

The Interconnected Web of All Existence
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Centering

In the beginning there was light and the universe was almost without shape or form. Yet, with the passage of time, beautiful and intricate things emerged. Galaxies arose from tiny seeds in the cosmic soup. Stars were born and died; some ending with a bang and others with a whimper. The death of each star sowed the seeds for a new generation. We are stardust; the elements in our bodies and the substance of the Earth itself came from the ashes of stars that were born and lived and died oceans of time ago.

The cosmic cycle is echoed in the history of life itself on Earth. Its diversity has blossomed over eons. Some living things flourish and others perish. Now we are here: the first creatures on our planet fully aware of the web of life of which we are all a part. We savor the rhythms of its songs. We know that they sing of both joys and sorrows, greetings and partings.

It is therefore right and proper that we should pause for a time and reflect upon the network of human relations that form the fabric of our daily lives. Think of those who made your heart light and those who made your heart heavy. And, in the full glory of an Ohio summer, we must also face the pain of families here from a tragedy across the world. The great Greek historian Herodotus said it best. In peace, children bury their parents. War violates the order of nature because it causes parents to bury their children. We reach out today to those in that impossible place. At this time name the people who are in your thoughts, aloud or in the stillness of your hearts.

The first reading is a selection from Galileo's Dialog on the Two Great World Systems, published in 1630. He was convicted of heresy by the Inquisition for advocating in this work that the Earth was not stationary.

"I cannot without great wonder, nay more, disbelief, hear it being attributed to natural bodies as a great honor and perfection that they are impassible, immutable, inalterable, etc.: as conversely, I hear it esteemed a great imperfection to be alterable, generable, and mutable. It is my opinion that the Earth is very noble and admirable by reason of the many and different alterations, mutations, and generations which incessantly occur in it. And if it had been all an immense globe of crystal wherein nothing had ever

changed...I should have esteemed it a wretched lump of no benefit to the Universe and a mass of idleness. The difference to me would be the same as between a living and a dead creature.”

The second reading is taken from a 1990 Natural History Magazine column by Stephen Jay Gould, reprinted in Eight Little Piggies.

Two linked arguments are often promoted as a basis for an environmental ethic: That we live on a fragile planet now subject to permanent derailment and disruption by human intervention and that humans must learn to act as stewards for this threatened world.

Such views, however well intentioned, are rooted in the old sin of pride and exaggerated self-importance...We can surely destroy ourselves, and take many other species with us, but we can barely dent bacterial diversity and will surely not remove many million species of insects and mites. On geological scales, our planet will take good care of itself and let time clear the impact of any human malfeasance... Our planet simply waits....

I have a decidedly unradical suggestion to make about an appropriate environmental ethic--one rooted in the issue of appropriate human scale versus the majesty, but irrelevance, of geological time.

Christians call this principle the "golden rule"; Plato, Hillel, and Confucius knew the same maxim by other names. If we all treated others as we wish to be treated ourselves, then decency and stability would have to prevail.

I suggest that we execute such a pact with our planet. She holds all the cards and has immense power over us. Such a compact, which we desperately need but she does not at her own time scale, would be a blessing for us and an indulgence for her. We had better sign the papers while she is still willing to make a deal.

The Spider or the Fly?

This service is the last in a series of seven sermons on the principles and purposes of Unitarian Universalism. The seventh principle is respect for the interdependent web of existence of which we are a part. As some of you may know, I was born and raised a UU. When I was young, as far as I could tell, our church didn't have principles or purposes. It had guidelines. I'm delighted that we chose to adopt

these seven principles, not least because it makes it easier for our children to explain who we are. I'm also grateful for the opportunity to speak to you today.

When the speakers for this series got together earlier this year we had a discussion about what the seven principles meant to us. The best summary I remember was that each principle extended the last to a wider circle. This image resonated with me. Beginning with respect for self, the principles of our faith ripple out like waves from a rock thrown in a pond until they embrace the world itself. I interpret the seventh principle as follows, informed by my career as a research scientist as well as by my chosen faith.

