

# Our World is One World

Rev. Ken Read-Brown  
First Parish in Hingham (Old Ship Church)  
Unitarian Universalist  
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## Readings

*Quran 5:48 (second half)*

For each among you We have appointed a law and a way. And had God willed, He would have made you one community, but He willed it otherwise, that He might try you in that which He has given you. So vie with each other in good deeds. Unto God shall be your return all together, and He will inform you of that wherein you differ.

“The Body is Humankind” by Norman Cousins (*written long enough ago that Cousins references the human population as four billion; the essence of the reading remains*)

I am a single cell in a body of four billion cells. The body is humankind. I am a single cell. My needs are individual, but they are not unique. I am interlocked with other human beings in the consequences of our actions, thoughts, and feelings. I will work for human unity and human peace; for a moral order in harmony with the order of the universe. Together we share the quest for a society of the whole equal to our needs, a society in which we need not live beneath our moral capacity, and in which justice has a life of its own. We are single cells in a body of four billion cells. The body is humankind.

## Sermon

Herman Melville kept a quote from the German poet, philosopher, and historian Johann Friedrich von Schiller, posted at his writing desk:

“Stay true to the dreams of thy youth.”

Ah, but can we even remember the dreams of our youth?

Well, I’ve been wondering this week if at least some of the dreams of my youth can’t be discerned from the walls of my youth.

I loved maps! At one point the walls of my room were pretty much covered in maps: Maps of the United States, South America, the world... and a “map” if you can call it that of the solar system.

In elementary school my favorite subject was one I’m not sure they even teach any more in elementary school: geography. There was something somehow close to magical for me simply in the word “geography.” And I loved that moment when our teacher would pull down one of those roll-up maps in front of the blackboard.

And if ever a class assignment meant that I could make a map of some sort on oak tag (that’s what we in the New York area called poster board) – well, that barely felt like homework.

And I can still remember unwrapping one of my favorite Christmas presents ever: a globe!

Don't ask me how I came to this fascination with maps. Because I don't know.

In any case, by the time I was a teenager I had begun to think about the politics of all this; and I had decided that we were on the road to world unity, that just as the United States had drawn together the various states into one nation, so would the United Nations draw together the various nations into one world government. It just made sense. And field trips to UN headquarters in New York City further inspired me in this vision.

This said, it's not that I was oblivious to some of the obvious obstacles to this one world vision. Growing up in the 1950s and 60s, I was after all a child of the Cold War divisions. In fact, my biggest big oak tag project, this one in fifth grade, was a huge world map (four pieces of oak tag taped together) with nations in blue for the free world, red for the communist world, and white for the non-aligned. In short, far from a united world, far from "one world"... quite a divided world.

In any case, as time went on, I was fortunate enough to go beyond the maps to traveling some of the wide world. This included, during seminary, traveling with Susan literally around the world on one of those Pan American round-the-world tickets. Our stops included Hong Kong, Thailand, India, Germany, and the Soviet Union.

This was in 1981.

Our visits to Asia, in particular three weeks in India, exposed us not only to the cultural diversity of the Asian nations, but to extreme and quite visible poverty.

Our two weeks in the Soviet Union with an American peace group? Exposed us to the through-the-looking-glass experience of that totalitarian state. For all the friendliness – and there was much friendliness – the all-encompassing nature of the Soviet system was quite apparent at the same time. One example:

Susan and I took the train from Germany into the Soviet Union. At the border, middle of the night, we were asked to get off the train. Our luggage, at that point including perhaps suspicious souvenirs of various kinds from our Asian travels, was carefully examined, and our travel papers and itineraries carefully scrutinized.

After what felt like a very long time, we were put back on the train. We were told we would be met at the station in Moscow.

And were we ever. A man was standing at the precise spot where the exit from our train car came to a rest to "welcome" us and escort us to a taxi, which in turn took us straight to the hotel where we were to meet our group.

Someone was paying very close attention to these clearly dangerous young Americans.

Well, all of this is a very long way around to saying that for all my visions of one world, and progress towards world unity, in the 1980s the world was very much divided – politically and economically, and of course in other ways as well.

Then, less than a decade after our trip, with the end of the Cold War, there was much talk of divisions dissolving, even history ending in a new world order of democracy and shared increasing prosperity, a world in which nuclear weapons would be eliminated and the rule of law would prevail.

Little did we all know, but probably should have suspected....

Quite needless to say, it turned out there were other fault lines in the world which became more clearly exposed once the Cold War came to an end: Continued divisions based on disparities in wealth, but also differences in culture and religion and much else.

Not so easy to politically unite into one world.

So, what has become of the dreams of my youth?

Well, notice the word “dream.”

You know how I often remind us that most religious language is metaphor? Well, this is even more certainly true of dreams, quite certainly of the dreams we have each night, but also often of those other sorts of dreams, our visions of the future we would like to see, whether personally or on much larger scales.

