

**Earth, Spirit, and Us**  
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First Parish in Hingham (Old Ship Church)  
Unitarian Universalist  
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**Readings**

“Remember” by Joy Harjo

Remember the sky that you were born under,  
know each of the star's stories.  
Remember the moon, know who she is.  
Remember the sun's birth at dawn, that is the  
strongest point of time. Remember sundown  
and the giving away to night.  
Remember your birth, how your mother struggled  
to give you form and breath. You are evidence of  
her life, and her mother's, and hers.  
Remember your father. He is your life, also.  
Remember the earth whose skin you are:  
red earth, black earth, yellow earth, white earth  
brown earth, we are earth.  
Remember the plants, trees, animal life who all have their  
tribes, their families, their histories, too. Talk to them,  
listen to them. They are alive poems.  
Remember the wind. Remember her voice. She knows the  
origin of this universe.  
Remember you are all people and all people  
are you.  
Remember you are this universe and this  
universe is you.  
Remember all is in motion, is growing, is you.  
Remember language comes from this.  
Remember the dance language is, that life is.  
Remember.

from “Gitanjali” by Rabindranath Tagore

The same stream of life that runs through my veins night and day runs through the world  
and dances in rhythmic measures.

It is the same life that shouts in joy through the dust of the earth in numberless blades of  
grass and breaks into tumultuous waves of leaves and flowers.

It is the same life that is rocked in the ocean-cradle of birth and of death, in ebb and in  
flow.

I feel my limbs are made glorious by the touch of this world of life And my pride is from  
the life-throb of ages dancing in my blood this moment.

## Sermon

Have you ever taken a walk through the woods with a two-year-old? Or held a 16-month-old in your arms as the sun rose and the birds sang?

As for the walk in the woods. You might not get far. You might not get your daily exercise. Your companion, utterly immersed, might stop every ten yards to examine the next mushroom or ant hill, or to pick up yet one more rock or leaf.

The sunrise experience? Perhaps this. Pointing at this tree and at that streak of sunshine or the moon still high and visible. Or turning at the sound of a chickadee's call. Pointing, looking, listening, wide-eyed.

Rachel Carson called all this sort of thing a manifestation of the "sense of wonder." Which it is. And a sense of wonder is grounded in full presence... indeed more than presence, an unspoken knowledge, experience, of oneness with what we call the natural world, no separation.

As many say, and it is true, we too often lose much of this as we learn to categorize and understand with our rational, scientific modes of thinking – modes of thinking that are important, essential to human survival and the thriving of life on the planet. But we also need grounding in a child-like sense of and experience of wonder and presence, even oneness. The esteemed Harvard biologist E.O. Wilson spent most of his professional career studying the ants that had fascinated him as a child; he put his wonder and scientific knowing together and in recent decades the two (wonder and science) led him to be among the strongest of voices on behalf of saving the planet's threatened biodiversity.

These days, though, it is often much younger folk who are taking the lead when it comes to global environmental issues, most notably climate change.

There is, not least, a 16-year-old girl from Sweden named Greta – who happens to have Asperger's (she calls it her superpower). She has a scientific bent that seems to me to be quite grounded in the experiential knowledge of our interwoven oneness with the natural world... as she calls her elders – that's us – to account.

Can this this young girl from Sweden change the world?

Well, I believe she already has.

As I wrote in my "Earth and Spirit" column in the Hingham Journal this week, Greta Thunberg sailed into New York Harbor last week on an emission-free solar and sail powered boat, having departed England two weeks earlier. She came to New York to attend the United Nations climate summit on September 23, and to promote the Global Climate Strike on September 20. Greta had begun striking last year by skipping school every Friday to protest government inaction on climate change.

Her example quickly went viral – including with her own family, who are now mostly vegan and who have mostly stopped flying, and at the same time with students all over the world, including here in Hingham.

Now the rest of us are invited to join in – youth and adult allies. Climate strike actions on September 20 are planned for cities and towns around the world, including in Boston at Government Center at 10:00 a.m. that morning. We are all invited, and I plan to be in Boston with many other UU youth and adults along with I expect thousands of others.

Thousands? I expect so, since the good news is that an increasing number of folks are deeply concerned about climate change and outraged about our own government's denial that we even have a problem.

And we must not be deterred by that denial – and worse than denial. As a song written by Rabbi Shoshana Meira Friedman a few years ago puts it: “The tide is rising, and so are we.” Actually, let’s sing a little....

The tide is rising... and so are we...  
The task is mighty... and so are we...  
The earth is holy... and so are we...  
The storm is raging... and so are we...  
The sun is shining... and so are we...  
The world is ready... and so are we...

And who is the “we”? All those who realize that we are not a collection of billions of separate individuals each out to get what we can, but rather that we, each and all, are part and parcel of the larger life we share. It is this realization, more than exhortations, more than charts and figures, that may yet save us from the worst consequences of global warming and climate change.

After all, why does our heart break when we see fires raging in the Amazon? Why does our heart break when we see the destruction of Hurricane Dorian in the Bahamas and elsewhere? Or when refugees from that destruction are told they are not welcome in the United States without all the necessary papers?

Why does our heart break?

Because deep down, in our hearts, we *know* – more than know, we *experience*... that our lives and our fates are interwoven; deep down we know that our well-being is dependent upon the well-being of everyone else, of all life, of the Earth.

