

**RESPONSIBILITY AND PERSONAL CULTIVATION #1:**  
***Your Growth and Your Response to Nature***  
Rev. Jack Donovan – Unitarian Universalist Church  
St. Petersburg, Florida - 03/0418

**READINGS**

**Invocation:** *In the Beginning* adapted from The Book of Genesis, ch. 1&2

**Meditation:** *This We Know*, attributed to Chief Seattle

**Readings:** *The Questioners*, The Sacred Depths of Nature, Ursula Goodenough  
*The Gift*, Mary Oliver

**Closing:** *Final Words* from The Bhagavad Gita

**SERMON**

Novelist Kurt Vonnegut was once criticized because he was a church-goer and belonged to an “organized religion.” He responded, “I don’t belong to an organized religion. I am a Unitarian.”

I love that. It reflects the Unitarian Universalist commitment to two things derived from the pilgrim heritage on Cape Cod where Vonnegut lived. One, we don’t abide by any creed ordained from above to which one must agree. Two, we do agree to help one another grow spiritually, that is, in understanding life and in caring for it.

In his famous novel Slaughterhouse Five, Vonnegut wrote, “And Lot’s wife, of course, was told not to look back where all those people and their homes had been. But she did look back, and I love her for that, because it was so human. So she was turned into a pillar of salt. So it goes.” By the above definition, Lot’s wife was a Unitarian, too – she lived more out of care about people than by externally ordained rules. I love that.

Vonnegut punctuated the forlorn plot of Slaughterhouse Five with the dejected phrase, “So it goes.” But the great reality I think that Vonnegut had learned and that UUism advocates is that after you admit, “So it goes,” you add the word, “unless.”

Vonnegut had to learn it as a child when his family’s wealth was bitterly lost in the Depression, when family dysfunction was softened by a wise and kind caregiver, when his mother committed suicide the night before he came home on Army leave for Mother’s Day, when a few months later he was captured during the Battle of the Bulge and experienced the firebombing of Dresden as a prisoner of war, then had to help recover the 25,000 civilian bodies, when his sister died of cancer two days after her husband died in a car crash and when Vonnegut adopted her three children. So it goes ... unless....

There are points in human maturation, according to philosophers and scientists, where we are considered responsible for the conduct and consequences of our lives, ready or not – maybe at

12, or 18, or 21, or 45. It is a given, I believe, that Nature and Culture set the context and conditions of our lives. But it is our responsibility to respond to our context and conditions. It is by our response that we influence the outcomes for better or worse. It is also our responsibility to develop our potentials for responding to these fraught circumstances. So it goes, unless....

Nature and Culture are inextricably intertwined in our lives. But as far as we know, in the beginning, Nature came first – so today I'd ask us to ponder our responses to the context and conditions of Nature, and next Sunday Culture.

Consider the response to Nature of another transplanted Cape Codder like Vonnegut, former president of the American Society of Cell Biologists, Ursula Goodenough of Martha's Vineyard. She writes, "We may be the only questioners in the universe, the only ones who have come to understand the astonishing dynamics of cosmic evolution.... Now if we can reverse how things are and can find a way to express gratitude for our existence." So it goes, unless ... unless we each take responsibility and unless we each then respond.

And still another transplanted Cape Codder, poet Mary Oliver of Provincetown, writes, "I wanted to thank the mockingbird for the vigor of his song.... And I give thanks also for my mind that thought of giving a gift, and mostly I'm grateful that I take this world so seriously." That is Mary Oliver's response to "unless." Does it not transform the weariness of "So it goes"?

I feel like we humans are always in the Season of Spring. Every new phase, every new day, every new moment, we are Nature's seeds and it's seeders – we are ever tender and we must be ever tending. Look around; look in. Nature's seeds are numerous in each of us, forever coming ready for planting and tending. Do we know this and do we take responsibility?

Western religion chose to call this time of year *Lent*, from the old European word for Spring – as in *Lentening or Lengthening* of daylight and hope. In my childhood religious understanding, Lent was a time of penitential sacrifice – confessing what the church told us was our perpetual fall from grace and paying for it in some childish way – like going 40 days without sweets.

