

## **Healing a Source of the Sacred**

**By Reverend Jane Smith, Channing Memorial Church, UU, Ellicott City, MD April 18, 2021**

My father and I stood on Mount Baker in Washington state after a day of hiking and driving up the mountain. Although the climate at lower altitudes called for t-shirts and shorts, the higher we climbed the more layers we needed as our bodies met with the crisp air. As we climbed we were met with foot after foot of bright, white snow, so thick it held the weight of our bodies. The sky above us offered scattered clouds, white to match that spring snow. Lower clouds obscured our vision as we mingled with those water droplets. Atop this mountain – a giant structure millions of years in the making as those plates well below the crust of the earth slowly, slowly move closer to each other, producing such a huge structure we were nestled with the clouds.

Or the ocean! Every summer I spend as much time as I can at the beach. Wading into the rising tide, myself and all of those around me enter a great mystery as our bodies slowly adjust to the cool salt water. We enthusiastically dive under those turbulent waves, intermingling with living crustaceans and inanimate salt and sand alike. And yet all that we experience in those rolling waves is but a microcosm of the vastness of this expanse of water and life. Giant blue whales, often a hundred feet long, feeding off tiny krill. The ocean floor – occupying a huge percentage of the earth's surface – and yet nearly all of it is unexplored by humans.<sup>1</sup> That ocean – filled with mystery.

The earth is filled with mystery, filled with awe, filled with wonder. And yet not only does it fulfill a spiritual need for many people – including myself – it also provides us with that sustenance we need to simply survive. Fresh water that runs through our veins, leafy greens that provide us with iron, oxygen that fills our expanding lungs, sun rays that travel billions of miles to penetrate our atmosphere and feed us through photosynthesis. The earth feeds our souls, and the earth feeds our bodies. The earth is in a

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<sup>1</sup>[Ocean Mysteries Scientists Still Can't Explain | Reader's Digest \(rd.com\)](https://www.rd.com/advice/ocean-mysteries-scientists-still-cant-explain/)

constant state of becoming as life cycles to decay and decay to life. Life cycles through the eons as dinosaurs roamed only to become extinct. And yet we are damaging this life source. We are releasing toxins in the air, waste in the soil and the depths of the oceans. We are releasing fumes that are deteriorating our ozone layer. With the overwhelming disregard for the well-being of the place we call home, the healthy cycle of becoming is disrupted as the earth is faced with detrimental changes. Life alters as oceans rise and glaciers melt. When we harm the earth, we feel the repercussions. Especially those on the margins – those of whom are forced to live by garbage dumps, who live in climates so hot it is becoming unbearable, who are forced to live by the rising waters that repeatedly ruin dwellings. This calls for us to become as well – to become stewards of the earth. To pause in our decisions, contemplating the effects on this place we all call home. We need to pause before we purchase plastic, or before we choose our mode of transportation. We can be intentional about utilizing renewable energy or recycling paper or picking up trash.

The earth is filled with the remarkable. It is no wonder this source of awe has been contemplated by those who are curious of the sacred. Many theologies and creation stories are inspired and shaped and transformed by the natural world. There are religious naturalists – those whose understanding of the earth has been shaped by monotheistic religions but whose musings have left them convinced that there is not a God in the sky to be worshipped, instead they are filled with reverence for the wonders of the world. Or Buddhists – who understand there are deities in trees, who practice loving kindness and nonviolence that extends to all living things, whose faith dictates that humans can be reborn as other creatures of the earth. There are Unitarian Universalists, who affirm and promote the interdependent web of existence of which we are all a part, connected to one another and ladybugs and spiderwebs and blue whales alike. I identify as a theist, and yet nature is sacred to me in that it offers me a holy way to connect with that which is bigger than me – my own understanding of my own God, felt through the wind in the leaves and the call of the birds.

