

“All Creatures”
by Rev. Meghan Conrad
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UUCM

Reading 1: “The Summer Day” by Mary Oliver

Who made the world?
Who made the swan, and the black bear?
Who made the grasshopper?
This grasshopper, I mean-
the one who has flung herself out of the grass,
the one who is eating sugar out of my hand,
who is moving her jaws back and forth instead of up and down-
who is gazing around with her enormous and complicated eyes.
Now she lifts her pale forearms and thoroughly washes her face.
Now she snaps her wings open, and floats away.
I don't know exactly what a prayer is.
I do know how to pay attention, how to fall down
into the grass, how to kneel down in the grass,
how to be idle and blessed, how to stroll through the fields,
which is what I have been doing all day.
Tell me, what else should I have done?
Doesn't everything die at last, and too soon?
Tell me, what is it you plan to do
with your one wild and precious life?

Reading 2: “The Life around Us” by Denise Levertov

Poplar and oak awake
all night. And through
all weathers of the days of the year.
There is a consciousness
undefined.
Yesterday's twilight, August
almost over, lasted, slowly changing,
until daybreak. Human sounds
were shut behind curtains.
No human saw the night in this garden,
sliding blue into morning.
Only the sightless trees,
without braincells, lived it
And wholly knew it.

Sermon:

I will admit to you that I am usually a little disappointed when I hear or read what people have to say about the Unitarian Universalist 7th principle. Remember that that is the one about how we respect “the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part.” The problem for me is that usually, no matter how inspiring or ecologically sound the arguments, I am left with a lingering sense of separateness from the rest of the natural world. It is almost like the last two words have become one, reversing their meaning. The web “of which we are a part” becomes the web “of which we are apart.”

When I think of this web I get a mental image of a vast shimmering net that looks like a dew-coated spider web glinting in the sunlight. But I see it in its entirety from the top down rather than the view I would have if I honestly felt like I was embedded in the interlacing fabric and sensed my connection with all existence. I have to admit, I often struggle to truly **feel** my interconnectedness with all of existence.

The old Judeo-Christian concept of humans having God-given dominion over the garden is a hard one for our culture to shake. When early European people first began to classify the natural world there were only two divisions: plants and animals. Human beings were not considered animals. We were above the system, being the only creatures with souls breathed into us by God. While we now have a much more complex classification system the sense that humans are separate from, better than, above, the animal world still persists.

This is so deeply engrained that it is almost impossible to notice without real effort. It is the paradigm that often under-girds even our most benevolent environmentalism.

When we declare that, “It is up to us to reverse the effects of global climate change” we are often still operating from this separation. It makes sense, of course, because the disastrous mess we see in our weather patterns, melting ice caps, rising ocean temperatures, and top soil erosion can be directly correlated with the effects of human deforestation, industrial farming and pollution.

But what is still missing for me is that crucial element of really registering how we are a commutual constituent of the whole planetary system. We belong to the earth so much more than

the earth belongs to us. I suspect that one of the reasons for this is because of our thinking. I mean this quite literally. I think it is language itself that keeps us feeling separate, apart, rather than interconnected.

Spoken language is the amazing ability that has allowed humanity to transcend many of our limitations. But because of our total reliance on it for all our communication it is also what often separates us from the rest of the web of all existence. It is fairly easy to see how this happens among human beings when two people who do not speak the same language encounter one another.

I spent a good part of two weeks in France feeling very lonely as I shrugged my shoulders and explained to everyone I encountered, “Je ne parle pas français.” The French person and I would smile at one another uncomfortably and that would usually signal the end any future attempts.

It is funny how we sometimes come up with creative and often silly ways to bridge our language barriers; gesturing, pantomiming or drawing pictures. Or we do like my grandfather did when he traveled in foreign countries and just shout at people. Not out of anger, of course, he must have thought that if his English was just a lot louder they would somehow be able understand him - which embarrassed my grandmother to no end. He once pounded his fist on the arm of his chair and declared that everyone in the world ought to learn English so that it would be the universal language.

Spoken language not only separates us from others who speak a different tongue but it also divides us from the natural world. People have found ways to bridge this divide and bring the animal world closer to ours by teaching certain animals to communicate with humans; from gorillas who use sign language to express their emotions to dolphins who can not only understand but argue with their trainers to our pets who respond (or not) to our verbal commands. And as we speak there are scientists busy trying to decipher the “language” of the whales in the great oceans.

