

A Liquid Life

Written by Vivian Bikulege



Water

What is the vitality and necessity

of clean water?

Ask the man who is ill, who is lifting

his lips to the cup.

Ask the forest.

- Mary Oliver

The next line in the poem *Water* by Mary Oliver – or maybe, instead of the last line – the poet might have written, "*Ask the marsh.*" As the oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico slowly spreads, suffocating life in the ocean basin, that directive, to

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ask the marsh

about "the vitality and necessity of clean water," may result in a response whose answer we can barely stand to hear.

In my professional life, I have treated water for twenty-four of the thirty years that I have been working. Interspersed in the remaining six years, I worked for a laboratory that performed sophisticated, environmental testing on water, and now, I sell products that blend with water for personal care. I was born under the sign of Aquarius whose Greek and Hindu roots reflect a god tilting a pitcher with a stream of water that spills toward the constellation Piscis Austrinus - the "southern fish."

All this to say, that the oil spilling into the Gulf makes me feel sad and helpless, even a bit hopeless. Our southern tideland cousin of white sands and bayous, wildlife and plant life, fish and whales and shellfish, looks like us. We Lowcountry folk have a family resemblance to our brethren in Louisiana, Mississippi, Alabama, and Florida. We know those shrimp, recognize the shorebirds, and love our turtles. The oil spill threatening, encroaching, and it seems, destined to come ashore, resembles the relentless vigil of watching a loved one die of cancer. The slick is slow, all-consuming, and uncontrollable, like the metastasized cells of a growing malignancy.

Our Lowcountry marshland offers a daily hymn in praise of "the vitality and necessity of clean water." Because South Carolina Lowcountry citizens live on the fringes of cord grass and plough mud, I suspect each of us has turned an eye and ear toward our neighbors bordering the Gulf of Mexico, and our breaths have turned to gasps in our unique understanding and perspective of the evolving tragedy. Yes, their misfortune could result in an economic windfall for our commercial fisherman, a boost to prices for the Carolina seafood industry. The Gulf represents one-fifth of the U.S. seafood supply, and like most things, one man's misfortune is another's bounty.

I was encouraged to learn, even proud to know, that Nalco Company, the corporation I work for, was partnering with British Petroleum to supply dispersing chemistry that "breaks up" the oil and drops it to the sea floor for eventual consumption by naturally occurring bacteria. This tentative solution provides some buffer for the prevention of oil reaching the shoreline. There is, however, an environmental trade-off. Oil, chemicals, none of it, is the "soup de jour" for aquatic life.

South Carolinians - the Lowcountry community - understands marshland. We live in a watery

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wonderland that sustains our lives, and the animal and plant life around us. The marsh surrounds us, feeds us, and envelops us in the signature beauty of our unique lifestyle. Our environment is fragile, and the seasonal threat of hurricanes awaits us in partnership with the warmth and humidity of our returning summertime. When the evening news reports on the difficulty of cleaning, even separating oil from marsh mud, we understand the impossibility of the task. Once joined, only nature and time can lick the residue from the mud that anchors the grass and feeds the sea life that eventually feeds us. We are all connected. I cannot fend off the nagging thought that my thirst for oil to fuel my automobile makes me share in the accountability heavy on the shoulders of BP for the damage and death of human life, wildlife and our ecology.

When I learned about the explosion, my first thought and prayer was for the loss of human lives lost on a distant rig, burning and sinking in a vast body of water. Then, my heart broke with the first pictures of white birds turned brown-black, matted in oil, necks and wings craning and straining to take flight. Next, as I was driving, listening to *Many Miles*, a CD of poetry read by Mary Oliver, I heard her read her short poem about water. I knew I had to voice and share my heartbreak with you, because we live a liquid life. Even now, drops of water from last night's rainfall, bounce against the windows of my sunroom. Toby, the beagle, sidesteps shallow puddles on his way to the backyard for his morning constitution, ignorant of the nourishment the rain provides.

By the time this article is published, the magnitude and damage caused by this slick, black behemoth will be better understood. There is a part of me that feels that our Lowcountry dodged another bullet, even as we ourselves consider drilling off of our coastline. We see our murky reflection in the Gulf of Mexico. We are akin to our neighbors who have suffered the ferociousness of hurricanes, and the blast of a manmade catastrophe.

I know there is hope to be found in the suffering of lessons learned, and I never like to end my column in despair. But this time, it is hard for me to grasp that ring of hope. Maybe, I can find it in the heroic efforts of people united along the Gulf coastline laying inflatable oil booms that float on the water's surface, a balloon wall bobbing at the mercy of coastal weather. Maybe, engineers will curtail the damage by successfully building, and placing, a "first of its kind" giant dome to cap the well and divert thousands of gallons of oil. Maybe, I will find solace in the wildlife rescue teams preparing baths to clean and save birds and mammals. I *will* find hope, because that is what we do.

However, in the days ahead, as I look out on the marsh, watching the tides rise and fall against an oil-free shoreline, I will exhale my hope, expecting that it will follow the currents flowing into

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the Gulf, and provide one, small, answered prayer that the worst has been avoided.

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