

SERMON: Color and Fragrance

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There is an old story of the Unitarian Farmer. Farmer Brown bought an old abandoned farm. The land was overgrown with weeds, the farmhouse and barn falling apart. On his first day there, the local town preacher stopped by to give a blessing and prayer, saying, "may God bless you and make this land fertile and bountiful".

The Preacher returned after a few months and found the farm transformed. The house and barns had fresh paint and a tidy yard, healthy young animals in well-fenced pens, fields lined with straight rows of green crops. "Amazing!" The preacher says, "Our prayers were answered! Look what God and you have accomplished together!". "Yes reverend." The Unitarian farmer says. "But remember what a mess the farm was when it was in God's hands alone?"

We Unitarian Universalists know that it is by our hands that the work gets done, and we cannot wait for miracles or trust in prayers alone. We accept responsibility for our lives, not expecting God to intervene for us. We cannot not act. We are people of action and of justice. We work to Heal lives and help heal the world. This is how we live our faith. We "do" things. We sign petitions, make signs, march in protest, buy sustainably produced products, recycle and use renewable resources.

We are doers. But simply "doing" something for the Earth isn't the entire solution. First we need to be, to be in relationship.

Unitarian, Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote his essay "Nature", in 1836.

Emerson reimagined the Divine as something large and visible, which he referred to as nature. He describes nature as a spiritual being that provides for humankind, and believed humankind, in return, must care for nature. Emerson recommended that people find a way to be in good relationship with nature, as nature gives generously all that we need, but humans often fail to reciprocate.

This reciprocity is our work, our deeply religious work.

Eco-Spirituality looks beyond our sense of environmental justice to connect us even more deeply with how we engage with nature on a personal and spiritual and theological level.

David Suzuki, a scientist, environmentalist, and leader in sustainable ecology, expresses the importance of including the sacred in addressing the ecological crisis: Suzuki says, "The way we see the world shapes the way we treat it. If a mountain is a deity, not a pile of ore; if a river is one of the veins of the land, not potential irrigation water; if a forest is a sacred grove, not timber; if other species are biological kin, not resources; or if the planet is our mother, not an opportunity—then we will treat each other with greater respect. Thus is the challenge, to look at the world from a different perspective." [21]

Eco-Spirituality blends and weaves different scientific, religious, and indigenous ways of knowing into a developing consciousness, expanding beyond the dualities of human/earth, heaven/earth, mind/body. Eco-spirituality can bring us to recognize the unity and interrelationship, or "interbeing," the interconnectedness of all of creation.

Unitarian Universalists' work for environmental justice is reflected in the 7th principle that "affirms and promotes the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part." and also one of the six sources of our faith: "spiritual teachings of Earth-centered traditions which celebrate the sacred circle of life and instruct us to live in harmony with the rhythms of nature."

Through worship, and other spiritual rituals, we nourish and ground ourselves in our call to action, blending our factual understanding of cosmology, astronomy, physics, chemistry, biology and botany with the contemplation, awe, and mystery that speak to our spiritual beings, acknowledging our deep connections with the natural world and with our living planet.

March being Women's History Month, and with Friday being International Woman's Day I would be remiss if I didn't mention the influence women have had on climate action and awareness.

In many ways, women started the environmental movement as we know it today. Rachel Carson's seminal book, *Silent Spring*, inspired a generation of grassroots action for the Earth, ultimately leading to the founding of Earth Day and the creation of the US Environmental Protection Agency.

Through 60 years of groundbreaking work in the field, Jane Goodall introduced the world to the complex family interactions of wild chimpanzees. She inspired a new public awareness about protecting primates and their vital habitats.

As a marine biologist, oceanographer, and explorer, Dr. Sylvia Earle was the first female chief scientist of the US National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration and continues to inspire action to end overfishing and pollution in our oceans.

Of course there is also Greta Thunberg, Ursula Goodenough and countless other women engaged within their own communities, in research and in global leadership. I want to mention a couple of my own women eco-heroes.

