

White Bear Unitarian Universalist Church

Eternity and Elements of Dust

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WHITE BEAR UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST CHURCH
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FIRST READING *from Ellen Bass, "The Big Picture"*

I try to look at the big picture.

The sun- an ardent tongue licking us like a mother besotted with her new cub-
the sun will wear itself out.

Everything is transitory.

Think of the meteor that annihilated the dinosaurs.
And before that, the volcanoes of the Permian period —
all those burnt ferns, and reptiles, sharks and bony fish —
that was extinction on a scale that makes our losses look like a bad day at the slots.

Perhaps we're slated to ascend to some kind of intelligence
that doesn't need bodies, or clean water, or even air.

But I can't shake my longing
for the last six hundred Iberian lynx with their tufted ears,

or my longing for the Brazilian guitarfish,
the 4 percent of them still cruising the seafloor, eyes staring straight up.

And all the newborn marsupials — red kangaroos, joeys the size of honeybees —
and steelhead trout, river dolphins,

and so many species of frogs breathing through their damp, permeable membranes.

Today on the bus, a woman in a sweater the exact shade of cardinals
makes me ache for those bright flashes in the snow.
And polar bears, the cream and amber of their fur,
the long, hollow hairs through which sun slips, swallowed into their dark skin.

When I get home, my son has a headache
and, though he's almost grown, asks me to sing him a song.
We lie together on the lumpy couch
and I warble out the old show tunes, "Night and Day". . .
"They Can't Take That Away from Me". . .
A cheap silver chain shimmers across his throat, rising and falling with his pulse.

There never was anything else.
Only these excruciatingly insignificant creatures we love.

SECOND READING

from the Green Sanctuary Covenant of White Bear UU Church, approved at the Annual Meeting in June 2015

Recognizing the fragile and interdependent state of our Earth and all living things;

Recognizing the need to protect and maintain the quality of our common life-giving natural resources such as water, soil and air;

Recognizing the need to join with others to bring forth a sustainable society based on respect for our planet;

And recognizing our universal human right to a clean environment:

WE DO THEREFORE DELARE

to one another,

to the greater community of life,

and to future generations,

our acceptance of responsibility for preserving and protecting the health, vitality, beauty, and diversity of this planet Earth.

Eternity and Elements of Dust

We are a small earth, says Joy Harjo, in a longer poem adapted here:

*We are a small earth. It's no simple thing.
Eventually we will be dust together;
can be used to make a house, to stop a flood or grow food for those who will never remember
who we were,
or know that we loved fiercely.
Laughter and sadness eventually become the same song turning us toward the nearest star --
a star constructed of eternity and elements of dust barely visible in the twilight ...
I imagine a promise made when no promise was possible.*

She is speaking of that day before time was time, that instant, when the planet, still so new and utterly devoid of any life at all, suddenly became alive, a home to living things. *I imagine a promise made when no promise was possible.*

If the children who are in our congregation now had been here 50 years ago, or anytime before 1989, when the people moved here from the tiny chapel down on Mahtomedi Avenue – if the children here now had been children between 1960 and 1990, they would have met for Sunday classes in a classroom filled with miracles and wonders. All around the room, near the ceiling, were great full color murals in which elephants stampeded out of the wall, shadowed by mastodons and woolly mammoths. Pterodactyls swooped in the background and with a thunder of wings became Canada geese and loons in the foreground. Sabretooth tigers prowled just behind the cheetahs and lions of Africa and North America. Jungles and savannah gave way to more familiar prairie, and all around the edges, children of world were shown playing and dancing, and except for the ones in very modern western dress you couldn't tell what era of human development they hailed from. Time and space collapsed in that room, *expanded* in that room in the minds of the children gathered every Sunday, and adults here now who were children then remember it: what it was like to go to church in that sanctified space, made holy by the presence of people, including themselves but not only themselves, and the presence of animals living and extinct, and the presence of the living world, and stars and stones and the four points of the compass. It was an ordinary space - linoleum, fluorescent lights- made holy by sacred stories of how it all began, how the earth began, and life on earth, and how it evolves, how everything is changing and how we are part of that, for better and for worse; stories from scriptures, stories from science, stories told in sweeping paintings that spoke to what those children could see and touch right outside their windows.

The murals were painted by members here, Verba Weaver, Murray Olyphant, and Pat Young, led by the distinguished artist Lee Jaques, who was also a member, and who was best known for his creation of the original dioramas in the American Museum of Natural History in New York. When the little church was sold in 1989, the murals were sold separately to the Bell Museum in Minneapolis, where Jaques also crafted dioramas. This past year, when the Bell crossed the river to its new home in St. Paul, the murals traveled too, to inspire new generations of young naturalists.

