

May 23 One Among Many – a lesson in humility

We'll be honoring the Unitarian Universalist Ministry for the Earth in considering biodiversity and how our presence on this earth is shared – sometimes well, and sometimes not! How is it we each and all remember to make room for the amazing diversity of life around us?

OPENING WORDS

The Calling of the Creatures By [Ian W. Riddell](#)

Come hoof and trunk and tail and horn
and paw and wing and claw;
Come bird and reptile, mammal born
all full of nature's law.
Bring bark and crow and ribbit, too
and silent stare and hiss;
Bring purr and trill and warble, too
and voice no ear can miss.
We gather here each life and all
to celebrate and sing
to honor creature large and small
'Tis holiness we bring.

Story for All Ages What the Turtle Taught Theodore, adapt'd. Rose Gallogly, CRE

This is a story from Theodore Parker's childhood, first told in his autobiography, retold in the UUA's tapestry of faith curriculum by Rev. Gary Kowalski, and retold and expanded a bit more by me.

It starts on a beautiful spring day on the farm in Lexington, Massachusetts where Theodore Parker grew up. It was warm and sunny, maybe much like today, and Theodore (age 4 or 5) was walking through the fields, absent-mindedly swinging a stick through the tall grass. Theodore stopped to watch the water bubble along a creek. Then he noticed a turtle sunning itself on a rock.

He'd seen other boys use their sticks to strike turtles and other animals. It was part of what children thought was fun. Often children, and grown-ups too, are often copycats — mimicking the behavior of others who seem bigger or stronger than themselves. Young Theodore wanted

to be like the other, older boys he'd seen, so he raised his stick into the air, taking aim and preparing to knock the turtle into the water.

Then something stopped him. Something seemed wrong about the situation. He looked again at the turtle, quiet, peaceful, enjoying the spring day, just as he liked to feel the warmth and light of the sun. Had the turtle ever done him any harm? Was the turtle so different than himself? Slowly he lowered his stick and walked home, thinking about what had happened.

When he arrived home, his mother was there to greet him, and he told her about the incident. She listened carefully to Theodore, and listened especially carefully when he related how some strange force inside had stopped him from hitting the little animal. "Theodore," she said, "that force inside you was the voice of conscience. Always pay attention to it. Always follow what your conscience tells you. If you honor your conscience, you'll never go wrong in this world."

As we know, Theodore Parker grew up to become a Unitarian minister, and was a leader in our faith and in many of the pressing issues of his time, including the abolition of slavery. He told this story in his autobiography as an early memory of discovering his conscience, the inner knowing that started him on his lifelong path to live with a sense of kinship with the whole family of creation.

There are few parts of this story that aren't named directly that I'd like to draw out. Young Theodore, at only age 4 or 5, had already been told by his culture (in the form of what the older boys had normalized) that the turtle was an object, something that could be hurt or disregarded at a person's whim. I think it's also worth remembering that in the culture he was growing up in, the dominant view was that some human beings were also objects, to be hurt or disregarded at the whim of someone who looked like him. The land he was on had only been settled by colonists for a few generations at that point, and I imagine that the people who knew the fields and streams and turtles of that land for many thousands of years before Theodore, may have a thing or two to say about how to relate to it.

Young Theodore met this turtle and felt a nudge in his heart that said, "this is a being too, there's no reason to harm it" — even most of the culture he was living in may have even praised him for doing the opposite. I think it's worth it to hold this small moment in that larger context, not because it means that Theodore was this special child who had this superior conscience — but because he was a child, who felt a deeper truth in his heart, and was tuned into that feeling enough to trust it.

Our relationship with the natural world and all other living beings is inherent, but sometimes our culture still tells us otherwise, and that we are above or separate from other beings. May the story of young Theodore, the turtle, and the tug at Theodore's heart remind us of the tug on our own hearts, saying we all belong here, that the whole big web of creation we are a part of needs all of us to thrive.

Meditation words from Dan Gerber, *Sacred Trusts: Essays on Stewardship a& Responsibility*

"Often when I walk out from my house into the hills surrounding it, I discover after twenty minutes or so that I have taken the house with me, have taken the unanswered letters and telephone calls, the windows that need caulking, the slights I suffered last week, the things I should have said but didn't, the things I plan to say next week but probably won't. My feet have been taking a walk without me. Every step has been clouded by the metronome beat of 'yes, no, yes, no.' Words like ground squirrel, cinquefoil, osprey, and dove flit across my consciousness in response to beings that appear, but I don't see them. It doesn't matter whether the ground I'm walking over is planted alfalfa or wild knapweed, whether the trees are virgin or second growth. If I am not aware of them, not conscious of their consciousness, nature doesn't exist for me, though I may be walking in Tierra del Fuego."

Dear and holy spirit of life, help us to be conscious travelers on this earth: to notice beyond our own cares, beyond the details of our daily distractions - that we might see and feel the consciousness of all that is, or at least all that we can manage to be aware of. Help us to silence the cacophony of human affairs, that we might know and care for all that we share this amazing time called life with.

