

Who Speaks for Earth?

Rev. Ken Read-Brown
First Parish in Hingham (Old Ship Church)
Unitarian Universalist
April 18, 2021

*“Give thanks for what you have been given.
Give a gift, in reciprocity for what you have taken.
Sustain the ones who sustain you and the earth will last forever.”*
--Robin Wall Kimmerer
guidelines for an Honorable Harvest (from “Braiding Sweetgrass”)

Readings

from *Early Spring*, by Amy Seidl:

Since 1965, the USDA has found that on average, lilacs in the U.S. are blooming two to four days earlier per decade than they did forty years ago. In China, *Syringa oblata*, an Asian lilac, is also blooming earlier – on average three days earlier per decade since 1963. Other plants are responding even faster than lilacs to temperature increases: *Lonicera tatarica*, a honeysuckle, and *Trifolium repens*, white clover, are blooming approximately four days and seven and a half days earlier each decade, respectively, since the 1960s.

Lilacs bloom eight to sixteen days earlier than they did when I was born. And by the time my daughters are my age, the lilacs in the hollow will be blooming fourteen to twenty-eight days earlier than they are now – in April rather than in May.

from *Love Letter to the Earth* by Thich Nhat Hanh:

We can't wait any longer to restore our relationship with the Earth because right now the Earth and everyone on Earth is in real danger. When a society is overcome by greed and pride, there is violence and unnecessary devastation. When we perpetrate violence toward our own and other species, we're being violent toward ourselves at the same time. When we know how to protect all beings, we will be protecting ourselves. A spiritual revolution is necessary if we're going to confront the environmental challenges that face us.

Real change will happen only when we fall in love with our planet. Only love can show us how to live in harmony with nature and with each other and save us from the devastating effects of environmental destruction and climate change.

Sermon

The utterly natural miracle of life on Earth is ever-present, but as we well know is on full view in the spring.

Leaves at the end of a dry stick, small alive,
Leaves out of wood. It was wonderful.
You can't imagine...

...as poet Archibald MacLeish exclaimed.

And there is so much more:

The daffodils springing to life with exuberant colors.

Chipmunks wakened from winter slumber, dashing this way and that, knowing, in whatever way chipmunks know, just where they are going and why and what for.

Cardinals and song sparrows singing their spring songs as day breaks in chorus with so many other birds most of whom I, in my ignorance, can't name.

With all this in view and in mind and heart, these few lines from climate activist Bill McKibben caught my eye this week, though they have been on my desk for years:

To be in love with the world is particularly lucky, as it's everywhere: city, country, suburb. And luckiest of all is that it's never too late to fall into this particular thrall. All you need to do is begin to look around.

Yet... so much is going on in our nation these spring days aside from the onset of spring: the heartbreak of yet another young Black man killed by police, unending gun violence, partisan divisions ever deepening... and of course none of this and more should be ignored or swept under a rug of feel good sunny ungrounded optimism.

Yet at the same time, none of this need prevent us from grounding ourselves in beauty and miracle. Indeed, we must ground ourselves in beauty and miracle, in love and gratitude... simply to get through each day, and then also to be of some use to our neighbors, to our communities, to our nation and world.

And all we need to do is to begin to look around... and maybe fall in love again... with the world... with the Earth.

We heard Thich Nhat Hanh's affirmation from his *Love Letter to the Earth* that "Real change will happen only when we fall in love with our planet."

So I guess that's my reminder to myself and to us this morning, to allow ourselves, to invite ourselves to fall in love with our planet in all her particulars.

One morning this week, one of those too few luxuriant spring mornings we've had during this fickle – which, after all, is to say typical – April, I felt with no special effort particularly in love with the world, with the Earth, during my morning run past flowering trees, across the greening golf course (no golfers out yet...), all as the sun rose through breaking clouds. It was certainly easy to love the world that morning.

However... another morning this week was one of those frequent gray and chilly ones; and I found it required some effort of attention to feel the love again. Truth is I am perhaps too much in the habit of thinking about other things as I run, and taking for granted the beauty all around me, especially if the beauty is a little subtler on a gray, chill day.

So, why not a little effort. Pay attention Ken!

Poet Mary Oliver summed it up this way:

Instructions for living a life:

Pay attention.

Be astonished.

Tell about it.

So, this is part of what I'm doing this morning, though nowhere near as artfully or succinctly as the poet so often did.

Well, I'm going to circle back to the title of my sermon "Who Speaks for Earth?"

It seems to me that the short answer is that Earth speaks for Earth. Our role, you might say, is as translators.

That first reading this morning, for example. Turns out that Earth has been telling us for a long time, if we would pay attention, that her climate is changing, speaking in the languages she knows – one of which is the language of blooming flowers.

And fortunately, some of us have indeed been paying attention, including ecologist Amy Seidl from whom we heard in that reading,

And, gratefully, some have been paying attention for much longer.

As you may know, during the 1850s Henry David Thoreau kept detailed records of the blooming times of the wildflowers in and around Concord; he paid attention, which is a form of love – it certainly was for him as he went for his daily hours long walks. And his careful, loving attention over a century and a half ago means we've been able to compare the onset of spring in the 1850s with the onset of spring these days.

Well, turns out that first blooms of various wildflowers in Concord are anywhere from a week to three weeks earlier these days. Earth is – and has been for some time – telling us something. Botanists and other scientists have translated her messages for the rest of us to hear. Further, we can hope, not only hear but respond, that we might learn to live more closely aligned with Earth's natural rhythms... so that life, not just human life, but all life might flourish.

After all, isn't that what lovers want? The health and well-being and flourishing of the beloved? Which, among other things, means we must give as much or more than we take.

Robin Wall Kimmerer, a botanist and a member of the Potawatomi Nation, tells us (in *Braiding Sweetgrass*) that an Algonquin ecologist, Carol Crowe, had once requested funding from her tribal council to attend a conference on sustainability. Council members asked her to tell them what sustainability meant. In her response she said it included (citing a standard sort of definition) "the management of natural resources and social institutions in such a manner as to ensure attainment and continued satisfaction of human needs for present and future generations."

Here was one elder's response:

This sustainable development sounds to me like they just want to be able to keep on taking like they always have. It's always about taking. You go there and tell them that in our way, our first thoughts are not "What can we take?" but "What can we give to Mother Earth?" That's how it's supposed to be.

Beautiful.

Yet I am left wondering – what does that mean for me?

I guess I know a little bit about taking less: all the usual things like driving less, turning down the thermostat, and eating lower on the food chain. But giving to mother Earth? Beyond composting I'm not sure. Though maybe we are, in a way, giving to Mother Earth when we take less. And maybe we are giving to Mother Earth when we encourage elected officials and corporations in the direction of Earth care, meeting the climate crisis. Maybe here in Hingham we are giving to Mother Earth when we support the article at this May's Town Meeting to develop a climate action plan for the town.

And maybe we are giving to Mother Earth simply when we pay attention. Don't you feel the attention of your friend or partner as a gift?

Terry Tempest Williams wrote this:

We are a species known as *Homo sapiens*, often paralyzed by despair, having forgotten who we are together in our adamant claims of difference. Fortunately, we live among other species, many unknown to us, who show us how to enter the home of another and offer the gift of attention and presence... We learn to listen.

(from "Gods Among Us" in the Autumn 2019 edition of "Orion")

Well then, at the very least may we learn to pay better attention, this gift of love and listening to Earth, to bird and beast, tree and flower, and surely to one another. Attention, love, and listening as pathways to healing, to acting, to giving, to flourishing. This Earth Day. Every day. Always.

Can you tell me a better way to live?

So may it be. Blessed be. Amen.