

“Keep the Circle Whole”
Sermon by Rev. Joan Javier-Duval
Unitarian Church of Montpelier
April 28, 2024

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

Reading Excerpts from “A Pattern of Reciprocity”¹

“Many indigenous peoples share the understanding that we are each endowed with a particular gift, a unique ability.... It is understood that these gifts have a dual nature, though: a gift is also a responsibility. If the bird’s gift is song, then it has a responsibility to greet the day with music. It is the duty of birds to sing and the rest of us receive the song as a gift.” Robin Wall Kimmerer

“What can we give back through a pattern of reciprocity to a planet that gives us so much? What will make the more-than-human creation glad that we are here?” Debra Rienstra

Sermon

Earlier this week under a full moon, my spouse, child and I quietly waited to hear the peenting of an American woodcock in a meadow at the nature center. We crept along in the dried grass trying not to make too much noise. A few moments after the peenting stopped we saw a small, dark figure fly above our heads and back down to the ground making its mating dance in the sky. I found it humbling to stand under the moonlit night sky searching out this avian kin whose ways are a mystery to me.

It's been 54 years since the first Earth Day was celebrated on April 22, 1970. Fifty-four years is a blip in planetary time, but it is also enough time for significant change to occur. These paradoxical truths are also humbling.

In the last 54 years, human activity has led to greenhouse gas emissions more than doubling, primarily due to the burning of fossil fuels. But also in the 54 years since the passage of the Clean Air Act, the presence of some air pollutants, like nitrogen oxide which comes out of the tailpipes of cars and trucks, has dropped significantly. In 54 years, a cypress tree can grow to 100 feet. Thirteen queen bees will hatch and die. And, twenty gray whale calves can be born to a single gray whale mother who lives a span of 54 years.

¹ <https://cac.org/daily-meditations/a-pattern-of-reciprocity/>

As part of the web of life and the great span of time, we humans are one among many living beings, one part of the interconnected and interdependent planet.

A couple weeks ago, when I asked you to share one sentence you would put into a sermon about interdependence, more than half of you wrote something that explicitly mentioned the Earth or the natural world and our human relationship to it.

You said things like:

“Interdependence includes the animals, plants, elements and people of earth.”

“All of life is one giant organism depending on all ‘cells’ to be complete.”

“None of us can survive or thrive alone. We are deeply dependent on each other and the earth.”

“We are not separate from the totality of the Universe.”

“A web of life: strong and flexible.”

“Even black flies have their place in the ecosystem. I don’t know about ticks.”

Interdependence is one of the core values of Unitarian Universalism. Among our current principles is our commitment to affirm and promote respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part.

We experience our interdependence when we plant seeds and harvest food. When a bear wanders into our yard looking for its next meal. When the earth quakes. When the light of the sun hasn’t shone enough on our gardens and also when there is too much rain or not enough. Evidence of our interdependence is everywhere.

We humans are not the center of the natural world. We might have out-sized power to shape and disrupt natural systems, but we are simply one among many dependent upon the earth and the all of life. At the heart of living with interdependence is acknowledging and respecting the web of all existence.

Of course, Unitarian Universalists are not alone in identifying interdependence as a core religious value. According to Buddhism, interdependence is the nature of reality. We are all linked, and our actions create the conditions that affect all other life. We, in turn, are affected by the actions of others.

The Tibetan Buddhist and environmental scientist, Dekila Chungyalpa writes: “The beauty of knowing that the Earth is a closed system is to understand—without hubris—that we are all part

of the same phenomenon, Life. When we take a few steps back, we can see how all species are part of one vast community, living and breathing in tandem with one another, acting in ways that are compassionate rather than competitive. Embracing interdependence as the central organizing principle is to dissolve that boundary between ourselves and ‘the other’ and to expand the circle of community so that there is no ‘other’ left; there is only us made whole.”²

This belief in the wholeness of all life is also present in Indigenous worldviews which regard interdependence and mutuality as fundamental truths. We are related to all other living beings. We are tied in kinship, and therefore we receive the gifts of the earth with gratitude and live in respectful relationship with plant life, animal life, and the entirety of Mother Earth.