The dream represented by all those maps of my youth? The dream of world unity represented by the array of flags flying together at the United Nations?

Well, it would be hard to make a case that the political world these days is united or will be any time soon. But it would be equally hard to make the case that in a deeper sense the world is *not* one world, in real ways united. The dream as metaphor, or intuition, of how things actually already are on a deep level.

Norman Cousins, in the second reading, gave us the image of each of us as one cell amidst billions in the one body of humanity. And he alluded as well to the larger family of life, of universe, of which we are a part, what in our Unitarian Universalist seventh Principle we name the interdependent web of existence.

This is *fact*, this is *reality*. Political, as well as cultural, economic, religious, and other divisions notwithstanding we do live as part of one living, breathing, system of life on earth.

*That* is the meaning of the “dream.” *That* is the reality, and I would affirm not just scientifically, but spiritually as well.

After all, the *illusion* is thinking that we could live as if apart from the whole, whether as individuals (me first) or as an individual nation (my nation first).

When I was in seminary I fell in with a group called the World Citizens Assembly, starry-eyed idealists all. The leader of the group, Lucille Greene, was fond of telling a story that makes the practical point:

A four engine plane is flying across the Atlantic. First one engine goes out, then the next, then the next, the pilot doing all he can to keep on course. Things are very dicey indeed. When the final engine quits, the co-pilot turns to the pilot and says, “Boy, have you got a problem.”

The message is clear. We sink or swim together.

So, just as clearly, we must increasingly learn to take our spiritual intuition of oneness, represented early in my own life by the “dreams of my youth,” into the often divided world of politics, culture, religion, and disparities of wealth and opportunity.

In this spirit, Walt Whitman, the 19<sup>th</sup> century American poet of unity and oneness, wrote, in his “Song of the Rolling Earth”:

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 say “amen” to that. We *must* learn to bring our intuitions and experiences – not dreams only – of the oneness of life (completeness we could say) into our personal *and* political lives.

And as we do, keep in mind the wisdom we heard from the *Quran*, teaching us that *differences* do not need to lead to or imply *divisiveness*. Instead, they can lead to learning and understanding.

Some of you may have seen my recent “Earth and Spirit” column in the Hingham Journal, in which I highlighted another of our hymns: “We Are the Earth Upright and Proud” – and which we will sing in a few minutes.

Now, even the title sounds more than a bit, shall we say, triumphalistic, humans at the center of things, the most important part of the creation. In this, the words of the hymn, particularly the opening verse (including this: “...in us the earth is growing.”) echo not the sober spirit of 2017, but the more optimistic post-war time they were written by Rev. Ken Patton - 1950.

But the heart of the message, it seems to me, still holds:

We human beings are not *on* the earth, we are *of* the earth – not separate from the earth, mere residents, but part of the complex living systems of the earth, and that means not separate from one another either. Once again, that’s the spiritual *truth* (not dream) of who we are.

And it seems to me that if we really came to understand this, we might feel more likely able to share the spirit of Ken Patton’s second verse of that hymn, which affirms that through our dedication of “minds and hearts... our love will win at length” – for “our day is just beginning.”

Even so: Too optimistic?

Maybe. But actually, who knows.

For if we *can* learn to work a bit more in harmony with nature and with one another (not so much “othering” of those with whom we differ, as I preached last week), rather than trying to control nature and control one another, or win over and against one another, our day might indeed be just beginning.

In any case, it is no time to throw up our hands in despair in the face of challenges and divisions; rather, it is time to roll up our sleeves and get to work in relation to whatever issue tugs most insistently at each of our hearts and consciences, get to work most certainly including our daily sharing of kindness, compassion, love... which may indeed “win at length” – particularly if we more and more live not from the illusion of division, but from the intuition of unity.

A final thought for today.

With age sometimes comes more of a long-view perspective. This includes a realization that none of us will live to see how it “all turns out.”

My father reported to us that when his mother, my grandmother, lay dying some fifty years ago, she wondered what the three of us, my two brothers and I, would do. Well, much of our stories have unfolded... but not the whole of them.

And when my father lay dying, Cold War and arms race still raging (about which he was so concerned), he wondered in relation to the world how it would all turn out.

But of course on the scale of generations and nations and the wide world, we are always mid-stream. And all we can do is navigate our stretch of the great river of life.

In this spirit, in the Jewish tradition of work for justice, these words of Rabbi Tarfon’s from almost two thousand years ago are often quoted:

It is not your responsibility to finish the work of perfecting the world, but you are not free to desist from it either.

Let us then, continue to bring our inward experience of unity and oneness to the outer world of difference and conflict, that we might be among those who heal and help one another in our troubled, likely never “perfect” (whatever that would mean), yet *one* world. So may it be.