

Earth's Creativity Needs Our Creativity

4/18/10 Sermon, Brockport Unitarian Universalist Fellowship

© Rev. Peggy Meeker

Reading: “The Peace of Wild Things” by Wendell Berry

When despair for the world grows in me
and I wake in the night at the least sound
in fear of what my life and my children's lives may be,
I go and lie down where the wood drake
rests in his beauty on the water, and the great heron feeds.
I come into the peace of wild things
who do not tax their lives with forethought
of grief. I come into the presence of still water.
And I feel above me the day-blind stars
waiting with their light. For a time
I rest in the grace of the world, and am free.

Sermon

When I think back over the times in my life when I've had what I might call a religious or spiritual experience, many of them have involved nature. The earliest one I remember took place when I was 9 or 10 years old, walking in the pastures above a quiet, little stream near my family's home, not far from here, in Naples, NY. I remember the warmth of the sun on my shoulders and the feel and smell of the grass, and I remember looking down at the water and feeling a tremendous sense of peace and wellbeing.

Another time, not long ago, I was following a hiking trail through a wooded area that opened up into a meadow, and there was a single tree in the meadow that seemed perfectly made for climbing into and sitting in. It took a little effort but I got myself up there, and settled in to enjoy it for a few minutes, and as I sat there looking out at the field, I was overtaken by such a sense of peace and connection that I lost all track of time, and just sat and looked, and felt at home.

I know many of you have had similar experiences because I've heard some of them. It's the kind of experience that Wendell Berry talks about: “I go and lie down where the wood drake / rests in his beauty on the water, and the great heron feeds. / I come into the peace of wild things / who do not tax their lives with forethought / of grief. I come into the presence of still water.” This is part of what our earth gives us.

But it's *only* a part! Earth gives us moments of quiet peace, and it also gives us moments of striking beauty, moments of grandeur, and, too, moments of terror—think of finding yourself in the path of a tornado, or near the epicenter of an earthquake—moments when we're reminded of how fragile life is, and that nature is both creative and destructive, and that it's a whole lot bigger than we are. And earth gives us lessons about life: about the food chain, about the cycles of nature, about birth, about death *and* regeneration, about the whole great and sometimes cruel

mystery of life in the world. And of course, earth gives us life to begin with, and sustains us. Even if we consider creation the work of the gods, it comes from earth. Here's a translation that I love by Thomas Mann of a couple of verses from Genesis: "Out of the dirt of the earth Yhwh God shaped the Earthling, and blew into [its] nostrils the breath of life, and the Earthling became a living creature ... out of the earth, every tree ... out of the earth, every animal and bird" [Gen. 2:8, 9, 19; Thomas W. Mann; *God of Dirt*, 2004]. That's from our Judeo-Christian heritage. If we look to the Native American Indian tradition of this area, we find other stories about earth. In one story, the Creator took white sea foam from the ocean and created light-skinned people, and then, not quite satisfied, the Creator took dark earth to create dark-skinned people, and then the bark of a birch tree to create yellow-skinned people, and then soft brown earth to create red-skinned people. Of course, the people began to fight, so the Creator had to separate them by sending them off to different parts of the earth until they could learn to get along better. But they all came from the earth. We all come from the earth. We are all family, because the earth is our mother.

And did I mention the earth's creativity? Creativity is, after all, our worship theme for the month. And the earth is the mother of creativity. Everywhere you look right now earth is budding and greening and blossoming. I walked around my yard yesterday and counted *twenty-four* different kinds of flowers in bloom. Granted, Marie and I are gardeners, so our little piece of earth is doing this with some help (except that we aren't really encouraging the dandelions), but on the other hand, if we weren't there, and if our house and all our neighbor's houses weren't there, and our garden was woods or meadow, it might be even more prolific. I remember a lesson from a summer camp counselor once, and maybe some of you have had this same experience, in which a group of children are asked to look closely at one square foot of ground to learn about the many forms of life that can be found in such a small piece of earth. Grass and wildflowers and weeds and ants are the most obvious, but then there are lady bugs and grasshoppers, and earthworms, and then bacteria and things like tardigrades and actinomycetes. I checked out a National Wildlife Federation website for a quick brush-up on all this, and I learned that there are 100 billion bacteria in a handful of soil. And I also learned that every atom in my body passed through an earthworm's stomach before it became part of me. Here's how they explain it: "... your body is made up of atoms that come from the food you eat. And almost everything you eat comes from plants. And almost all plants grow in soil that earthworms have eaten over and over again." Talk about being related! And talk about creativity! It's amazing how life on earth works.

But here's the problem. Earth our mother, earth our home—our *only* home, earth our sustenance, earth our source for everything we make and use, earth our teacher, our inspiration—this earth is hurting. I'm not just talking about global warming, though I do believe we're approaching a critical point there. I'm talking about pollution, population growth, habitat loss, over-consumption of natural resources, especially water, and economic globalization, which creates yet more demand for resources.

