

## LET THEM FIND YOU

A sermon preached by Galen Guengerich  
All Souls Unitarian Church, New York City  
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Several weeks ago, I flew to California on one of those flights that seem cursed by the gods from the outset. The flight had nearly hit the three-hour mark before we even took off. Eventually, I ended up watching the movie *San Andreas*. Given the circumstances, it seemed like the right thing to do.

As it turned out, the movie rounded out a trifecta of suffering: a badly-delayed flight and a badly-made movie about a badly-cataclysmic earthquake and tidal wave that destroyed San Francisco. Fortunately for me, I was headed for LA.

Why did I subject myself to the movie? I wanted to see how the story compared with a *New Yorker* article I read last summer about a similar topic. Written by Katherine Shulz and titled “The Really Big One,” the article describes how an earthquake and resulting tidal wave will eventually destroy a sizable portion of the coastal Northwest.

According to the article, the question is not whether these events will happen but when. The odds are one in three that it will happen in the next 50 years. And when it does, the destruction will be an order of magnitude — that is, 10 times — greater than when an earthquake occurs along the San Andreas Fault. Major earthquakes and tidal waves have occurred, on average, every 250 years at each of the four corners of the Ring of Fire that encircles the Pacific Ocean. Seattle stands at one of those corners — and it’s the only corner of the four that hasn’t moved in the past several hundred years.

If you haven’t done so already, you should probably read the article before you decide to move to Seattle.

One of the most interesting — and distressing — parts of the story concerns why scientists didn’t know this until recently. In fact, ample clues had long been present in the oral histories handed down by First Nation peoples in Canada and Native Americans in the Northwest US. One of the stories recounts the obliteration of the Pachena Bay people on Vancouver Island. The story describes how one night the land shook, and everyone was drowned; not a single person survived. Another story describes all the water receding from one of the bays in Washington State, and then suddenly pouring back into the bay, inundating the entire region. Survivors found canoes hanging from the trees.

Once scientists had confirmed that an earthquake and tidal wave had in fact occurred in 1701, they began collecting these indigenous stories and examining them for clues to when these events happened. On average, Schulz says, the midpoint of the date range predicted by the stories was 1701. She adds, “It does not speak well of European

Americans that such stories counted as evidence for a proposition only after that proposition had been proved.”

Sometimes, listening to the wisdom of indigenous peoples can help us understand cataclysms that have already passed. At other times, their wisdom may help us prevent cataclysms yet to come.

On my way to California, I spent a couple of days at a conference on spirituality and sustainable agriculture at Harvard Divinity School. One of the speakers was a young woman named Sarah Williams, who was completing a degree in sustainable agriculture at Evergreen State College in Olympia, Washington. Along with one of her professors, she led a workshop titled “Growing a Biodynamic Farmer: Educating for the Future from a Biodynamic Past.” Based in part on various concepts — some of them quite esoteric — drawn from the writings of the early 20<sup>th</sup>-century educator Rudolf Steiner, biodynamic agriculture views farms as living organisms and farming as a spiritual practice.

In her workshop, Sarah Williams described a practicum she took during her second semester at Evergreen State College. As I recall the story, she was assigned to a farmer in the area, one who practiced biodynamic farming and also happened to be Native American. When she showed up at the farm for the first time, the farmer greeted her and then led her to a large tree standing on its own somewhat away from the farm buildings.

“Your work this semester,” the farmer told her, “is to sit with this tree.”

She was dumbfounded. “But what am I supposed to do?”

The farmer replied, “You are supposed to sit with the tree.”

“What does that mean?” she asked.

“The tree will tell you what that means.”

For several hours each week for the rest of the semester, Sarah Williams sat with her tree. Since she began in January, there wasn’t much to see at first, at least to her eye. Against the sky, the sturdy trunk stood tall and silent, the bare branches occasionally swaying in the breeze and sometimes whipping in the wind. When it rained, she watched the water run down the bark and into the ground.

As she watched the water disappear, however, she realized that she could only see half of her tree — and maybe even less than half. Its roots plunged deep into the earth below, holding tight against the wind and drawing water and nutrients from the soil and sending them upward into the trunk and out to the branches.

When spring came, she watched buds form on the branches and then leaves unfurl. She already knew about photosynthesis, the work of leaves, which transform sunlight and water into carbohydrate molecules, providing fuel for the work of the rest of the tree. From the perspective of a leaf, the oxygen it gives off is merely a waste product.

