

Never Too Late
Rev. Ken Read-Brown
First Parish in Hingham (Old Ship Church)
Unitarian Universalist
April 24, 2022

Readings

excerpts from Love Letter to the Earth, by Thich Nhat Hanh

Dear Mother Earth,

I bow my head before you as I look deeply and recognize that you are present in me and that I'm a part of you. I was born from you and you are always present, offering me everything I need for my nourishment and growth. My mother, my father, and all my ancestors are also your children. We breathe your fresh air. We drink your clear water. We eat your nourishing food. Your herbs heal us when we're sick.

You are the mother of all beings.

You are more than just my environment. You are nothing less than myself.

I promise to keep the awareness alive that you are always in me, and I am always in you. I promise to be aware that your health and well-being is my own health and well-being. I know I need to keep this awareness alive in me for us both to be peaceful, happy, healthy, and strong.

Dear Mother, my deep wish is to wake up to the miracle of life. I promise to train myself to be present for myself, my life, and for you in every moment. I know that my true presence is the best gift I can offer to you, the one I love.

For us to survive, both as individuals and as a species, we need a revolution in consciousness. It can start with our collective awakening. Looking deeply, with mindfulness and concentration, we can see that we are the Earth and, with this insight, love and understanding will be born.

Beginners, by Denise Levertov

*Dedicated to the memory of
Karen Silkwood and Eliot Gralla*

*“From too much love of living,
Hope and desire set free,
Even the weariest river
Winds somewhere to the sea--“*

But we have only begun
To love the earth.

We have only begun
To imagine the fullness of life.

How could we tire of hope?

-- so much is in bud.

How can desire fail?
-- we have only begun

to imagine justice and mercy,
only begun to envision

how it might be
to live as siblings with beast and flower,
not as oppressors.

Surely our river
cannot already be hastening
into the sea of nonbeing?

Surely it cannot
drag, in the silt,
all that is innocent?

Not yet, not yet--
there is too much broken
that must be mended,

too much hurt we have done to each other
that cannot yet be forgiven.

We have only begun to know
the power that is in us if we would join
our solitudes in the communion of struggle.

So much is unfolding that must
complete its gesture,

so much is in bud.

Song – My Rainbow Race, 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

Sermon

Near the end of my Easter sermon last week, I quoted the writer and climate activist Bill McKibben, who reminded us how lucky it is to be in love with the world, since it is everywhere: “And luckiest of all is that it’s never too late to fall into this particular thrall. All you need to do is to begin to look around.”

It’s all about love, isn’t it, as we’ve been hearing this morning, this Earth Day Sunday: Thich Nhat Hanh’s “Love Letter to the Earth,” Denise Levertov declaring that we have “only begun to love the Earth,” and Pete Seeger’s words we just sang, “And because I love you, I’ll give it one more try...”

It is all about love – love of the Earth and every little piece of the Earth, with the awareness that, as Thich Nhat Hanh put it, addressing the Earth, that “you are always in me, and I am always in you.” To put it another way, we do not just live *on* the Earth, we are *of* the Earth, part of this interdependent web of life.

So, to love another human being is part of our loving, is to love the Earth.

To love any other being is to love the Earth.

To love the beauty of a spring day is to love the Earth.

To love the oak or maple in your backyard... or the ocean waves and sandy beach... is to love the Earth.

And when you love something or someone you of course... of course... are moved to take care of it or them. And really, there are no “its.” Jewish philosopher Martin Buber reminded us almost a hundred years ago in his book *I and Thou* that to live a full life in relationship we must learn to experience each person as a thou, experience a tree as a thou, and, I would add, experience the Earth as thou – as beings as whole and worthy as we are. By contrast, when something is an “it” we will easily feel that we can exploit it for some selfish purpose or gain. The extreme example among humans is of course slavery, where the enslaved person is just a means to build a pyramid or grow and harvest a field of cotton. But you don’t have to literally enslave a person to treat them as an “it” – as a means to some end – some corporations and nations do this all the time.

Earth too. For too long and still we humans have mostly treated the Earth and the Earth’s lakes, rivers, oceans, forests, fields it, as things to be harvested and plundered, with not much concern for the long term health of the land or water or for the long term sustainability of what we call resources.

All of which has of course brought us to where we are, all too slowly discovering that when we treat the Earth as a thing, as an it, we end up harming ourselves, treating ourselves as “its” – not to mention harming huge numbers of the other beings with whom we share the Earth.

Is it too late to change course?

I’ll get to that...

First, when did you realize you were in a life-long love affair with Earth? I’m assuming that you are. When did you first consciously experience love for the Earth? Or maybe only in retrospect realize that one or another early experience or feeling in the natural world was the feeling of love?

As for me... one of my first experiences of what I much later realized was about love for the Earth was on one Thanksgiving morning almost sixty years ago, as our family drove across the Whitestone Bridge on our way from our home on Long Island to Thanksgiving dinner in Connecticut at the home of Aunt Alice and Uncle Ray.

As many of you know, when you cross Long Island Sound on the Whitestone Bridge going north, you look to the left for a stunning view of the New York City skyline. Well, on that morning the view was indeed stunning... but not in a happy way. New York was experiencing what is called an atmospheric air inversion, trapping days’ worth of pollution over the city. I can still picture it. The brown air (if you could call it air) was ugly. The view that day was depressing and sad.