Even so, *can* we rise to this moment in the history of life on our blue-green, beloved, home? So far, the signs have not been great. We might wonder if there has been a missing ingredient in our climate activism?

When the depth psychologist Carl Jung was asked “Will we make it?” referring to the collective challenges facing humanity even earlier in the twentieth century, his response was “If enough people will do their inner work.”

In other words, maybe giving people the facts and telling them what they should do... won’t do the job.

Joanna Macy put it this way in an essay titled “The Greening of Self”, noting the failures of moral exhortation to spur enduring activism: “Sermons seldom hinder us from following our self-interest as we conceive it. The obvious choice, then, is to extend our notions of self-interest.” To deepen our heart’s knowing.

She points out that just as we don’t need someone else to tell us not to saw off our own leg, since our leg is part of our body... so it should be with the trees in the Amazon which are “our external lungs.”

“We are,” she says, “beginning to realize that the world is our body.” Beginning to experience self not as just what’s wrapped up in this envelope of skin, but as what she calls an “ecological self.”

This is actually ancient stuff. Do you hear echoes of “ecological self” in Paul’s metaphor calling us to see ourselves as part of the Body of Christ, or as similar to the larger Self as expressed in the Hindu Upanishads – the Atman united and one with the Brahman, Self of the cosmos?

Our second reading, in that spirit, was from a Hindu source, the writing of the 20<sup>th</sup> century Indian philosopher Rabindranath Tagore. And he wrote elsewhere that this

wisdom of the ancient sages of the Hindu Upanishads was not just an abstract thought, but was grounded in their experience of and in the forest. For it was in the forest that they strived, Tagore wrote, to realize this great harmony between the human spirit and the spirit of the world. In the forest, immersed (like a child) in what we call the natural world. I've studied the Upanishads for decades, and never thought of the context of their creation in this beautiful and inspiring way.

Do *we* ever experience or realize this truth of the union of the human spirit and the spirit of the larger world, the earth? Well, I've already said as much. Our empathy, whether when we see the Amazon burning or see the suffering of someone we don't even know is an expression of our deep spiritual knowing that we *are* part and parcel of one another. In other words you don't have to sit on a meditation cushion for twenty years to experience at least flashes of this knowing, this realization of union, of oneness, of connection.

Sometimes this knowing comes to the fore in a much more dramatic instant – as for the young man recently who seemingly without a thought dived into the frigid cold of Lake Tahoe to try to save two struggling swimmers... and losing his own life in the effort. His friends described their 27-year-old friend as loving and generous, this final act of love completely in character.

But he's not alone in such sacrifice. The examples are myriad! Because this is who we are.

So, maybe when it comes to the health of our shared home and the interwoven health of all humans, all life, we just need to open our hearts and lives a bit more and then even more to what is already true: the reality that we are One Self, one body of life.

In this spirit maybe we will be moved to dive into climate activism – or activism in relation to whatever breaks our heart – with the same urgency that young man felt in that moment on the boat?

Look, the next chapter of life on earth may turn out very badly. Climate change is already well underway – heat waves, routinely monster storms, rising seas, melting glaciers, and the poorest of the poor, already on the margins, often getting hit first and worst.

Does this mean we should throw up our hands? Of course not!

You've heard me quote on other occasions one of my favorite passages in literature, from the last page of George Eliot's *Middlemarch*):

...the growing good of the world is partly dependent on unhistoric acts; and that things are not so ill with you and me as they might have been, is half owing to the number who lived faithfully a hidden life, and rest in unvisited tombs.

In other words, more good news: that the world includes and needs not only a Greta Thunberg, but millions of others, not just the leaders of nations and CEOs, but each of us who understand our situation and who understand and experience who we are... and therefore choose to live and act accordingly – to change our individual lives and to hold our leaders to account so that together we can create a future at least not so bad as it might have been without us, and perhaps quite a lot better. Who knows?

Yet another good sign: The book *Drawdown: The most comprehensive plan ever proposed to reverse global warming* has been a New York Times bestseller, remarkable given the pages of small print and charts and graphs. The draw to *Drawdown* though is

the stories of hundreds of efforts already underway around the planet in relation not only to fossil fuel use, but to agricultural practices, land use, transportation and construction alternatives.

And right here in Hingham we have our stories as members of our Green Sanctuary Team and others work to get Hingham to net zero carbon. And wouldn't it be something to bring our own buildings to net zero?

Meanwhile, right now we are invited to the Global Climate Strike this Friday (beginning at 10:00 on City Hall Plaza). If you can't come to Boston? You could, if you are so moved, write notes to our elected representatives encouraging them in green directions, reminding them that there is more to life than narrow self-interest, that we are indeed part of one life that must be our shared interest.

I'll give Joanna Macy the final word, reminding us that we need not be grim about all this. At the end of her essay she writes:

Thus the greening of the self helps us to reinhabit time and own our story as life on Earth... Beneath the outer layers of our neocortex and what we learned in school, that story is in us – the story of a deep kinship with all life, bringing strengths that we never imagined. When we claim this story as our innermost sense of who we are, a gladness comes that will help us survive.

I love that: “A gladness comes that will help us survive.” And maybe thrive! With our sense of wonder intact or reclaimed, our knowing who we most truly are – whether we are two or ninety two or somewhere in between.

So may it be.