

“The Air in Woods”
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First Parish in Hingham (Old Ship Church)
Unitarian Universalist
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For Earth Day

Meditation

In our ancient meeting house on this yet more ancient hillside... spinning round on our unfathomably ancient earth... our home... we find a quiet, a calm, a peace within, a deep centeredness... And from this peaceful centeredness...

We hold those we love in our hearts...
 with gentle kindness and healing thoughts.
We hold all who grieve or who are ill in our hearts...
 with gentle kindness and healing thoughts.
We hold those who are struggling financially...
 Those who are hungry... or who are without a home... in our hearts...
 with gentle kindness and healing thoughts.
We hold those who suffer from oppression or violence or war in our hearts...
 with gentle kindness and healing thoughts.
We hold this dear earth and all life with whom we share the earth
 in our hearts... with gentle kindness and healing thoughts.

Readings

three haiku by Issa (1763-1827)

Red morning sky,
snail;
are you glad of it?

Don't kill that fly!
Look – it's wringing its hands,
wringing its feet.

What a strange thing!
to be alive
beneath cherry blossoms.

from an essay titled “Commonwealth” by Scott Russell Sanders

What is being sold to us as the “American way of life” is mostly a cheat and a lie. It is an infantile dream of endless consumption, endless novelty, and endless play. It is bad for us and bad for the earth.

We need a dream worthy of grown-ups, one that values simplicity over novelty, conservation over consumption, harmony over competition, community over ego. We need a story that celebrates the true source of our wellbeing, not in the private wealth we hold as individuals or as corporations but in the common wealth we share as members of the human family. We need a new vision of the good life. Or, rather, we need to recover and refresh an old vision, one well known to our ancestors but now largely forgotten.

Sermon

For Unitarian Universalists, Joseph Priestly is revered as one of the early leaders of Unitarianism in the new United States in the late 18th century, a friend of Jefferson and Franklin and other founders.

In the history of science, however, Priestly is remembered primarily for his path-breaking experiments which led to the identification of the key element of oxygen in the air we breathe.

Biographically these two aspects of Priestly's life are linked, since it was because of his radical religious and political views that an angry mob burned down his lab and home in England, leading to his exile from his native land and settlement outside Philadelphia late in his life.

Priestly's scientific life had of course begun many years earlier. When he was a boy in rural Yorkshire, for example, some of his first "experiments," such as they were, had to do with sealing spiders in glass jars to observe how long it took for them to die!

Not good for the spiders... but it was the beginning of a life suffused with a vigorously open-minded desire to learn and know, not to mention a foreshadowing of the critical experiments later in his life that led to a new understanding of the nature of the air we breathe.

For in 1771, Priestly created a series of experiments having to do with placing living things, animal and plant, in sealed jars. It was clear, to begin with, that a mouse couldn't last long at all. And a mouse placed in a jar in which another mouse had already died would begin to convulse within mere seconds (not good for the mice!). Nor would a candle burn in a jar in which a mouse had died.

And yet! (Big "and yet"!) If there was a little plant in the jar, in this case it was a mint plant, the mouse would survive notably much longer – and a candle would burn!

There is lots more detail here, but *we* get the picture right away, because *we* know what was going on.

Imagine yourself, though, in Priestly's place, before we all knew that plants breathe in carbon dioxide and breathe out oxygen, whereas animals breathe in oxygen and breathe out carbon dioxide. Priestly and his friends and colleagues, most notably Benjamin Franklin, were just beginning to figure this out. All they knew at this point was that somehow the plant was, as they put it, purifying the air that had been made "putrid" by a dying mouse.

The implications of all this of course turned out to be profound and far-reaching.

As Steven Johnson put it in his recent biography of Priestly, *The Invention of Air* (from which I have been drawing this rough outline of Priestly's experiments), "We can see here the first stirrings of a genuinely new way of thinking about life on Earth and our role in that system." And remember: we didn't know this before, didn't know that simply through our breathing, breath by breath, we are doing our part in "a vast, interconnected system that links animals, plants, and invisible gases" in a remarkable flow.

And of course, as Johnson concludes, this means that "choices we make as humans... can have dangerous impact on that flow..." Likewise of course our choices can have a positive impact.

Franklin, in a letter to Priestly in which he muses on the significance of Priestly's experiments, already had more than a glimmer of this. Franklin wrote:

I hope this will give some check to the rage of destroying trees that grow near houses, which has accompanied our late improvements in gardening, from an opinion of their being unwholesome. I am certain, from long observation, that there is nothing unhealthy in the air of woods; for we Americans have every where our country habitations in the midst of woods, and no people on earth enjoy better health, or are more prolific.

“Nothing unhealthy in the air of woods,” Franklin affirms, and Priestly’s experiments helped to confirm. And we know with even more certainty today just how true and important this is. Not just “nothing unhealthy in the air of woods”: rather, so much depends upon the air of woods, and this means on the woods themselves, as our planet warms as a result of the ever-increasing levels of carbon dioxide in the air, far beyond the natural levels from the breathing of human beings and all the other living animal creatures on the planet.

So much depends.

Sometimes on my morning run through one of Hingham’s woods I bring to my attention this elegant and beautiful exchange of air that is going on as I run, between me and other creatures on the one hand and the trees and brush of the woods on the other, this breath by breath reminder that we humans are not simply *existing* in the midst of a more or less random and huge collection of living beings, plant and animal, here on the earth. We are part of an integrated and still-evolving, ever-changing whole. As naturalist and Sierra Club founder John Muir put it so directly over 100 years ago, it is all hooked together.

