

Reflection

April 19, 2015

Rev. Lyn Oglesby

**A celebration of Earth Day and Our Seventh Principle:
Respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a
part**

Morning Poem, by Mary Oliver

Every morning
the world
is created.
Under the orange

sticks of the sun
the heaped
ashes of the night
turn into leaves again

and fasten themselves to the high branches ---
and the ponds appear
like black cloth
on which are painted islands

of summer lilies.
If it is your nature
to be happy
you will swim away along the soft trails

for hours, your imagination

alighting everywhere.
And if your spirit
carries within it

the thorn
that is heavier than lead ---
if it's all you can do
to keep on trudging ---

there is still
somewhere deep within you
a beast shouting that the earth
is exactly what it wanted ---

each pond with its blazing lilies
is a prayer heard and answered
lavishly,
every morning,

whether or not
you have ever dared to be happy,
whether or not
you have ever dared to pray. ^A

“Our seventh Principle, respect for the interdependent web of all existence, is a glorious statement. Yet we make a profound mistake when we limit it to merely an environmental idea. It is so much more. It is our response to the great dangers of both individualism and oppression. It is our solution to the

seeming conflict between the individual and the group.

“Our seventh Principle may be our Unitarian Universalist way of coming to fully embrace something greater than ourselves. The interdependent web—expressed as the spirit of life, the ground of all being, the oneness of all existence, the community-forming power, the process of life, the creative force, even God—can help us develop that social understanding of ourselves that we and our culture so desperately need. It is a source of meaning to which we can dedicate our lives.”^B

Unitarian Universalism is often referred to by its members as a *living tradition*, and the principles and purposes have been modified over time to reflect changes in spiritual beliefs among the membership. Most recently, the last principle, adopted in 1985 and generally known as the *Seventh Principle*, "Respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part", and a sixth source (adopted in 1995), "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" were added to explicitly include members with Neopagan, Native American, and pantheist spiritualities.^C

These additions to our Principles remind us that our faith and our

association are flexible, adaptable, and not dogmatic. Change is not always rapid in our faith, but it is always possible.

On this Earth Day, I would like to feel more hopeful that we can save our planet, with its beautiful trees, flowers, grasshoppers, rivers, and blue skies.

Unfortunately, blue skies are not everywhere, like they are here on our gorgeous shoreline. Exhaust fumes have turned the air and sky in our nation's capital a hazy blue-gray, except for right after a cleansing rain. Several years ago I spent a month in India, and was beset by coughing every day, whether I was in the city or in the countryside, caused by industrial pollution and exhaust fumes from cars and diesel trucks. I suffered from a sore throat the entire time I was there, and recovered within two days of my departure. I love India, have good friends there, and used to think about spending my winters in New Delhi when roses bloom and one only needs a heavy sweater on the coldest days. That dream is no more. Even though Washington, DC, my home, is not much better.

Just like many of you, I worry and ponder about what I can do to help preserve our forests, our blue skies, our water supply, for future generations.

But I am not very hopeful that I can make a difference. Yes, I bought a Prius and refuse to purchase gas at the BP station most convenient to me, still angry about the spill in the Gulf a few years back. But I use too much water. When I do my laundry I do each load twice, to rinse out the detergent, because the machine doesn't get it all out and my skin is sensitive and reacts to detergent remaining in my clothes if they are not thoroughly rinsed. I turn the lights off when I leave the room not because I am an environmentalist – though I am -- but because I grew up in during the depression when we were frugal because we had to be. It is a good habit.

I'm sure each of you can think of any number of ways you conserve water, electricity, energy. Sometimes discussions about how best to conserve and be kind to our environment can be hilarious in Unitarian Universalist congregations. They probably happened here—arguments about whether to use paper plates, plastic, or Styrofoam and which was least damaging to the environment. One minister's wife I know got tired of all the discussions, figured out that washing regular dishes and reusing them – even though it did use a lot of water – was least damaging. So she used her own money and bought several sets of simple, attractive china for use during coffee hour and special events. She gave them to the church and everyone was happy for

about two months. Then people got tired of loading the dishwasher, and they went back to using paper or plastic or Styrofoam and periodic discussions of the virtues of using one over the other. The minister's wife still laughs about it

How to do our best to save the earth and honor its beauty is a recurring question for us, especially when we go beyond our own personal practices. How to make a difference systemically? Contribute to the World Wildlife Fund, the National Resources Defense Council, the Sierra Club. Organize cleanup days for our rivers, streams, and roadsides? Help repair trails in our state and national parks? We want to help, and sometimes the problem seems overwhelming. So we advocate and witness and write to our congressmen and senators and local government officials. Some of us decide to remove carbon-producing industries from our investment portfolios. The Unitarian Universalist Association has done that. But how do we know whether what we do has any effect? And as the water continues to rise on our Florida beaches, some countries like India, continue to invest in coal burning industrial plants. It can be discouraging because the problem is so big, and we can't seem to get our arms around it. Much less our minds.

We know that when a butterfly in Mexico flaps her wings, there is some kind of an effect up in Canada. And that noxious fumes from Chinese

industries travel across the Pacific to our western shores and more. Maybe I'm just a worrier, but I think about my grandchildren and I worry about their futures.

How can we recreate the beloved community we have here at SUUS, warts and all, in the larger world? Our Social Action folks are helping with periodic reminders how we can help with periodic Outreach Offerings to environmentally-friendly organizations. And you are always generous in your responses. Thank you.

We are indeed all connected. We are all interdependent. We need one another to survive. Here we all need one another when we are sick, fall on bad times, and are faced with the finality of death. Every day I ask myself, how can we expand the love and support we offer here in our beloved community to the larger world, and do it so that what we do makes a difference. How can we inspire our children and youth to carry on our work in the larger community and carry the torch forward?

I was ever so proud that several of our youth and several of parents traveled to New York City Easter weekend on a service trip with other UU Youth and youth from the Congregational Church. I didn't have a thing to do with it. Our parents did all the work.

We are indeed all connected, dependent on one another, and it is good to remind ourselves that some people are alone and do not feel or experience the connectedness. We have a Caring Team of volunteers who are coming together to support our members and friends who are elderly or ill or alone. Hopefully, in the near future, we will move forward from a crisis-driven service to more periodic visits, to provide more contact for people who are alone or homebound.

Song of the Builders

On a summer morning
I sat down
on a hillside
to think about God -

a worthy pastime.
Near me, I saw
a single cricket;
it was moving the grains of the hillside

this way and that way.
How great was its energy,

how humble its effort.
Let us hope

it will always be like this,
each of us going on
in our inexplicable ways
building the universe. ^D

Amen.

^A Mary Oliver. from *Dream Work* (1986).

^B www.uua.org/beliefs. Rev. Forrest Gilmore, [The Seven Principles in Word and Worship](#), ed. Ellen Brandenburg)

^C Warren R. Ross (November–December 2000). "Shared values: How the UUA's Principles and Purposes were shaped and how they've shaped Unitarian Universalism". *UUWorld*. Unitarian Universalist Association of Congregations.

^D Mary Oliver. Why I Wake Early (2004).