

## **“A Change of Climate, Inside and Out”**

Sermon by Rev. Joan Javier-Duval

Unitarian Church of Montpelier

September 24, 2023

*The delivered sermon may have slight variations from this written manuscript. Video recordings of sermons can be found online at <https://ucmvt.org/category/whats-new/sermons-and-podcasts/>.*

### **Reading**

“The river speaks” by Ursa Goldenrose, 13, of Hardwick<sup>1</sup>

There is a web  
and it holds us.  
Pieces come apart,  
so we help rebuild it.  
We are a species  
that has forgotten  
our place  
on the web,  
so the Earth reminds us...

We are a thread  
in a web that  
is breaking.  
We have forgotten  
the path.  
We have forgotten  
the way  
the river speaks.  
It wills us to understand  
this is not just our land.

### **Sermon**

When the waters swelled in the North Branch and the Dog River and the Winooski on July 10 and 11, it was not just our homes and downtown buildings, not just our roads and bridges that were damaged.

Wildlife and ecosystems of the web that holds us were also harmed.

Fish communities that live in mountain streams have experienced a severe reduction in their population with young fish in particular not surviving the strong currents of the swollen streams.

---

<sup>1</sup> Young Writers Project: The river speaks, <https://vtdigger.org/2023/08/13/553993/>.

Flooding stripped waterways of small amphibians like salamanders which lay their eggs under rocks in the river beds that were tumbled over and carried downstream. Salamanders that do survive the displacement return to unfamiliar habitats where the insects that provide their food and nourishment must also reestablish themselves.

Injured turtles with cracked shells are also among those in the web that suffer from the impacts of flooded waterways.

While it seems there may have been some beneficial impacts for some species that live along the water, biologists note that it is harder for wildlife to recover in places where humans have interfered with the flow of the river.<sup>2</sup>

On our too hot planet, the swimming, slithering, and soaring living beings of the earth are also suffering from the effects of the climate crisis we have caused with our greenhouse gas emissions.

This past summer was yet another season of weather extremes and climate disasters from the riverbanks in our own backyards to the smoke-filled skies above our northern neighbors to the fire-devastated island of Maui in the windswept and warming Pacific Ocean.

The planet cries out, and we cry with her in grief and anguish.

All that we do that harms our planet, that wreaks havoc upon ecosystems and earth systems, comes from our forgetting as the poet writes.

“We have forgotten our place on the web. We have forgotten the path. We have forgotten the way the river speaks.”

How do we find our way back to remembering? To returning once again to the home of our soul?

---

<sup>2</sup> The Deeper Dig: How flooding affects Vermont’s wildlife and ecosystems, <https://vtdigger.org/2023/08/14/the-deeper-dig-how-flooding-affects-vermonts-wildlife-and-ecosystems/>.

The ecoactivist, writer, and Buddhist scholar, Joanna Macy, envisions a Great Turning, the transition from an Industrial Growth Society to a Life-sustaining Society.<sup>3</sup>

This Great Turning requires actions that keep the harms of the Industrial Growth Society at bay - everything from marches and protests to soup kitchens. The Great Turning also requires the creative and courageous development of new ecologically-based structures, many of which are actually a recalling of ancient ways of living in mutuality with the earth. Perhaps most importantly of all, the Great Turning requires our own turning inward and an examination of the spiritual turmoil we have wrought within ourselves that lies at the root of the turmoil we have caused in our planet's natural systems.

We turn inward to face the grief of what has already been lost, of what and who we will continue to lose, and of the impact of our actions. We turn inward to awaken our spirits and our consciousness. We turn inward to remember what we have forgotten.

In Judaism, the period of holy days that are now being observed are The Ten Days of *Teshuvah*. *Teshuvah* is sometimes translated as repentance, but its literal translation is return. Jews are called upon to return to themselves, to the essence of their best selves, and to the source of the Holy.

