

## **An Ode to the Earth**

**By Rev. Jane Smith, Channing Memorial Church, UU, Ellicott City, MD April 16, 2023**

Our past becomes an interlocking web of memories, woven together by an invisible thread connecting who we were to who we have become. I think of my own memories, seemingly insignificant moments, that were, in hindsight, formative to who I am this day. I remember searching with great delight for those wild strawberries – their runners growing untamed in those forgotten corners of nature – the sweet juice from the ripe, red fruit filling my mouth. Or the wish I made on a star every night, each evening searching for that first star in the night sky, putting into practice the ritual I heard of in storybooks and fairytales. The prayer of children – “I wish I may I wish I might have the wish I wish tonight.” I think of more mature moments as well, as childhood shifted into adulthood – memories that had more meaning at the time. I remember with great detail one summer night I lay atop the cool sand on a beach in New Jersey – reveling in the numerous stars burning with great intensity lightyears away, immersed in thoughts of the creatures that inhabited the great depths of the ocean. In that moment, I realized my own seeming insignificance, and simultaneously my connection with all that is. These strawberries, stars and ocean waters are all gifts from our great mother – this earth – and from whatever essence created the universe and all that is.

The gifts of joy, beauty, taste, sustenance, and wonder; gifts from the realm of mystery offered from a source unknown.<sup>1</sup> Gifts that we have turned to commodities, offerings we have stripped of their innate wonder and awe and have instead incased in plastic. We live in a culture of productivity and consumerism; we live with a scarcity mindset and a need for more, more, more. And yet it was not always this way on the earthen grounds of Maryland, Virginia, Pennsylvania. This is much different than the practice of reciprocity held sacred in the destroyed indigenous cultures. So let us reflect on that holy reciprocity of the indigenous peoples: gifts given and received in this land of innate beauty and abundant resources. With

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<sup>1</sup> *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge, and the Teachings of Plants* by Robin Wall Kimmerer pg. 24

this mindset, a practice of giving and receiving becomes, indeed, our duty. I offer the reflection of author Robin Wall Kimmerer, an enrolled member of the Citizen Potawatomi Nation, asking “what is our gift?” She continues, “It is said that only humans have the capacity for gratitude. This is among our gifts.”<sup>2</sup> So let us offer this gift, which is gratitude, to that which we are tempted to package in saran wrap, to box up and put on shelves – the grains that make our bread, the fruits that fill our stomachs, the wood that constructed this very building. Let us frame our days in gratitude for what surrounds us – arising with the sun alongside the stirring birds and the dew-covered grass, returning to slumber once the sun has slipped below the horizon and the blue-grey sky has returned to velvety darkness. Let this be our prayer as we join together in sacred community.

This month, we have reflected on the holy act of resistance - and so what do we resist this Earth Day? We resist consumer culture, we resist precious and sacred resources turned into commodities, we resist the systemic destruction of our mother – this earth. We’ll talk more about this later. We also offer quiet resistance – spiritual resistance. We resist by offering not dominion, but gratitude – murmurings of “thank you” whispered in meditative prayer. By celebrating our kinship with all that is; knowing that we, too, will return to dust – to our web of all things sacred.

Nature, to me, has always been sacred. I think of those seemingly mundane moments of childhood that, in retrospect, taught me to immerse myself in spirituality and awe – my meditations with the tender strawberries, treasuring the tart and sweet juices running down my chin, the smells of fruit and spring – this sacred pause is always available. Or my wishes to the distant stars, beginning a practice of prayer to those huge balls of hydrogen and helium – offering prayers of petition, of gratitude, of love. Nature has fostered within me devotion for decades. Nature is held sacred by so many – those theists who understand God as being immanent through a presence in the natural world, becoming the trees and bushes, the pagans

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<sup>2</sup> *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge, and the Teachings of Plants* by Robin Wall Kimmerer pg. 115

who find sacred the natural cycles of birth, growth, and death, the religious naturalists and Transcendentalists who believe that the beauty and wonder of nature are necessary in grounding ourselves in a life of wholeness. What about nature evokes such reverence, respect, holiness, and awe? I think of our kindred connection with all that is – we are all stardust – we are all dirt and trees and tulips and boulders – those molecules and atoms that have cycled through nature’s creations both living and inanimate for millennia. Or the wonder and awe that nature – that life – exists at all – where did these flowers, this earth, this universe, come from? From where came that first, living single cell organism, the first conscious thought? What about the consistency of nature – its unceasing presence – a presence that will outlive us all – even our species? Is not all of this sacred? Our interactions with nature teach us ways to make each day – each moment – sacred, like my childhood interactions with wild strawberries and twinkling stars.

