

Poetry for the Earth
Rev. Ken Read-Brown
First Parish in Hingham (Old Ship Church)
Unitarian Universalist
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Poems for Earth Day

“The Nest” by Benjamin Gucciardi

This morning
I watched a goldfinch
Disappear into a tree
Through a hole no bigger

Than my open mouth.
From the hollow
The bird
Began her crooning.

That’s what poetry is
I thought –
Not the tree,
But the hidden song.

Not the yellow bird,
But the instinct to climb
Inside the darkness
To sing.

“Lost” by David Wagoner

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,
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.

from "A Song of the Rolling Earth" by Walt Whitman

A song of the rolling earth, and of words according,
Were you thinking that those were the words, those upright lines?
those curves, angles, dots?
No, those are not the words, the substantial words are in the ground and sea,
They are in the air, they are in you.

*

I swear the earth shall surely be complete to him or her
who shall be complete,
The earth remains jagged and broken only to him or her who remains
jagged and broken.

I swear there is no greatness or power that does not emulate
those of the earth,
There can be no theory of any account unless it corroborate the
theory of the earth,
No politics, song, religion, behavior, or what not, is of account,
unless it compare with the amplitude of the earth,
Unless it face the exactness, vitality, impartiality, rectitude
of the earth.

"Rainbow Race" (song) by Pete Seeger

chorus: One blue sky above us, one ocean lapping all our shores,
One earth so green and round, who could ask for more.
And because I love you, I'll give it one more try,
To show my Rainbow Race it's too soon to die.

"Global Warming" by Jane Hirshfield

When his ship first came to Australia,
Cook wrote, the natives
continued fishing, without looking up.
Unable, it seems, to fear what was too large to be comprehended.

Sermon

In the car the other day I caught a radio program concerning the bleaching and dying of coral reefs around the planet.

I learned that occasional bleaching events are part of the natural life cycle of coral. But I also was reminded (because we've been being told for some time now) that the bleaching and dying of coral are now occurring at a historically unprecedented rate. And the scientists who were part of a panel on this program were quite clear that the only reasonable explanation for this is global warming and climate change.

You probably knew this, as I did.

Perhaps you didn't fully realize, though – as at least I didn't – that not only are entire coral ecosystems and fisheries at risk because of this bleaching and dying; it is also estimated that the livelihoods of half a billion people are directly or indirectly affected as well. Fishing, food supply, tourism, local economies more generally, and so on.

Yet one more way – of the almost too many ways to count – in which climate change is changing not only the planet, but our human lives on the planet. *Is* changing, not someday will change.

Even so... we, collectively, find ways to continue to deny what is happening. Jane Hirshfield's poem "Global Warming" says it perfectly. Just as the seismic changes represented by those first looming European sailing vessels were impossible for the indigenous people to see or even begin to imagine, so is it almost impossible for us to see what is coming (is already now upon us) by way of climate change. But we must learn to see.

Well, that radio program was accepting callers.

It was illuminating to observe the forms that one or another degree of denial took.

One caller asked, isn't this just cyclical?

No, the scientist answered, the bleaching and dying we are now seeing is far beyond any cyclical phenomenon.

Another caller affirmed that the main problem was all the toxic chemicals in the sunscreen that bathers lather on just before going into the water.

Yes, the answer came, that might have some local effect on local coral, but it is overwhelmingly dwarfed by the damage caused by the heated waters brought about by human induced global warming.

We just don't want to see what looms before us.

Even the best of us, the most committed climate activists among us, may find it difficult to imagine, to fully see, what is before our very eyes, to realize that far more – far more! – than changing a light bulb and recycling (good things that they are!) is necessary as a response.

Which may be why poetry needs to be one of the arrows in our quiver.

The poem we heard earlier, "The Nest", is more than suggestive in this regard. Remember these last lines?:

That's what poetry is
I thought –
Not the tree,
But the hidden song.

Not the yellow bird,
But the instinct to climb
Inside the darkness
To sing.

We need, after all, and need perhaps more than ever, to learn to sing from inside the darkness that now threatens to envelope us, to sing with our lives.

Poetry might help.

Even as we may believe we have no time for what some may think to be frills and extras: poetry, music, literature, dance. No time when there is lobbying to be done, letters and emails to write, light bulbs to change and politicians to change, millions of hearts and minds to change...

How could there possibly be time for poetry?

I remember though, the words of Emma Goldman, the 19th and early 20th century Russian activist, socialist, feminist, who said: "If I can't dance, I don't want to be part of your revolution." To "dance" we could add "sing" and read and write poetry... and so on.