But Lent can be understood as a time of abstinence from the goodness of life in order to better appreciate that goodness as described in Genesis. We take so many good things for granted. So it goes, unless occasional abstinence makes the heart grow fonder.

And Lenten Spring can also be a time to remember Death, beginning with Ash Wednesday. Ashes to ashes, dust to dust. And what is good about that? For me, at least, as the future's decades decrease in number, remembering death prompts not wasting life. That may be what Buddhism is really all about.

In my childhood, as April neared, my friends and I clung every day to the sun for a precious thawed moment of baseball. Then I walked home in the gathering dusk – always taking the short cut through the Old Hill Burial Ground that rose between two of the town's churches.

Up the pathway past the gravestones of Colonel John Buttrick, remembered for commanding the Concord Minutemen at the Old North in 1775, and his wife, Lydia (I think was her name), remembered for her life of leading the community in its caring. Past the rough-hewn stone of John Smythe, died 1636, remembered as a town founder. Past the gravestone of John Jack, remembered for his virtue and for buying himself out of slavery, died 1770. And at the top of the hill at eye level with the belltower and clock of the First Parish Unitarian Church, the sepulchre of its minister, Rev. William Emerson, died on campaign as chaplain to George Washington's army, 1776.

At the head of many of the gravestones are the words, "Memento Mori" – Remember Death. The epitaphs below those words made it clear why. Our time is limited. We have many potentials. We must be attentive if we are to discover and develop and use them for blessing. Remembering Death can help us remember Life.

So it goes with the Nature inside us - our potentials to sense, experience, assess, imagine, value, prioritize, choose, thrive. It is up to us to learn to develop these potentials by using our other potentials - for movement, communication, education, craft, invention, art, and communion.

We also have some inner potentials that not only help us survive and thrive, but might also thwart us: our slow maturation, our vulnerable dependency, our perceptual limitations, our self-centeredness, our impulsiveness, our anxieties, fears, envy, avarice – all gifts at one moment, but encumbrances over time, like too much old furniture. To learn how to develop and employ these natural potentials well, it may take the spiritual practices - like education, therapy, meditation, prayer, art, song, dance, poetry, friendship, community, kindness.

Using these development tools does not always occur to us. How lucky when we pause long enough to realize our need or to find trustworthy inspiring guides – and none better than here, where the guidance draws from many sources and believes in great fulfillments.

Besides the influence of Nature inside us, there is Nature outside us. External Nature provides niches of food and drink, climate, energy systems, and natural communities for our growth.

External Nature also threatens us and our networks with poverty, injury, illness, aging, and death from changing climate and environment, predators, and plagues. So it goes. Unless we take responsibility for developing our helpful potentials to respond to threats inside and outside of us, we do not survive, much less thrive.

And our tools for this? We have bodies and movement, minds and technology and power, craft and art. We can avoid, we can bond, we can preserve, we can persist. But how do we develop awareness and will?

The world's wisdom traditions all repeat a few basics. One is taking advantage of accidental discovery, as science often does. You wake up from repeated accidents of pain, pleasure,

diminishment or growth realizing there's a better way. Or, with a bit of luck, a perceptive teacher or mentor provokes you by pointing out possibilities you haven't seen. Then somehow, maybe by gradual awakening or inspired will, you take responsibility for yourself.

Each step can help advance us. Even our most ancient stories show this. Child Moses had high education in the pharaoh's palace, child Siddhartha in his father's palace, child Jesus in his Father's house, child Mohamed from the passing caravans, child Krishna from the passing brahmins.

Then each chose Wilderness to get distance from traditional wisdom, and distance gave freedom to learn their particular potentials and options. Wilderness was moderate deprivation, to let life's distractions settle out and let clarity emerge. In each case, liberation from conventional distractions and connection to the Universal Source let the pure energy of life – call it grace, if you will – become fully available for actualizing their potentials. Their souls could seek and find better ways, then bring them back to the world for testing, and revision, and, perhaps, an occasional return to their Wilderness laboratory.

