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Water is alive: Are we listening?

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Water is life.

We sit with this wisdom as legislators at the federal and state level consider a number of investments in water and water management.

As we face a dangerously dry and hot summer in the Pacific Northwest and droughts throughout the world, I reflect on what it means to also say that water is alive, another living being just like humans, capable of communicating with us. In the Afro-Indigenous Caribbean knowledges that are my inheritance, water is not a thing, not an “it,” but rather the being that brings forth life in our blood, the uterus, semen, the rivers, seas, rain, wells, lakes, lagoons and caverns. She carries the ancestral memories of all our peoples as she traverses the planet.

I cannot think of a better time to engage in this reflection. This week birds and bees seek water drops from a water fountain in my garden that dries up every day in the heat.

This spring many of us enjoyed a season without our usually dreary, cloudy, rainy skies that last for months. In the midst of a year of social isolation, our sunny skies seemed to be a gift that enabled some to see loved ones or at least enjoy being outside without a rain coat.

Water justice: Addressing issues of water justice

Along with many others, I kept hoping that rain would come. I kept hoping that this summer season on the West Coast would once again not be plagued by fires.

Those fires have already begun.

As I sit with these realities, two sacred Afro-Caribbean patakís stories come to mind that lead us into a deeper examination of how we respond to devastating climate transformations. Our stories are lessons on how to act ethically. They teach us through their infinite number of interpretations.

One of them is about Obba, the sacred guardian of lakes and lagoons. Listening to faulty advice, Obba refuses to accept the fact that her husband will not change his polygamous ways. Hoping he will choose her, she cuts her own ears as an offering. He leaves. She dies.

This story is about the dangers of denying the truth, such as the fact that less rain and snow due to climate change means less water in wells, rivers, lakes. This denial requires that we “cut our ears” to not listen. It leaves us vulnerable to people with faulty advice, hoping that another truth will manifest by itself. In the meantime, a part of us is sacrificed, the lives of those most vulnerable, those seen as expendable, like Obba’s ears. Already so many plants and animals are disappearing; people are dying, too. Are we going to let our lakes and lagoons die as well, like Obba? Obba’s story also reminds us that, while we are in denial, lakes and lagoons are dying and leaving us without the clouds needed for life-sustaining rain.

Another sacred story speaks about those who acknowledge the truth and all the work ahead of us to heal the planet but are overwhelmed by the collective work it entails. Ogun — the sacred guardian of the forest, agriculture and industry — sees how humanity is willing to destroy one another mercilessly. He cannot withstand this truth and hides in the forest. In the meantime, all agriculture and industry stops. People start going hungry. He is needed for people to survive. He just needs to find a way to collaborate with others. Oshun, the sacred guardian of the rivers, comes to Ogun with sweet honey and convinces him to return to the world to help bring forth life.

Ogun and Oshun’s story remind us that we must face the truths of climate change together. We cannot run into the forest. We must mobilize love together to change how we live and to sweeten the path when it gets hard.

Can we embrace the fact that water is alive and it speaks to us? In this drought, can we hear Oshun inviting us to accept our responsibility? Can we learn from Obba’s death about the dangers of denial? Can we start saying that water is alive, and we must care for her, instead of managing her no matter the cost to her life?

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