HOMILY the Rev. Anne Bancroft

Nearly two years ago, at General Assembly in Spokane, Washington, I arrived back at my hotel one afternoon to a parade - not so much music, really, but lots of people holding up big public art images: a huge paper mache earth, a big whale, a wide-winged condor and a big worm; also, a big poster that said, "We need bees!" This was the celebration of species hosted by the Unitarian Universalist Ministry for the Earth that seeks to remind us we are not the only ones here and certainly not the only ones that matter. It's a good reminder. With all that's going on in our human lives - all the adventures and worries of our daily existence - it is sometimes imperative that we be reminded.

It occurred to me when I was thinking about this service that in the realm of biodiversity, or diversity of bio interests, at least . . . some of us are born with science genes, and some of us are not. This is my very unscientific data discovery, based primarily on the fact that I am not a science person. I did not get that gene. And I know that many people did get it, because I've met you . . . but still, I didn't. And if you're more like me, you might enjoy numbers or ideas, music, sports - mostly watching them - but you may also have not been born with either great curiosity nor great comfort with things that crawl, or crunch when you step on them, with worms, or toads, sea creatures or insects. My love of biodiversity extends to various breeds of dogs and the beauty of birds or butterflies, though unlike a bunch of you I spend little to no time looking for the varieties of species. My loss, no doubt.

But even though I'm not personally invested in forming relationships with the plethora of species with whom we share this planet, I know in my heart of hearts - and because I have asked people who ARE far more invested and knowledgeable than I am - (I know) that our lives depend on the existence of species varieties - a.k.a. biodiversity.

In anticipation of this Sunday, I called my friend Jim (Hanken) - with whom I swam for nearly twenty years. Jim is a Professor of Biology, the Curator of Herpetology in the Museum of Comparative Zoology, Director of the Museum of Comparative Zoology, and the Alexander Agassiz Professor of Zoology in the Museum of Comparative Zoology at Harvard University. In the event you don't know, as I didn't, herpetology is the branch of zoology concerned with reptiles and amphibians. For many years, I would hear (briefly, because swimming does not allow much time for conversation) about Jim's trips around the world searching for and studying frogs and other related amphibious creatures.

Jim is the one who told me there are many reasons to be concerned with preserving biodiversity - which I knew instinctively, if not specifically - including ethical reasons (meaning we should care about other species and their survival) and esthetic reasons (meaning the world is more beautiful with more variety). But the one most important reason for caring about biodiversity is the most pragmatic, and self-serving, I might add: because human life depends on it. And our impact on the planet's diversity of life has been devastating. Apparently, the news in the community of those who pay close attention is so depressing that organizations have taken pains to share success stories and develop conferences to showcase positive initiatives in order to shape a different narrative of possibility. Remember, this month - for us - is the theme of Story, and narratives are important.

According to Jim, this morning's go-to expert, our human contribution to world imbalance, particularly since the era of industrialization, is to have caused the rate of extinction to be far

and away above the rate of speciation. New species, he assures me, are developing constantly - though it takes time - and the rate now is apparently fairly consistent with what it has always been. But the historical balance of new life forms to departing life forms is now absurdly out of whack for reasons we can probably all imagine: not least our use of pesticides and herbicides, and the overall impacts of climate change and especially its effect on the availability of water.

It is finite, right? The amount of air and fresh water available to us and to all species does not change so that whatever we use for ourselves - by way of diverting rivers to huge expanses of farmlands or to provide water for the gazillion cows we require in service to our consumption, for example - is no longer available to the range of life that depended on it before.

It is a profoundly spiritual practice to take responsibility for the imbalance we have created on this earth; and a profoundly spiritual practice to pay attention to what we leave for future generations. And, being born without a science-gene is not a good excuse for not paying attending to both those things.

Many of you may be familiar with the work of **Edward Osborne Wilson** “usually cited as **E. O. Wilson** - an American **biologist, naturalist**, and writer. . . an influential biologist who on . . . has been given the nicknames "The New **Darwin**", "Darwin's natural heir" or "The Darwin of the 21st century." His biological specialty is **myrmecology**, the study of **ants**, on which he has been called the world's leading expert.” (Wikipedia)

Wilson has developed something called The Half-Earth Project “to protect half the land and sea (on our globe) in order to manage sufficient habitat to reverse the species extinction crisis and ensure the long-term health of our planet.”

“With science at its core and our transcendent moral obligation to the rest of life at its heart, the Half-Earth Project® is working to conserve half the land and sea to safeguard the bulk of biodiversity, including ourselves.” (<https://www.half-earthproject.org>)

It’s an amazingly simple idea within an organization that is also paying attention to the imbalance of climate change impact on communities of color, and paying attention to the ongoing relationships with indigenous peoples.

I was so grateful to discover this initiative, encouraged to imagine that we humans might have the capacity to reverse some of our worst impacts on the balance of life on this planet. There is a Half-Earth pledge on the website that references a commitment to learning about

biodiversity. I hope you'll share that goal with me. Even we non-scientists can be a part of this endeavor - indeed, we must.

I want us to close singing the same song with which we opened our service today and encourage you to imagine a sense of commitment to a new way of being - that we might each and all look for ways to live more consciously and more conscientiously on this planet on behalf of all creatures, ourselves included but not prioritized.

This earth IS our blessing. Let's take care of it.

BENEDICTION

I only went out for a walk, and finally concluded to stay out till sundown, for going out, I found, was really going in. - John Muir, *Journal*