You and I, it seems to me, also can draw upon accident, teachers, exploration, and one another to develop the will to responsibility and response. Ours is not an organized religion insisting on a particular set of answers to the great questions. But ours is not a disorganized religion, either. We join together, each and all, by covenanting our respect and caring and support as we search and grow.

With Chief Seattle, we know we are dependent on the web of existence and it is dependent on us. We are here to hear you, so you may better hear and organize yourself toward your greatest values and hopes.

With the Book of Genesis, we see that all phases and parts of creation have a goodness that gives worth and dignity – and we see that in one another.

With cell biologist Ursula Goodenough we feel that the depths of nature are sacred and deserve our reverent care.

With nature poet Mary Oliver we sing our gratitude for the wings and songs of birds and for our minds that can be grateful and joyful and can take this world so seriously.

With soldier, satirist and story-teller Kurt Vonnegut, we believe in adoption and adaptation.

Life is full of suffering if we won't let it flow to us and through us. So it goes, unless we take our Nature seriously, reverently, joyfully, gratefully, responsibly. So it goes. I love that.

## READINGS

**INVOCATION** *In the Beginning* adapted from Genesis 1 & 2:

May we call the Spirit of Life to fullness within us.

May it come as it was at the first dawning, from dark formlessness into the goodness of time and light.

May it come as it was at the second dawning, in the goodness of fluidity and space.

May it come as it was at the third dawning, in the goodness of forms and objects.

May it come as it was at the fourth dawning, in the goodness of waters and air and earth.

May it come as it was at the fifth dawning, in the goodness of living creatures of sea and sky and land.

May it come as it was at the sixth dawning, in the goodness of animals, and in the goodness of the peoples, empowered to transform and care.

And may the Spirit of Life come as it was at the seventh dawning, in the great goodness of *shalom*.

**MEDITATION** *This We Know* from Chief Seattle

Every part of this earth is sacred.

Every shining pine needle, every sandy shore,

every mist in the dark woods, every clearing,

every humming insect is holy in experience & memory –

the lovely cry of the whippoorwill,

the arguments of the frogs around a pond at night,

the soft sound of the wind

itself cleansed by a mid-day rain

or scented by a pinõn pine,

the precious air that all things share –

the beast, the tree, the human.

This we know:

the earth does not belong to us;

we belong to the earth.

All things are connected

like the blood that unites us all.

We did not weave the web of life,

we are merely a strand in it.

Whatever we do to the web,

we do to ourselves.

Hold in your memory the way the land is,

and with all your strength,

with all your might,

with all your heart,

preserve it for your children

and love it as the Great Spirit loves us all.

**READING** *The Sacred Depths of Nature*, by Ursula Goodenough

We humans may be the only questioners in the universe,  
the only ones who have come to understand  
the astonishing dynamics of cosmic evolution.  
If we are not, if there are others who Know,  
it is unlikely that we will ever encounter one another.  
We are also, whether we like it or not,  
the dominant species and the stewards of this planet.  
If we can reverse how things are,  
and can find a way to express gratitude for our existence,  
then we should be able to figure out,  
with a great deal of work and good will,  
how to share the Earth with one another and with other creatures,  
how to restore and preserve its elegance and grace,  
and how to commit ourselves to love and joy and laughter and hope.

**READING** *The Gift* by Mary Oliver

I wanted to thank the mockingbird  
for the vigor of his song.  
Every day he sang from the rim of the field,  
while I picked blueberries or just idled in the sun.  
Every day he came fluttering by to show me, and why not,  
the white blossoms in his wings.  
So one day I went there with a machine,  
and played some songs of Mahler.  
The mockingbird stopped singing,  
he came close and seemed to listen.  
Now when I go down to the field,  
a little Mahler spills  
through the sputters of his song.  
How happy I am, lounging in the light,  
listening as the music floats by!  
And I give thanks also for my mind,  
that thought of giving a gift.  
And mostly I'm grateful that I take this world so seriously.

**\*CLOSING** *Final Words* from The Bhagavad Gita

With steadfast devoted awareness  
of the divinity within you and all creatures,  
make every act an offering with that awareness  
and you will become one with that divinity  
and you will find a happier world where good people dwell.