

## **“From Fragments to Wholeness”**

Sermon delivered by Rev. Joan Javier-Duval  
at the Unitarian Church of Montpelier  
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Last Sunday, we began our church year with the exploration of the theme of connection. All this year, I will be inviting us to reflect on a particular theme each month which will be integrated into our worship services and other areas of our congregational life together.

As I reflect on the theme of connection, I wonder what it is that so often leads us away from connection and keeps us from feeling connected to ourselves, to others, and to the broader world and universe.

The quotation that was projected on the walls this morning and that is printed in the order of service makes a simple but profound statement:

“We are not isolated beings, but connected, in mystery and miracle, to the universe and to each other.”

What a simple and yet profound truth that is. On my best days and in my best moments, this simple truth shines through clearly and is impossible to ignore.

Growing up in Chicago, I would often feel this deep connection riding the “el” train. I would be sitting in my seat, and take a moment to look up at the other passengers on the train. I would see the pregnant woman with her hands on her belly. I would see the teenaged boy with his headphones on bopping his head to some bit of music. I would see the middle aged man in his gray business suit staring off into space. And, I would just know that there was some common thread weaving us all together.

Here in Vermont, those moments of recognition happen in other places. A few summers ago, Jared and I visited the Chazy Fossil Reef in Isle La Motte. Only a few remnants still remain of this 480 million year old reef that once stretched from what is now Quebec to Tennessee. Standing in the pasture amidst the fossil reef outcroppings, it took a stretch of the imagination to picture the marine environment that existed there so many millions of years ago. Yet, seeing and touching the fossils that remain there connected me to that now ancient version of our planet and reminded me of the continuing transformation of the earth and our connection to the vast and miraculous universe.

In moments like these, when I have felt deeply connected to the world around me, I have also felt a sense of wholeness. A sense of well-being and deep peace, of being fully integrated within myself, and existing in harmony with the broader world and creation.

But, like I said, these are my best days and my best moments.

More often than I would like, I find myself living not from the place of connection but from a place of isolation.

In this place, I don't see myself as part of the greater whole. Instead, I am caught in the overwhelming sense of my own concerns and the idea that I exist apart from others.

It happens in the simple, day to day moments. Like when I'm in line at Shaw's or the Coop and things are taking a bit too long. I eye with irritation the conveyor belt full of items that the customer in front of me is buying as well as the clerk who seems perfectly content to just take her time while I am in a big hurry.

Or, when someone on the street approaches me asking for some help. There's a moment when I know I'm about to be stopped when I can feel myself drawing inward. When for a moment, I hope that maybe I'm invisible. And then I start to assess whether this person might really need my help...and I lose hold of that thread weaving us together.

Albert Einstein called this sense of separation a delusion of consciousness. In Buddhism, it is referred to as "the illusion of separateness." Both terms express the idea that experiencing ourselves as separate is a false reality.

This sense of isolation can have an impact not only on our relationship with others but also with our very selves.

As Philip Hewett writes in our opening words, "By many cares and preoccupations, by diverse and selfish aims are we separated from one another and divided within ourselves."

Instead of feeling a sense of wholeness that comes with connection, in our isolation we feel unbalanced and unsettled. Our sense of self becomes divided rather than integrated.

Like in the moment I am stopped on the street by someone asking for some help, I can feel both separated from that person and his or her needs and also divided within myself. I have a sense of how I want to act and I recognize the values of compassion and kindness within me and yet I feel conflicted.

Because connection is the nature of existence, the fragmentation I might feel within myself doesn't affect me alone. There are rippling affects out into the world. The illusion of separateness manifests in the social and environmental ills that plague us.

Just this past week, I was struck by this in hearing the story of Ahmed Mohammed. Ahmed is 14 years old and lives outside Dallas, Texas. He is gifted in the way of engineering and mechanics and has fun just tinkering with wires and transformers. One day Ahmed decided to re-create a digital clock inside of a metal lunch box. This past Monday he brought his invention to school to share with his teacher. Unfortunately, his teacher took one look at the small box with all its wires and one look at Ahmed with his dark skin and Muslim name and decided his invention looked suspiciously like a bomb. The police were called and Ahmed, wearing his plastic rimmed glasses and a NASA t-shirt, was handcuffed and taken to a juvenile detention center where he was interrogated by the police. After several hours, he was finally released to his parents.

I can only imagine what was going through the minds of the teacher and administration at the school and of the police who were called in. I have to imagine the fear that was clouding their judgment that made it so easy to make that young teenager brimming with potential into a threat.

It is the illusion of separateness that drives such racist actions.

It is a fragmentation within the human community that drives us to tighten border controls here in the United States and that has left 17,000 migrants stranded in Croatia.<sup>1</sup>

And, it is our sense of separateness from our natural world that has led to the depletion of our natural resources and the climate crisis.

When we lose the sense that we are indeed part of a greater whole, we push each other farther away and we destroy the beautiful earth we call home.

So, how do we find our way back into wholeness?

In the Jewish tradition, the phrase "tikkun olam" refers to the actions that are taken to participate in the "repair of the world."

