

Episode 23: Water

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VO: Welcome to UNDERCURRENTS, my name is Ken Ogasawara. I'm part of the Communications team at Mennonite Central Committee in Ontario. This podcast is just one way of telling all the amazing stories coming out of our community of program participants, staff, partners and others.

VO: Undercurrents is brought to you as always by our friends at Kindred Credit Union. Kindred's purpose is cooperative banking that connects values and faith with finances, inspiring peaceful, just, and prosperous communities. Kindred is committed to learning, building partnerships, and mobilizing their resources to make tangible progress towards reconciliation. This episode is about Water.

VO: On a clear, warm morning in mid September, my eight year old daughter and I woke up early, which in our house is about 7:00 o'clock and loaded up our breakfast to go and hopped into the car.

VO: We had an hour and a half drive ahead of us down to Dunville, Ontario for the last 20 km of 2023 All Nations Grand River Water Walk. What is a Water Walk? Who is a Water Walker? My daughter and I were about to find out as we listened in the car ride to an interview I had conducted earlier that week with Mary Anne Caibaiosai, an Ojibwe Anishinaabe teacher and one of the organizers of the All Nations Grand River Water Walk.

Mary Anne: Boozhoo. Nodin Ikwe ndizhnikaaaz. Mukwa ndoodem. Ojibwe-Anishinaabe kwe miinwa niizhoo Midewewin kwe miinwaa e-kinomaagazid ndaaw.

Mary Anne: Right now I'm a visitor on the land of the Michi Saagiig Anishinaabeg people in Warsaw, just outside of Peterborough. My English name is Mary Anne Caibaiosai. I'm a Ojibwe Anishinaabe from the Bear Clan and I belong to the community of Wiikwemkoong unceded territory and my relatives are from Sagamok first nations. And I'm a Water Walker.

VO: I first met Mary Anne when she was a keynote speaker at MCC's student seminars in Ottawa, an annual 3 day conference hosting university students from across Canada. Mary Anne opened and closed each day with us, sharing her teachings on Water, encouraging us to share

and learn from each other, and inviting us to participate in a ceremony at the Ottawa River. She has a warm, kind grandmotherly energy with a bright smile that can change your day. She's also tireless in her advocacy for water, sharing her teachings, and pursuing a PhD on top of it all. Mary Anne had invited me to join the Water Walk in the fall and I gladly accepted that invitation.

Mary Anne: A Water Walker is an individual, normally Anishinaabe. In our teachings, the woman is responsible for taking care of the water because she's the one who creates life. And when I first became familiar with water walking, it was through Josephine Mondamek Ba, she's Ojibwe also from Wiikwemkoong. And I started walking with her in 2017 and that's where I first became familiar with how to be a water walker. And that's someone who walks with the water, literally.

Mary Anne: But also during that walk, which is not just a walk, it's a ceremony, we walk, we're holding the water, we're singing for the water, we're praying for the water, and we're carrying her in a pail that we dip into the source. And you're walking with her and you're trying to make sure that she's safe as you're carrying her. And as you're walking with her and holding her next to you, you're putting your positive energies, love and kindness into that pail so that she feels it. And I say that knowing that she has a life, that she's life. It's not just water. People say, "Oh, it's just water." Well, water is life.

VO: Mary Anne organizes the All Nations Grand River Water Walk every fall. This year, they were praying for the waters held behind the dams along the Grand River. She's supported by a hearty group of both Indigenous and settler supporters, including MCC's Indigenous Neighbours program team. The walk starts at the source of the Grand River in Dundalk, Ontario. They scoop a bucketful of water from the Grand River into a ceremonial copper pail and then proceed to walk all along the Grand River, as roads allow, for over 200km, until it empties into Lake Erie at Port Maitland.

VO: The procession consists of two core walkers - one, usually a woman who carries the water, and just behind her is usually a man, carrying the eagle staff. Community walkers, like me and my daughter, walk along behind the Core Walkers. They take turns walking about 1 km at a time, with teams of walkers driving ahead of them to receive the pail of water and eagle staff and continue the relay. My daughter and I were taking the day off school and work to catch up to the Water Walkers for the final leg of their five day journey.

