

What is Your Place in the Web of Life?

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Readings

from the 14th century poet Hafiz

Cloak yourself in a thousand ways; still shall I know you, my Beloved.
Veil yourself with every enchantment
and yet I shall feel you, Presence most dear, close and intimate.
I shall salute you in the springing of cypresses
and in the sheen of lakes, the laughter of fountains.
I shall surely see you in tumbling clouds,
in brightly embroidered meadows.
Oh, Beloved Presence, more beautiful than
all the stars together,
I trace your face I ivy that climbs,
in clusters of grapes,
in morning flaming the mountains,
in the clear arch of sky.
You gladden the whole earth and make every heart great.
You are the breathing of the world.

from *An Altar in the World*, by Barbara Brown Taylor

People long for more meaning, more feeling, more connection, more life, and are willing to look all over the place for this treasure. They will spend hours launching prayers into the heavens. They will travel halfway around the world to visit a monastery in India or to take part in a mission trip to Belize. The last place most people look is right under their feet, in the everyday activities, accidents, and encounters of their lives. What possible spiritual significance could a trip to the grocery store have? How could something as common as a toothache be a door to a greater life? No one longs for what he or she already has, and yet the accumulated insight of those wise about spiritual life suggests that the reason so many of us cannot see the red X that marks the spot is because we are standing on it. The treasure we seek requires no lengthy expedition, no expensive equipment, no superior aptitude or special company. All we lack is the willingness to imagine that we already have everything we need. The only thing missing is our consent to be where we are.

Sermon

Some of you may have recently learned, as I have, that the Fish and Wildlife Service has recommended that the *rufa red knot* be considered for “threatened” status under the Endangered Species Act.

Do you know about the *rufa red knot*? Do you know of its remarkable place in what we call the web of life?

Do you know about this bird, with its wingspan of a mere twenty inches, commuting every year from the southernmost tip of South America to the Arctic and back again? Nine thousand miles each way – flying as much as fifteen hundred miles without a rest stop?

An amazing bird! Part of an amazing world!

The *red knot* spends the winter (well, our winter, their summer) in South (way south) America, and heads north to the Arctic in time for the summer mating and breeding season. Come fall, these modest little birds head south. They stop each way at places like Nauset Beach on Cape Cod. And Delaware Bay, which scientists believe is their primary feeding station on the journey.

For they spend several days at Delaware Bay, feasting on the eggs of horseshoe crabs. During this time some of their internal organs shrink, while their pectoral muscles and heart increase in size... until they are ready to soar again.

Talk about an incredible journey. The product of millions of years of evolution, or more accurately co-evolution of the *red knot* with the horseshoe crab with whatever species upon which the horseshoe crab depends, with habitat, and so on.

For this web of life is no static thing; it is, we are, ever in interrelated motion.

As for the *red knot* and why it is endangered... why in 2011 the wintering populations in South America declined from just the year before by about a third...

Might have to do with the precipitous decline in horseshoe crabs due to overharvesting. Might additionally have to do with habitat loss along the migratory route, this due to development and to sea-level rise caused by climate change. Might have to do with dramatic changes in the Arctic environment, also caused by climate change.

As the 19th century conservationist John Muir famously put it: “When we try to pick out anything by itself, we find it hitched to everything else in the Universe.”

Red knot hitched to horseshoe crabs hitched to us... hitched to everything... everything hitched to everything else.

This is what we call the interdependent web of life.

So, the *red knot* is threatened mostly because of our human behavior. And the *red knot* is not alone.

Have you seen the photo of the 10,000 walruses on the beach in Alaska? At this time of year they used to hang out on the Arctic sea ice. Which mostly isn’t there anymore by the end of the summer.

Polar bears, monarch butterflies, the list is long. Many scientists say we are in the midst of the greatest wave of extinctions since the great extinction 65 million years ago that wiped out the dinosaurs and most other large creatures.

And are we to think we are immune?

It would seem we still have much to learn about living in the web of life. And not much time in which to do the learning.

What, then, *is* the web of life? I expect most often we think of it in terms of the so-called natural world, thereby separating in our minds what is usually called environmentalism from issues of social justice and peace. But there really is no such hard and fast line – or any line at all.

When it comes to climate change, this is abundantly clear.

For aside from our fellow species such as the *red knot* and the walrus and the polar bear, who among our brothers and sisters on this earth is being impacted first and hardest by climate change?

Those who are least able to withstand the impact, those who are living at the edge already – literally at the edge of growing deserts in Africa, literally at the edge of the sea in Bangladesh, and at the same time at the edge of poverty and so unable to move away from encroaching desert or sea. And this is not just about Bangladesh or sub-Saharan Africa – think about those, including many living on a financial edge, still recovering from Katrina or Sandy.

Let me come at this from what may seem to be quite another direction.

I've been thinking lately about what *seem* to be two tracks of my life (maybe of all our lives...).

First, every morning over breakfast I read the newspaper. Then I receive emails with more news. I listen to the news on NPR; sometimes I watch the PBS news hour. I do this because I feel a responsibility to know what is going on the world so that I can be as good a citizen as I am able to be. Choosing how to vote, sending emails to elected officials, supporting Old Ship's social service efforts and social activism – which over the years has include standing in vigil for peace, supporting equal marriage rights, and demonstrating in relation to climate change, as some of us did at the Statehouse a couple of weeks ago, others (like our own Turner Bledsoe) at the Brayton Point coal fired plant over the summer, our youth group in Washington last winter.