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<sup>1</sup> [http://www.nytimes.com/2015/09/19/world/europe/refugee-migrant-crisis-europe.html?hp&action=click&pgtype=Homepage&module=second-column-region&region=top-news&WT.nav=top-news&\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2015/09/19/world/europe/refugee-migrant-crisis-europe.html?hp&action=click&pgtype=Homepage&module=second-column-region&region=top-news&WT.nav=top-news&_r=0)

One myth that explains the origins of “tikkun olam” comes from the mystical tradition of Judaism. It’s a story of how the world was created. The story goes that in the beginning, God’s presence filled the universe. And, when God decided to bring this world into being, God contracted God’s breath, and this created darkness. When God the Creator said, “Let there be light,” ten vessels came forth each filled with primordial light. But the vessels were too fragile to contain such a powerful, divine light. They shattered and sparks scattered everywhere. And, as the myth goes, human beings were created to gather up these sparks and to do the work of “tikkun olam” - repairing the world.<sup>2</sup>

I think there is something incredibly powerful in this image. The light that we know is at our core - that sense of wholeness and connectedness to all things - exists yet it can feel scattered. Our work is to seek out and find that light. Repairing the world means recognizing the brokenness in the world and within ourselves and bringing back together those broken and fragmented pieces.

We see in our own faith tradition a similar call to participate in the repairing of the world and to restore to the world wholeness and peace.

In our seven principles, we covenant to affirm and promote justice for all, equity, compassion, peace, and respect for the interdependent web of all existence. And, in our tradition’s history, we find many examples of people who have been motivated by their Unitarian Universalist faith to work towards the abolition of slavery, for women’s rights, for civil rights, for immigrant justice, for racial justice, for ethical eating, divestment from fossil fuels, and responding to international crises.

The Chinese philosopher Lao-Tse is known to have said, if there is to be peace in the world, there must be peace in the nations, in the cities, between neighbors, in the home, and finally, in the heart.

Repairing the world out there and returning to wholeness within ourselves cannot be separated. The oneness of everything means that our internal sense of wholeness is connected to the wholeness of the greater world. It means that as we find balance and wholeness within ourselves we are more able to give of ourselves to repair the world; it also means that when we participate in bringing wholeness to the world around us, we are more able to find a sense of wholeness within.

Returning to wholeness starts with acknowledging the division within ourselves and also those times when we feel distanced and isolated from others.

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<sup>2</sup> <http://www.tikkun.org/nextgen/how-the-ari-created-a-myth-and-transformed-judaism>

As we recognize the light within ourselves and our connection to each other and to the universe, the more able we are to take part in bringing wholeness into the world.

I want to close with this story about Michael Massimino. Massimino was an astronaut with NASA from 1996 until 2014 who completed two space shuttle missions to service the Hubble Space Telescope. On one of these missions in 2009, he had to repair an instrument on the telescope that had failed.

He and another astronaut were to do this spacewalk together and Massimino was the one to do the actual repair. He describes being out in space looking at his friend next to him in his space suit and knowing that his friend had his own responsibilities to take care of and he could assist him but really it was his job to repair that instrument. And, then he looked inside the cabin at his five crew mates, none of whom had space suits on, and he knew they couldn't go out there to help him. And, then he looked at the earth, and he thought, there are billions of people down there, but there's no way I'm gonna get a house call on this one. No one can help me.

And, he writes, "I felt this deep loneliness. And it wasn't just a *Saturday-afternoon-with-a-book* alone. I felt *detached* from the Earth. I felt that I was by myself, and everything that I knew and loved and that made me feel comfortable was far away."<sup>3</sup>

Massimino and his partner endured a challenging eight hours to complete the repairs. At the end of those eight hours, before returning to the inside of the shuttle, Massimino took a moment to just hang out in space...He turned his gaze toward earth. He turned his head and realized he could also see the moon and the stars and the Milky Way galaxy.

He says, "And that moment changed my relationship with the Earth. Because for me the Earth had always been a kind of a safe haven...where I could go to work or be in my home or take my kids to school. But I realized it really wasn't that. It really *is* its own spaceship. And I had always been a space traveler. All of us here today...we're on this spaceship Earth, amongst all the chaos of the universe, whipping around the sun and around the Milky Way galaxy."

When he returned home a few days later, he was met at the airfield by his wife and kids. His wife told him how she could tell from watching and listening to the NASA television channel how sad he was and that it worried her.

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<sup>3</sup> <http://www.esquire.com/news-politics/news/a24509/a-view-of-earth/>

And, as they approached his house, he saw that the neighbors were outside and they had decorated his house. And as he got out of his car, they hugged him and told him how happy they were that he was back.

The next day, he and his team had their return ceremony. And, the engineers that had worked with them for years in preparation, and their trainers, and the people in the control center all started telling him how they were running around like crazy trying to find solutions for him.

Massimino says that he realized that at that time up in space that he felt so lonely, so detached from everyone else and like he was literally so far from the planet, that he never really had been alone.

May we know that we are never really alone  
May we know that we are indeed connected in ways visible and invisible  
to our deepest selves,  
to those around us,  
and to the great and mysterious universe.