

**All Hitched Together**  
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First Parish in Hingham (Old Ship Church)  
Unitarian Universalist  
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**Meditation and Prayer**

May we come to rest in the quiet of this place,  
    this house made sacred by love, by the love of generations, by our love...  
May we come to rest in the quiet of this place.

With each in-breath may we find a more sustained measure of peace.  
With each in-breath may we feel a deeper connection with one another...  
    with our neighbor... with the family of life...

With each out-breath may we breathe our prayers...  
    Of healing and wholeness for those in pain or grief...  
    Of peace for those in the midst of violence or war...  
    For justice for those oppressed...  
    For homes for the homeless... food for the hungry...  
    For an earth, our home, transformed by our care...  
    For love... more love... more love.

As we pause in the silence, may we discover an ever deeper quiet,  
peace, love... overflowing with prayer and blessing.

**Readings**

from Isaiah 58

Is this not the fast that I choose:  
To loose the bonds of injustice,  
to undo the thongs of the yoke,  
to let the oppressed go free,  
and to break every yoke?

Is it not to share your bread with the hungry,  
and bring the homeless poor into your house;  
when you see them naked, to cover them,  
and not to hide yourself from your own kin?

Then shall your light break forth like the dawn,  
and your healing shall spring up quickly;

If you remove the yoke from among you,  
the pointing of the finger, the speaking of evil,  
if you offer your food to the hungry  
and satisfy the needs of the afflicted,

You shall be like a watered garden,  
like a spring whose waters never fail.

from *My First Summer in the Sierra* by John Muir

The snow on the high mountains is melting fast, and the streams are singing bankfull, swaying softly through the level meadows and bogs, quivering with sun-spangles, swirling in pot-holes, resting in deep pools, leaping, shouting in wild, exulting energy over rough boulder dams, joyful, beautiful in all their forms. No Sierra landscape that I have seen holds anything truly dead or dull, or any trace of what in manufactories is called rubbish or waste; everything is perfectly clean and pure and full of divine lessons. This quick, inevitable interest attaching to everything seems marvelous until the hand of God becomes visible; then it seems reasonable that what interests Him may well interest us. When we try to pick out anything by itself, we find it hitched to everything else in the universe. One fancies a heart like our own must be beating in every crystal and cell, and we feel like stopping to speak to the plants and animals as friendly fellow-mountaineers. Nature as a poet, an enthusiastic workingman, becomes more and more visible the farther and higher we go; for the mountains are fountains--beginning places, however related to sources beyond mortal ken.

### **Sermon**

The first time – so far as I recall – that I sensed and articulated for myself the interdependence of life was one summer when I was a camp counselor at Forest Lake Camp in the Adirondack Mountains. I was the “pioneering” counselor for 8-9 year-old boys, and once each summer another counselor and I would take the “best” pioneers on an overnight hike all of a mile away from camp, where we slept in and around a lean-to at the foot of Vampire Mountain.

Well, early in the morning one of those summers I remarkably found myself awake before all the boys. So I walked a short way up the mountain trail, getting just high enough to see back to the main camp. And suddenly it came to me that no matter how far I walked I would still be tied to the whole human world, dependent upon a web of connections for sustenance and well-being in all kinds of ways, just as I was clearly part of the natural world – “hitched to everything else...” as I discovered a few years later Muir had put it.

Now, it turns out that for years – decades actually – I’ve been misremembering my early reading of Muir, and therefore misquoting him. I thought (as it turns out do many others) he had written about everything being “hooked together.” But it turns out

as I learned this week that the key word was “hitched” rather than hooked. Perhaps a small point – but accuracy matters.

I also re-discovered this week that the line “When we try to pick out anything by itself, we find it hitched to everything else in the Universe” appears in Muir’s 1911 book *My First Summer in the Sierra*. In chapter 6.

