

White Bear Unitarian Universalist Church

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Holy Ground
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FIRST READING

from William Schulz, past president of the Unitarian Universalist Association and former Executive Director of Amnesty International

Hundreds of years ago Saint Lawrence asked, “Who should I adore, the Creator or the Creation?” Most western religions have answered back, “Adore the Creator!” and supplied an image (Zeus, Jehovah, Christ) to be adored. But our answer is far different. Whom should we adore? The Creation, surely, for whatever there be of the Creator will be made manifest in Her handiwork.

. . . The Divine for us. . . is not confined to a transcendent realm, its ramparts guarded by a scholarly elite. On the contrary, the Holy is made manifest to every one of us - not just those of us who can recite the catechism - in the transactions of the Everyday. It lies curled, in other words, in the very bosom of our experience.

This is a fundamental departure from religion’s preoccupation with abstraction. It is not a distant, mysterious God to whom we appeal, or even the cold vagaries of Progress, Evolution, Creativity or History. The gods and goddesses – or if you prefer, the most precious and profound –are accessible to us in the taste of honey and the touch of stone.

And this in turn is why we love the earth, honor the human body and bless the stars. Religion is not just a matter of Things Unseen. For us the Holy is not hidden but shows its face in the blush of the world’s exuberance.

SECOND READING

from William Stafford (? unidentified fragment)

If I said “religion” or “music” you might believe a life could be guided and helped by something outside itself. If I say “land” (clouds going over, it lying there dark, one hill then another, slowly under the sky,) what would you think?

It is night, and only the country, and beyond that, more and more of the same, maybe a ridge where clouds drag over, and they wear it down...not music, not religion, - but something the earth has to give – might reach even into the church or wherever you live. So I say “land.” Slow as those clouds in summer the fields descend around us and our lives reach out for something beyond where the sunset ends.

Holy Ground

Twenty years ago, in 1989, writer Bill McKibben brought out a book called *The End of Nature*. He made cataclysmic statements and predictions about climate change, all of them based in solid science, all sounding crazy at the time, and all (we can see now) alarmingly accurate. It was one of the very first books written for a general audience about global warming, though the term had not yet even been coined. Near the end of the book, McKibben writes very personally:

A half hour's hike brings my dog and me to the top of the hill behind my house. I know the hill well by now, each gully and small creek, each big rock, each opening around the edges. I know the places where the deer come, and the coyotes after them. [This is]... no unlogged virgin forest with trees ten feet around, but it is a deep and quiet and lovely place...

The thought of what will happen as the new weather kicks in darkens my view: the trees dying, the hillside unable to hold its soil against the rainfall, the gullies sharpening, the deer looking for ever scarcer browse. And, finally, the scrub and brush colonizing the slopes, clinging to what soil remains. Either that, or the cemetery rows of perfect, heat-tolerant genetically improved pines.

From the top of the hill ... I can see my house down below, white against the hemlocks. I can see my whole material life – the car, the bedroom, the chimney above the stove. I like that life. I like it enormously. But a choice seems unavoidable. Either that life down there changes, perhaps dramatically, or this life all around me up here changes – passes away. That is a terrible choice. Two years ago, when I got married, my wife and I had the standard hopes and dreams, and their fulfillment seemed not so far away. We love to travel; we had set up our lives so our work wouldn't tie us down. Our house is nice and big – it seemed only matter of time before it would fill with the racket of children. As the consequences of the greenhouse effect have become clearer to us though, we've started to prune ... our desires. I've spent my whole life wanting more, so it's hard to imagine "less" in any but a negative way. But that imagination is what counts. Would I love [these woods] enough to leave them behind?

He talks about the prospect of painful personal choices, for them as a couple, for all of us, and then goes on,

Should we so choose, we could exercise our reason to do what no other animal can do; we could limit ourselves voluntarily, choose to remain God's creatures instead of making ourselves gods. What a towering achievement it would be, so much more impressive than the largest dams (beavers can build dams) – because so much harder. Restraint is the real challenge, the hard thing. Of course we can splice genes. But can we not splice genes?