Religious naturalists find miracles not in that of an otherworldly God but in the understanding of life as emergence – as something coming from nothing at all. The emergence of creatures, the emergence of survival skills, the emergence of motility and of metabolism. The emergence of self-awareness – the functioning of our brains and our ability to have a consciousness, which in turn leads to art and music and scientific discoveries. This emergence – this becoming – this is a true miracle, filled with awe that is more powerful than a traditional creation story – that there is an emerging process unique to life – to all life. This remarkable understanding that somehow, we are more than simply a collection of molecules.<sup>2</sup>

Inherent to this idea of religious naturalism is the sense of mystery and wonder. Religious naturalist Ursula Goodenough sees the sacred of the earth as a “locus of mystery,” a divine unknown. This mystery of why “there is anything at all, rather than nothing.” The mystery of “where the laws of physics came from.” The mystery of “why the universe seems so strange.”<sup>3</sup> Religious naturalists approach the mysteries of the planet not by asking the purpose of each element but instead by acknowledging a sacred celebration of what is observed each and every day, seen in dandelions and babies alike – an “outrageous celebration that it occurred at all.”<sup>4</sup>

What about this celebration of life? Of the occurrence and emergence and becoming of all living things – invertebrates creeping in the soil, hairy mammals wandering throughout vegetation and underbrush. Let us celebrate this – this sacred fact that each and every one of us is here at all!<sup>5</sup> This astounding improbability. Our very lives are sacred. The complexity of cells and organisms – this is sacred. The improbability of life, of the forces of physics, of the existence of planets and solar systems and galaxies.<sup>6</sup> Goodenough writes, “most religions ask us to bow and tremble in deference to the

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<sup>2</sup> *The Sacred Depths of Nature* Ursula Goodenough pg. 28

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid* pg. 11

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid* pg. 29-30

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid* pg. 60

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid* 170

divine, to walk humbly with God. Religious naturalism asks that we locate such feelings of deference somewhere within the earthly whole.”<sup>7</sup> In that snow covered mountain mingling with the clouds. In that vast expanse of water, salt, and life, of which we understand a mere piece. There is so much that science cannot explain – and the wonder and appreciation of it all is a theology in and of itself. The existence of immeasurable complexity, of awareness, of beauty - this is understood as ultimate meaning and ultimate value.<sup>8</sup>

There are innumerable ways to find the sacred in nature. Buddhism offers yet another unique viewpoint. The Buddha’s life was intricately connected with nature, spanning from birth to death. The very beginning of Buddhism was born from nature as the Buddha attained enlightenment while settled in contemplation beneath a bodhi tree – sitting under the much needed shade during the profound heat that surrounded him. Following enlightenment he spent a week under a Bodhi tree, immersed in appreciation of that sturdy trunk and reaching branches and budding leaves – gratitude for the tree that provided Enlightenment.<sup>9</sup> And as nature and the earth are deeply entwined with the beginning of Buddhism it is also embedded in how Buddhists understand and navigate life.

Inherent to Buddhism is the practice of nonviolence. This extends well beyond the human realm and is applicable to all life – animals and vegetation alike. Buddhists understand all of creation to be deserving of respect and free of harm. It is our duty to treat the earth as such. There is a profound idea that each living thing is deserving of kindness and compassion, that each living thing desires happiness and fears death. This demands a life of non-violence. This begs of us gratitude – this begs of us to do least harm to all of that which is blessed with life.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> *The Sacred Depths of Nature* Ursula Goodenough pg. 87

<sup>8</sup> Ibid pg. 171

<sup>9</sup> [Significance of Nature in Buddhism | Buddhistdoor](#)

<sup>10</sup> Ibid

Nonviolence towards all living life determines how Buddhists and especially Buddhist monks navigate the world – not traveling by foot during the rainy season for fear of injury to worms and insects. This ties into the Buddhist practice of *metta*, or loving kindness. Just as our own lives are precious, so are the lives of all living things. Each life is deserving of reverence. Crustaceans digging in the sand, cicadas emerging from their earthly home, green-brown moss growing on a fallen tree. We can live together in harmony if we cultivate sympathy and practice a respectful regard for all life.<sup>11</sup>