We accept that we are part of a larger whole. The interdependent web takes many forms. We can see it in the bonds of human community. This especially speaks to me as I grow older. I recall a line from my favorite poet, Yeats. I feel my life drifting like a river, flowing from change to change. I have been many things. I have always been blessed to be part of a large and close clan, with many aunts and uncles and cousins. I once was one of the herd of children buzzing around the adults in their mysterious world. Then I had children of my own and the veil opened. Now my daughter is out of the home and I have moved on again. I see my father and my mother in me now as I move into the place where they once were.

The world itself has grown more interconnected, for good and for ill. You can now carry a GPS and a cell phone to the far corners of the globe, although I am still enough of a traditionalist that I confess to being utterly mystified as to why you would want to.

It is, however, our connection to nature that the seventh principle is most frequently invoked for. Nature is beautiful, ever-changing, and strange. Like the cat that walks by himself I'm drawn to the high wild places that put my soul at ease. To go into the deep woods and sit quietly is to see and hear the web of being in its full glory. The contrast with the rattle and hum of the human world can be so extreme that it may seem as if we stand outside of the natural order. There is a strain of ecological thought that treats nature as a static and perfectly balanced thing and humans as a sort of malignant growth. I find such rigid romanticism hollow, and the division between us and nature false. We are animals. We share our genes, in varying measure, with cats and dogs, bats and flies. Nature is hardly a peaceable kingdom. A spider web is beautiful when shimmering in the sunlight, but it is deadly to a fly. Even the diversity of life is a moving feast. After all, the vast majority of species that have ever lived are extinct. As Galileo noted, the essence of nature is precisely the incessant mutations and alterations within it. It is neither good nor bad. It simply is, like the Tao.

How then do we understand the workings of the world? Unitarians and Universalists have always embraced reason as a path to understanding. However, reason does not dull the beauty of the world. Instead it is multiplied. This idea has deep historical roots. Eudoxus, in our reading, understood that constant change was the natural order of things. He was also a follower of Pythagoras in the cosmopolitan culture of ancient Greece who believed that all things are numbers. Rather than being soulless, this was an expression of a deep awe that there was an underlying thread that connected everything. For the Pythagoreans numbers even had shapes, and we carry the echo of that idea today when we refer to them as figures. The most incredible thing to me about the universe is precisely that so many complex things can be understood with simple rules.

Humans also affect the world around us. We have reshaped the land. The great forest that once covered the eastern United States survives only as fragments interspersed between teeming cities. The wild expanses of the Great Plains are now tamed and tilled to feed people across the world. The fires that fuel our industries and power our cars are changing the air around us. It is commonly accepted among scientists that we are currently living in one of the periodic epochs of mass extinction that punctuate the history of the Earth. Prior episodes can be traced to continental drift, volcano eruptions, or catastrophic impacts from space. We are the agent of the current convulsion in our ecosystem, and its imprint will be seen in the rocks millions of years hence.

At the same time, I concur with the late Stephen Jay Gould. The power that people have is limited. All of our terrible nuclear weapons have far less power than the earthquake that caused the deadly tsunami in Indonesia. Our planet has seen worse extinctions in the past, and it has been warmer in the past than in any of the likely global warming scenarios. The survival of life is not in the balance whatever we do. We can do great harm and we can cause great human suffering if we do not choose wisely. This is reason enough to act.

What then must we do? Our moral principles demand a response. From our Christian roots the words from the Book of James speak out to us. “For as the body **without** the spirit is **dead**, so **faith without works** is **dead** also.” At one level we can respond with actions in our day to day life. I have no special wisdom here. I could urge people to recycle, for example, but for this crowd that advice would be wholly unnecessary. Susan Ritchie, speaking at Summer Institute earlier this year, made a persuasive case that “Thou Shall Recycle” is the closest thing that there is to a UU creed.