These are practical questions, these questions of restraint: science-based, self-interested (if we extend the self beyond our own lives to another generation), ethical, political, matters of policy, pragmatic, rational, responsible. But for us, here, they are religious questions also. Our regard for the land, for the water, for the weather, the fragile climate and all that it sustains is not merely responsible and rational, nor is it romantic or sentimental, a tender affection for familiar places we love, nor simply an appreciation of pretty scenery, park preserves, this whale to save, that

wolf to protect. It is not even a matter of respect, as our own 7th Principle expresses it (“*respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part...*”). This is a religious orientation, it is a matter of reverence, a matter of awe and prayer and right relation, because as Bill Schulz says, “the Divine for us is not confined to a transcendent realm...” guarded by scholars and priests. When we ask, like St. Lawrence, “whom should I adore, the Creator or the Creation?” we answer that the holy is known to us “in the taste of honey and the touch of stone,” and therefore will we “love the earth, honor the human body and bless the stars.” To say that we can’t say where the creator leaves off and creation begins is to speak of the sacred and also about science in a way that is very new and it is also very, very old.

If I said “religion,” says the poet, you might believe a life could be guided and helped by something outside itself. If I say “land” (clouds going over, it lying there dark, one hill then another, slowly under the sky), what would you think?

In another poem William Stafford describes a single ordinary revelation, on an ordinary afternoon, walking around his yard:

*It was all the clods at once become
precious; it was the barn, and the shed,
and the windmill, my hands, the crack
Arlie made in the ax handle: oh, let me stay
here humbly, forgotten, to rejoice in it all;
let the sun casually rise and set.
If I have not found the right place,
teach me; for, somewhere inside, the clods are
vaulted mansions, lines through the barn sing
for the saints forever, the shed and windmill
rear so glorious the sun shudders like a gong.*

*Now I know why people worship, carry around
magic emblems, wake up talking dreams
they teach to their children: the world speaks.
The world speaks everything to us.
It is our only friend.*

This world, this earth, this tangible, sensual universe, these delicate arrangements of carbon, oxygen, nitrogen, in planets, in atoms, in us, this land is our only friend; “her blue body,” says Alice Walker, “everything we know.” To speak of earth, of nature in this way is to sing sacred music in a key very different from those to which many religions have for so long been tuned.

Fifty years ago, Aldo Leopold wrote that “conservation is getting nowhere because it is incompatible with our Abrahamic concept of land,” specifically the idea that earth can be owned, divided, destroyed, purchased and sold, given by God to some of the creatures, to one of the peoples, to possess, to dominate at the expense of all others. It is possible to read the Hebrew bible and the Christian testament and find traces of reverence for the planet there, for the universe of planets and galaxies, but to me these have always been thin traces. I am always

disappointed. The whole history of Israel begins with possession of the land and its subjugation; and in the Christian story, momentum builds and builds, rushing out of this sorry sinful world toward God's realm in heaven, away from the profanity of body and ground toward the divine, which is and must stay separate. This is not to say that Jews and Christians and others are not leading the way in the interfaith dialogue on climate change – they are. There are Jewish and Christian theologians, and some Muslim scholars, who say it's time to read the old stories with new eyes, to retell the Genesis story, for example, as the critical moment, the crisis, when man and woman, so newly proud of their reasoning powers, expelled God from the Garden of Eden, instead of the other way around. After that the garden became no more than real estate and they lived no more on holy ground (they lived where we live now), though they could always choose to sanctify the world again. They could bless it easily by naming it, as they were taught to do in the beginning, by calling it sacred, or holy, or mother, source of life, Turtle Island, or any of the thousand, thousand names that peoples have devised for god.

“We abuse land because we regard it as a commodity belonging to us, rather than a community to which we belong,” wrote Aldo Leopold in 1948, and the ecology still stands. The sacred theology (he would not have called it that) still stands.

...Our bigger-and-better society, he wrote, is now like a hypochondriac, so obsessed with its own economic health as to have lost the capacity to remain healthy. .. Nothing could be more salutary at this stage than a little healthy contempt for a plethora of material blessings, reappraising things unnatural, tame and confined, in terms of things natural, wild and free.

Where do you learn religion like that? Where did you learn it? I remember the woods in the neighborhood where I grew up, just 30 miles outside of New York City - not a vast wilderness, but several square miles of old forest that had never been developed and had not been farmed since around the Revolutionary War. (Stone walls running through the woods still testify to that.) Those were days when for some reason mothers let their children run wild outside, and those woods were a good place to fall in love with the world, to learn about old things, the very spine of the earth visible in glacial rocks bigger than a house; a good place to get lost and be afraid in; a good place to meet animals alive and dead, and poke at fascinating carcasses with sticks and see the fur fall away full of maggots, and learn for oneself: “ashes to ashes, to dust thou shalt return.” I learned about beauty there, and prayer, and the solace of lonely wild places, and also about appropriate terror - not because of the cougars that my brother swore still lived there (they did not) - but the very fear of God, a sense of proper proportion.

I remember one day trying to squeeze sideways between two huge granite slabs, a split rock maybe ten feet wide and six feet tall, with about 9 inches in between, just wide enough for a child to move through sideways on a dare. I got halfway through, with solid rock against my back and rock six inches from my face, and right there was a wolf spider as big as my hand. There were quite a few. What I learned in those woods is that the world is beautiful, which is not the same as pretty; it gives us life and demands our love, but it is not affectionate nor tender nor compassionate – those are dimensions that human beings can bring to the incredible enterprise, the complicated dance. It can be cruel (the natural world), unmerciful, terrifying, there are hideous spiders in it, and earthquakes, hurricanes, with such power to wreak such devastation,

such massive misery unending -- but even in this it is never hateful, never vengeful, never evil, never intentional. Evil, vengeance, hatred, greed, intention: those are dimensions (like compassion, like justice, like love) that human beings uniquely bring to the design. I believe my religion was established in those woods, my soul found its home and I learned reverence there. One philosopher defines it as a virtue which “begins in a deep understanding of human limitations, from which grows the capacity to be in awe of whatever we believe lies outside of our control.”

I think of Robinson Jeffers, a poet, in a letter to a Catholic friend, a nun:

I believe that the Universe is one being, all its parts are different expressions of the same energy and they are all in communication with each other, therefore parts of one organic whole. This is physics, I believe, as well as religion. The parts change and pass, or die, people and races and rocks and stars, none of them seems to me important in itself, but only the whole. This whole is in all its parts so beautiful, and is felt by me to be so intensely in earnest, that I am compelled to love it and to think of it as divine. It seems to me that this whole alone is worthy of the deeper sort of love and there is peace, freedom, I might say a kind of salvation, in turning one's affections outward toward this one God, rather than inwards to one's self, or on humanity, or on human imaginations and abstractions – the world of spirits. I think it is our privilege and felicity to love God for his beauty, without claiming or expecting love from him. We are not important to him, but he to us.

Where do you learn a religion like that?

The other day I was meeting with someone in my office when a flock of ninth graders banged on the door, burst their way in and needed to know immediately how many hours in a week I plug in my computer, how many lights I have on and what wattage they are and whether they're compact fluorescents, what temperature the thermostat is set to and what other resources I'm burning or using or wasting in an average week. They wrote it all down and flew noisily away, a riot of crows. They're working with our Global Climate Committee to do an energy audit of our entire building and all of its uses and users; it's the first of many steps the Committee hopes to take toward our certification here, eventually, as a “Green Sanctuary.” That status is earned by congregations willing to make significant changes not only in energy but what we buy, eat, recycle, produce (in terms of paper or waste) and also every aspect of our programming – themes addressed in worship, what we talk about and care about, the curricula we teach to children and what we study as adults, programs we sponsor, interfaith collaborations, all the ways we practice our religion. Five years ago when we first started to imagine the renovation and expansion of this building, we hoped that the larger new space would make a smaller ecological footprint than the old structure had. We worked with an architect using sustainable materials. We hired an arborist to catalog every tree on these 4.5 acres, and tried to mitigate the cutting of healthy oaks by bringing their beautiful lumber inside. We collaborated with a small business owned by members to put solar collectors on the roof. We wrote a grant to make a permeable parking lot, to care better for the precious water on our wetland site. The building is beautiful, but the list of what we couldn't accomplish, what we couldn't, in the moment, afford, is a long list. The building is not “green” yet, only “greenish.” Green-ing. We have a long way to go.