Let us return, for a moment, to the cycles of the earth and our web of life. I recently visited a natural burial ground, where abstract thoughts of human life, death, and a return to nature became tangible. There, before me, were the fields where the deceased would lay at rest, not encased in coffins or urns hard woods but soft woods or cardboard that would easily decompose; not buried deep below the earth but closer to the grass, where their bodies stripped of the breath of life and the thud of heartbeats could return to all that is. We are part of the earth. There was the grass that would sprout from the nutrients of decomposition, the trees that would flourish and the chirp of birds that would raise young ones in the stretching branches. I saw this same sacred, holy cycle last Sunday immersed deep in the woods of rural Pennsylvania on a hike with my husband. In these early days of spring the vegetation was in mid-transition from the brown of death to green as new life emerged, sprawling across the revitalized earth, moss growing on top of rotting logs as decomposing wood returned to new life. Let us reflect again on the words of Joy Harjo. “We pray that it will be done,” she writes of this cycle of life, “in beauty. In beauty.”<sup>3</sup> Our ancestors are the trees, the ocean, the first daffodils of spring. They haven’t left us. All we need do to be with them is sit, pause, and

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<sup>3</sup> “Eagle Poem,” by Joy Harjo

meditate among all that is. This is part of what makes nature so sacred. Our ancestors return to mother earth, and together - together - they offer us gifts abundant – the stark blue of a hydrangea, the cool breeze carrying the ocean’s mist, the wild honeysuckle offering its sweet nectar to bumblebees and young children alike. Let us offer the gift of gratitude in return – relishing in the scents of pollen and wet earth, enveloping ourselves in natural beauty – the beauty that will outlive us all.

And I see other things while hiking as well. I see trails littered with plastic bags and half-smoked cigarettes. I see the tracks of cars indenting the earth, asphalt covering natural life with grey-black death. And as we enter our own car and drive home from these deserted parks, my husband and I note the rolling hills and thick forests slowly transitioning to large farmlands where wilderness is tamed, to the suburbs where we, as humans, have invaded. Their air fills with chemicals, the water runs thick with unnatural waste. We enter stores to buy groceries – I see strawberries mass produced, impersonally packaged in containers of clear plastic and sold as an item – no longer the wild, sweet berries of my younger years, gifted to me by mother earth. There is no reciprocity as we exchange bread for money; no gratitude or even awareness of where those grains came from.

This is another contradiction offered between our capitalist, consumer society and that of the earth. That of a culture of scarcity, versus a mindset of gratitude and abundance. Our economy thrives on unmet desires, sending us to stores as we chase false satisfaction and unnecessary yearnings – the gifts of the earth now cheap commodities. And yet if we pause in gratitude, we realize we are not immersed in scarcity but abundance. Our lives are full of beauty and gifts – white clouds drifting above us made possible as water pauses in its endless cycle; the scent of flowers created to lure hungry insects.<sup>4</sup> No matter where we are, no matter what the state of our lives, the summer rain falls, and the sky transitions from day to night with awesome hues of orange and red.

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<sup>4</sup> *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge, and the Teachings of Plants* by Robin Wall Kimmerer pg. 111

And yet our modern industrial society is destructive. All that we have created in an effort to enhance our lives simultaneously has an adverse effect on the climate – cars, mass produced food, air conditioning, roadways, clothes, gadgets – those modern-day conveniences we are immersed in. We see the destruction in the storms increasing in intensity, in miles of massive fires. The wrecking of the earth has been systemic, and our response needs to be systemic as well – policy changes, new laws, targeted investments, and incentives. This may seem so far beyond the reach of our individual lives, but it is not – we can vote, we can contact politicians, those of us with means can make a difference with our wallets, sending our money to where it matters. And, in conjunction, we can do those small-scale, personal things – mindful of how we travel, what we eat, what we purchase.<sup>5</sup> The earth offers so much, let us gift this in return.

We prayed, earlier, for the cycles of the earth. For the contemplative silence of winter, the hope and new life of spring, the energy and abundance of summer, and the invitation to pause offered in autumn. And so may we leave this space made sacred by our presence with a gift to this earth, our mother earth – a planet so reflective of the cycles of quiet introspection and hopeful new beginnings found in our own lives. The earth – to which we will all return – flowers to bodies to sapling trees.

We pray that it will be done

In beauty.

In beauty.<sup>6</sup>

As we leave this space may we feel the warm, soft wind our on cheeks and murmur, “thank you.” May we note the blue of the sky, the clouds held far above us as if balls of cotton, and whisper, “thank you.” May we smell the sweet nectar of freshly budding flowers, taste the

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<sup>5</sup> [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yiw6\\_JakZFc](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yiw6_JakZFc)

<sup>6</sup> “Eagle Poem,” by Joy Harjo

tangy juice of a wild strawberry, touch the rough bark of a tree returning to life and say to the earth “thank you, thank you, thank you.”

May it be so, and Amen