

Thirsty for life

By [Edwin Searcy](#)

February 17, 2008

The texts speak of thirst for life. The people thirst for water in the wilderness. The Samaritan woman at the well meets the One who gives the water of eternal life. Paul speaks of God's love being "poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit."

The metaphor of thirst needs no translation from the ancient texts. Alchemists once picked up the language of "spirit" and applied it to volatile substances as they sought eternal youth. From this redefinition alcohol became known as "spirits." The desire to slake our thirst for companionship, to fill up the dark places of loneliness and guilt with "spirits" leads to multinational corporate empires that market beer and soft drinks by portraying the ways that these drinks help one make friends.

I once visited the World of Coke in Atlanta. At the conclusion of a journey through the history of Coca-Cola (created by a pharmacist trying to help Civil War vets cope with chronic physical pain), I watched a wide-screen video that showed people in every culture drinking the life-giving elixir. Singers chanted, "Life. . .life. . .life," then the doors opened and I was ushered to a huge magical font. I placed a cup on its edge and water shot up from the center of the fountain, landing on a sensor above my glass so that the life-giving drink poured freely. I could drink as much as I wanted.

The word "spirituality" has many positive connotations in our day. Jesus speaks to the woman at the well about worship in "spirit and truth." Spirit is from the Latin word for "breath," although the word originally also meant "hope" (the word "despair" means "to have lost spirit"). In Hebrew *ruah* means wind, breath and Spirit of God. Jesus links this spirit, this breathing, this hoping, with truth-telling. He tells the woman the truth about her life. His dialogue with her speaks her into new life. It literally in-spires her.

I remember the day when Paul's statement that "suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us" spoke to me. I was with a vintner in his vineyard, and asked about the effects of a huge fire the year before, when the valley had been filled with smoke for three weeks. He said that it had been a very hard year for the vines; they had suffered greatly and had worked very hard to produce fruit. The result, however, was a very beautiful vintage. Apparently the plants' struggle had produced a wine with complex characteristics, a wine that would mature well with age. The vintner was reminded of people he knew who had weathered difficult events and whose character was rich, complex and mature.

I wonder if this is what a community justified by the faithfulness of God revealed on the cross is meant to embody. Not a "cheap grace," in Bonhoeffer's terms, but a costly one, marked by shared suffering through which we discover "God's love poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit."