

KINDRED PILGRIMS AND KINDRED SOULS
 Reflections by Rev. Tracy Sprowls and Rev. Audette Fulbright
 Sunday, April 22, 2018
 All Souls Unitarian Church, New York City

Kindred Pilgrims
By Rev. Tracy Sprowls

Our planet did not come with instructions. The Earth easily cares for itself in perfect and beautiful equilibrium. It's only with human beings and their activities that the planet has fallen out of balance and things have gone awry. This might make a little sense if we consider that we did not come with instructions either. We humans, pilgrims on this blue boat home, have had to make our own way on this Earth for several thousand years now without any instructions.

Early humans, lacking instructions or guidance to help them understand the world, created instructions in the form of religion. There is so much richness in the teachings of the world's religions that guide adherents to love one another, to be present to the holy, to serve those in need and to care for the Earth. The shadow side of every religion, though, is when the instructions or teachings are interpreted in a way that actually causes harm or conflict. Too often, religion is used to support the various ways of polluting and disregarding the planet we live on and the creatures with who we share it.

John Squadra wrote:

If you listen, not to the pages or preachers
 But to the smallest flower growing from the crack in your heart,
 You will hear a great song
 Moving across a wide ocean
 Whose water is the music connecting all the islands
 Of the universe together,
 And touching all
 You will feel it
 Touching you
 Around you...
 Embracing you with light.

In our religion, in Unitarian Universalism, we know that ultimately the soul is not hungry for instructions or guidelines even if these are necessary. Our pilgrim souls are hungry for connections: connections to other people, connections to other living creatures, connections to the Earth and for some, connections to that something beyond us.

Connections are found in the clasp of a friend's hand, in the hug of a child, in the exchange of a kiss. They are found in the night sky when the moon shows itself as a tiny sliver of silver in the darkness, in the gurgling sounds of a mountain-brook, in the call of a baby bird. Connections are found in listening deeply to the sounds of your own heart as it beats in rhythm to the varied songs of the Earth.

In our concrete houses and office buildings, in our climate-controlled rooms where the windows do not even open it is easy to forget about our connection to the Earth. And when we forget, our actions can be careless or reckless or simply mindless. Yet, our religion tells us that the salt of the ocean runs through our veins and the stuff of stars is in our DNA. There is a flower growing

in the crack of our hearts. The spheres of the universe hum with the same song that echoes inside us. We may forget our connection to the Earth only at great risk to our spiritual wellbeing.

We have choices. We can live each day, mindlessly performing the duties that give us temporary satisfaction. We can ignore our connections to other people, to the Earth's creatures and to the Earth itself but at what cost? We can continue to live as we do and not fully realize what we are missing, we can continue to live in isolation trying to fill that hole inside of us with rich foods, new clothes and bigger and better toys. We can make our song a battle cry towards each other and the Earth and continue to sacrifice our human future for the rewards of today.

Or we can live as if connections mattered, as if we were part and parcel to each other. We can practice awareness of our connections with each other and the universe and live in a way that honors these connections. We can listen to the ancient song that our hearts already recognize; a song that connects you and me and all of creation, a song that honors that great web of existence of which we are all a part.

As we celebrate Earth Day, as we consider the ways we wish to walk on this planet in the very short time we have, let us listen to the great song that already moves in the wind, and sails across the oceans and connects each one of us here to each other and the universe. Our song is the Earth's song and it is calling us, calling us.

Amen

Kindred Souls

By Rev. Audette Fulbright

As I sat to write this reflection on yet another Earth day, it just struck me: most of the time, we preachers have such a simple message. Though we dress it in all the thematic colors of the rainbow, what we're saying to you is this: *This is a world of distraction. Turn off the noise. Make time for the still, small voice...for the beauty of nature...for conversations with God.* After that, feed the hungry, free the prisoner, love your neighbor. The rest? It's just to keep you coming back again, some literary sleight of word.

Today's reflections are: Turn off the noise. Get out into nature.

Our transcendentalist fore-parents believed that nature was the most honest book of God; that if the goal was to understand divine or universal truths, nature was a far better place than church to seek it. Ralph Waldo Emerson was the pre-eminent articulator of this. He was prone to exclamations such as, "Crossing a bare common, in snow puddles, at twilight, under a clouded sky, without having in my thoughts any occurrence of special good fortune, I have enjoyed a perfect exhilaration. I am glad to the brink of fear." (from *Nature*)

My own guess is that you don't need to be told that communing with nature can be everything from refreshing to transcendent. We Unitarian Universalists also are generally well versed in the destruction we humans are wreaking on our small, blue-green planet. So what is useful to say?

In her poem "The Speed of Darkness," the poet Muriel Rukeyser said, "The universe is made of stories, not atoms." This, I think, is the secret. We need to have a story that we tell about

ourselves, about our lives, about who we are and what is possible. Then we can envision a future of health and wholeness, of beauty and peace and plenty.

Right now, dystopian stories are a dime a dozen - in literature and on television, on podcasts and in our own minds, as we suffer through the depredations of our civic discourse. But what if we faced the future undaunted, with friends ready and willing to face it with us? One of my great heroes and former teachers, Joanna Macy, believes this is how we do it. We face the now, which she calls "The Great Unraveling," and we work together in love and with integrity for "The Great Turning," when we can reweave the parts of the web we have damaged in our careless human youthfulness on the planet. In an interview with *Truthout*, she says:

When people [face the reality of our moment and] get integrated and find how good it feels, then they really want that more than the narcotic of ignorance and delusion, as painful as it is. ...Because alone you get overwhelmed, and it becomes traumatizing. But once people have tasted that they can, with each other, speak about what they see and feel is happening to our world, a number of things happen, in addition to the fact that they fall in love with each other. There is a trust and realization of, "Oh my god, I'm not alone." ...And the release would come, and as people began to break through their reluctance to suffer with our world.. then they found their unity with our world. Often, not only did a sense of bondedness come, but a lot of hilarity. There is laughter and joking, and a shaking off of a kind of spell or curse. A feeling comes, of, "I can be here."

One of her great practices is helping people begin to imagine what we can do, what their story is about how we empower ourselves and one another, what we can do to change the world, learn again how to live as if we deeply understand how to be kindred souls in the web of all existence. We're going to take a few moments now to mindwalk through and adaptation of one of her exercises....

Hill, sun
Child approaches

...

...

...what I needed to help me get started was
Thanks you

A gift for you...symbol of what you need

You already know what matters most in this world: to take time for silence, and beauty, and seeking God or that still, small voice. Let me close with this poem by Barbara Pescan. ("First Fire")