I believe that what we need to do most is to stand against the leveling wind that is currently blowing in our nation. In the Jewish tradition the Passover feast begins with a child asking “why is this day different from any other day?” There have always been powerful forces challenging the role of reason in the public sphere. This day is different because these forces now have a seamless propaganda machine. They have carefully crafted a message that takes the form of science but reject its ethics and essence. Scientists seek to establish facts about how the world is to inform our policies and test the outcomes of our actions. In this brave new world we are faced instead with an insistent drumbeat that facts exist only to justify our desires. They should be used as a drunk uses a light post: for support, not illumination. There is no better example than global climate change.

Humans are burning fossil fuels, and human activity has doubled the carbon dioxide content of the atmosphere since the Industrial Revolution. This has been proven, in scientific terms, beyond a reasonable doubt. The Earth is hotter than it has been in millennia, and quite possibly hotter than it has been in the last several million years. There is basic physics that connects the two, and the reasonable early doubts about uncertainties in climate studies have been amply laid to rest by careful work from many scientists. We are conducting an uncontrolled experiment on the planet.

I have no easy answers as to what we should do, but the facts above simply represent the world as it is rather than the world as we wish it should be. And yet, somehow, the public is left with the false impression that this is a fuzzy matter and not understood at all. The similarity to the treatment of evolution is eerie and unwelcome.

A small example may illustrate my point. As I was preparing this sermon there was an opinion piece by John Tierney in the New York Times. It was witty and carefully crafted. He mocked the idea that polar bears might be endangered by climate change. In this column he pointed out that polar bear populations are increasing in Inuit country. Not only that: the native peoples of the Arctic would enjoy warmer weather! Like all good propaganda, these items are both true and irrelevant. The Arctic sea ice is melting at an unprecedented rate. If it completely vanishes, and it will if current trends continue, polar bears won't be able to reach their hunting grounds and all of them will die. He knows this is the stated reason for concern; the online version of the column directly links to articles that make this very point. He simply evades it. It is hard to avoid the conclusion that the column, broadcast from our nation's paper of record, is both dishonest and designed to mislead. The house of denial is built of bricks like this. I will predict right now that we'll be seeing more and more published claims that, even if climate change happens, it'll be a good thing.

I therefore do not disbelieve the climate change skeptics because they are largely funded by industry, although many of them are. People with dubious motives can still be right. Many of these skeptics have been incorrect in their predictions, but that too isn't sufficient cause to discount their work. I've proposed theories that were falsified by later data. You can make a decent scientific career, in fact, by being wrong in interesting ways. I reject their work because they have been repeatedly proven to be wrong, on points large and small, and they have not had the scientific integrity to acknowledge when the data has not come out in their favor.

I do not want to finish on a note of despair. A powerful Chinese proverb comes to mind: The beginning of wisdom is calling things by their right names. I believe that we can make a tremendous difference for the better. If you notice nonsense in the media, speak up. Work for change in the political sphere. And recall that not all things human are for ill in the natural world. Our air and water are cleaner by any measure than they were when I was a child, and even the growth of human population is slowing and will soon cease. We have begun to change our ways as our awareness has grown. To be mindful of what we do is a mark of coming of age. Let us then prepare the pact with nature while she is still willing to sign the papers. We are neither the spider nor the fly. We have the freedom, and responsibility, to choose our place.

For our final piece I was faced with a dilemma. I love music, but singing is not one of my strong suits. Furthermore, for the closing service in the series a song about all of the principles seemed to be in order. Fortunately, when I was a preschool teacher at Summer Institute the kindergarten class had a song about the seven principles that even I could do. Please rise as willing and able to join me in the singing of the closing song, and remain standing for the closing blessing. There is no music, but I think you'll pick it up after the first couple of lines. Repeat after me:

Closing Blessing