Week after week, Sarah Williams sat with her tree. She saw bugs appear on the bark of her tree, and birds show up to feed on them. She saw worms aerating and

enriching the soil beneath the canopy – and birds feeding on them too. Over time, she began to realize what the farmer wanted her to understand. Her tree was alive. And while she could have said beforehand that all trees are alive, she had never realized how fully alive each individual tree was – and how much a community of life it was. Each individual leaf and branch on her tree was alive, as was each individual bug, and each individual bird, and each individual worm. Her tree was a community of life – alive in its own unique, distinctive, and irreplaceable way.

In a poem titled “Lost,” the contemporary American poet David Wagoner, a leading poet of the Pacific Northwest, echoes the farmer’s call to pay attention to each particular instance of life. He writes:

Stand still. The trees ahead and bushes beside you  
Are not lost. Wherever you are is called Here,  
And you must treat it as a powerful stranger,  
Must ask permission to know it and be known.  
The forest breathes. Listen. It answers, okay  
I have made this place around you.  
If you leave it, you may come back again, saying Here.  
No two trees are the same to Raven.  
No two branches are the same to Wren.  
If what a tree or a bush does is lost on you,  
You are surely lost. Stand still. The forest knows  
Where you are. You must let it find you.

“If what a tree or bush does is lost on you,” the poet writes, “you are surely lost.” On these terms, human civilization over the past couple of centuries has become lost indeed. We’re inattentive to what the living things that share this world with us are trying to say. And what they are trying to tell us is that we are all in this together. Unless the trees stay alive, and the bushes stay alive, and the birds stay alive, and the bugs stay alive, and the worms stay alive, we won’t stay alive either. We must let them find us.

Otherwise, a cataclysm will befall us. It may not come in the form of an earthquake or tidal wave; but then again, it may. Our callous indifference to the complex web of relationships that constitute life on this planet has become so extensive, and so pervasive, that we don’t yet know the extent of the damage we have caused. But we do know enough to recognize that we have lost our way, and we need to find ourselves again.

Whether or not Rudolf Steiner was right about the science of agriculture, and he often was not, he was certainly right about agriculture being a spiritual practice. The environmental crisis we face is, more than anything else, a spiritual crisis. As we approach the celebration of Earth Day, it’s worth reminding ourselves of our utter

dependence on the natural world — not only for our sustenance, but also for our very existence.

My own way of describing an appropriate spiritual response to our dependence upon the natural world is what I call an ethic of gratitude. Because we personally take what we need from the people and world around us, we need to take personally with the people and world around us need.

What does it mean to take the needs of the natural world personally? As one of the speakers at the spirituality and agriculture conference put it, this work needs to be taken outdoors — not merely for our own enjoyment and edification, but to make us ever more deeply aware of the particular forms of life that surround us and sustain us. We need to know them personally before we can take their needs personally.

Robin Wall Kimmerer is a scientist and TED Talk star who teaches environmental biology at SUNY in Syracuse. A member of the Potawatomi Nation, she is founding Director of the Center for Native Peoples and the Environment. She is also the author of the book *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge and the Teachings of Plants*, which I recommend.

In the book, she writes: “Listening in wild places, we are audience to conversations in a language not our own.” The language of science, she explains, “can be a language of distance, which reduces a being to its working parts; it is a language of objects.” The language of plants and animals, in contrast, is a language of relationship and reciprocity.

She says, “Cultures of gratitude must also be cultures of reciprocity... Just as all beings have a duty to me, I have a duty to them. If an animal gives its life to feed me, I am in turn bound to support its life. If I receive a stream’s gift of pure water, then I am responsible for returning a gift in kind. An integral part of a human’s education is to know these duties and how to perform them.”

Kimmerer goes on to describe what indigenous peoples call the Honorable Harvest, which is a canon of practices that govern the exchange of life for life. The guidelines for the Honorable Harvest, she says, look something like this:

Know the ways of the ones who take care of you, so that you may take care of them.

Introduce yourself. Be accountable as the one who comes asking for life. Ask permission before taking. Abide by the answer.

Never take the first. Never take the last. Take only what you need.

Take only that which is given.

Never take more than half. Leave some for others. Harvest in a way that minimizes harm.

Use it respectfully. Never waste what you have taken. Share.

Give thanks for what you have been given.

Give a gift, in reciprocity for what you have taken.

Sustain the ones who sustain you and the earth will last forever.

In order to sustain the ones who sustain us, we need to learn who and what they are — up close and in particular. We need to take personally what nature needs from us. This is our spiritual calling as people of faith. And this is the environmental challenge upon which our very survival may depend.

The ones who sustain you know where you are. You must let them find you.