Why? I couldn’t have expressed it in so many words at the time, when I was twelve years old or so, but I think my feelings of repulsion and sadness were not unlike what you feel if you see a loved one being harmed or seriously ill. My feelings were, in short, about love for the Earth.

Now... fortunately, as I was growing up I also had many positive experiences of love for the Earth. Beginning in our own suburban backyard, which included the beauty, for example, of the blossoming Japanese cherry tree every spring. Then there were years of summer camp

amidst the lakes and forests of the Adirondacks. And Jones Beach almost any season – the power and beauty of the waves and the peaceful expanses of sand and dunes. All so easy to love.

And of course my love affair with the Earth continues, as I expect does yours. With every sunrise and sunset or glorious high noon, with the greening of spring and the splendor of autumn; or on my runs at World’s End or Wompatuck Park or during walks at Nantasket Beach... I feel the love. Then there are the birds at our feeder... including, the return of hummingbirds to the hummingbird feeder – just this morning I saw the first of no doubt many of these amazing little birds having flown over twenty miles a day to arrive from their southern wintering.

What’s not to love about all of this?

Sadly, though, my love affair also includes, echoing that long ago experience of the air inversion over New York, seeing example after example of harm to the Earth: from mountain-top removal for coal mining to climate change fueled devastating storms and heat waves and so much more – right now we see the suffering in South Africa in the wake of flooding the likes of which they had rarely if ever seen.

But you don’t need to hear the list yet again to know what I’m talking about and to feel what I’m feeling – this poignant sadness when someone you love is suffering – in this case the Earth, which means also our siblings in the human family and our siblings in the family of all life.

Back then to my question: Is it too late to change course?

Sometimes it feels like it must be. After all, the list of climate change disasters grows practically by the day. And the war in Ukraine, though it might eventually lead us to speed our weaning from fossil fuels, right now is not helping at all – and as we well know is bringing unspeakable suffering to Ukrainians, along with impending suffering for millions around the planet as food shortages and hunger loom.

Is it too late to change course?

Well... do we even know enough to hazard an answer to that question? I would suggest that we don’t. How could we possibly know enough about the future to make that judgement? At most, we know enough to be worried, to be very worried. But we don’t know enough to declare that “the end is near” that our “river is hastening into the sea of non-being.”

Wendell Berry, poet, farmer, essayist, novelist, and activist, in a poem titled “The Future” wrote:

For God’s sake, be done
with this jabber of “a better world.”
What blasphemy! No “futuristic”
twit or child thereof ever
in embodied light will see
a better world than this, though they
foretell inevitably a worse.
Do something! Go cut the weeds
beside the oblivious road. Pick up
the cans and bottles, old tires,
and dead predictions. No future
can be stuffed into this presence
except by being dead. The day is
clear and bright, and overhead
the sun not yet half finished
with his daily praise.

Wendell Berry's poem reminds me of that experience I had several years ago of singing the "What Can We Do?" song at Hingham Nursery School. The song begins "What can we do to make the world a better place?". The children knew the answer before I could take a breath and teach them the second verse! Recycle, pick up the trash, and so on. Do something!

We adults also know what to do, including and beyond recycling and picking up the trash: Learning to be as energy efficient as we can as individuals and demanding of our political and corporate leaders that they... well lead! In getting us off the fossil fuel addiction as soon as possible.

Here in Hingham, Town Meeting committed last year to a net zero carbon emissions goal. Nothing magical or automatic about this vote; it was the result of the hard work of town activists, including members of our own Old Ship congregation!

And right here at Old Ship, when it comes to a new Parish House, I know you will seize the opportunity – with extra fundraising if necessary – to set an example and motivate others by building a Parish House as close to net zero carbon emissions as possible.

As I suggested a moment ago, though we know enough about what's happening on the planet to be very worried, we simply don't know enough to know that the end is near, that all is lost.

The better news is that we do know enough to be hopeful. Why? Because we know enough and we love enough to know what to do. As the writer and hero of Czechoslovakia, Vaclav Havel, once wrote:

Hope... is a deep orientation of the human soul that can be held at the darkest times... an ability to work for something because it is good, not just because it stands a chance to succeed.

Even better news is that we are not doing this work alone. We truly are part of a great and growing number committed to making a difference to make more likely the flourishing of life for the next generation and the next. From the youth movement "Sunrise" to the elders of Bill McKibben's new organization "Third Act," to activists and innovators around the planet.

The most recent United Nations report on climate makes clear the imminent danger we face, but also affirms that we do have time, maybe not much, but we do have time, and we have the tools and the knowledge to turn things around – if we can generate the will. A will rooted, I would say, in what must be our ever-deepening experience of the reality that we are living, breathing parts of one living, breathing Earth. Think of it! Feel it!

Then join in spirit with one of our former Old Ship interns, Rev. Gail Collins-Ranadive, who in her recent beautiful book on the challenge of the climate crisis affirmed this:

A lifelong student of nature and human nature, I choose to believe that our species can and will wake up and take action.

Well, I do too.

May it be so because together we make it so. Amen. Blessed be.