This plays into the understanding of karma and rebirth. The understanding of cycling through lifetimes – believers who currently are in human form may be reborn as any other living thing. This Buddhist belief that all that surrounds those of this faith may be relatives. Lost beloveds - those lost ones who separated from their human bodies and perhaps surround believers as other life forms. This begs of us to treat all animals with kindness and sympathy. Or the understanding that kindness to animals is deserving of merit – merit which will improve the future existence of believers as they cycle through rebirth, to reach the final goal of Nirvana.<sup>12</sup>

Both of these religious beliefs and our own understandings of Unitarian Universalist values imply an inherent interconnectedness of nature and all life. Ursula Goodenough writes that this connectedness is in a sense a religion in itself – the sacredness of this web. That we are not connected merely by the food chain or by the balance of our ecosystems but also of a common ancestor – sharing between us “evolutionary constraints and possibilities,” connected “all the way down.”<sup>13</sup> Buddhists see this interrelatedness through the cycles of reincarnation, through the implications of loving kindness. And we have this within our own 7<sup>th</sup> Principle to which we covenant to live. And yet – all around us we see destruction. Through the ways we have interacted with this sacred planet we are destroying it. Through

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<sup>11</sup> [Significance of Nature in Buddhism | Buddhistdoor](#)

<sup>12</sup> [The Buddhist Attitude Towards Nature \(accesstoinsight.org\)](#)

<sup>13</sup> *The Sacred Depths of Nature* Ursula Goodenough pg. 73

destructive ways of producing energy or promoting travel or harvesting food in an unsustainable way we have disrupted the sacred balance that connects us and holds us together. We need to become stewards – we need to change our lives to heal this aching planet. Earth and dirt mixing with pesticides and heavy metals, affecting crops and harming farmers.

Scholar and author Jeremy Davies theorizes that with all the change we have afflicted on this earth we have created a new epoch – a new section of the planet’s history.<sup>14</sup> Through their studies, students and scholars are finding that throughout the earth – the “atmosphere, the oceans, the rocks, plants and animals” – all of these elements are experiencing changes so drastic that one epoch is ending as another begins. Scholars claim this ecological crisis is creating the epoch of the Anthropocene.<sup>15</sup> We will be faced with radically different ecological conditions.<sup>16</sup> Again – we are interconnected. Society and ecosystems directly affecting each other, interwoven as the earth faces detrimental changes,<sup>17</sup> a careful balance of cause and effect.<sup>18</sup> And he says this crisis accentuates the differences between those with means and those on the margins. Those with less means, often in the global south, are far more likely to be affected by industrialization, toxic waste, and the privatization of land. The marginalized in any area feel the detrimental impacts of pollution of the air and water, of soil degradation, and of forest destruction most acutely.<sup>19</sup> Davies terms this “environmentalism of the poor.”<sup>20</sup> This crisis highlights the interconnectedness of us all – how the food we eat affects the health of those on another continent. How our waste travels vast expanses, detrimental to the lives of others. How the plastic we use is filling the oceans. We are interconnected with the forces of nature and all living things – including one another. And this works both ways! This means that when we eat less meat, our impact ripples out

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<sup>14</sup> *The Birth of the Anthropocene* Jeremy Davies pg. 2

<sup>15</sup> Ibid pg. 2

<sup>16</sup> Ibid pg. 5

<sup>17</sup> Ibid pg. 6

<sup>18</sup> Ibid pg. 8

<sup>19</sup> Ibid pgs. 202-203

<sup>20</sup> Ibid pg. 203

beyond our immediate surroundings, promoting clean water, sustainable farming, and protecting our climate. That when we use renewable energy we are keeping fossil fuels in the ground where they cannot cause glaciers to melt and oceans to rise. Each thing we do has an impact on this earth we so graciously call home; this space that fills our stomachs and lungs just as surely as it fills our souls. Let us become good stewards of this earth – taking care of that which offers us so much. Let us appreciate each and every life and acknowledge that simple existence is a resounding miracle. Let us live in awe of those giant plates made up of a rocky substance well below our feet slowly giving birth to mountains. Let us live each day in loving kindness with all the beauty that surrounds us, stewards of this awe producing source of life.

May it be so, and Amen