But this bridge is built from that same set of assumptions about a human-centered existence. We place a much higher value on animals that we deem “smart enough” to be taught to communicate with us. The way we are insisting that animals communicate in the same manner we do reminds me of my grandfather. We are metaphorically shouting at the planet hoping that if we just yell loud enough it will begin to understand us.

What if we thought about it differently? What if we took ourselves out of the center of the web and instead endeavored to learn to communicate with other beings, animals as well as plants, in **their** native tongues? This is a pretty radical idea. It may sound a bit crazy. But bear with me.

It would require a different set of assumptions to bridge the communication divide between humans and the rest of the web of all existence by listening rather than shouting. A great deal of communication is transpiring in the natural world that we have not even begun to perceive.

One day, Chris and I were driving across the wide open prairie in Eastern Kansas and we became mesmerized by a flock of birds flying in formation. They were all in a big ball and as they flew together they would all simultaneously change direction. At the exact same moment the entire flock would dart as one body at odd angles. As far as we could tell there was no “lead bird” that gave the orders. We were so taken with trying to figure out how those birds were able to fly like this that we nearly drove off the interstate.

We do not typically think of plants speaking but in a recent study botanists have discovered that plants do communicate with one another as well as with insects. By mimicking the effects of a predatory insect these scientists discovered that a tobacco plant not only changed its own chemical make-up to become less appealing to the insect but also warned other nearby plants, including plants of another species. The communication happens when a puff of a chemical is released into the air from the leaves. The plants that were downwind also altered their chemistry in anticipation of the insect attack and the botanists discovered that the puff of chemical also summoned wasps that fed on the predatory insect.¹

¹ <http://www.edwardwillett.com/Columns/plantcommunication.htm>

I wonder how our experience of the world might be different if we slowed down and learned to listen to what communication is already happening all around us. As Mary Oliver put it if we learned “how to kneel down in the grass, how to be idle and blessed, how to stroll through the fields”.

One of my meditation teachers explained that when our minds are free of the incessant “chatter” of our language we become more open to “hearing” the subtleties of the natural world.

I was once on a Sufi meditation retreat. The group and I spent three days in total silence and meditation broken only by Sufi zikrs, or devotional chanting. At one point towards the end of the retreat the teacher asked us to go out into the forest and place our hands on various trees and see if we could notice subtle differences among the way they felt to us energetically.

I don't know if I felt the different energies the way my teacher intended for me to. But when I stood in the forest that afternoon and brought my attention to the life surrounding me something shifted. I felt a part of all that is in a way I had never done before. This was the first of the few times when I acutely sensed my embeddedness in the web of existence. After all the stillness and mental quiet it was like I found the boundaries between different life forms blurred for a few moments. I felt that “humility before the ants and trees” that Vern Barnet spoke of in the prayer I read earlier.

I have come to believe that beneath our ability for spoken language rests a wisdom that knows our place in the order of things. And when we peel back that layer we can touch that wisdom.

Before then I stood in nature the same way I stood in a grocery store. And now, after that experience, I try to recreate that sense of standing in the greater family of creation, sensing my relatedness.

This kind of experience is what makes all the difference. Feeling my personal interconnection with all of life makes me care for the planet like my life depends upon it. While the intellectual

arguments for creating a sustainable world or fear-based urgency about global climate change often make me depressed and want to hide.

My great fear is that while the paradigm of people above and separate from all of life persists we will not care deeply enough to make all the necessary changes. Until a majority of us realize in our bones that humanity is not at the center of things, we are not outside the web of existence looking down, we will simply go on talking about respecting the web of all existence of which we are a part. And it will continue to feel like we are “apart”.

There is a reading in the back of our hymnal by Edward Everett Hale that goes:

I am only one
But still I am one.
I cannot do everything,
But still I can do something.
And because I cannot do everything
I will not refuse to do the something that I can do.

I know I alone cannot bring about a global paradigm shift. But I will not refuse to do the something that I can do. I will work to deepen my own understanding and preach and teach about my experiences.

What is the something you will do?

Amen