

## The Interdependent Web

Earth Day homily by Rev. Edmund Robinson  
Unitarian Church of Barnstable  
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Reading: “The Peace Of Wild Things” by Wendell Berry #483

*When despair for the world grows in me and I wake in the night at the least sound  
in fear of what my life and my children's lives may be,  
I go and lie down where the wood drake rests in his beauty  
on the water, and the great heron feeds.*

*I come into the peace of wild things  
who do not tax their lives with forethought of grief.  
I come into the presence of still water.  
And I feel above me the day-blind stars waiting with their light.  
For a time I rest in the grace of the world, and am free.*

Our Seventh UU Principle is “respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part.” And among the sources from which we draw inspiration are the “Spiritual teachings of earth-centered traditions which celebrate the sacred circle of life and instruct us to live in harmony with nature.” Maybe this is best summed up in the saying attributed, or rather misattributed, to Chief Seattle, “The earth does not belong to us; we belong to the earth.”

What does the principle mean, “the interdependent web of all existence”? A web is a structure which is woven out of connected strands of string or rope. My grandsons who live over in England, are great fans of Spider-Man, and through them I have learned that Spider-man, like the spider for which he is named, can do a lot of good things with his web.

But the web that this principle talks about is of all existence. Everything that is, is part of the web. Everything, in other words, is connected to everything else through the web. It’s a little bit like the Internet, which is a kind of web built out of data connections between millions of computers. The internet was made much more useful in the late 1980's by a new layer of web which was called the World-Wide Web; the World-Wide Web was invented by a man named Tim Berners-Lee, and I can’t resist observing that Sir Tim is one of us; he is a UU.

But the Seventh UU Principle doesn’t just say that everything is connected to everything else; it says that the web is “interdependent.” That means that everything depends on everything else. Let’s say that you and I are playing tug-of-war with this rope. As we pull on the rope, we are each trying to get the other to come over to our side. We are creating a tension in this rope, a pull, and as the pull gets stronger, we lean away from it to keep our balance. You are depending on my pull and I am depending on yours. If I let go of my end of the rope, you might fall over backwards, as I might if you let go. So while we are pulling on the rope, you and I are

interdependent; each of us depends on the other to keep on our feet.

So this is what the Seventh Principle says the whole universe is like. Every part of it depends on every other part.

A few years ago, I listened to a fascinating talk on ticks – a tick talk – from Larry Dapsis, the county entomologist with the Barnstable Extension Service. He had a lot of useful information on avoiding tick bites.

One thing he said in the question and answer period fascinated me. The ticks which carry Lyme disease are called deer ticks, but the name is not really appropriate, because deer don't carry these ticks at the stage of their lives where they are most dangerous to humans. And it's not really named for your beloved deer Sullivan either. The stage at which the ticks are most dangerous is the nymph stage. Mr. Dapsis used the image of two popular bagel toppings. The adult deer tick is the size of a sesame seed, while the nymph is the size of a poppy seed. Nymphs get their meals and their bacteria from white-footed mice. And it is the size of the mouse population which determines how likely we are to get Lyme.

The size of the mouse population, in turn is related to the size of populations of animals who eat the mice, in particular foxes and coyotes. Foxes prey on mice efficiently, coyotes don't. But the population of foxes and of coyotes are two ends of a seesaw: when the coyote population is up, the fox population is down, and vice versa. But even that wasn't the strongest factor. The strongest factor in predicting the prevalence of tick-borne illnesses is acorns. In a year when the oaks produce a lot of acorns, the mice are well-fed and there will be a bumper crop of tick nymphs in the next cycle. If there are few acorns, the ticks will be fewer.

The interdependent web. What this drives home to me is that we are all part of a scene which has big forces operating in it. A lot of the things which affect human life are caused by forces outside of human life.

And the dependency extends over time. When the environment changes, plants and animals in the environment have to adapt to the changes or they will become extinct. Who loves dinosaurs? We all are fond of these oversized reptiles, but you don't see live ones around anymore – or do you? Actually where we are right now there are descendants of the dinosaurs all around us. They are the birds. They are the dinosaurs who adapted to the changing climate millions of years ago.

This week the nation observes Earth Day. The first Earth Day took place on April 22, 1970, 51 years ago. U.S. Senator Gaylord Nelson of Wisconsin witnessed the disastrous consequences of an oil spill in Santa Barbara, CA. A few months earlier, the Cayuhoga River in Cleveland had caught fire. Nelson had been impressed with the organizational energy of the student antiwar movement at the time, and wondered if the same kind of energies could be mobilized on behalf of saving the environment. So he announced plans for a 'national teach-in on the environment' and persuaded a liberal Republican congressman, Pete McCloskey, to sign on as co-chair, and they hired an organizer named Denis Hayes of Harvard, who built a national staff of 85.

They succeeded beyond their wildest expectations that first year: more than 20 million Americans took part in activities that first Earth Day. How many of you were among them?

The politicians heard. In short order, the Clean Water Act and Clean Air Act became law, and the Environmental Protection Agency was set up to oversee implementation of the law. Great powers were given to the agency to regulate industry. And gradually the air and the waters and the soil of our planet began to recover.

But in the decades that followed, scientists discovered that the biggest threat to the environment was not dirty chemicals or toxic pollution. It was something called the greenhouse effect in which the warmth of the sun was being trapped in the earth's atmosphere and raising the temperature of the whole planet, just like the glass in a greenhouse allows it to keep warm and grow plants which normally don't grow in that climate. And the most harmful greenhouse gas was not something produced in a chemical or a nuclear plant, but simple carbon dioxide, the stuff we breathe out with every breath we exhale.

It isn't our breath that's the principal problem – it's our cars and our trucks and our airplanes and the heaters in our buildings which burn oil and gas and coal, fossil fuels which trapped carbon millions of years ago from decaying plants and animals, and release it back into the atmosphere when we burn them.

The first Earth Day taught us that the way we are living is harming the environment, and what we know now is that same lesson but in a lot more detail.

A lot of people still do not get this message, and a lot more hear the message but go on living the way we have been living. For some of us this is because they – we – don't know any better, but for some of us it is because we are too fond of our ways. It is hard to give up burning oil and gas and coal. We like warm houses, and we like the convenience of getting in a car and going wherever we want to go. I am in this category.

You may have heard of the Swedish teenager named Greta Thunberg. She is trying to get the message out about the climate change crisis. When she wanted to spread her message in America a few years ago, she found a sailing ship which would take her across the ocean without her having to ride in an airplane. The message she was trying to convey is if we want to avert climate change, we're going to have to make some drastic changes in the way we live.

We here on Cape Cod are very vulnerable to changes in the sea level. I have been here 12 years, and have seen many seaside houses claimed by the rising ocean.

Many people do not see the connection between the way we live and the change in climate we are experiencing. It is a complex problem to be sure. But our Seventh Principle reminds us that we are all interconnected and interdependent.

You see we all want to be free and independent, and in many important senses we are. But we are also all sailing in the same boat, this planet earth which is the only home we know. It is as a

favorite song puts it, our Blue Boat Home. We are all in the same boat.

Or to put it another way, no one is an island. Back in the seventeenth century, the poet John Donne showed that he understood the interdependent nature of all existence when he wrote this meditation, a meditation inspired by the shape of the land in the sea:

No man is an island entire of itself; every man  
is a piece of the continent, a part of the main;  
if a clod be washed away by the sea, Europe  
is the less, as well as if a promontory were, as  
well as any manner of thy friends or of thine  
own were; any man's death diminishes me,  
because I am involved in mankind.  
And therefore never send to know for whom  
the bell tolls; it tolls for thee.

Amen.