where we are gathered around her enshrined water filter system, enfolded in loving embroidery. On the white bucket to which the filter is attached Carmen has drawn bright flowers, butterflies, prayers, the names of her children. There is a little drawing of heaven: a bright blue river running through a neat little Honduran ranchito. With this bucket and filter, Carmen no longer buys clean water: she makes it.

As Water Woman, Carmen was gifted with a “first world worthy” filter system (irony intended) and supporting gear, trained in its use and maintenance: an abundant blessing of absolutely clean water for years to come. Her promise, by sacred covenant: a commitment to filter drinking water for just three other families for only six months, and never to sell water. “*Bendicida por Dios,*” says Carmen, “for five years now I give clean water to six other families. And with the money I save?” Amazed joy lights her eyes. “*Compro leche! I buy milk for the children!*”

All we need to do is find and equip more Carmens. What the world needs, right now, is more Water Women, with equipment that is worthy of them. Seems simple enough.
Yesterday, Honduran friends and I rode up the mountain behind the Basilica of Suyapa in a bucking Toyota truck conducted with light hand by a stray Colombian, Padre Arismendis. He manifests a ferocious heart for the poor. “I must show you the great need, you must come and see the reality. Please, please come. The people, the people of my parish suffer for want of water...Bueno, the people here have water once in a while...

Bueno, this barrio, the water truck comes muy muy poco... Bueno, in that marginal place, there is absolutely no water...Up there, see, there is no water! “No hay agua, no hay agua.” On and on, the truck weaving through barrios clientes, where the violent reputation of Honduras is made every day in assassinations and kidnappings, then snorting and clawing up stone and mud roads through sudden open fields to ranchitos perched high, high above the basilica, now a toy church far below. Here are your young girls, two quite small, lugging great yellow oil jugs of water just filled from a neighbor’s spring... Here a sip, there a sip for each mamá y papá y hermano who labors in the hot sun in the struggling fields. Here is a roadside “well”... A dammed up pool from a spring, tadpoles kicking across.

Over and over Padre Arismendis chants his little refrain, “they have no water... Over there they have only a little dirty water...”

My friends and I, who work together “for God’s thirsty children,” nod patiently and murmur in agreement. We aren’t really here to learn the reality. We could, ourselves, conduct this same tour across Honduras for anyone who would listen and see. But this battered priest, so impassioned, so hopeful that we will help his flock, a priest with the odor of the sheep in his clothes... We felt we had no choice but to ride with him, listen, see. In reality, half of those in the double cab truck live in the exact same reality he wants us to see. They comment, critique the situation, explain our program and its future possibilities over and over to mothers. We others maintain a quieter respect... What right have we to speak, to comment, to critique? Our task is to see.

Building a Fail Safe Water System

Here’s a compelling statistic: over 50% of water projects fail within a year. That’s a lot of resources down the drain. Let’s try to get this right.

Our very favorite water technology is the Sawyer PointONE filter. This tough little filter attaches to a bucket or pouch in just a few minutes, but it goes on for years and years...guaranteed for a million gallons of delicious, clean water. And with no chemicals (chlorine is a chemical!) or electricity...just gravity and direct filtration.

But we have a saying in Spanish: “El filtro vale nada sin la madre conectada.” The filter is worthless without a mother attached. That’s why we build water systems in a very different way: from mothers.

Think about it. Large scale water systems serve many people, until one tiny failure, technological or human. Then it’s down the drain with all the invested resources. Not to mention the real danger to humans in the picture.

Imagine instead an organic, community based system built from mothers: each mother providing clean water to at least four families, each system “maintained” and led by local women. If one mother fails in her commitment (and that’s rare), the rest will continue to bring forth clean water, without a hitch. The blessing in WWB is the Water Women!
Hours later, back in the casa cural, we gratefully sip at small glasses of coolish clean water. We ponder...
This is the sixteenth formal request on our list of petitioners in three days. Si Dios quiere... says Ayde, if God wills it and the funds come, we will return to your people. We already love this good, good man, so hopeful for his suffering people. We desperately want to work with him.

He is good, he is manifestly worthy of trust...he has a truck. Si el Diosito quiere, more someones somewhere will open their hearts, and will come down a rain of becas, scholarships to make Water Women of mothers, and after 15 other communities where the padres and madres, too, present impassioned hope, we will come back to this good man and his thirsty flock.
In four or five or six months... but sooner if someone can help him. Perhaps, we gently query, the Basilica Foundation? We know there is plenty tucked away in this rich land cloaked in poverty. His face falls a bit...yes, but so many needs, bueno, very easy to ask for an altar, a chalice, a \textit{la Gloria de Dios}. He brightens. “Perhaps,” cautiously, “a business man I know... I will approach him humbly.” This scores and breaks my heart, \textit{verdad}.

All praise, my Love, Lover of us all, for Sister Water, so precious in taste and tears, in sweat and sweet hope. \textit{Todo honor y gloria}, for this Gift of life, so precious and useful. \textit{Perdonanas, mi Amor}, forgive us when we are hard and dry of heart, withered and cracked open in the hot wind of our false fears, false needs, our fingers pinched tight around the abundance you poured out for all. Be patient with us, teach us to drink slowly, gently, gratefully: here a sip, there a sip...All praise, \textit{Dios Amado y Amado}, who has given us Sister Water as our teacher in the face of mystery.

We want to bring typhoons of “aid” and awesome storms of “charity”, but you show us her life-giving art: careful, slow, trickling down into every dry crook and cranny. That’s how life is brought forth, by flow, not force.

All praise for what we do not willingly understand. Teach us to water with tears what we want to flood with grand scale projects and promises.