In her beautiful and evocative book, *Braiding Sweetgrass*, Potawatomi botanist, Robin Wall Kimmerer shares nuggets of native ecological wisdom, through the lenses of science and tradition. There are many rich stories woven in her pages, but I will share only one with you today, of asters and goldenrods. Kimmerer writes of the remarkable beauty of her homeland's fields in September. "As if harvest time were not enough—peaches, grapes, sweet corn, squash— the fields are also embroidered with drifts of golden yellow and pools of deepest purple, a masterpiece."

She told her university adviser that she wanted to study botany, "because I want to learn about why asters and goldenrod looked so beautiful together. " She wasn't taken very seriously. He replied, "I must tell you that that is not science." she tried again: "I'd like to learn why plants make medicines, why willow bends for baskets and why strawberries are sweeter in the shade." "Also, not science," he said. "I just wanted to know why. Why do they stand beside each other

when they could grow alone? Einstein himself said that “God doesn’t play dice with the universe.” Why is the world so beautiful? “

She studied the formulas, facts, figures, the mechanical structures of hard science, learned about evidence and logic. After her PhD, Kimmerer met a Navajo woman who shared the ancient teachings. “One by one, name by name, she told of the plants in her valley. Where each one lived, when it bloomed, who it liked to live near and all its relationships, who ate it, who lined their nests with its fibers, what kind of medicine it offered. She spoke of beauty.” Kimmerer then used her scientific knowledge and discovered there are special color receptor cells in the eye, she learned about colors that are reciprocal pairs, meaning they make one another even more vivid.

Asters and goldenrods have known this for a long time. Their striking contrast when they grow together makes them the most attractive target for bees in the whole meadow. Growing together, both receive more pollinator visits than they would if they were growing alone. They thrive together.

Kimmerer writes “That September pairing of purple and gold is lived reciprocity; its wisdom is that the beauty of one is illuminated by the radiance of the other. Science and art, matter and spirit, indigenous knowledge and Western science— can they be goldenrod and asters for each other? When I am in their presence, their beauty asks me for reciprocity, to be the complementary color, to make something beautiful in response.” (Kimmerer, 2014)

The beauty of the earth asks us to make something beautiful in response.

Eco-philosopher Joanna Macy, one of the great activists and spiritual teachers of our era, is the author of “Active Hope: How to face the mess we’re in with unexpected resilience and creative power”, which was updated and re-released last year to include reflections on the pandemic. The 94-year-old Macy writes that being able to experience anguish and grief in response to the pain of our world is crucial to staying connected and engaged in life¹ A scholar of Buddhism, general systems theory, and deep ecology. A respected voice in movements for peace, justice, and the environment, She encourages us to address the Climate Crises as a Spiritual Path, and to expand our perspective, recognizing our intricate connections with all living things, as well as with all people, even those we may disagree with.

The experiential work follows a *spiral* sequence flowing through four stages:

- 1 COME FROM A PLACE OF GRATITUDE
- 2 HONOURING OUR PAIN AND GRIEF FOR THE WORLD
- 3 SEEING WITH NEW EYES

¹ <https://www.uuworld.org/articles/uua-pres-column-fall-2022>

4 GOING BACK OUT TO THE WORLD WITH NEW INSIGHTS AND HOPES, renewed.

And then the Spiral begins again, with gratitude. Each stage leads naturally to the next. This spiritually grounded journey helps us become larger, stronger, more creative –more deeply interconnected – and more resilient. Unity’s Act for the Earth Team is offering a workshop on March 23 to explore Joanna Macy’s Active Hope framework and practice.

In *Braiding Sweetgrass*, Kimmerer circles toward a central argument: that the awakening of a wider ecological consciousness requires the acknowledgment and celebration of our reciprocal relationship with the rest of the living world. For only when we can hear the languages of other beings will we be capable of understanding the generosity of the earth, and learn to give our own gifts in return.

Our spiritual response to the environmental crisis can bring us to understand ourselves as part of the divine wholeness of the natural world, finding our ‘self’ intertwined with the web of life in a way that enriches all life. Let us be mindful. Let us celebrate the wonder of life and our interdependence.

Let us find the sacred thread that weaves the essence of humanity into the tapestry of all creation, and then engage with the world from this new awareness, making something beautiful in response.

May it be so. Amen.