WHY REVERE THE INTERDEPENDENT WEB OF EXISTENCE
Unitarian Universalist Church of St Petersburg
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READINGS (see below)
From *The Summer Day* by Mary Oliver
*Fall Gatherings* in *Bring Me the Ocean* by Rebecca A. Reynolds
*There Will Be No Poor Among You* from Deuteronomy 15
*There Will Always Be Poor Among You* from the Gospel According to Mark 14
*The Sense of Wonder* by Rachel Carson
*Crossing the Bar* by Alfred, Lord Tennyson

SERMON

Why cultivate a sense of respect or, even more, a sense of reverence for the interdependent web of existence? Reverence, as we discussed last Sunday, can be understood as the fulfillment of the human potential to experience and even abide in a stunning sense of union and communion with Being and all its forms of being. Abide in a stunning sense of union and communion – what developmental psychologists have called the peak experience; what the artist describes as knowing that if you cut a tree your arm will bleed.

The beloved asks, How dost thou love me? And the lover answers, How do I love thee? Let me count the ways. Saying why one reveres Being and the web of being evolved from it is like being the lover, saying, Let me count the ways. So I will. I have seven. You might have even more, which I’d love to hear.

First of all, I rightly might revere the web of existence, or the web of being, because it is us. As the East puts it, Thou art that. As the West puts it, We and the Being of beings are one. I am and you are of one substance with the great I Am. It is everything we love - and a mess of stuff we don’t love, but without which we would not be. If I’m glad I’m alive, I’ve got a lot of existence to revere with thanks and love - all creatures of the earth and sky, great and small, sentient or not.

I may wonder, Who made the world – but in an instant of paying attention I am enraptured by the question of a grasshopper and I am on my knees or on my back in the meadow, feeling blessed. I am with the mystics, seeing the world in a grain of sand and a heaven in a wild flower. Why would I not want to live in that state of spirit even as I carry my daily water and chop my daily wood and earn my daily bread? I might be tempted to say *Eat or
be eaten; Beat or be beaten. But let me test that temptation against Love or be lost.

Second, I rightly might revere the web of existence because it holds and gives all potential for being, for survival, for consciousness, for happiness. It is the potential for all things. The flowing web emerges from the source of being and makes the channels for the force of being to flow in. Life, beauty, truth, justice, freedom, love, compassion, joy – all evolve from the threads of the web of existence, the streams of grace that form and transform the world. Call it Brahman, call it Tao, call it the Great Spirit or the Spirit of Life. Gaze upon its beauty and know you are blessed and can bless.

Third, I rightly might revere the web of being because its power is potential that must be nurtured to be fulfilled. Reverence can be appreciation in the form of understanding - understanding the blessing innate in life’s potentials. Reverence can be worship in the old English sense of worth-shaping and worth-shipping wonder and gladness in the vessel of your spirit into the world of existence.

Remember the story of when Jesus and the apostles visited Martha and Mary’s house on the way to Jerusalem for their Passover seder – at about this time almost 2000 years ago? Martha was frenetically busy acting the hostess to their guests and a crowd of villagers and she complained to Jesus that Mary was just sitting at his feet, enraptured by his teaching, and he should tell her to go help Martha. And Jesus replied, “Martha, Martha – you are worried and distracted by many things. There is need of only one thing. Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken from her.” That was Martha’s challenge, I’d say – to appreciate and choose to nurture what was of highest worth in her, in Jesus, and in the community.

By the way, Mary carried her love and compassion one step further that day than rapture at Jesus’ reverent vision of life. It was Mary at that gathering who anointed Jesus with costly perfumed ointments in anticipation of his death and burial.

Then it was the apostles who complained. But Jesus cut them short and revered Mary’s conduct by quoting one of the most important passages in Jewish scriptural law: If anyone is in need, serve them in their need with an open hand and an open heart, and thereby you will have no poor among you and the people will prosper in your land. But since you will always have poor among you, you must always always always at the drop of a hat help with an open hand and an open heart. And here am I in need, right in front of you – and she is the only one who comforts me, and does so in accord
with the memorial rituals. For this her story will always be told so her name will always be remembered.”

Actually, Matthew, Mark, and Luke all left Mary’s name out of the story – Women’s History, indeed. But the purpose of being a community is to be large enough that someone remembers the important stories and passes them on when others forget. And that’s what John did, writing his version of the gospel ten to twenty years after the Mark, Matthew and Luke. He told the story at least in part in remembrance of her.