Several years ago I was among thousands (including some of our Old Ship youth and others) at a climate rally at the Washington Monument followed by a march around the White House. It was February, and in spite of global warming was quite cold. And we stood for a long time by the Monument and listened to many speeches, fine words, even inspiring words.

But... there was no singing! Yet we needed to sing! *Needed!*

Why needed? Song – which is, after all, a form of poetry, comes from and goes to a different part of the brain than plain prose. Prose certainly has its place, to inform and even at its best to inspire. But prose mostly stays in the logical, discursive part of the brain. Good. But not good enough. We need to awaken the part of the brain that we call heart. Music, song, poetry does this.

For example: David Wagoner's last lines, which we also heard earlier, do not make much logical sense:

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.

Logical sense? We could surely argue the point. How can a forest know where I am? How can a forest find me?

But our heart knows what those lines mean. Our heart awakens to the message that we need to learn to be at home wherever we are in nature, because we are part of the whole of what we call nature, not separate in a way that we could ever be lost.

And then the implication can be drawn that if we are at home everywhere, how could we possibly think to despoil anywhere, any part of the whole?

Then Whitman, though writing over a century and a half ago, bringing the message that our individual wholeness enables us to experience the earth's wholeness... and maybe vice versa:

I swear the earth shall surely be complete to him or her
who shall be complete,
The earth remains jagged and broken only to him or her who remains
jagged and broken.

Finally for now, if we awaken, whether through poetry and song or through a walk in the woods or sitting at the side of the sea in the midst of the wordless poetry of nature... if we awaken to how deeply we are part of the whole of nature, of one another, of all life, this it seems to me is another way of saying we have awakened to love.

Yes, love again and always.

So Pete Seeger's poem that became a song:

And because I love you, I'll give it one more try,
To show my Rainbow Race, it's too soon to die.

Because I love "you"? Love *who*? Well, I hear this: love the earth and love one another, and especially love the children (Pete said, "go tell all the children and their mothers and fathers too...").

In this same spirit, Gary Snyder concludes his poem "For the Children" (which we will hear shortly) this way:

To climb these coming crests
one word to you, to
you and your children:
stay together
learn the flowers
go light

Well, then, as many of you know, Susan and I have three children and now two grandchildren. I look into the eyes of these two small ones, one twenty months old, the other not quite twenty days old, both of whom could live into the next century, the 22nd century... and I wonder, poignantly wonder, what will this planet, their world, look like, be like then? And will they wonder why we, here and now, didn't do more to meet the challenge of climate change, to save those reefs, to help the most vulnerable people at the edges of the seas, edges of the deserts, edges of bare existence?

I look into their eyes with these wonderings, and my first response is tears. My second must be to do more, to do what I can – march, rally, write, and:

"*stay together*" – of course, we must stay together in community.

"*learn the flowers*" – yes, continue to deepen our understanding of the natural world of which we are a part.

"*go light*" – learn to live differently from the way in which the industrial civilization based on ever increasing consumption has conditioned us to live.

And then I also remember the message you'll hear in this morning's final poem by Martha Postlewaite, paraphrasing: Not to try to save the whole world, but to patiently listen for the song of *my* life, and then (now her words):

know
how to give yourself
to this world
so worthy of rescue.

Worthy of rescue so that life will flourish, which means poetry and song and dance and art will flourish, all that makes us fully human and that enhances all life, will flourish... always. You see it is a sort of circle: poetry (for example) can inspire us in our work to enhance the flourishing of life (life which itself is a sort of poetry, the flora

and fauna living in dramatic harmony), and in turn the flourishing of life including the gift of our human poetry and all of the arts which make our lives all the more worth living.

So may it long be. Blessed be. Amen.

Concluding Poems

“For the Children” by Gary Snyder

The rising hills, the slopes,
of statistics
lie before us.
The steep climb
of everything, going up,
up, as we all
go down.
in the next century
or the one beyond that,
they say,
are valley, pastures,
we can meet there in peace
if we make it.
To climb these coming crests
one word to you, to
you and your children:
stay together
learn the flowers
go light

“The Clearing” by Martha Postlewaite

Do not try to save
the whole world
or do anything grandiose.
Instead, create
a clearing
in the dense forest
of your life
and wait there
patiently,
until the song
that is your life
falls into your own cupped hands
and you recognize and greet it.
Only then will you know
how to give yourself
to this world
so worthy of rescue.