

## Through the Lens of Faith

By Rev. Jane Smith, Channing Memorial Church, UU, Ellicott City, MD March 29, 2026

As a people of this beloved liberal faith tradition, we are intimately bound together in a theological search for truth and meaning. At the heart of our faith is the journey we share—sojourning together as each of us seeks our own understanding of faith, theology, and our sense of meaning and purpose. Together we question, reflect, wonder, and ruminate. Ours is a journey with no true end, and yet it is critical in self-discovery. Our greater denomination articulates this quest through the theology of pluralism, that, quote, “We are all sacred beings, diverse in culture, experience, and theology.”<sup>1</sup> We are bound together with each sacred being in our web, celebrating our differences, yet journeying as a unified and covenantal whole. Questions abound, answers elusive. Is divinity all powerful? All loving? Is divinity bound together with the least of these? Is there a divine essence at all? Our responses are fundamentally evasive, yet open to contemplation and exploration.

Today we are invited to continue to craft our own theology by engaging deeply with the natural world. I chose this focus because we are so profoundly interlaced with all living, sentient beings, interwoven with each of nature’s blessings – we cannot escape forming a relationship. Faith calls us to pay attention to all that is around us, fostering spirituality through engagement with towering trees, ancient stardust, and the birds that circle above us. No matter how finite and profane, there is a sense of spirit weaving the mundane together in a web of faith and awe. Today we explore different theological understandings of the natural world of which we are immersed in, inviting a shift in our own meaning-making by exploring religious overlaps of nature and the divine.

First, I invite us into an exploration of Religious Naturalism. In this understanding of religion, there is no God, no Goddess, no essence of divine love. There is nature – beautiful, awe-inspiring nature. Nature is not imbued with the sacred, saturated with any sort of divine

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.uua.org/beliefs/shared-values>

essence, it is simply atoms and photosynthesis and inanimate rocks – and that in and of itself is worthy of reverence. By immersing ourselves in plunging canyons and mere lighting bugs alike, we create meaning. We create meaning from this awe when we intuit that we are interconnected; that we belong to one another. We create meaning when we realize we are a patchwork of the animate and the inanimate interacting in ways that fill our lives with wonder and awe. It is a profound sense of gratitude and shared experience. I think of the many hikes my husband and I have taken all throughout myriad ecosystems of the natural world. Alligators in North Carolina, which were, on the surface, quite alarming. Or cascading waterfalls in upstate New York. The depths of the earth at the Grand Canyon. No matter where we were in any particular moment, we found something worthy of reverence and awe. The first blooming snowdrops of the season, reminding us that there is ever-present beauty in this world, ignorant of the surrounding angst. The rotting trees that so beautifully depict that there is an ever-evolving circle of life with any living thing. Our lives seem forever finite, yet in nature they persist. Each element of nature typically met with monotony is to be revered. Well-known religious naturalist Ursula Goodenough offered the following quote, “Reverence is the sense that there is something larger than the self... to which one accords respect and awe and assent.”<sup>2</sup> Nature is expansive in all of its wonder and awe. We are but a piece, a blessed, beloved, yet wildly insignificant piece of all that has ever been. May we revere the expanse.

To many others, the natural world is not simply atoms and physics. Transcendentalism is an offshoot of Unitarianism, established in the mid 1800s in New England. Nature, in this philosophical and spiritual movement, is fully imbued with divinity. Ralph Waldo Emerson, prominent Unitarian turned Transcendentalist offered, quote, “In the woods, we return to reason and faith... I see all; the currents of the Universal Being circulate through me; I am part or particle of God.”<sup>3</sup> Nature, God, all of us – deeply and profoundly interconnected. We are not separate from all that is holy, but expressions of it.

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<sup>2</sup> *The Sacred Depths of Nature* by Ursula Goodenough

<sup>3</sup> *Nature* by Ralph Waldo Emerson

Connecting with nature – residing with nature – if done with intention leads to spiritual insight and a sense of profound connection. This is the crux of Transcendentalism. I am curious if you have ever wandered on a nighttime beach, held under a canopy of stars. If you have ever leaned against a tree so ancient your ancestors could have sat there. These are moments to connect with a much deeper reality as nature and spirit join as one. And it is this – meaning, purpose, faith – these are not passed down through religious doctrines nor past religious leaders. They are, instead, crafted by the individual through profound and intentional personal experience with the first cherry blossoms of spring, the abundant, yellow dandelions. Through an immersion in nature, Transcendentalists hold that people are inspired to craft their own meaning, their own faith, their own beliefs. Emerson wrote of the intuition that nature so generously provides. When paused in nature we are offered this question: What is your pure, inner truth? What is held deeper than spirit and soul, too silent to be heard by that still, small voice within? Listen. Wonder. Invite.

I offer a second quote from prominent Transcendentalist Ralph Waldo Emerson, edited for gendered language. “The happiest [person] is [one] who learns from nature the lesson of worship.”<sup>4</sup> Worship need not be spoken prayer, hymns, nor sermons offered in brick-and-mortar churches. Worship is found in true connection with all that the earth so graciously provides. Worship is to stand below the clouds, to see your reflection mirrored in a tranquil stream. Nature provides those time-honored elements of traditional worship: awe, humility, gratitude, and wonder.

