

“All Our Relations”

Sermon by Rev. Joan Javier-Duval

Unitarian Church of Montpelier

September 21, 2025

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Reading “Gitanjali 69” by Rabindranath Tagore¹

The same stream of life that runs
through my veins night and day runs
through the world and dances in
rhythmic measures.

It is the same life that shoots in joy
through the dust of the earth in
numberless blades of grass and breaks
into tumultuous waves of leaves and
flowers.

It is the same life that is rocked in
the ocean-cradle of birth and of death,
in ebb and in flow.

I feel my limbs are made glorious by
the touch of this world of life. And my
pride is from the life-throb of ages
dancing in my blood this moment.

Sermon

According to the stories passed from generation to generation among the Haudenosaunee people of North America, there was a time when the Great Spirit and Skywoman lived far, far way among the Sky People. Earth as we know it did not yet exist. Far below the Sky World, there was only the watery darkness and some creatures of the water. In some versions of the story, the Great Spirit sent Skywoman on a journey to the world below. She peered into a hole from the

¹ From *Gitanjali* (Macmillan and Company, 1916) by Rabindranath Tagore. This poem is in the public domain.

Skyworld her belly full of life and her hands full of seeds. She went down through the hole and as she fell toward the waters, the animals could see her and they began to worry for her. The loons flew up to guide Skywoman down. They called up a giant turtle and upon the shell of the turtle they piled up mud brought up from deep, deep down in the water. Here they laid Skywoman. Her seeds brought plant life to the newly formed Earth, and Skywoman gave birth to twins. Their conflicting natures - one of life and goodness and one of death and destruction - led to strife. Yet, life prevailed on Turtle Island.²

In another creation story from the ancient Near East, one that is perhaps more familiar to many of you here, God created the world in an orderly fashion over six days. Starting with day and night, then sky, earth and waters, plants and trees, sun and moon, fish and birds, four-legged animals and creeping ones. Finally, God created humans in God's image and deemed all that God had created was good and God entrusted humans to be protectors of all creation. They started their lives in a paradise nestled between rivers and full of life, but they were not able to live in that paradise for long. In this story, there is also strife - rules not followed, violence, and life was not easy but life continued and God reminded the people again and again of their duty to care for all that God had created.³

These stories and the interpretations of them over many, many years have invited our ancestors and now us today to consider the relationship between humans and the earth and humans with one another.

What role do we have in creating and tending? Do plants and animals serve the needs of humanity? Or does humanity serve and steward plant life and animal life? Or is there another, nonhierarchical way to relate to other creatures of this planet?

In the book *Restoring the Kinship Worldview*, Wahinkpe Topa (also known as Four Arrows) and Dr. Darcia Narvaez lay out a stark choice. They write: "We adopt the idea that there are only two observable, essential forms of assumptions—worldviews—to choose from today. One has us as creatures that are intrinsically part of Nature, physically and spiritually. The other has us

² There are many tellings of the story of Skywoman. What I have shared is based on the story told in "Skywoman Falling" from *Braiding Sweetgrass* by Robin Wall Kimmerer and at these links: <https://www.oneidaindiannation.com/the-haudenosaunee-creation-story/> and <https://nfexchange.ca/museum/discover-our-history/reclaiming-cultural-identity/creation-story>.

³ Book of Genesis, chapters 1-4

separated from Nature, also physically and spiritually...we are at a point where either/or decisions must be made regarding which way of understanding our place in the world will best serve life systems. For us and many other scholars, the choice is clear because the Indigenous worldview has proven itself over thousands if not tens or hundreds of thousands of years.”⁴

These indigenous thinkers urge us to examine the worldviews that shape our relationships to the Earth writ large and to the animals, plants, and all life with whom we share this planet. This worldview is the same one expressed in the words of Rabindranath Tagore that I shared earlier: The same stream of life that runs through my veins runs through the world.

On the surface, it might seem that it is easy to adopt the worldview that we are intrinsically part of Nature. Here in Vermont, we are more oriented toward recognizing our interdependence with the earth than in other places. However, I find the implications of such a worldview to be incredibly challenging, particularly in a society shaped primarily by Western philosophy and religion which has placed humans at the center of existence.

When I was on a silent meditation retreat one year, I noticed that all around the retreat center there were small containers tucked into windowsills and in the corners of rooms. The containers had instructions on them indicating that they were to be used to transport any insects that were found indoors to the insect’s natural habitat outdoors. Presumably this was to be done rather than squashing the bug as might be one’s instinct.

One day as I was doing my walking meditation, I noticed one of my fellow retreatants passing by - walking slowly but with his arms lifted as he carefully and without breaking out of his meditative state carried one of these containers to the front door. Instinctively, I found the scene to be ridiculous. It was not often that I had seen another person so intently, and so slowly, moving a bug outside.