WATER WALK

Mary Anne: This is a whole lot of teachings that come to people when they're walking for the water. Normally we start every day at three o'clock in the morning, and primarily because that's when everything is just coming alive. That's when creation starts. That's when you start hearing creation waking up.

Mary Anne: And then we see the sky without the light pollution. And what happens is that you suddenly start to feel like you're a part of it, that you're a part of something grand when you're walking for the water. And you also start to understand that you're just a small part of it. You're a small part of something wonderful. A lot of people get transformed when they walk for the water. And I've heard indigenous and non-indigenous people talk about that, how it changed them, how it led them to come back to walk more and to be part of that ceremony. It is very spiritual, you become connected. All you hear are your footsteps, you hear people singing, you hear people praying, and you just hear the sound of the land.

Mary Anne: We can't help but see the birds that come or the deer that walk out or the animals that come out, like the fox or those beings that come out and they witness everything. We can't help but notice them. And so we say, "Wow, I don't think I've ever seen a deer come out." A lot of the people that come and join us at ceremonies are always amazed when they see those things that happen.

Mary Anne: And then what you see is the sky. You start to see the sky change colour. You start to see the stars and you start to see the sun coming up. And those are parts of our being that we take it for granted. We think, well, the sun's going to come up every day or the stars are always out there. But to actually see it is a totally different thing altogether. You just feel it in your spirit. I've heard people and men actually crying. It's one of those experiences that it just takes you to another place. And sometimes people just start thinking about other things as they're walking, things they're going through in their life. And our own inner water starts moving. Their being moved cause something happened during that walk and it's powerful.

Mary Anne: When we do the water walks, we try to reconnect people to the land and see them as our relatives. Because if you see something as just an object, it's easy for you to just destroy it because it has no meaning. But when it's your relative who's alive and breathing as you are, it's not so easy.

Mary Anne: And I remember hearing a woman in the US. I don't recall exactly what nation she was from, but she took youth out onto the land. And she was saying, "If you don't see who's out

there, if you don't hear them, if you don't connect with them, why would you want to protect them?" And I think it's that disconnection that could have led to the destruction of the earth. It becomes a resource instead of our relatives.

Mary Anne: And so often, what happens too is we will walk through chaos. And by chaos I mean like rush hour traffic. And we've often felt the brunt of people rushing to work and they feel like we're impeding their progress. They're so excited to get to work. And so we've often been haunted by settlers honking their horns and some are supportive, but often it's the opposite and we just keep walking. And so what we do to counter that is we smudge. Everybody carries medicine with them. We offer tobacco every time we pick up the pail. Every time we go over the water, the men put down tobacco. And it just becomes a way of being for a period of eight hours that you can't repeat anywhere else. It's just how it is. And you develop relationships, it becomes a family.

Mary Anne: So I mentioned earlier the idea that water has a spirit as we do, and that means she's alive and which means that she's breathing, she's hearing, she's feeling. So we see creation and it's part of our original creation story that everything is alive and everything on the earth is our relative. And so you might've heard the phrase as father is sky, grandmother moon, grandfather son, and we say mother earth.

Mary Anne: So we believe that she is the one who feeds us with all of the beings on the earth who give up their life for us. She nourishes us, she takes care of us because we find all of our medicines on the earth with the tree beings, the standing ones, and they're full of life and they give their medicine to us. And when we think about the water, it's like she is the blood of Mother Earth. She's the one that flows and gives the earth life and everything else on it, life. We believe that everything on the earth is related to us. But we're not the main beings. In our creation story, everything else was put first. Like the stars and the sun and the moon, they were all placed here first, we were put here last. So it's that humility that we carry in our relationship with everything out there.

VO: I asked Mary Anne, now we reconcile holding the land and water as sacred, but at the same time recognizing that we live in a world where billions of people need to be fed and housed and provided for.

Mary Anne: That's a really good question and sometimes it takes courage to say things like, it's an industry, it's money making. Like when you go into some people's homes, yes, they have a home. And if you look at the basic needs of food, running water and a place to sleep. And a lot of people have that. But then there's places where there's such unnecessary material goods

that are created that do we really need two Keurig machines? Do we really need two vehicles? How many televisions do you need in your home?

