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The Legend of the Living Water
(a parable of religion)

Have you heard the legend of the living water?

Once, long ago, there was a marvelous pool of the purest water, 'living water' the people called it, atop a quiet grassy hill. And the people would come from miles around to sit by the pool of living water, to watch the sunlight play upon its clear surface, to feel the gentle breeze as it blew across its smooth exterior, and to drink of its sweet, life-giving, substance. And all would be refreshed.

But then, as the fame of the pool spread and the visitors became more numerous, it was decided to place a fence around the pool and assign administrators who would govern the people's access to it. Still, all were able to come to the pool and sit by the water, and drink of the pool's living essence, and be refreshed -- though not as readily or as freely as before. One had first to apply to the administrators, who would assign a time for one's visit.

But this too became cumbersome, and many were climbing over the fence and violating the administrative procedures, and so, to make the administrative task easier and help secure the administrative prerogatives, it was decided to erect a sturdier barrier to the pool of living water. A great granite block was built around the pool, with an opening only at the front. And upon this great granite block were etched the words 'The Living Water.' No one could see the pool anymore, but still the people could apply to the administrators, who would bring out cool cups of water for the people to drink.

Years and decades and centuries went by. And it came to pass that fewer and fewer people partook of the living water, since, without being able to see the beauty of the pool, and feel the cool breeze from the surface, and rejoice in the freedom of access, it was no longer as refreshing as before. And the pool of living water became more and more neglected.

But the administrators, who earned their living from administering the water to the people, were much distressed. They began scolding the people for their neglect, and telling them that if they did not pay their respect to what was now known as the Stone of Living Water (since the pool itself was no longer visible), the most terrible calamities would befall them. And these calamities were described in the most horrific terms, and each time something bad occurred in the world it was attributed to the wrath of the Living Water, who was said to be angered by the people's neglect, and the people were very afraid.

And so they came to the Stone of Living Water; offering it gifts and vows of obeisance. They no longer came to be refreshed, but to escape the threatened danger. And the

administrators no longer provided even a taste of the living water to the people. Rather they would stand before the great Stone, and conduct the people in long periods of worship, which mainly consisted of pleas that the great Stone spare the people its wrath.

And it was not long before even the Administrators forgot that there was a real pool of living water beneath the mammoth Stone; and they too would pray to it incessantly, pray to the great Stone which still had, emblazoned on its side in letters now embossed with gold, the words 'The Living Water.' And all would pray for the Stone to grant them favors and shield them from its mighty wrath. And children would ask their parents "Why is the Stone called 'Living' when it does not move?" and "Why is the Stone called 'water' when it is hard as rock?" And the parents would look to the right and to the left, fearing that someone had heard, and then say, "Hush, it is not right to question the Stone of Living Water." And the children would hush.

And one day a man came who proclaimed that beneath the Stone of Living Water was the true pool of living water, which all had forgotten. And he and his followers attacked the Stone with hammers and chisels, attempting to break it up and smash through to the pool beneath. But the Administrators, horrified at this, arrested him and put him to death. Soon men began to proclaim that only this man knew the way to the Living Water, and they began worshipping his image and his words, which they dutifully wrote down.

And they worshipped the words, and even the punctuation marks between the words, calling these words and these punctuation marks 'The Living Water.' And a great rivalry grew between the followers of the man and the followers of the Stone. And they cursed at each other and warred with each other and put each other to death in the name of the Living Water, each accusing the other of blasphemy and heresy and deceit. Each calling down upon the other the Living Water's great and terrible wrath -- glad, at last, to be able to divert it from themselves.

And others, seeing this, came to detest the very mention of the Living Water, calling its idea chimerical and dangerous, and to believe that only fools and knaves continued to speak of it.

And so it remains to this day.

But the true pool of living water -- it has not dried up. It lives still, buried beneath the stone and the words and the fears and the hatreds. It shines and it glistens and it gives off its cool breeze. But who is able to uncover it?