Which means that, as we all know by now, it is at our grave peril that we forget this, forget that it is an intimately interdependent web in which we live and move and have our being.

Sadly, all too often we do indeed behave as though we are in blind ignorance of this reality, this *fact* of our interdependence. Among other things, we burn the store of carbon-based fuels as if there is no tomorrow... (talk about a potentially self-fulfilling prophecy!)... we cut down woods and forests for developments we don’t need... and on it goes... And so, extended droughts, more destructive storms, rising seas, more widespread malaria and dengue fever – and all of this not in some feared future, but now.

So then, is Scott Russell Sanders correct? Correct when he wrote (as we heard in the reading), that “What is being sold to us as the ‘American way of life’ is mostly a cheat and a lie”? That “It is an infantile dream of endless consumption, endless novelty, and endless play... bad for us and bad for the earth”?

Perhaps even to the point that many of the proposed “solutions” to the crisis of global warming do not question the inherent assumed goodness of “the ‘American way of life’... of endless consumption” – and so proposed engineering of the atmosphere, carbon sequestering, even all the alternative energy technologies are seen by many as ways of ensuring that we *can* simply continue to consume as much and as quickly as we want, buying always bigger and better, driving and flying hither and yon purely for our own pleasure and enjoyment, and on and on?

Whereas the reality is, it seems to me, that all of these technical fixes and changes will get us next to nowhere if they are not coupled with a change of heart and change of our way of life.

Is it so impossible to dream, in Sanders’ words, “a dream worthy of grown-ups” – not to mention worthy of the precious children in our charge? So impossible to imagine a

society and a world based on the idea that our commonwealth of air and water and food and knowledge is meant to be shared and carefully tended and conserved for the common good of all life? So impossible to bring these sorts of Earth Day considerations into our lives every day, into our votes on election day?

I sure hope not.

It perplexes me, though, as perhaps it perplexes you, why we aren't collectively waking up and doing more as the climate crisis inexorably worsens. It may simply be, as some have said, that we are like the frog placed in a comfortable pot of water, easily ignoring the slow but inexorable warming from the pot below... until it is too late. Evolutionary biologists tell us that we are programmed more for short-term than long-term planning, so this may well be our situation.

But... we are *not* frogs... and unlike the frog in the pot, we *do* have the capacity to learn the reality of our situation and to imagine our future; and we each have a role to play.

So, while scientists do the essential work of helping us to understand ever more thoroughly the nature of the crisis we face; and while engineers and entrepreneurs develop essential new energy technologies, what about the rest of us?

What is our job? Whether or not we are a scientist, engineer, or entrepreneur, what is our part of the Great Work of creating a world that works for all life?

Well, whatever else we do: conserving energy, growing some of our own food, eating less meat (a surprisingly huge contributor to increasing greenhouse gas emissions), driving and flying less, writing our elected leaders, speaking out on behalf of the woods and the streams and the wild things... *every day* we can *practice* awakening to the reality of who we are on this dear earth – so that we'll more naturally do all these other things. Every day.

And note: this practice is not work! It is joyful play.

For example: A couple dozen of us have been exploring classical Japanese haiku during this National Poetry Month. We've been experiencing the way in which a well-crafted haiku, capturing a moment in nature centuries ago or last week can re-awaken our appreciation for this moment in nature, on the earth, today.

Listen again to the haiku (from the Japanese poet Issa) shared earlier in our first reading:

Red morning sky,
snail;
are you glad of it?

And what about us? Are we glad of the red morning sky? Have we even noticed it?

And this one:

Don't kill that fly!
Look – it's wringing its hands,
wringing its feet.

Yes, all life is inconceivably precious! Are we caring for the life around us, in woods, streams, fields?

And this one:

What a strange thing!
to be alive
beneath cherry blossoms.

Can *we* be awake to the mystery and miracle of creation?

What I'm trying to convey is that this is not incidental, not a frill, this practice of presence in nature, attentiveness to the beauty all around us and therefore more attuned to the ways in which it is all threatened. Not a frill at all.

Among other things, wouldn't it be true that if we could learn to take greater pleasure in the simplest of things – the sunlight coming through the window at a slant on a spring afternoon, freshly greening grass, bee exploring those new blossoms – well, then we might not think we *need* the next new thing, bigger better thing, trip to here, trip to there... which will further warm the earth?

And we might be more likely to *do* the next thing to care for the earth and for one another?

In the *Tao Te Ching* it is written: If you realize you have enough, then you are truly rich. (chapter 33, Stephen Mitchell translator)

Jesus proclaimed that our lives do not consist in the abundance of our possessions. (Luke 12:15).

Thoreau wrote that we are rich in proportion to the number of things we can afford to let alone.

Any progress we've made since the first Earth Day 40 years ago has been in fits and starts; by many measures the air and water are cleaner, there is more recycling, and so forth. But has it all been enough? I'm afraid it hasn't, certainly not in relation to the challenge of climate change; so I don't know how we are going to manage or muddle through the next several years or decades or centuries. In fact, no one really does know.

But day to day I *do* know that we can choose to strive to be ever more awake to the fragile blessings of the gift of life and to return the blessings in whatever ways we can.

The youngest children among us will live into the 22nd century – imagine that!

So imagine this too: Decisions we make today, every day, will help determine in what kind of world they will then be living.

So let's seize the opportunity we have *today* to wake up and to help create a better world *tomorrow*... for the children's sake, and for the sake of all life on this precious and beautiful Earth we share.

So may it be.

Benediction

May we go forth on our journeys

for the benefit of Earth

for the benefit of all her beings,

out of compassion for the welfare, the benefit, and the joy of all.

So may it be.