

## Opening words

“The earth is not a mere fragment of dead history, stratum upon stratum like the leaves of a book, to be studied by geologists and antiquaries chiefly, but living poetry like the leaves of a tree, which precede flowers and fruit — not a fossil earth, but a living earth; compared with whose great central life all animal and vegetable life is merely parasitic.”  
– Henry David Thoreau

Moment of Silence: As Earth Day was this past Wednesday, I'd like you to take a moment to think about how you celebrated Earth Day this year and how you would like to celebrate it next year.

## Connecting With the Earth By Shannon Anderson

Janet picked a great topic for this month – the Earth. I was thinking a lot about earth, with a lower case e, the past few weeks as I recently did some landscaping at my dad's house. Apparently there is this thing called “curb appeal” and let's just say my dad's house doesn't have it. So, as I was kneeling on the ground, my hands deep in earth, I was reflecting on how connected we all are via the most simplest of elements. The Earth – with a capitol E – is after all just a whole made up of intricate parts. Soil, water, air, and the life that survives based on those things. That's really all the Earth is.

And all of this life needs the Earth and the Earth needs us. We all have these connections – which in Unitarianism we call this “interconnectedness” - connections with the Earth, with each other, and with all other living things. The earthworms nourish the soil, the birds eat the earthworms, neighbor cats chase the birds, we listen to the birds and appreciate their beauty and we take care of the cats. A pretty neat cycle of life if I do say so myself, although perhaps I have to admit it's a bit more complicated than that. But regardless, it all starts from that soil – that earth – that we share.

Most of us live our day to day lives without thinking about these connections – or least not consciously thinking about them. Our mental deliberations are sometimes limited to what should I eat for breakfast, do I walk or drive to work, and what task to take up when I get there. We rarely think about what the bird you saw on your morning walk ate for breakfast or how that earthworm gets itself from point A to point B or what work that rabbit must do to find food or build its burrow. Yet those questions are answered daily, not by us but by our neighbors and by neighbors I mean all of the creatures and plants that live near us and with us. Although in a somewhat different form than you and me, all of our neighbor creatures ask themselves the same questions we do. All of us creatures are connected by the things we do every day – eat, travel, work, and other essentials of daily living. We also all have a yearning to connect with each other – to love, to touch, to listen.

So in this week – the 45<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of Earth Week – my call to all of you – and to myself – is to more deliberately think of the connections we share. We must all challenge ourselves to think and act with the recognition that we are only parts in this interdependent web of all existence – and remember our place within it.

As you will note from today's opening and closing words, I've been reading a lot of Henry David Thoreau recently. More specifically, I've been reading my dad's dog-eared highlighted copies of Henry David Thoreau's writings. I've also been reading a lot of my dad's writings – a collection of half-finished ramblings my brother and I found distributed around his house. In discovering my dad's writings, there is a similarity with Thoreau's rants and philosophizing both to get the ear of another but also to reach inside and touch one's own soul. My dad received a lot of inspiration from Thoreau and I received a lot of inspiration from my dad. Reading both of their writings, and reflecting on my own, has made me discover one of the inter-generational connections of how I have inherited this "rambling with purpose" as I like to call it. Hopefully my talk today will fit the bill.

So, going back to those connections you can make, here is how Thoreau phrased it to more deliberately think about the web of interdependent life and our place within it.

He said:

*We must learn to reawaken and keep ourselves awake, not by mechanical aids, but by an infinite expectation of the dawn, which does not forsake us in our soundest sleep. I know of no more encouraging fact than the unquestionable ability of man to elevate his life by a conscious endeavor. It is something to be able to paint a particular picture, or to carve a statue, and so to make a few objects beautiful; but it is far more glorious to carve and paint the very atmosphere and medium through which we look, which morally we can do. To affect the quality of the day, that is the highest of arts. Every man is tasked to make his life, even in its details, worthy of the contemplation of his most elevated and critical hour.*

It's a beautiful set of words, with many phrases worthy of serious unpacking. There is the "Infinite expectation of the dawn" – the idea that it's worth getting up in the morning, that the day will bring good things, if only you will bring good things to it. And then there is "the unquestionable ability of man to elevate his life by a conscious endeavor." I'm not sure about you, but there are some people I know for which I have some serious questions about their ability to elevate, but for argument's sake, let's embrace ourselves in Thoreau's optimism that we all have the ability to live a better life, if only we act a bit more consciously. And finally there is "To affect the quality of the day, that is the highest of arts" – a sentiment worthy of those who consider those connections with the Earth, those individuals that actively seek to understand our world and our place within it, those people that are able to in fact affect the quality of the day not just for themselves but for others and the Earth as well.

On this theme, Reverend James Leach, of Charlotte's UU Fellowship, gave a sermon with the proposition that the Unitarian Universalist's "most radical, controversial, countercultural message just may be our affirmation that each of us, every single, individual one of us is a part of an interdependent web of all existence." He said, "To make such an affirmation with full integrity suggests that 'what's in it for *me*?' is directly, completely entwined in 'what's in it for...*us*?'" Reverend Leach contemplates that "If the web of existence of which we are each parts truly is interdependent, then there is really *only* the common good."

Perhaps that's what Thoreau was trying to get at with the "highest of arts" – the art of creating a better world, of furthering the common good, of asking "what's in it for us?" and acting deliberately to answer the question. And in that light, I am glad to call of you fellow artists, and together we will work to paint a picture of a better tomorrow. It is not an easy task, and some days our paint may run dry, but if we work together and remember those connections – not just to each other but to the world at large – the picture will turn out beautifully.

It would not be an Earth Week talk with a Wendell Berry quote. As he once famously – and perhaps quite simply – stated, "The Earth is what we all have in common." This is the realization that we are linked with the Earth, and by we, I mean all of us. The Earth is the only common bond every one of us on the planet shares. The Earth connects us in a way that binds our fates, and that, if we choose to recognize its bond, allows us to be those artists of higher moral good. The Earth is after all our Mother, the giver of our lives, the sustainer of our existence.

If our mother is hurting with polluted water, dirty air, and spoiled land, our lives – and the lives of our neighbor creatures – cannot be sustained. It is up to us (again the collective us) to restore the connection by healing our mother and taking better care of our neighbors. We all must remember our unquestionable ability to elevate our lives, and the lives of others in this interdependent world of ours. I know you will join me in doing just that.

Now, I know this talk was filled with rhetoric and generalized inspiration and did not contain examples of specific actions you and I can take to fulfill its promise. However, knowing all of you, I feel confident you all know what to do. While some of it may seem overwhelming – or at times hopeless – every little action matters. It is only the sum of our parts that is the painting that we must artfully create in order to sustain us all.

Closing words

"A single gentle rain makes the grass many shades greener. So our prospects brighten on the influx of better thoughts. We should be blessed if we lived in the present always, and took advantage of every accident that befell us, like the grass which confesses the influence of the slightest dew that falls on it; and did not spend our time in atoning for the neglect of past opportunities, which we call doing our duty." – Henry David Thoreau