Our young people know that, these enthusiastic noisy people barging into us with their clipboards and their database, their critically raised eyebrows when I say “There are five lamps in my office– and one still has an incandescent bulb,” their urgency, their expectation, their attitude (which is a spiritual orientation), their critical analytical skills (which are also a spiritual orientation, in this age so hostile to science and common sense); these young people with their hope, their young lives stretching out in front of them as if the green world would stay for the rest of their days; these young ones full of the right to expect that we’re walking our talk – all of this is religion in practice. They are learning what applied reverence might look like, what practical theology might act like. They’re learning, and teaching, about choices, and the sacred discipline of restraint and sacrifice that Bill McKibben wrote about, the restraint that may be our salvation.

McKibben will be speaking here in April, close to Earth Day. He has a new book out, and I hope that he will talk about his latest project, called “350.org;” it’s an international campaign involving activists, religious leaders, scientists, artists, policy makers, people all over the world. The goal is achingly simple: to convince governments and businesses worldwide to collaborate in reducing carbon in the atmosphere to 350 parts per million, the essential limit recognized by the world’s most respected scientists as the one we have to reach, beyond which the fragile and required balance will be tipped too far. The compromises endorsed by President Obama and the United Nations at the Kyoto climate conference in December come nowhere near this fundamental limit.

It’s a precarious time. I read this week that China’s current plan for economic growth and the new coal-burning plants required to fuel that growth will absolutely overwhelm all conservation efforts currently underway in the United States and any that can reasonably be imagined. It’s a precarious, darkening time.

I also learned this week about a new word invented by an Australian philosopher. For several years he’s been interviewing people there, ordinary people, about their changing landscape. The article says, “Australia is suffering through its worst dry spell in a millennium. The outback has turned into a dust bowl, crops are dying off at fantastic rates, cities are rationing water, coral reefs are dying, and the agricultural base is evaporating.” In his interviews, Glen Albrecht found over and over that what the people spoke of first, and mostly, and wrenchingly, was grief. They talked about the land the way you might speak of a dear friend who has just moved away, or a loved one who has died and you just can’t resolve it. This was not what he expected. Before anger, before any political commentary, before concern for the economy or even their own livelihood, they shared this pervasive consuming sadness, a melancholy so profound and so widespread that he made a name for it: *solastalgia*, from “solas,” meaning comfort, and “algia,” meaning pain. “It is a sadness similar to that of indigenous populations,” he says, “that throughout history have been forcibly removed from their traditional homelands. But nobody has been relocated. They haven’t moved. Their home is vanishing, and they miss it terribly. Solastalgia is a form of homesickness when one has not left home.” It’s a sickness of the spirit, of the soul.

Somehow there’s a drop of hope in this for me. What’s needed now is that we bring to bear all of the science we’ve gathered in 10,000 of learning, all of our evolved, evolving powers of

reason and rational mind, our savviest politics, our most keenly honed sense of self-preservation and a primal will to live – but what’s needed just as well is something just as deep and maybe just as ancient in us: the power of this sadness, the power of this loneliness for home, this love of the world, our reverence for trees and animals and stars, our delight in the beauty of it, childlike wonder, childlike fear, the trembling we knew as children and a mature, appropriate, deliberate humility. What’s needed is the best religion we can imagine, from that old word, *religio*, like ligament – whatever you’re connected to, by love, by fear, by blood and bone, what your very life and soul depend on, call it what you will.

-- silence --

These words come from Mark Van Doren:

*O world, my friend, my foe,
My deep dark stranger, doubtless
Unthinkable to know;
My many and my one,
Created when I was and doomed to go
Back into the same sun;*

*O world, my thought's despair,
My heart's companion, made by love
So intimate, so fair,
Stay with me till I die--
O air,
O stillness, O great sky.*

sources

Bill McKibben, *The End of Nature*

Aldo Leopold, *A Sand County Almanac*

William Stafford, “Earth Dweller” and fragment

Paul Woodruff, *Reverence: Renewing a Forgotten Virtue*

Elizabeth Kolbert, *Field Notes from a Catastrophe*

Clive Thompson, “How the Next Victim of Climate Change will be Our Minds”, *Wired*, 200_

Daniel B. Smith, “Is There an Ecological Unconscious?,” *New York Times Magazine*, 31 January 2010

Peter Mayer, *phone conversation* half-way through the writing