By the way, Jesus’ teaching that day should be called his Sermon on the Amount – fit for a pledge campaign. How much should we give to the community that nurtures our souls’ potentials so our spirits may be fulfilled? Enough to make a difference in each other’s lives and to keep the blessings of our community alive and passed forward to bless the world. If you’re going to be in, be in with all heart and mind and soul and strength – for we are on a journey which deserves that we pledge to it our lives, our fortunes, our sacred honor. Widow’s mite added to God’s might - they always work when they work together.

And this connects me to the fourth reason why I rightly might respect and revere and shape and ship forward the potentials of grace within me. It is because the interdependent web connects us. Again, I am not an island entire of myself. The people who left the shell mounds from eating oysters on Weedon Island and I who ate from a Styrofoam box on Friday once journeyed from the same gene pool. The chimpanzees reading Darwin over their attendant’s shoulders spoke rightly, “We are our keeper’s brothers and sisters.”

Our home is a blue houseboat that sails us home together over the currents of existence. If we don’t appreciate that we live in a system, if we don’t appreciate the system we’re in, if we don’t appreciate the value of the potentials we are given by that system, our ship will founder far from home. Our fruit of transcending value will wither off its vine. We are connected and related to everything – of one substance with the Father and the Mother – the pater and mater – the pattern and matter – us in them and them in us along with everything else.

The fifth reason follows the fourth. I rightly might revere the web of being because I am influenced by everything. As naturalist John Muir wrote, “When we try to pick out anything by itself, we find it hitched to everything else in the Universe.” It’s not just gravity – it’s emergence and expansion and evolution. No wonder Rachel Carson, fighting with cancer long enough
to finish her great book that woke humanity to the decimation of our planet, affirmed the infinite healing from contemplating the beauty of nature, its order, its continuation. Everything influences everything – for better or for worse. With reverence as our guide, we can make our influence be for the better.

The reality of the influence of everything on everything leads me to the sixth of the seven reasons why I rightly might revere the web of being. The inter-dependent web of existence – the great spirit of life - is our fundamental teacher.

Take for example how the restoration of wolves to Yellowstone Park restored the biodiverse health of the whole area. This is not a consume-everything Wolves of Wall Street story – quite the opposite. When the niche which the web of existence provides to each species is sustained in health, great diversity and beauty of life is sustained. Wolves balanced the out-of-balance deer, so over-grazed grasses returned and forests, and then their ground critters and all kinds of birds, and bears returned home, too, and the rivers were renewed and deepened as river banks were rooted, and pools of fish came back again.

No wasted land and no wasted creatures. This is a lesson in interdependence offered by the web of existence – offered continually to us through the collapses we have caused in many local ecologies. It may be that next time the whole planet’s ecology will be the teacher. The umbilical chords (chords with an H) – the umbilical chords of the web resonate from species to species to bioregion to bioregion to biosphere to biosphere.

And at last, the seventh reason why I rightly might seek to grow in spiritual, caring relationship with the web of existence is the realization that it wants to be alive -- and when it is, it evolves into consciousness and a capacity for comprehension and bliss. This is what Mary knew better than Martha. To experience the essence of being with full appreciation is the best experience – to move slow enough to relish moving, to chew slow enough to relish tasting, to kiss slow enough with eyes or mouths to relish loving, brings life to life. When we revere with caring, the sacred murmur Om becomes the holy shout, Oh My God!

This seventh and final sacrament – the greatest crossing of the bar – is realizing and manifesting the fullness of grace by loving all of life, the whole interdependent web of which we are a part. Then Om becomes Home and even Mom. When from out our bourne of Time and Place the flood may bear us far, then that which drew us from out the boundless deep turns again...
home. The sacrament of completion, of wholeness, of holiness, becomes our blessing and our memorial – our monument to be remembered into the future. The monument says, We realized what we were here for. The monument says, We - as part of the interdependent web of existence, as part of the great flow of grace and truth - we realized how great thou art and how great are we. The monument says, Be in communion in memory of us.

