

“Cup O Kindness”

Presented by Rev. Margie King Saphier on January 1, 2006  
at United First Parish Church, Quincy, MA

For auld lang syne, my dear,  
For auld lang syne,  
We'll tak a cup of kindness yet,  
For auld lang syne!

It is often remarked that "Auld Lang Syne" is one of the most popular songs that nobody knows the lyrics to. "Auld Lang Syne" literally translates as "old long since" and means "times gone by." The song asks whether old friends and times will be forgotten and promises to remember people of the past with fondness, "For auld lang syne, we'll tak a cup o' kindness yet."

In my younger days, I remember singing this song - as I imagine many of you did too or maybe did last night - and raising your cup or glass in the spirit of memories held dear.

And what was the beverage in your cup of kindness? Was it beer? wine, champagne? Maybe it was rum, whiskey or scotch? Maybe it was good hot cup of tea or coffee. Maybe it was a Coca-Cola with or without the rum. I ask what was in your "cup of kindness" because a majority of the just mentioned drinks carries a legacy - a legacy mostly tarnished with a history of oppression.

In Tom Standage's book, The History of the World in Six Glasses, he quotes Karl Popper, a philosopher of science who died in 1994, who said, "There is no history of humankind, there are only histories of all kinds of aspects of human life." With this perspective in mind, Standage looks at the history of western civilization and its impact on the world through the lens of human thirst and the drive to quench that thirst. Standage notes, "Thirst is deadlier than hunger. We can live weeks without food, but we cannot live more than a few days without liquid refreshment." About 10,000 years ago or around 8,000 BCE as humankind moved toward becoming an agricultural society, "The availability

of water constrained and guided humankind's progress." One of the inherent hazards of civilization is contaminated water. As a result the beverages I just listed that might have been in your raised cup of kindness, were created, not only to quench one's thirst, but also to provide a source of income/profit; as well as to offer safe alternatives to the polluted water of human progress. The first three beverages that protect humankind from the pollutants of city living have alcohol as their major ingredient. It is the alcohol or the process in which the alcohol is made that destroys the contaminating bacteria found in water. The last three use boiling water to provide a safe alternative and had caffeine that provided a desirable lift to the day..

In reading this book, I kept thinking of James Luther Adams' view that history is tragic. I have read this quote by Adams in other sermons, but I believe it is profound. I also believe that Standage, in his book, unwittingly illustrated Adams' view of history. According to Adams, "History is a tension of conflicts in which the tensions between the will to mutuality and the will to power appear in their most subtle and perverse forms. In short, history is tragic. ... When we say tragic, we mean that the perversions and failures and failures in history are associated precisely with the highest creative powers of humanity and thus with our greatest achievements. ... The very means and evidences of progress turn out again and again to be also the instruments of perversion or destruction."

So Adams reminds us ( as the opening words reminded us) that to be human religiously and to live with hope and joy is to be mindful of the multitude of moments of opportunity as they occur in our lives. This is not easy to do, especially when the destruction caused by our human actions seem to be evident everywhere. This dilemma reminds me of the comic strip, "Calvin and Hobbs." Calvin is trying to be environmentally responsible. Everything he does -just the simple acts of living, seems to negatively impact the environment. In the last frame we see Calvin hanging upside-down from a clothesline. It's one of those with pulley wheels, so he can move backward and forward. Hobbs asks

Calvin what's he doing. Calvin explains this is the only way he can move without killing an innocent sentient being.

Sometimes life feels that way, especially as a U.S. citizen. No matter what we do it can have unintended negative consequences, as well as hoped for positive ones. So in addition to looking at history through six glasses, I also plan to lift up the positive, as well as the negative consequences of our choices and hence, our actions.

I have good news for those of you who are beer drinkers. The history of beer seems to be the exception to Adams' maxim that with progress there is destruction. Or beer historically has been the least destructive. Beer was the universal beverage that was available to all and does not seem to be intertwined with the oppression of others. Ten thousand years ago beer was a safe alternative to water and even had nutritional value. It was relatively low in alcohol content and was an excellent source of vitamin B. Mesopotamian and Egyptians saw beer as an ancient, god-given drink that was a staple in their diet. By 2500 BCE, the standard ration for a laborer was three or four loaves of bread and two jugs of beer (or 4 litres or 8 American pints). The use of bread and beer as a means of wages or currency meant they became synonymous with prosperity and good health. The greeting, "Bread and Beer to you," was a way of saying "Good luck" or "Good Health."<sup>1</sup>

Over time wine replaced beer in the Greek and Roman Empires. Both Empires depended on their slave population to provide manual labor for the tending of the vineyards and the making of the wine, so the educated, landed gentry had leisure time for politics, discourse and warfare. Although wine was available to slaves, it was made from fermented grape seeds, stems and skins, and its taste was horrid. Not surprisingly, when the Roman Empire collapsed, Northern Europe returned to drinking beer, while the Mediterranean countries continued drinking wine.

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<sup>1</sup> Ibid., pp.24 - 39.

The next group of beverages was distilled spirits. Although some individuals claimed medicinal benefits from distilled spirits – it was effective in cleaning wounds - they were primarily drunk for their intoxicating effects. During the Age of Exploration, when men were at sea months at a time, it was believed that distilled spirits helped to make the daily tedium bearable. On ships where space was always a premium, distilled spirits with its high alcoholic content required fewer barrels to provide the crew with the desired effect.

