

Water

In the third part of her series, **Melissa Addey** looks at this shape-shifting element

More than food, water is essential to our survival. Over 60% of our bodies is made up of water, and whereas a healthy adult might last eight weeks without food, he or she would last only three to five days without water. So reliant are we on water that even when we visit other planets our first interest is in whether that planet has or ever had water – we cannot imagine a life form that does not rely on this element. Our own oceans and seas are so deep and uncharted that it has been said that we know more about the surface of the moon than about the depths of the seas! How do your mouth and throat feel when you need a drink? Do you feel more energetic after a big glass of water when you've been thirsty a while?

This element is a shape-shifter. Water, icicles or hail, rain, snowflakes, steam... Find ways to watch this element change before your very eyes. Count how many times a day you use water, from brushing teeth to washing, cooking, playing, drinking and more. Water is the focus of many stories, from *The Odyssey* to Noah's ark as well as mermaids and sea monsters. It is also often seen as sacred, from the huge Ganges to the small font of a church.

You can see the water cycle in action for yourself. Collect rainwater in a shallow bowl, then leave it in the sun to watch it disappear back into the air – and return once more as rain on another day. Look at an atlas to see the interconnectedness of water: how tiny streams join mighty rivers and make their way to the sea. There's a theory (the aquatic ape hypothesis) that humans might once have spent a lot of time in the water and evolved accordingly. Soak your hands and feet in water and watch as your skin grows wrinkly; perhaps this is to give us a better grip when climbing over rocks near the water's edge.

Use all your senses to explore this element. Listen to water: rain, hail, showers, taps running, baths being

filled, blowing on bottles filled to different levels with water. Smell water: sea air, food being steamed, a scented steam bath. Feel water on your skin: in a bath and a sauna, your own tears and sweat, hot and cold water, rain falling on your face. Taste water: fresh and salty, flavoured with lemons, juice or herbs, soapy bath water (ewww!). Watch as a seemingly transparent element takes on the hues of the rainbow when sprayed in the air on a sunny day, or a shimmering blue to reflect the sky. Read or watch the news to see its raging power when it brings monsoons, tsunamis and floods. Look at deserts to see what happens to the earth without water, and the extreme lengths of evolution attained by plants and animals required to manage without water for long periods.

If you're indoors, bathtime can mean playtime. Run a bath in the middle of the day, fill it with a ridiculous amount of bubbles, use the shower to recreate a monsoon, catch paper fish before they sink, and give your dolls swimming lessons. Make an ice bowl embedded with edible leaves, berries and flowers and fill it with fresh fruit salad. Turn water into ice cubes or steam facials. Bob for apples. Watch the rain fall, and have raindrop races down the windowpanes. Make 'shaky bottles' filled with water and glitter or beads to entrance little ones. Read poems about water and snow, then write your own. Visit an aquarium.

Outdoors in wintertime brings snowmen and snowballs, igloo-building and sledging. You can make snow 'jewels' by filling water balloons with coloured water, leaving them outside to freeze, then popping and peeling away the rubber to show the frozen colour beneath. Use natural food colouring in squeeze bottles to draw snow pictures. Follow tracks in the fresh snow. If it doesn't snow, find an ice-skating rink, wash the car or anything else in need of a clean, and do your own 'Singin' in the Rain' dance outside to amuse the neighbours. Go for puddle walks and try to come home as wet as possible.

When play baths and snowmen no longer tempt your older children and teenagers, introduce them to water adventures of a more challenging nature. Go snorkelling or even scuba-diving in warmer climes >

It's important to remember that not everyone in the world has access to clean water. Water is a precious resource. Take a look around your house and garden to see how you could save water (rainwater butts, using grey water, having a shower instead of a bath, and more). You can also visit www.wateraid.org to learn about fun ways to support WaterAid's work around the world.