READINGS

The Summer Day by Mary Oliver

Who made the world?
Who made the swan, and the black bear?
Who made the grasshopper?
This grasshopper, I mean-
the one who has flung herself out of the grass,
the one who is eating sugar out of my hand,
who is moving her jaws back and forth
instead of up and down,
who is gazing around
with her enormous and complicated eyes?
Now she lifts her pale forearms
and thoroughly washes her face.
Now she snaps her wings open, and floats away.
I don't know exactly what a prayer is.
I do know how to pay attention, how to fall down
into the grass, how to kneel down in the grass,
how to be idle and blessed,
how to stroll through the fields,
which is what I have been doing all day.
Tell me, what else should I have done?
Doesn't everything die at last, and too soon?
Tell me, what is it you plan to do
with your one wild and precious life?

Fall Gatherings in Bring Me the Ocean by Rebecca A. Reynolds

Morning arrives, a crisp, chilly fall morning. Sarah, Suzanne, and I set out down the back meadow to see what we can gather for our day’s program. This morning we will be bringing a fall meadow into a hospital school setting for elementary school children who have physical handicaps stemming from
such difficulties as cerebral palsy, muscular dystrophy, and spina bifida. The majority of the children are in wheelchairs or bed carts, and many of them have difficulties with speech....

On we walk, the three of us selecting materials that will carry our theme of smelling and touching and hearing the meadow; finally, our baskets hold enough rich bounty.... At the house, we begin placing animals into their traveling cases: the rabbits with their dried grasses, the swainson’s hawk with the permanently injured left wing, two orphaned flying squirrels who are with us until next spring.

We load up rocks of many sizes, a big hollow log, water moss, cattails, the skull of a deer, empty butterfly cocoons, dried seed pods that rattle loudly, the lower jaw bone of a fox, a once-living, now preserved, green heron with wings spread wide so the iridescent greens shine in the light, multihued, and lastly, our two dogs, Shadow and Fern, excited to be going to work, and Tanga, our huge golden cat.

(The author then tells of the visit to the hospital school and concludes with two final interchanges.) One young girl, lying in a bed cart with her arms spread out on the sheets above her head, looks over at the heron, and indicating her own arched and widespread arms with a gesture of her chin, says with a smile, “I have a large wingspan too!” A young tree is shown around, its roots held in burlap so that it can be seen top to bottom before being replanted. A young girl who is blind strokes the roots and says, “Now I see how a tree stands! I’ve never seen roots before.”

There Will Be No Poor Among You from Deuteronomy 15

There will be no poor among you, because Yehovah your God is sure to bless you if only you will obey this entire commandment:
If there are poor among you, a member of your community in any of your towns within the land, do not be hard-hearted or tight-fisted toward your needy neighbor. You should rather open your hand, willingly lending enough to meet the need, whatever it may be.

Be careful that you do not entertain a mean thought; give liberally and be ungrudging when you do so, for on this account Yehovah your God will bless you in all your work and in all that you undertake. And since there will never cease to be some poor on the earth, I command you, Open your hand to the poor and needy neighbor in your land.”

There Will Always Be Poor Among You from the Gospel of Mark 14

While he was at Bethany in the house of Simon the leper,
as he sat at the table,
a woman came with an alabaster jar
of very costly ointment of nard,
and she broke open the jar and poured the ointment on his head. But some were there who said to one another in anger,
‘Why was the ointment wasted in this way?
For this ointment could have been sold for more than three hundred denarii,
and the money given to the poor.’
And they scolded her.
But Jesus said, ‘Let her alone; why do you trouble her?
She has performed a good service for me.
For the poor you will always have the poor among you,
and you can show kindness to them whenever you wish;
but you will not always have me.
She has done what she could;
she has anointed my body beforehand for its burial.
Truly I tell you,
wherever the good news is proclaimed in the whole world,
what she has done will be told in remembrance of her.’

_The Sense of Wonder_ by Rachel Carson

Those who contemplate the beauty of the earth find reserves of strength that will endure as long as life lasts. There is symbolic as well as actual beauty in the migration of the birds, the ebb and flow of the tides, the folded bud ready for the spring. There is something infinitely healing in the repeated refrains of nature – the assurance that dawn comes after night, and spring after the winter.

_Crossing the Bar_ by Alfred, Lord Tennyson

Sunset and evening star,
   And one clear call for me!
And may there be no moaning of the bar,
   When I put out to sea,

But such a tide as moving seems asleep,
   Too full for sound and foam,
When that which drew from out the boundless deep
   Turns again home.
Twilight and evening bell,
   And after that the dark!
And may there be no sadness of farewell,
   When I embark;

For though from out our bourne of Time and Place
   The flood may bear me far,
I hope to see my Pilot face to face
   When I have crossed the bar.