Only after days of slowing down myself and tuning in did it make more sense. Reflecting on the incident more deeply, I realize that the humor of it came from turning an anthropocentric worldview on its head.

⁴ Wahinkpe Topa (Four Arrows) and Darcia Narvaez, *Restoring the Kinship Worldview: Indigenous Voices Introduce 28 Precepts for Rebalancing Life on Planet Earth* (North Atlantic Books, 2022), 8.

If we are intrinsically a part of nature, physically and spiritually, would we not offer care even to the smallest creature in our midst? Would we not take the time to notice the ant, the mosquito, the spider and help it find its way back home?

My fellow retreatant's actions jarred me out of my assumption that I, as a human, could determine which creatures live or die based on my need for comfort or convenience.

Worldviews live within us at the deepest level. Often, we are not aware of the worldviews that we hold. They are developed over a lifetime of absorbing the dominant narratives, social norms, and traditions around us.

Some of you might be familiar with the iceberg of culture model developed by the anthropologist Edward Hall.⁵ At the tip of the iceberg are those surface level aspects of culture that we see and experience - art, food, customs, and traditions. Below the surface we get to shallow culture. These are our unspoken expectations, norms, and beliefs, such as etiquette and forms of non-verbal communication. And then, we go further down and get to deep culture. This is the place of our implicit beliefs and worldviews - beliefs about religious matters, concepts of time, attitudes towards authority. These aspects of deep culture are almost imperceptible and rarely challenged.

Our worldview, either based on a presumption of human dominance over other living beings, or one based on kinship with all life, shapes how we treat the smallest creatures like the spider who happens to cross our path in the meditation room as well as how we treat the habitats and ecosystems all around us.

Systems thinkers also use an iceberg model to better understand events as they appear to us at the surface level. In this way of thinking, you observe an event that has taken place. One layer beneath that, you notice patterns and trends. Below that are the systems that undergird these patterns. And at the deepest level are the mental models that shape the systems that are in place.

If we embrace a worldview in which we are all kindred and equally worthy of dignity and respect, then we would see systems that ensure protection of all parts of our world - rivers, mountains, and forests, the spotted turtle, the little brown bat, the marten, and the rusty blackbird. Systems of protection might include granting legal status as a living entity to these

⁵ "Beyond the Surface: Exploring the Iceberg of Culture," by The Core Collaborative Learning Lab, <https://thecorecollaborative.com/beyond-the-surface-exploring-the-iceberg-of-culture/>.

kindred. And, this has, in fact, taken place. One example is the Whanganui River in New Zealand which was granted legal personhood in 2017 under the guardianship of the Whanganui tribe after hundreds of years of indigenous struggle.⁶

Across the world, there are other examples of nature being granted rights and recognized as living beings from Ecuador to India to Spain and even Toledo, Ohio, where for one year Lake Erie was granted a bill of rights before that was challenged in court.⁷ As people in those communities change how they interact with these rivers and mountains and other ecosystems, the culture shifts and behaviors change over time.

It is not easy and there are setbacks at time. But, change can happen.

We can work to consciously uncover those aspects of deep culture and the mental models that will actually lead to the world we want to live in and pass onto future generations. As we do so, we can then intentionally and purposefully nurture those values and worldviews in our homes, our schools, our workplaces, and right here in this spiritual community.

We can hold fast to the belief that we are kindred with all life and greet the sun with gratitude and listen to the crow's call and plant flowers for the bees and harvest apples to keep and to share and use only what we need of the precious water held in reserve and rest in the leaves shed by the maple and the oak.

The scientist and author Robin Wall Kimmerer writes: "Perhaps the Skywoman story endures because we too are always falling. Our lives, both personal and collective, share her trajectory. Whether we jump or are pushed, or the edge of the unknown world just crumbles at our feet, we fall, spinning into someplace new and unexpected. Despite our fears, the gifts of the world stand by to catch us."⁸

⁶ Eleanor Ainge Roy, "New Zealand river granted same legal rights as human being," The Guardian, March 26, 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/mar/16/new-zealand-river-granted-same-legal-rights-as-human-being>.

⁷ Viktoria Kahui, "Granting legal 'personhood' to nature is a growing movement – can it stem biodiversity loss?" April 25, 2024, <https://theconversation.com/granting-legal-personhood-to-nature-is-a-growing-movement-can-it-stem-biodiversity-loss-227336>.

⁸ Robin Wall Kimmerer, *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge, and the Teachings of Plants* (Milkweed Editions, 2013) 9.

We are shaped by the stories that have been passed down to us and we are creating stories of our kinship and of our interdependence rooted in our deepest beliefs and expressed through how we choose to live together right now in this moment.

What world could we create if we believed the gifts of the earth stand by to catch us?

And if we believed that we are part of the stream of life?

And if we believed that Paradise can exist if we protect it?

Let us create that world together.

So may it be.