In a little book called *The End of the Wild* [MIT Press, 2006], Stephen Meyer, a political science professor at MIT, says that we are in the midst of an extinction crisis the likes of which has not been seen on earth for a hundred million years. Scientists have estimated the average

extinction rate, until recently, at several species per year. Now, because human activity has invaded the wilderness virtually everywhere, the extinction rate is over 3,000 species per year and accelerating. There are still many different forms of life, but we are crowding out the ones that need specialized habitats and may be left with only the ones that can accommodate themselves to living close to humanity. The web of life is losing many of its strands.

Here is one example: the California tiger salamander. These little amphibians live most of the year underground in woods and fields, but every spring they migrate some thousands of feet to the small pools where they were born in order to find mates and lay eggs, after which they return to their burrows. The pools are shallow basins that are dry most of the year, but fill with the spring rains. The salamander larvae grow quickly and move out into the surrounding area, at just about the time the rains end and the pools dry up. It's a cycle that has worked for millions of years, but today this habitat is prime real estate. About three quarters of it has already been developed, and more is slated for development. The pools that haven't been bulldozed are subjected to runoff saturated with fertilizers, herbicides, pesticides, and heavy metals, causing physical defects and immune system dysfunction in the salamanders. The humans who've moved in nearby introduced fish to some of the pools in order to keep mosquitoes down, and the fish eat both the salamanders' food supplies and their eggs. And finally, the spring rains no longer come as regularly as they did in the past. As Stephen Meyer puts it, "... the matrix of connecting wetlands has been eliminated, and habitat fragmentation makes the chance encounter with a car tire orders of magnitude more likely than an encounter with either a suitable mate or a suitable habitat" [p. 28].

And it's not just the tiger salamanders, though, really, I would want human interest and compassion to embrace just the tiger salamanders. But this same story is playing out with hundreds of species. It's no longer natural selection that directs life; it's human selection. We are assaulting earth's very creativity. And, as our responsive reading reminded us, "whatever we do to the web we do to ourselves" [*Singing the Living Tradition*, Rdg. 550, "We Belong to the Earth"].

So what we can do? I'm asking us to love our earth—to revere it, really—and to pledge ourselves and our creativity to helping it. Unitarian Universalist minister Vern Barnet has written a pledge of allegiance to the earth that could serve us well: "I pledge allegiance to the earth on which I stand, and to the environment of which I am a part, one planet in a Process, with soil, water and air like one body, indivisible, with resources to be cherished and protected by all."

And I'm asking us to act. The way we humans live on this earth needs to change, and I want us to be a part of that. Let us UUs be in the forefront. Here's my specific challenge. There's a team of people who've been working within the Unitarian Universalist Association on a study issue called Ethical Eating: Food and Environmental Justice. Recently they came up with an idea called 40/40/40: for the 40th anniversary of Earth Day, congregations are encouraged to get 40% of their members to commit to taking some action for 40 days that would benefit the environment. 40% of us, for 40 days, for the 40th anniversary of Earth Day. I figure we can do that. The campaign starts today and runs through May 27th. Some of the suggestions for individual actions are "giving up bottled water or soda, eating a step lower on the food chain, or supporting or starting a community garden" [www.uuworld.org/news/articles/160449.shtml]. Their ideas all deal with food, but your idea could be anything that would be good for the earth. It could be a

daily action or you could use the 40 days to study some issue or begin some project, like planting a lettuce garden or building a compost bin. Maybe you've been thinking about making some change. Now would be a great time to do it. I'm pretty sure I know what I'm going to do. I got my idea from an EARTHJUSTICE email about hosting a Green Cleaning Party. They promise that I and all my friends and family will learn how to mix our own safe and effective surface cleaners and laundry detergent. We'll put less chemicals into the environment, save money, and send a message to household cleaner companies that don't want to disclose information about the health risks of the chemical ingredients they use in their products.

Will you join me in 40/40/40? I have a sign-up sheet! You don't need to know your idea to sign up—just add your name and count yourself included. And I'll be getting onto BUUF's Facebook page with this. Maybe you can join me there. Maybe 40/40/40 will spread around the earth. And we will make a difference for our earth.

I'd like to close with a poem by Mary Oliver called "The Summer Day" [*New and Selected Poems*, Beacon Press, 1992]. It's a poem about the earth and about paying attention.

Who made the world?
Who made the swan, and the black bear?
Who made the grasshopper?
This grasshopper, I mean—
the one who has flung herself out of the grass,
the one who is eating sugar out of my hand,
who is moving her jaws back and forth instead of up and down—
who is gazing around with her enormous and complicated eyes.
Now she lifts her pale forearms and thoroughly washes her face.
Now she snaps her wings open, and floats away.
I don't know exactly what a prayer is.
I do know how to pay attention, how to fall down
into the grass, how to kneel down in the grass,
how to be idle and blessed, how to stroll through the fields,
which is what I have been doing all day.
Tell me, what else should I have done?
Doesn't everything die at last, and too soon?
Tell me, what is it you plan to do
with your one wild and precious life?

What is it *you* plan to do with your one wild and precious life? // Amen.