Rabbi P.J. Schwartz shares this reflection on the Ten Days of Teshuvah: "One theme that I am always reminded of... is that we can recreate and renew ourselves, as well as the world around us. Judaism provides us with a time of year for us to speak about ourselves differently, examine the world with a clearer mind, and remind us that with a commitment to ourselves we can become who and what we want to be."<sup>4</sup>

Jains have just concluded Paryushan with their day of repentance, Samvatsari. On this day, they too seek forgiveness for any wrongs they have done and they also renew their pledge to protect all living beings.

---

<sup>3</sup> Joanna Macy: The Great Turning is a shift from the Industrial Growth Society to a life-sustaining civilization, <https://www.ecoliteracy.org/article/great-turning>.

<sup>4</sup> P.J. Schwartz, "Rosh Hashanah - A Personal Reflection," August 14, 2012, <https://reformjudaism.org/blog/2012/08/14/rosh-hashanah-%E2%80%93-personal-reflection>.

Within Judaism, Jainism, and other religious traditions lies our human intention to notice the impact of our actions and inactions and to hold ourselves accountable to living in right relationship with others and to repair the web the holds us together.

This act of acknowledgement and atonement is not easy. This might actually be one of the most difficult spiritual tasks we are called to engage in as part of our spiritual journeys.

I believe there is great wisdom in religious traditions that make atonement and forgiveness the center of communal festivals and rituals. It is easier to do hard things together.

In the act of acknowledging our wrongdoings or the ways we have hurt others, we are tending to the interdependent web of all existence. We are tending to the relationships that we each depend upon as beings in need of care and belonging.

The good news is that we can recreate and renew ourselves. The ways we have missed the mark and not lived as our best selves is not the end of the story. There is yet a chance for honest reckoning, for forgiveness, and for repair.

In the spirit of repentance and returning to ourselves and the Holy, religious leaders across the world came together in November of last year to create ten spiritual principles for climate repentance.<sup>5</sup>

As the 27th UN Climate Conference took place on the Sinai Peninsula in Egypt, Jewish and Christian leaders ascended to the top of Mount Sinai to read these principles that call on us to recognize human responsibility to love and protect nature and treat all of life with reverence. From Mount Abu in India, a spiritual teacher shared the principle that we are responsible for the wellbeing of all life today, as well as for future generations. And from Mount Saint Francis in Indiana, Catholic priests declared that a disciplined spiritual life is helpful in overcoming the challenges of climate change and that we can act knowing that every action counts.

Just about a month ago, religious leaders from many traditions and all parts of the world came together beside the great expanse of Lake Michigan in Chicago to lament together the destruction we have wrought on the planet and the suffering this destruction has caused. In this climate

---

<sup>5</sup> <https://climaterepentance.com/>

repentance ceremony, they read aloud the ten principles. They prayed and chanted and committed themselves anew to living in harmony with the earth and all living beings.

In this collective act, we are reminded that we not only harm but we repair. These strings that connect us to one another can become frayed and we can strengthen them when we are willing to recognize how we have erred and we take the steps to make amends and start anew.

I invite you now to reflect quietly for a few moments on how your own relationship with the earth might need repair. Where do you notice sorrow and grief? Where do you notice guilt? How do you long for a restoration of kinship?

While you reflect, you are welcome to hold a string that you can find on the backs of the chairs meditating upon the threads of your life that are in need of repair.

In facing the ways we have erred, we then allow ourselves the possibility of making amends. In noticing what we have forgotten, we can remember the deeper truth of our connection and belonging to the living systems of the earth. And, we can then choose the next action that moves us in the direction of wholeness, healing, and survival.

Perhaps then, we can be a thread in a web that is not breaking, but that is mending.

We can take part in the great mending of the fraying threads of humanity's relationship to the earth and in the great turning towards a renewed and sustainable world in which we are but one part of the great web of all life that flourishes and thrives.

So may it be.