

“Lessons from the Earth”

By Reverend Jane Smith, Channing Memorial Church, UU, Ellicott City, MD, April 19, 2020

I have always delighted in the mystery and wonder of nature, lying on a darkened beach, waves crashing, wondering in awe of those twinkling stars above me, or watching with amazement as hundreds of ants run to a fro in what seems to be mass confusion but is in reality a systematic, organized, building of shelter and procuring of food. These warm spring days call to me. I have always delighted in nature. But in these days after our stay-at-home orders, nature has become a refuge. I find myself sitting on the porch outside of the apartment I share with my husband simply being in that fresh air, or finding that sacred refuge in one of the nature trails adjacent to where I live. That is how I am experiencing nature today, not only in awe and wonder, but as a holy refuge.

In delighting in this mystery and wonder I cannot help but think of the billions of years that this planet existed before I was even a thought; before the first city, before those massive dinosaurs roamed the land, before photosynthesis, before even single celled organisms existed, when all that existed was heat, lava and rock! The earth has billions of years of wisdom, of watching and producing life. Wisdom from time, from experience, from observation. What can we learn from this ancient planet if only we pause to listen?

Let us first delve into this awe, this wonder, this mystery that is nature. People who identify as religious naturalists espouse the views that there are religious aspects to this world, best appreciated through the framework of nature.¹ The holy can be seen and understood through

¹ *Religious Naturalism Today: The Rebirth of a Forgotten Alternative* Jerome A. Stone pg 2

the awe we experience in the natural world. A framework to look at the world not for “design” or “purpose” but instead with a celebration – an “outrageous celebration” that life even occurred at all. A sacred acknowledgement of the great mysteries of this planet, of life; looking at this nature that surrounds us as simply a miracle – a miracle, not of divine intervention, but of the fact that life as we know it emerged at all.²

A miracle that life as we know it emerged at all. An “outrageous celebration” for all that is: scattered ants, towering trees, colorful algae. And throughout all of these remarkable forms of existence, we can find wisdom; sacred, ancient wisdom.

We can gain wisdom from even the tiniest of life forms! I wonder of the wisdom of a seed. Those tiny things that hold within them life- life waiting to happen, waiting to be liberated! Seeds – teaching us all the benefits of patience. Many seeds wait for years before starting to grow.³ And while patience is consistently a virtue to which many of us aspire, this is particularly resonant in our current state of living. We are waiting – all of us. Some of us more patiently than others, yet all of us waiting. Waiting in fear, perhaps, for own health or the health of those we care about, those around us. Living with a “new normal,” waiting to touch and hug all of those we love, waiting for that freedom we were so used to, going wherever we pleased whenever we pleased. Waiting for a trip to the grocery store to not be a scary, dangerous venture. Waiting. So in this waiting I invite wisdom of seeds. What about the wisdom of a cherry seed – able to wait for a hundred years for just the right circumstances to grow? Let us embody this patience as we navigate the days ahead.

² *The Sacred Depths of Nature* Ursula Goodenough pg 29-30

³ *Lab Girl* Hope Jahren pg 30-31

Hope Jahren, the author of our reading, offered us her interpretation of the remarkable way seeds wait. Seeds wait, in that soil, waiting for just the right combination of temperature, moisture and light, to flourish.⁴ So while we sit in our rooms, our apartments, our houses, simply waiting, I invite us to wait like seeds, patiently. I invite us to wait to flourish! To anticipate flourishing. Changing the framework of what we are waiting for alters how we live our day to day lives. Each moment is touched in such a life-altering way based simply on how we wait. If we wait to flourish, we can enjoy the wait. We can bake cookies or read novels – intentionally doing things that feed our souls. We can create some way to find joy in waiting! Can we wait like a seed, the potential to flourish hidden gently below our surface?

Jahren writes, “Each beginning is the end of a waiting. We are each given exactly one chance to be... Every replete tree was first a seed that waited.”⁵ Our next big beginning may be our opportunity to flourish. Our next big beginning may be this gradual shift, this gradual transition, back into a new normal. Back to some semblance of life as we knew it. This lifestyle of waiting to flourish is found in an astounding amount of life forms at any moment – thousands of seeds, waiting, below a single footprint in the forest!⁶ All waiting. Just as we are. Waiting to flourish.