Mary Anne: Because they've become disconnected, they've just attached to technology or they've attached to materialism. And of course, all of those material goods come from the land. And so it's up to us, not just Anishnawbek people, but whoever works to protect the water, that they understand that all of what they're doing, the negative things that happen, all of the gas spills and the oil spills and the dredging and dumping waste into the water, it's destroying our mother.

Mary Anne: There's that reconciling the greed for making money. And one of the elders talks about that, that the water is going to be like the price of gold because it becomes something that's no longer honoured or respected or valued as something integral to living. And I think there's finding that balance of what we need as compared to what we actually want and crave. And the industry of materialism feeds the craving. But it's changing. I think when you come and walk for the water, you do start to understand.

Phil: I participated in the water walk as a core helper.

VO: This is Phil Martin, retired teacher, avid cycling advocate, and a core supporter of this year's Water Walk.

Phil: Supplied coffee and other things, other kinds of things that people might need, and that was my role. But I ended up benefiting in so many ways that I didn't expect, and I would say that water walking has made me a better Mennonite.

Phil: I think I grew up thinking that there was sort of one kind of faith that was right, and so what I'm understanding, and I really feel it in this water walking, is that the water walk actually resonates a lot with my own faith, and it also challenges. It challenges me in good ways. So, I was walking, for example, with people who really sense the divine presence in the whole world. God may be somehow in that eagle or in that tree or in that water, or in and about there, the spirit.

Phil: That's a little harder for Mennonites, and I think this is really important as we understand, though, like, I don't know, deep interconnections of all elements of creation and the challenges that the world and water are facing. Like, yeah, this importance of seeing God's presence everywhere. Being part of this water walk was very important to me in the development of my own faith and what it means for me to follow Jesus, which is, that's really at the heart of my

faith. And I feel like, whoa, I think Jesus would be very at home walking on this water walk.

Mary Anne: I like to invite people. So I like to invite people to some of my other ceremonies, and I remind them when I give the teachings of that ceremony that this is ours, our way of healing and our way of doing things, and knowing that respectfully, that they probably have their own ways of doing things. So for example, if you take your children down to the water or even in your living room and you want to lift the water, you can just start by saying, I learned how to do this from an Anishinaabe woman who taught us this. Then you can still honour and do that, but you just remember that it came from someone else, and you're helping in that way.

Mary Anne: I think what people have started to do, and we've witnessed it at our monthly water ceremonies for the Grand River, is that people will actually join. You just come and be part of it, and witness it, and contribute. Just being there is huge.

VO: “Just being there is huge.” When my daughter and I showed up for the walk, the first water walkers that saw us thought we were just random passersby who were curious about their roadside procession. They were absolutely thrilled when we told them we were joining them on the walk. Participating in the All Nations Grand River Water Walk, for example, not only shows solidarity, but also specifically supports the work of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. The TRC Call to Action #60 addresses, among other important things, the need for the Christian church to “respect Indigenous spirituality in its own right.” This can be challenging work for some of us. This may also soon be joyful work, like for Phil, who saw that supporting this week-long Indigenous ceremony did not negate, but rather elevated his own Christian faith. If you want to know more about the All Nations Grand River Water Walk, or participate in next year’s walk, go to grandriverwaterwalk.com.

VO: I want to thank Mary Anne for her generous sharing of her teachings and the good faith invitation to join her in the Water Walk. Thanks to all the joyful and gracious Water Walkers who welcomed me and my daughter on the walk - it was an honour to join you. Thanks to Phil Martin for setting a good example for settlers like me and how to engage humbly and meaningfully in this learning journey.

VO: Editorial support came from Christen Kong, original music by Brian MacMillan, and artwork by Jesse Bergen. Big thanks to Kindred Credit Union for their ongoing support of Undercurrents. And of course, thank you for listening and sharing these stories, it helps us know that these stories are valued. My name is Ken Ogasawara, have a great rest of your day.