This next theology adds yet another layer to this intersection of faith and divinity. Let us further explore the teachings of a particular theology – panentheism. I offer the sentiments of Philip Clayton, renowned philosopher of religion. Clayton uses the word God, for that is the name of divinity in this theology. May you lift up in your own heart Goddess, spirit, essence of love – the divine that holds true to you. Clayton offers, quote, “The simple definition of panentheism is the view that the world is in some sense “within” God, although God is also

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<sup>4</sup> *Nature* by Ralph Waldo Emerson

more than the world.”<sup>5</sup> Unlike Transcendentalism, God is both imminent and transcendent. Immanence is understood as a divine presence inherent in the living and the tangible – all people, all plants, all animals – as well as the inanimate. Transcendent means that divinity is well beyond the range of mere human experience; exceeding all that we could possibly comprehend. The sacred is present everywhere and simultaneously far greater than all that is tangible and experiential. God is in the first crocuses of spring, and yet God transcends the crocuses. It is sitting with a favorite bush covered in blue petals, immersed in beauty and in sentimentality, yet also pulled by the spirit. The natural world is imbued with divine presence.

Panentheism holds another foundational theological view: relationship. While the divine is not distant in this tangible realm – held within the trees right within our grasp – neither is divinity removed from the human spirit. All that is sacred resides as a caring and compassionate entity; intimately connected and held within each living, breathing person. The spirit interacts with and responds to all of our woes and laments, our joys and celebrations. Renowned philosopher Albert North Whitehead wrote, “God is the fellow-sufferer who understands.”<sup>6</sup> God knows each spirit intimately. When we suffer, the divine laments with us. When we rejoice, all that is sacred celebrates as well. In many theologies, we are fundamentally affected by divinity. Yet here, our experiences affect this great, divine essence in return.

I think of our own Unitarian Universalist faith, and I consider how we move within and relate to the natural world that surrounds us. What is perhaps most apparent is our stated value of interdependence, quote, “We honor the interdependent web of all existence and acknowledge our place in it.”<sup>7</sup> We are intimately interwoven with each plant, animal, and person residing in this forever finite realm, as well as all who were and all who ever will be. We are deeply interwoven with all that we find sacred and holy. And, akin to all we have been discussing, this nature and this divinity may overlap and intertwine. At times we find this intimate connection beautiful and at times we find this terrifying. When we tend to nature, she flourishes. When we

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<sup>5</sup> *Adventures of the Spirit* by Philip Clayton

<sup>6</sup> *Process and Reality* by Albert North Whitehead

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.uua.org/beliefs/shared-values>

take advantage of nature, we help contribute to the climate crisis, entirely antithetical to our faith. All that we do ripples to the edges of the ever-expansive web, affecting natural resources, as well as myriad humans that we will never meet. In this, our seeming insignificance becomes deeply significant. I think this is crucial when we look at this broken world we are immersed in. All of humanity, all abilities, all faiths, all races, all political parties, all socioeconomic status, we are interwoven into one greater whole, a patchwork of identities spanning the time and space yet all connected by a common humanity; all connected by an eternal and everlasting spirit. When one of our siblings suffers, we all suffer. How can we look upon one another as siblings in this transient and finite realm?

We are here in this space made sacred by our presence because we question our own theology. Nature, entities, transcendence, finitude, immortality – the list of queries is endless. And just as limitless are our responses – no two of us share the same theology. But we journey together, nonetheless. The journey is what binds us together. Nature is held sacred to so many of us, not just those in this room but our faith as a whole – there is a sense of wonder and reverence in those first spring fireflies, the clouds that release a torrential downpour. Nature is so proximate and so awe inspiring in its expansiveness and in its beauty. How can we continuously pay attention to the world around us in new ways, with new eyes? I leave you with these questions: Where do we see divinity? How do we see divinity? Your charge is to bring these inquiries to a space you hold most sacred and listen to what nature tells you. Let us end with a piece of the poem we heard earlier:

When despair grows in me  
and I wake in the night at the least sound  
In fear of what my life and my children's lives may be,  
I go and lie down where the wood drake  
Rests in his beauty on the water, and the great heron feeds...

For a time

I rest in the grace of the world, and am free.<sup>8</sup>

As we leave this space may we rest in the grace of the world and be free. May we revel in the journey of discovering what is life affirming and awe inspiring. May we never stop questioning, exploring, and sojourning together as a community of believers. May we see the world through the lens of faith: each tree, each boulder, each grasshopper as something far greater and more expansive than meets the eye. May we endlessly rejoice in the wonder and awe of all the natural world gifted to us by great spirit of love. Spirit of life may we forever know faith, love, wonder, and awe.

May it be so, and Amen.

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<sup>8</sup> "The Peace of Wild Things" – by Wendell Berry