It is a beautiful piece of writing. We heard a bit in the second reading. Essentially it is Muir’s journal from what he calls a “ramble” one July in the high Sierra. It begins this way, with his July 26 entry – and I simply can’t resist quoting for you the entire first paragraph – the man is besotted with wonder as he walks the beauty of the summer Sierra:

July 26: Ramble to the summit of Mt. Hoffman, eleven thousand feet high, the highest point in life's journey my feet have yet touched. And what glorious landscapes are about me, new plants, new animals, new crystals, and multitudes of new mountains far higher than Hoffman, towering in glorious array along the axis of the range, serene, majestic, snow-laden, sundrenched, vast domes and ridges shining below them, forests, lakes, and meadows in the hollows, the pure blue bell-flower sky brooding them all, --a glory day of admission into a new realm of wonders as if Nature had woongly whispered, "Come higher." What questions I asked, and how little I know of all the vast show, and how eagerly, tremulously hopeful of some day knowing more, learning the meaning of these divine symbols crowded together on this wondrous page.

Wow!

Muir is even poetic about the geology of the mountains, as he writes, for example, of “picturesque pillared and castellated remnants of red metamorphic slates.” And then he ascends quickly from the earthy to the spiritual: “Both the granite and slates are divided by joints, making them separable into blocks like the stones of artificial masonry, suggesting the Scripture "He hath builded the mountains."

Later on Muir tells us of the flora of the region in prose that is at one and the same time florid and scientifically precise:

Beds of azure daisies smile confidingly in moist hollows, and along the banks of small rills, with several species of eriogonum, silky-leaved ivesia, pentstemon, orthocarpus, and patches of *Primula suffruticosa*, a beautiful shrubby species.

And for all the scientific accuracy of Muir’s report, he never hesitates to tell us as well how it makes him *feel*: “How the touch of the flowers makes one's flesh tingle!”

Then, eventually, still swooning with delight, joy, and wonder, he gets to the famously quoted line, linking everything he’s been sharing with us into one grand design... everything “hitched to everything else...”

Unitarian preacher and reformer Theodore Parker, living a few decades before John Muir, though he never hiked the high Sierra, expressed similar feelings of wonder in the midst of nature:

To me human life in all its forms, individual and aggregate, is a perpetual wonder; the flora of the earth and sea is full of beauty and mystery...; the fauna of land and ocean is not less wonderful; the world which holds them both and the great universe that folds it on every side, are still more wonderful...

Clearly another 19<sup>th</sup> century besotted nature-lover.

Parker went further, though, for his deeply felt sense of wonder and appreciation of the way everything is held together and linked extended to his enduring commitment to the social issues of the day. In this regard he is perhaps best known as an abolitionist, but Parker spoke and acted also on behalf of prison reform, women's rights, temperance, poverty, peace. And as his biographer Henry Steele Commager put it, for Parker every one of these issues and social problems "went to the heart of things," for there was no way to see any one of them as separate from the others.

Well, what was true then is of course true today. Issues of justice and fairness, of peace, of the health of the natural world that so enamored Muir, Parker... and us – none of this can be separated out one from another.

Looking, for example, at the three issues which we've been discussing in our parish, one of which we'll choose today for our congregation-wide focus, we see this clearly: For whether we choose access to education, homelessness, or racism and oppression as our focus, the other issues and many more besides are related and with our energy and interest will be able to be brought under the umbrella of whichever central issue we have chosen.

If, for example, your family is homeless, access to education will likely also be an issue for you.

If you are African American in one of our center cities or a non-English speaking immigrant, access to quality education may well be an issue.

When it comes to climate change, though not one of our three issues, we can also see connections and links: think of homeless climate refugees fleeing catastrophic weather events, rising seas, encroaching deserts, often the poorest of the poor, often in non-western, non-white parts of our country and of the world, first in line to feel the effects of climate change, whether African Americans in New Orleans 9<sup>th</sup> Ward or Africans on the edge of growing deserts or Bangladeshis inundated by increasingly devastating floods related to rising sea levels and stronger storms.

Yes, John Muir, everything *is* "hitched together" – in the natural and human worlds, which is after all one world, a world born of stardust 15 billion years ago... all of us cousins with one another, with all life, with the galaxies...

But... back to earth, back to today:

How *will* we decide today which of our three issues to choose?