We do not understand the curse of this drought, why it falls on those who have no culpability for our climate-wrecking practices. Through our fault, such hard, painful mystery... The sin of each one is affecting the all. We are all One, in blessing and in curse. I set before you life and death, pleads the Voice: choose! Choose life, for the sake of your children! Do you not understand, they are all your children?

In my home parish community in Kentucky we sing with full heart a beloved song: “not by might, not by power, but by my Spirit, says the Lord.” We sing in One Voice that “these mountains shall be removed,” that temples be built within us. “I can see your heart is tired, and your courage is worn thin...”
I ponder the sheer, raw, bucking and snorting courage of the People of God in Honduras, clawing and climbing up mountains of violence, mountains of fear-driven greed and obstinate blindness, refusing to lower the Voice calling for justice, calling for radical trust in our loving, forgiving, pleading God. Holding back the angry flood of disease and death and crime with determined Love.

Dirty water is really only one of many, many “plagas” in the life of these people. I can’t really comprehend the courage it takes to rise day after day to live for good, where there’s a particularly good chance my son will fall by nightfall. Where it’s more than likely my mother won’t see a doctor... Where it’s highly likely that my daughter will not be returning to school. Where my brother applies his engineering degree to driving a taxi. Where some pathetic little street thug will wave his knife at my neck and demand his “war tax.” Where the police are likely behind the threats to kidnap my baby if I denounce extortion from my livelihood. Where I might be the next one on my block to have three hours to vacate my house for some arrogant drug lord. Where I’m not sure we will eat tomorrow. Where we may have no choice but to sip, grimacing at the stench, from dirty water.

Six years back, these are the same amazingly good people who laid the foundation for our work with mothers and water. They offered gentle assessment and guidance to our first flailing attempts. They set aside any well-deserved resentments to work side by side with those of us who eat every day, who drink clean water without thought for its precious quality. What they began with us, we find, is a wise path in over twenty other countries. We haven’t yet found a culture where mothers aren’t passionate for the good of the children, where mothers don’t want to be Water Women, where God has forgotten to put smart, dynamic women who can teach their sisters to love and cherish Sister Water.

At times it truly slams my heart to think of these everyday, every moment struggles replicated a hundred million times or more across the planet. There is so, so much need, tanto tanto necesidad, as Padre Arismendis says, so much need, and, it seems, much less love. Suppose we had the money spent in one day by the US for one day of the Iraq war, we could flood the world with water Women... Bueno, is that truly wise? Would floods of money in our frail human hands not more likely wreak destruction?
Such devastating mystery. We don’t have enough...y no tienen agua. And they have no water. And up there, no water. There is no water. No hay agua. Out beyond that border, no hay agua. Behind that wall, no hay agua. In that house of cartón, no hay agua. On that little ranchito, no hay agua. In that marginal community built overnight in desperation, no hay agua. What devastating mystery is this, oh my soul? This is only one small country among many. You have only a little to share. Water by flow and not by force. “Not by might, not by power, but by my Spirit,” así dice el Dios Amador.

Perhaps our Heart’s calling is simply to offer a sip here, a sip there...whatever will refresh the soul, bring courage; small determined gestures of justice in the face of evil, humble gestures of love in the face of fear. Trust that hidden in every heart in every shadowed barrio lies the wisdom, the insight, the courage needed, if only awakened in simple solidarity. No one needs our arrogant big sister or big brother teaching and preaching.

Quiet, useful Sister Water...“Take us by the hand and lead us,” says another song we sing. “Lead us through the desert sands. Bring us living water. Holy Spirit, come.” Here a sip, there a sip. Let us be useful, humble, pure.
Water With Blessings in Honduras

During Sister Larraine’s 15 day visit to Honduras, over 20 communities besides Padre Arismendi’s have applied to be Water With Blessings sites. As of August 1, Water With Blessings has dedicated funds for 13 communities. The training for the women is scheduled to start in mid-October, trusting that the needed funds will arrive. “Si Dios quiere,” say the people, trusting that God does indeed desire that they have clean water.

Scholarships for Water Women are $60, which covers the equipment and training materials for each mother. The work in Honduras is carried out by teams of local teachers and coordinators who receive a just stipend for their service. All of the team members are women and men of Water With Blessings communities, and all of the Honduran teachers are Water Women. Training by Hondurans adds another $14 per woman to the costs, but this is a wise and just investment.

If you can help in even a modest way, please visit: waterwithblessings.org, where a donation can be made via a secure online payment system. To help void the “mordita” (little bite) taken by the processing fees, you might want to send a check directly to Water With Blessings, 11714 Main Street, Suite D, Middletown, Kentucky, 40243. Please indicate if you wish your donation to go specifically to Honduras. Water With Blessings is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization, so your donation can take a mordita out of your federal taxes!

PRAYER REFLECTION

At this very moment...
...a mother filters water through a scrap of rag, hoping it will be safe for her newly weaned daughter.
...a mother considers her children: Who gets the little clean water she can buy? The weakest? The youngest? The boy?
...a mother and her daughters walk hours to bring home water for the day.
...a mother sees the chronic pain of her small son: parasites riddle his tiny body.
...a mother sponges her fevered baby with river water.
...a mother is seized with terror as her baby girl shows the first symptoms of cholera.
...a mother keens in grief...
Sister Larraine Lauter, OSU, never planned to be spending much time in Honduras. No, she was quite happy in teaching art and parish work in western Kentucky. She didn’t anticipate falling in love with God’s people in Honduras, and she never imagined being obsessed by all things water. Forever caught off guard by God, now she serves as full time director of Water With Blessings in Louisville, Kentucky.

You can contact Sister Larraine at larraine@waterwithblessings.org
See Water With Blessings in Action: http://smilebox.co/1kfAnbC