And all of this we can learn from simple seeds! Waiting to flourish, enjoying the anticipation – enjoying this life inside the shell!

⁴ ibid

⁵ ibid

⁶ ibid

I am reminded of the timeline we spoke of earlier. Lava and water to single celled organisms and beyond. These billions of years marking a series of transitions – marked periods of extinction and drastic changes in climate, of dinosaurs and ice ages – throughout all of this, the earth persists. The earth always persists. The earth will continue to persist – this we know. No matter what happens, for billions of years, the earth will be here. Constant. In a time of so much change, this is constant. No matter what happens, those rocks will be there – whatever we are experiencing, let us find solace in the continuity of nature and all of the beauty that this entails!

And what about the reassurance found in the continuity of change? In the changing of the seasons, or the changing of night to day – these cycle from light to dark and light again – this cycle of warmth to cold and warmth again - we know this change will happen! Cold and darkness to warmth and light. This cyclical way of life inherent in how this planet survives – when things are dark, we know they will become light again.

What about the earth's lessons on caring, or courage, or limitation, wisdom we drew upon from our reading from the Ute native people of North America? The earth teaches us about caring through the parenting we see every day – deer teaching their young to stand stock-still to camouflage, birds building nests where their eggs can safely hatch into chicks. The Ute people note the courage we can learn from a single tree – a single tree alone, surviving throughout all of the elements nature throws its way – storms, lightning, drought, flood, heat, cold. The courage of a tree. Lessons in limitation, noting those many limitations a tiny ant faces every day! Or the freedom of an eagle soaring through the sky, focused on its next meal, not intimidated by other birds.

All that we experience the earth has also experienced – birth, life, death. Periods of suffering and periods of flourishing! The earth has watched species struggle and thrive; watched triumphs and failures alike. And this ancient earth has so much wisdom to offer! These things that religious naturalist best explain as some interpretation of the holy at work.

This also serves as a reminder of our 7th Principle of Unitarian Universalism: respect for the interdependent web of which we are a part. We are all connected, past, present, and future. We are all connected – human, ant, cherry seed! We depend on each other for sustenance, for protection, for opportunities to be in delight! And we depend on the wisdom of all that has come before, teaching us life lessons simply by existing. We need nurture this web, this sacred web of which we are all a part.

We are children of the earth – without the earth we could not survive. Those basic elements – earth, air, wind, and fire. The earth provides us food. The earth provides us water. The earth provides us with all we need to procure shelter. The earth provides us joy! Beauty! Wonder! Awe. An awe that some people find to be religious, holy. The earth offers us so much, and in these ways we are deeply interconnected. And with all the earth offers us, what can we offer the earth? For so much of what we do is damaging! We are in the midst of a climate crisis – the way we are living our lives, dependent on fossil fuels, we are destroying the planet that offers us so very much. Droughts and heat waves become more common, hurricanes become more intense, sea levels are rising, the Arctic ocean is losing ice at an alarming rate.⁷ In this pause we are in right now – a pause of human activity, the earth is thriving.⁸ Let this be a reminder; a

⁷ <https://climate.nasa.gov/effects/>

⁸ <https://forge.medium.com/prepare-for-the-ultimate-gaslighting-6a8ce3f0a0e0>

reminder that we need to change our habits and how we live our lives. We need to use renewable energy, to eat less meat, to consider different ways of travel – we can all do things to help heal this planet on which we have inflicted suffering, we can all do what we need to do to restore peace and balance to this sacred planet which offers us life and which sustains this life each and every day. This begs our attention! We need act soon – putting life-saving legislation into place, making changes on an individual level, on a national level, on an international level, before we can begin to see these necessary changes. We need to work together to maintain the sacred balance of our interdependent web.

The earth has so much to teach us, drawing wisdom from billions of years of existence, of millions of different species. Trees teach us courage. Ants teach us limitation. The rotation of the earth teaches us that cycles are an inherent piece of life. Those tiny seeds – hundreds or thousands beneath each footprint in the forest – teaching us patience, just when we need it the most. The earth – a blessing, a sacred gift, our wisest teacher.

May it be so, and Amen