Well, it is as I said a few weeks ago: All these issues move us, touch our hearts. All the issues are worthy of our attention and energy. We can make a difference on any one of them – we actually can't make a bad or wrong choice. So we will choose the one that after careful shared discernment we believe we at Old Ship have the resources and gifts to address with greatest effect. Simple as that. Then, regardless of which issue each of us may have favored, we'll get on with the work at hand together.

But before we get on with that work at hand, or even with our conversation and vote across the street, let me add a few thoughts about why we are doing this at all, why “Serving Others,” our social service and social justice ministry, is one of our five Old Ship ministries, along with Nourishing the Spirit, Educating Mind and Heart, Nurturing Community, and Stewarding Our Resources.

The short, simple, and correct answer is that “Serving Others” is an integral dimension of a full and mature spiritual life.

From a purely humanistic perspective, the maturity of a human being can be measured by how wide a circle of concern he or she has drawn... so that in the course of a fully developed human life our circle of concern grows from individual to immediate family to community and eventually to the whole of humanity and the family of life.

In the history of religion, we see that the prophets and spiritual giants of every age and tradition also declare this to be true; and declare the converse to be true as well, that a life lived only for selfish and individual ends is not a whole and fulfilled human life – quite the contrary, it is a sad and shrunken life.

The Hebrew prophets knew this better than most. As we heard in the first reading, Isaiah preached that loosing the bonds of injustice, letting the oppressed go free, sharing your bread with the hungry, shelter with those without a home is our religious duty. Further, he said that when we live in fulfillment of this duty, “Then shall your light break forth like the dawn, and your healing shall spring up quickly.” Sounds like spiritual fulfillment to me if anything does!

And the Hindu *Upanishads* and the *Bhagavad Gita*, which some of us are now reading together, affirm that “selfless service of all” is both the means and the end of a complete spiritual life.

And wasn’t this also Jesus’ teaching of the kingdom of heaven? A “kingdom” which is, he proclaimed, spread before us though we too often do not see.

Yet we do and can see it, feel it, know it if we’re paying attention, we can and do experience it with every act of “selfless service”... do we not? Whether a kind word to a friend or serving a meal at Father Bill’s to a neighbor or surrounding the White House on behalf of the planet... these and other such moments of service and advocacy often do open our hearts to this fundamental experience of oneness: the unity of life, the reality of interdependence, the kingdom of God, open-hearted love... everything hitched to everything else.

So, then, isn’t this how we would choose to live in this world where everything is “hitched together” – the well-being of a family without a home in Quincy or hungry in Hull or Hingham linked to their children’s ability to get a good education and thereby help create for the next generation a better and more just nation and world; how we treat immigrants whatever their background or color of their skin linked to the freedom of all of us and to the health of our democracy; the fate of John Muir’s flowers in the high Sierra linked to coal mining mountain top removal in Appalachia linked to the devastations of climate change everywhere.

Yes, all hitched together.

Finally, a brief personal word:

I entered the path to ministry over thirty years ago and came to Old Ship almost twenty-five years ago not just to spin philosophical wheels or webs of elaborate theology – as much fun as that sort of thing can be.

No, I became a Unitarian Universalist minister and covenanted with you as your minister in order to be part of, to be sustained by, and to serve with a community of faith which begins with nourishing love in the heart, moves to bringing love to friends and neighbors, *and* radiates ever outward with love and service to and in the world. This is why I'm here. Does it sound something like why you are here too? (And all of this just another way of naming our Unitarian Universalist principles, filled with language of justice, rooted in respect for the individual and for the interdependent web of life, spiritually grounded.)

So today, whichever issue we choose (and remember we can't make a bad or wrong choice at this point)... together we will continue precisely this journey from love in the heart to love of the world, this journey on which all is hitched together, all are hitched to one another, all are hitched to the family of life... this journey in the spirit of John Muir besotted with wonder and with love for it all... this journey in the spirit of Theodore Parker, moved to *bring* love to it all, to each person, to the family of life on this dear earth.

Yes, together we will continue this shared and sacred journey.

So may it long be.