The first distilled spirit was brandy, made from distilled wine. When the slave trade began the slavers were originally paid in brandy, but that soon changed with the distillation of the by-products of sugar cane into rum. Rum soon oiled the wheels of the slave trade. In the late seventeenth century in the spirit of capitalism and profit, rum formed the basis of a thriving industry as New England merchants began to import molasses rather than rum and do the distilling themselves. The number of rum distilleries in Boston went from 8 in 1738 to 63 in 1750.

In the spirit of James Luther Adams' paradoxical nature of history, I want to note that rum was not only associated with slavery; it was also a drink that helped fuel liberty. In 1766, John Adams wrote in his diary, that when the Sons of Liberty met, they drank rum punch, ate cheese biscuits and smoked their pipes while they discussed injustice of taxation on molasses and tea. In 1775, on his infamous ride to Concord, Paul Revere stopped off at a pub in Medford for a hot rum toddy. In 1781, John Adams wrote to a friend: "I know not why we should blush to confess that molasses was an essential ingredient in American independence. Many great events have proceeded from much smaller causes." This last quote implies the John Adams might have been temporarily blinded by the radiance of the democracy which he helped to create that he failed to remember how intimately our freedom was linked to slavery.

At the same time distilled spirits (early 1600's) were being produced, a new non-alcoholic beverage was introduced from Turkey – Coffee. Because

coffee was made with boiling water, it was a safe alternative to water. During the day, it was a better alternative than wine or beer, both of which left one fuzzy-thinking. With the Age of Reason upon them, Europeans valued clarity of mind. Coffee became the preferred drink of intellectuals, scientists, merchants and clerks (people whom today we would call “information workers”). As demand for coffee in Europe outstripped the Arab’s ability to supply their own citizens as well as Europeans, the Europeans (first the Dutch, then the French) took (really stole) samplings of coffee plants and took them to Indonesia and Martinique in the Caribbean. Here large coffee plantations were begun – owned by Europeans but cultivated by the poor of the islands. Coffee helped to oil wheels of colonialism, as did tea. Presently the legacy of colonialism persist the growing and selling of coffee. This why UUSC and this church sell “fairly traded coffee.”

But tea has a more tarnished history. Although it was available in Europe a few years earlier than coffee, tea had far less impact during the seventeenth century, largely because it was so much more expensive. The British East India Company played a significant role in decreasing the cost of importing tea to England by selling opium to Chinese merchants. Because China wanted to be paid in silver for the tea it exported, the British East India Company sold opium it grew in India to Chinese merchants. The profits they accrued from these sales offset the cost of purchasing the tea. Although the sale of opium was illegal, so many in the Chinese and British governments were on the take that this corrupt arrangement grew along with the sales of opium and tea. Eventually this corrupt arrangement led to the Opium Wars of 1839-42. The prohibitive cost of war caused the British to look for other sources of tea. They soon realized that tea would grow very successfully in Assam, India – one of their colonies and where they had been growing opium. This alternative was always available to England, but the illegal profits of opium and tea dulled any interest in looking elsewhere.

The last beverage but not the least is Coca-Cola. Through creative marketing that is trademark of American capitalism, Coca Cola became the leading international beverage during the twentieth century and remains so today. When U. S. citizens travel in second and third world countries, they are often counseled to drink a Coca Cola from the bottle "just to be safe." According to Standage's history of Coca Cola, it may be that this soda, like beer, is relatively free of the blatant sins of colonialism, the sins of slavery and corruption, as it becomes the "Every man/woman/child Drink." The way Standage writes the history of Coca-Cola it is the history of shrewd marketing, nothing else. I personally don't know enough about its history to raise its possible historical dark side - other than its ubiquitous presence undermines the local customs.

Standage concludes that he believes the next glass of history will contain water. "Water was the first drink to steer the course of history; now after 10,000 years it seems to be back in the driving seat." But this time it seems that water has the potential to be both a cause of war and a catalyst for peace. The United Nations has set a goal of reducing by half the proportion of people without access to freshwater and adequate sanitation by 2015. If they are successful, it will be quite a feat, because around 2007, demographers estimate more than half of the world's population will for the first time be living in cities. When this happens, humankind will have completed the six-thousand-year transition from being predominately rural to a predominately urban species. With this transition will come disputes over water rights. In fact the disputes are already here as we hear the disputes of the rights to rivers in which salmon spawn and from which farmers take water for irrigation.

But we in the first world have arrived to the point that tap water is so safe that we can shun this safe resource for bottled water instead. We can do this when at the same time one-fifth of world's population or 1.2 billion people currently lack access to safe drinking water.

So when we raise our cup of kindness to remember loved ones gone by, may we drink with awareness, but not with despair. Ram Das teaches that joy is a profound emotion because it holds the awareness of the sorrow of life as well as the beauty and the surprise of all creation. We need to remember the seeds of injustice are always with us. But we need not be like Calvin hanging upside down from a clothesline to avoid injustice, instead we need to follow the UUA Principles and Sources. They truly do show us the way to create hope and know joy. May we all rise and say them together.