This year, Earth Day coincided with the beginning of the Jewish festival of Passover. Some Jews say that the commemoration of the ancient Israelites’ emancipation from slavery and exodus from Egypt is a time to recall our interdependence and recommit to the freedom and liberation of all people and all beings.

In this spirit, the Rabbi Arthur Waskow prepared a haggadah called the Earth & Justice Freedom-Seder two years ago.³ He is the author of the original Freedom Seder haggadah which was written and told for the one year anniversary of the assassination of Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. in 1969. These haggadahs were meant to be told at the Passover seder table and also out in public.

The Earth & Justice Freedom-Seder bears a message for the “Corporate Carbon Pharaohs” to let all people and the planet go free. And, the haggadah mourns the plagues of wildfires, melted Arctic and Antarctic ice, flooded cities, acidic oceans, and mass extinction of plants and animals. This haggadah is offered in the spirit of Tikkun Olam, or repair of the world. The implicit and explicit message is that, while our actions can lead to environmental plagues, we also have a role to play in redemption and repair.

Within Unitarian Universalism, we are honing our own articulation of the value of interdependence. In the proposed revision to Article II of the UUA Bylaws which will be voted upon this June, the study commission names six values with love in the center. One of these values is interdependence. And, the statement on interdependence reads:

² Dekila Chungyalpa, “At the Center of All Things is Interdependence,” Center for Humans & Nature, May 17, 2021, <https://humansandnature.org/at-the-center-of-all-things-is-interdependence/>.

³ <https://greenfaith.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/08/Earth-Justice-Freedom-Seder.pdf>

“We honor the interdependent web of all existence. With reverence for the great web of life and with humility, we acknowledge our place in it.”

These words affirm our belief that we humans are but one part of a great and interdependent web of life. And, this reality ought to be treated with reverence and humility.

The Article II statement continues: “We covenant to protect Earth and all beings from exploitation. We will create and nurture sustainable relationships of care and respect, mutuality and justice. We will work to repair harm and damaged relationships.”

In the reflection group that I led this winter, a few of the participants named the high bar being set in this statement. One person wondered, how can I “protect Earth and all beings from exploitation”?

This statement is truly aspirational. It boldly names the ways that we as Unitarian Universalists can strive to be in relationship with all beings, human and non-human. We can strive to be non-exploitative, to relate to others with care and mutuality, to acknowledge and repair harm.

I appreciate this statement because it recognizes the smallness and largeness of our place in the web of life at the same time. We can recognize our place as beings with the agency and power to change our environment. And, we are also vulnerable beings subject to natural forces that we cannot control. Forces strong enough to take down trees, to wash away land, to inundate our built environment.

We are feeling the duality of this smallness and largeness as the climate crisis continues to unfold. We are vulnerable to the chaos and disruptions being caused by the extreme and unpredictable changes in the climate, and we also have the ability to do something about it.

And, right now, we are being invited onto simultaneous paths to respond to the climate crisis. There is the path of reducing our harm to the planet and to future generations as much as possible by reducing our greenhouse gas emissions. There is also the path of learning to adapt to the realities of a changed climate in ways that ensure an equitable and sustainable future for all.

As we move further down these paths, we have an opportunity to move with collective action. We can choose to take action as a collective body not just as disparate and separate entities each just trying to do our small part on our own.

And this is why the UCM Climate Action Team exists. Not as a social club for those with environmental concerns but as an organized group that can support one another and bring inspiration to our religious community to act together. And so, I hope you will stay for the conversation after the service to begin mapping out how we can do our part from our place in the great web of life to make the more-than-human creation glad that we are here.

We come together in kinship with the whole of life.

We are one among many: the dancing woodcock, the singing spring peeper, the foraging rabbit, the leafing oak, the unfurling tulip, the budding crabapple.

All of us warmed by the sun.

All of us basked in moonlight.

All of us one circle of community, part of the whole.