And all this is what might be named the social activist track of my life, of our lives, the part of me – as of you – that wants to make the world a better place, that wants to serve and be of use to others.

On the other hand – other track – my interest in the world's spiritual traditions, paths, and practices seems to grow deeper as I grow older. Leading the Upanishads Study Group or the Bodhisattva Study Group, preparing to lead my winter class this year on humanity's perennial wisdom, engaging in my personal spiritual practices: reading ancient texts, meditation, mindfulness, journaling... all this is so enriching to me. Sitting in a circle in our parlor for what I have long called "conversation about things that matter" never tires, always engages, always awakens.

The message for me in all this, in what could be called the "spiritual track" of my life? Echoing the language of the perennial wisdom: Each of us is an individual manifestation of the universal, call that universal what you will: God, Brahman, Buddha-nature, Tao, Cosmos, Universe.

And this is not just an airy idea from so-called Eastern traditions. Saint Paul said we are each of us part of one body of Christ. The 17th century English metaphysical poet John Donne expressed the insight this way:

No man is an island,
Entire of itself,
Every man is a piece of the continent,
A part of the main....

Well, maybe easy enough to accept this sort of thing as an intellectual concept. After all, when stripped of religious language, it simply makes logical sense. But the task for what we call our spiritual lives – which means the task for our *lives* – is to learn to *experience* ourselves as “a part of the main,” as an individual manifestation of the universal, of the divine by whatever name, the “breathing of the world” as the Sufi poet Hafiz put it a long time ago.

Perhaps by now you begin to see – as I have increasingly come to realize – that these are not actually “two tracks” I’ve been describing: the activist and the spiritual. They are two dimensions of one life – mine, yours, ours. Two sides of one life coin, each reinforcing the other: Spiritual practices and reading informing our social and environmental concerns; activism and service deepening our spiritual experience – experience of oneness transcending individuality, experience of being part of the whole.

So it is in this spirit that Rick Mattila and I will be leading a class titled “Our Place in the Web of Life.” We will be using a curriculum created by the Unitarian Universalist Ministry for Earth. Over the course of five weeks we will be challenging ourselves to see ourselves in the web in terms of the one world that encompasses those two other kinds of dimensions of our lives of which I spoke earlier: the natural and social worlds which are of course part of one world. We will be learning the ways in which issues usually defined as social justice issues are related to issues usually defined as environmental and vice-versa. For example: Who can afford to buy a hybrid vehicle? Who does and who doesn’t have to worry much about pollution from a nearby coal-fired power plant? Who has the money to shop at Whole Foods? Who even lives near a supermarket of any type and who doesn’t?

And so on.

Remembering that we really are all in this together – this life, this earth... natural world, social world... one world. And spiritual life, activist life... one life.

With all this in mind, before I finish, a little more about climate change, this global issue from which none of us, no matter how privileged we seem to be, can walk away, whether physically or spiritually... since there is no away. A word especially about things we can and must do, and about the very specific action in regard to climate change that we’ll be talking about today at our parish discussion at noon, namely divestment from fossil fuel investments.

First: this is serious! The report just released from the Intergovernmental Program on Climate Change (IPCC), represents a more powerful consensus than ever of scientists from around the world. In short, depending on the model, depending on what we manage to do or not do from a policy perspective, we are facing a range of global

warming due largely to fossil fuel burning that suggests either minor or major catastrophe: increase in destructive storms, drought, crop failures, sea level rise, extinctions, disease, along with likely increase in political ferment around the globe, climate related resource wars... and on it goes.

Most, probably all, of you know all this. Even the Pentagon knows how serious this is – they have plans in place to meet the potential disruptions and dangers to national security posed by climate change.

So to begin with, then, we must all continue and augment changes in our own lives – you know the list: changing light bulbs, conserving energy every which way, driving less, traveling less, using less of everything, recycling more of everything. In other words, changing our lives.

But while *essential*, this is not *enough*, it is indeed only “to begin with.” As my colleague Fred Small at First Parish in Cambridge has put it, changing a light bulb is fine, changing a senator is better.

And changing a system is even better than that, which is to say an economic and political system that continues to reward consumption over conservation, fossil fuel use over renewables, ever more stuff rather than more genuine happiness and well-being.

Divestment? To divest our Old Ship investment portfolio from stocks involved in the extraction and production of fossil fuels may indeed have little direct impact, may merely be symbolic; I understand that perspective. But I respond that “symbolic” need not be “merely.” Over the centuries people have transformed and even sacrificed their lives for a symbol, be that symbol a cross or a flag. Were Old Ship to divest it sure would be symbolic and I hope inspiring: first of all for each of us as we look at our own lives and our own investments, if we have them; for other houses of worship; for our wider community. And this is in fact is the point of divestment, which is to become a powerful enough symbol that both corporate and political figures and institutions will change their ways and help us all to change our ways. (Not incidentally, divestment might turn out to be a wiser investment financially, too, as fossil fuels become ever more untenable as a way of providing energy.)

Because yes, we *are* all in this together. We *are* all individual manifestations of the divine. The *red knot*, walrus, monarch... and our brothers and sisters everywhere in every circumstance of life.

The perennial wisdom traditions of humanity suggest that we learn to see ourselves in all creatures and all creatures in ourselves in this web of life. And then live as best we can in this spirit.

That’s all. And that’s everything.

So may it be.