

Falling in Love Again

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“Talk about enlightenment”, writes Scott Russell Sanders, “makes us nervous, because it implies that we pass our ordinary days in darkness.” The hard truth is, humanity, much of the time, does pass ordinary days in darkness. This is abundantly clear in many human relationships and especially so in our relationship with the planet.

I’m reminded now of a scene in the movie “The Great Outdoors.” (Movies, by the way, can be great resources for spiritual and theological reflection.) In the scene I’m remembering two men, Chet, played by the late John Candy and Roman, played by Dan Akroyd, are sitting on a deck at a cabin overlooking a pristine lake with trees and mountains in the distance. Roman, who has imposed himself on Chet’s family vacation, asks Chet, “Why the heck would you want to come up to this plant –infested no man’s land and live like a barbarian for a week?”

Chet responds by recalling childhood memories of the place and points out the sheer beauty, “Look around”, he says, “this is beautiful country here, take a good look.”

Roman responds by asking, “You want to know what I see? Reluctantly, Chet invites Roman to continue and so he does, telling Chet,

“I see the underdeveloped resources of northern Minnesota, Wisconsin and Michigan...I see a syndicated development consortium exploiting a billion and a half dollars in forest products. I see paper mills and if the metals are there a mining operation. A green belt between condos on the lake and a waste management facility, focusing on the newest rage in toxic waste, medical refuse. Infected bandages, body parts, IV tubing, contaminated glassware, entrails, syringes, blood fluids, and low-grade radioactive waste. All safely contained and buried for centuries under the bottom of the lake.”

Roman’s response reminds us that though blessed with vision, we humans often fail to see. His words highlight the sometimes mindless arrogance of human selfishness, narcissism, and privilege. They are a poignant reminder that we, as a species, have fallen out of love with the earth, “steadily building”, as Frederick Turner, writes in today’s call to worship, “the illusion of independence from nature.” And from this broken relationship has emerged what Turner calls “the

greatest of illusions: “the omnipotence of man (humankind).” This illusion has allowed us to exploit, deface, and contaminate the earth upon which we depend for our own existence and to continue doing so even as environmentalists warn us we are fast approaching a point of no return.

Perhaps it is no small irony that our illusion of omnipotence has brought us to the brink of annihilation. Like Icarus, in the Greek myth, we have flown too far from the earth and too close to the sun with wings made of feathers and wax, our ambitions increasingly mocked by a planet unable to sustain our relentless abuse of power.

As Daniel Martin, one time Director of International Communities for the Renewal of the Earth notes, “We are corrupting the Earth, poisoning the air, disrupting the fire, polluting the water. We are making life impossible for our fellow creatures and for ourselves...” And so, we are faced with a question, a religious question...a moral question...”What are we called to do?”

When we let this question settle in...we realize we must face the uncomfortable fact that we largely pass our ordinary days in darkness...we realize we are neither as enlightened nor as powerful as we think.

And if we are honest with ourselves and really do care for our children’s future, then it is time for us to declare an end to the age of anthropocentric hubris and for us to get serious about mending our relationship with the earth. It is time to fall, like old Gloucester in King Lear, on our face as it were and wake up.

It is time to fall in love again with this planet... and pray that it will have us back.

To fall in love again with the earth is to do the work of healing; healing, as Scott Russell Sanders writes, “of the mind through a change in consciousness, healing of the earth through a change in our lives.”

To begin, we start right where we are, in the here and now. Those of you who know something of Buddhism, might hear echoes of the practice of mindfulness in these words. Whatever words we choose to describe a practice we might use to change our consciousness and thus our relationship to ourselves and the world in which we live, the heart of all such practices involves a commitment to listen. Listening not just with our ears but with all our senses, and indeed, with our whole being. Listening, called by some, “the most basic form of love” is a practice of profound openness and acceptance.

In terms of our relationship with the earth, our failure to listen, to be present to the earth has allowed us to treat it as some sort of magical vending machine

dispensing whatever and as much as is desired to whoever can afford to pay for it while simultaneously refusing to believe it needs to be maintained or restocked.

This abusive relationship with the earth will continue so long as we refuse to listen, passing “our ordinary days in darkness. Yet, if we fall in love again with the earth, and really listen to it, we will again respect it, treat it with affection and admiration...we will accord it due reverence and marvel at its generosity.

One of the values we uphold as Unitarian Universalists is interdependence, indeed, our congregations covenant to affirm and promote, “respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part.” I think a lot of people understand life as interdependent, but have little or no awareness of this reality in daily life. By this I mean we affirm it in the mind but deny it with how we live our lives.

To be aware of the interdependence or interconnectedness of life however is to be attentive or present to it in our daily lives. This is how we listen to life and to the earth, by being engaged... by paying attention...by listening with all our senses.

If we are to fall in love and stay in love with the earth it is vital that we come to know...and I mean fully know- head and heart, hands and feet- that life is interdependent. Indeed, the healing of our mind and the earth truly begins when we learn to see beyond our human vision...and realize as Chief Seattle did, “The earth does not belong to us; we belong to the earth.” We are not separate from the earth, but a part of it. Only then can there be, as Scott Russell Sanders writes, “a knitting of self and world.”

To fall in love again with the earth you have to get to know it.

Go on a date with it...

Get outside...take a walk, maybe along a river, lake, or the shore.

Notice life from the most humble weed to the most fragrant flower or ancient gnarled tree...from the tiniest insect to the most majestic bird. Marvel and wonder at the very “isness” of life...it is sacred, all of it.

Let raindrops fall upon your flesh, see if you can feel the variation of their size.

Hear birds sing of places far away and shout, “Encore!”

Taste the salty kiss of ocean air as waves greet the shore.

Watch grass grow, especially when you’re sure there’s something better to do.

Do this and encourage others to do the same and you will help mend humanity’s relationship with the earth...you will fall in love again with this planet.

As your love grows so will your desire to care for your beloved. Rather than a chore, energy conservation might become an expression of tenderness and

recycling an act of loving devotion. Petitions and protests shift from political actions to affirmations of love.

A word of caution is in order. My words are not a call to deny human need, nor a romantic musing ignorant of the very real concerns of people for whom contact with the natural world is sometimes less a source of wonder than of anxiety and trauma resulting from disasters, disease, or other hardships.

The call here is to love...to listen...to be mindful of our interdependence. It is a reminder that any salvation humankind might hope for lies as much on this side of the grave as the other. As Mary de La Valette, poet and activist at the Gaia institute writes,

*I do not have to go
To Sacred Places
In far-off lands.
The ground I stand on
Is holy.*

*Here, in this little garden
I tend
My pilgrimage ends.
The wild honeybees
The hummingbird moths
The flickering fireflies at dusk
Are a microcosm
Of the Universe.
Each seed that grows
Each spade of soil
Is full of miracles.*

*And I toil and sweat
And watch and wonder
And am full of love.
Living in peace
In this place.
For truth and beauty
Dwell here.*

Like the birds in our story for all ages came to realize, the poet knows wherever she stands, she stands on holy ground. And she stands not alone, but as one within the community of the earth with a gift to bring. Her gift, our gift, includes the gift of attention, of listening, of love.

It is time for us recognize this earth, this place we call home...as Holy. There is much mending to be done in our relationship with the earth...good intentions will not do...nothing short of a miracle is needed...a miracle called love.

The arrival of spring once again tells us the earth is open to making amends. The question is... are we?

Amen and Blessed Be