

Sermon for Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Central Michigan

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Celebrating Earth Day

Good morning. I want to talk this morning about Earth Day as a Unitarian Universalist holiday, and how this holiday connects us to other religious traditions.

At the beginning of this hour, I began the worship service with the words of the Sisters of Mercy, a community of Catholic nuns. I want to say two things about my experience knowing and working with Catholic nuns. The first is that when they pray, it is the most comfortable and familiar conversation, like talking to an old friend—which indeed it is. It's beautiful to witness when nuns pray. Secondly, Catholic nuns express a deep religious conviction to honor and sustain the earth, to live in harmony with God's earth. That's what was present in the prayer that I shared as our Call to Worship today.¹ They see it as their religious duty: that this is God's earth that God has given us, and it's our duty to sustain it and protect it. In this way, I claim a brotherhood, a sisterhood, a siblinghood with those Catholic nuns, the Sisters of Mercy.

Next I want to mention another religious tradition that is—for me—much less familiar and much farther away. This is the Shinto religion, the traditional religion of Japan. When I studied world religions, I was fascinated to learn a little bit about Shinto, and to learn that it does not have a founder. Right away that's very different from other religions...obviously Christianity has a founder in Jesus; Islam has a founder, the prophet Muhammed. But Shinto has no founder. And it does not have a sacred text, so you can't say, "these are the sacred words of Shinto." It's more about ritual, and many of their rituals are rooted in nature. In the Shinto religion, there are natural shrines and in their belief the divine spirits—their word is *kami*—dwell in these places. So there is a divine spirit in the waterfall; a divine spirit in the mountaintop.

Well, I've felt that all my life. I didn't have those same words for it, but if I go hiking and I come to a waterfall I know it's a special place. My word for that—I don't know if you're comfortable with "God" language and divine language—but my word for that would be that it's a holy place. It's a place to find God, if you like. For me, then, I find kinship with the Shinto religion also, in finding divine holiness in natural places.

For instance, I have a reverent relationship with the Chippewa River. When I go to the park in the city, or when I go to Deerfield Park outside of the city as I did yesterday, and walk by the river, I have a reverence for the river and I feel like I'm in the presence of the holy. That river is older than I am; it is life-giving in a way that I can barely grasp; it has an important purpose. And so I honor the river.

This, I think, is a bit like the words in the poem that I just read by Nancy Wood. She says:

*I find a rock and sit on it
And a stream where the water runs gentle
And the trees which one by one give me company.
So must I stay for a long time
Until I have grown from the rock
And the stream is running through me
And I cannot tell myself from one tall tree.²*

So there's a deep sense of religious connection to nature that I find in that poem. And it always makes me think of a song by John Denver, one of my favorite songs that expresses to me the same thing. And one little part of that song is:

*Now he walks in quiet solitude, the forests and the streams
Seeking grace with every step he takes
And he turned his sight inside himself to try and understand
The serenity of a clear blue mountain lake
And the Colorado Rocky Mountain high*

*I've seen it raining fire in the sky
Talk to God and listen to the casual reply...³*

“Talk to God and listen to the casual reply,” which is, for me, even more possible on a mountaintop or in a beautiful natural place.

“Talk to God and listen to the casual reply,” just like the Catholic nuns do.

For me, I define my theology as not Catholic, not Shinto, but as Religious Naturalism. And I'll explain what that means to me. The idea of Religious Naturalism is that everything is nature, first of all. So there's no separation like there's the normal world and then there's God or the divine—no. Everything is part of nature, so whatever God is, or whatever you understand or think about the divine—that's part of nature. There's no such thing as the supernatural. Everything is part of nature—so that includes the stars; that includes the breath in my body; that includes the DNA that are replicating in my body and in your body; that includes the river; it includes the flowers that are blooming outside the door of the Fellowship; it includes the thoughts and feelings that are part of the human brain and body. All of this is part of nature.

And the “religious” part of Religious Naturalism is that all of those things are worthy of reverence and awe. So that what we're worshipping, so you to speak, what we're naming as the divine, is part of nature. There's no separation. In that way, instead of the holy being something special or outside of us, the holy is what's all around us and within us. That's my understanding of Religious Naturalism.

It makes me think of another song. This song is by Peter Mayer, and here is a little part of this song:

*Read a questioning child's face
and say it's not a testament,
that'd be very hard to say
see another new morning come
and say it's not a sacrament
I tell you that it can't be done*

*This morning outside I stood
And saw a little red wing bird
Shining like a burning bush
and singing like a scripture verse
it made me want to bow my head
I remember when church let out
How things have changed since then
Everything is Holy now⁴*

Blessed be the words of Peter Mayer. What he's expressing in that song and what really speaks deeply to me, is that some of us may have learned in church or some time that the holy is somewhere else, or you have to be a priest to connect to the holy or something...and he's saying just the opposite. The holy is everywhere. It's in the bird. It's in the child's face. It's in the morning that comes every day. Everything is holy.

I want to end by connecting those ideas to Unitarian Universalism: this religion that is an over-arching religion, this religion that welcomes people who identify with other religious traditions. We in Unitarian Universalism don't tell people what to think about the divine. We agree to disagree about what God is, or is there a God. But we have seven principles that we collectively affirm and promote. And one of the principles that we invoke most often is the seventh principle, which states that we affirm and promote respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part. That religious principle, one of our seven principles, calls us to be stewards of the earth because we are connected. It's part of our religion. Another thing that's true about our religious tradition is that we claim six sources, and one of the is “Wisdom from the world's religions, which inspire us in our ethical and spiritual life.” so it's

appropriate in Unitarian Universalism to call on other religions—such as Shinto, such as Catholicism, such as Religious Naturalism—as part of Unitarian Universalism.

One of the other explicitly named sources of our Unitarian Universalist tradition is this one, the sixth source, “Spiritual teachings of Earth-centered traditions, which celebrate the sacred circle of life and instruct us to live in harmony with the rhythms of nature.” As much as we have any dogma or creed, it’s that: that we believe in living in harmony with nature. It is part of our Unitarian Universalist tradition, and part of our stated principles that make Earth Day a special holiday for us and that call us to be connected to the natural environment.

On Earth Day, we are called as Unitarian Universalists by our religious principles to celebrate the Earth, to rededicate ourselves to living in harmony with the natural environment. In this we see our kinship to other religious traditions around the world.

As the moment of global pandemic reminds us, all of humankind shares the earth and we are indeed interconnected. May we be strengthened and renewed from our connection with the earth – in our gardens, in our parks and forests, basking in the spring sunshine – and may we be fiercely committed to pro-environment action and advocacy so that our children and our children’s children may enjoy green earth and blue skies and clear waters. May it be so.

¹ Earth Day Prayer adapted by the Catholic Health Association from a novena by the Mercy Justice Circle in New Jersey. Retrieved at <https://www.sistersofmercy.org/resources/prayer-earth-day/>

² Wood, Nancy. “My help is in the mountain.” *Hollering Sun*, Simon & Schuster, 1972.

³ “Rocky Mountain High” by John Denver and Mike Taylor. RCA records, 1972.

⁴ “Holy Now” by Peter Mayer. Blue Boat Records, 1999.