In old paper newsletters of the old little church, you can find notes about the Izaak Walton League, a conservation group, meeting in the building and an article from 1969 about a snowshoe hike at Warner Nature Center which attracted more than 70 people (which must have been every single adult and child and dog and cat in the entire congregation). You can read about the wild foods dinner hosted by Herb Harper, or the Christmas Day bird-count with the Audubon Society, or the purchase of trees for a new site in Centerville where the congregation thought it would be moving before this building came on the market at the 11th hour, and they chose to stay in town.

Fast forward 35 or 40 years to 2005, just before this space was built. This was a gravel driveway, encircled by brambles and trees, including a 79 year-old oak that was rooted right here. This pulpit desk was made from it as a memorial. That year we invited a scholar who knew the history of first peoples here to walk the land and tell us something of its story, which, over several months, she did. We brought in a forester from the University of Minnesota who assessed every standing tree on this 4 ½ acre site, and the architect took all of it, science and stories, to build the sanctuary as green as possible, and orient it toward the east and toward the water. He said, “This [out the window] is the center of your worship and of your community,” and he tried throughout these new spaces to blur the margins between indoors and outdoors, spirit and nature.

The living earth is not a landscape or a view. That’s a theological statement. The earth is not a landscape to us here. It is not picturesque, and nor is it a bargain basket of “natural resources” over which we humans somehow have “dominion.” Nature is not a playground to visit for vacations from the “real world” where we work; the natural world is not “up north” or “out west” or anywhere but *everywhere*, including here, in my body and in yours, in the bone and blood and breath of mortal animals made of dirt and water. Among the seven principles adopted by the Unitarian Universalist Association years ago, only one rises for me to the level of a creedal statement, because for me it’s manifest in everything I touch and know and breathe: *we covenant to affirm and promote the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part*. This is theology for us, this science, this mystery, this reverence, this love.

We touch the whole, the universal, always through the particular. I don’t know if you can really love the earth, anymore than you can love humanity, except theoretically, on principle. But we can love each other in particular, and we cherish certain places and thereby hold a reverence for the whole. Ellen Bass speaks in her poem of the “big picture” – the great round earth and all of its transient inhabitants: the last remaining Iberian lynx, river dolphins, steelhead trout, polar bears, and her own teenage son on the couch, all embodied in fragile bodies, all excruciatingly insignificant, all beautiful, essential beloved.

Think of one place you love – a large place like the Boundary Waters wilderness, or a small place, like your garden; a present place, like this woods here, or a lost place, like the woods of your childhood, now ruined to development, or a great prairie watershed, shattered for a pipeline. Think of one place and how you love it, and what that love is, which is not romantic, but more the kind of love that believers speak of when they speak of God. The natural spaces we “love” often are places where we’re known some mystical experience, some transcendent, transforming experience, those rare moments in which for a small eternity you are one with all

things, with all creatures and all people, with the flowing water and the falling rain, the little grasses and the birds. That kind of love puts us in our place, literally, it grounds us, gives us to believe that we are held within the embrace of something larger more eternal than ourselves, yet part of us.

From Linda Hogan, poet,

Walking, I can almost hear [the heart of] the redwoods beating. And the oceans are above me here, rolling clouds, heavy and dark. . . . It's a world of elemental attention, of all things working together, listening to what speaks in the blood. Whichever road I follow, I walk in the land of many gods, and they love and eat one another. Walking, I am listening to a deeper way. Suddenly all my ancestors are behind me. Be still, they say. Watch and listen. You are the result of the love of thousands.

Fear falls away. I think of Rachel Carson walking the coastline in the middle of the night, a woman all alone in the dark studying underwater phosphorescent animals and fish, or Sigurd Olson camping in Minnesota's boreal forest before Gore-tex and polar fleece and nylon, but it didn't matter, because he often went without a tent, without even a sleeping bag or blanket, burrowed under pine boughs and damp leaves on his face against the mosquitos, the curve of his own back against the soft curve of earth, and only air between his own eye and the nearest star. Fear falls away with a love like that. The New York Times ran a video essay last month by a sound engineer who is also an ecologist; he's trying to record silence on the planet before it all dies out, the sounds the earth makes when no humans are nearby. At one point he lies down on a wooded hillside to record the sound of a thunderstorm coming on, the sounds the birds make over the course of several hours as the pressure falls, and the insects and the wind, which suddenly goes silent before it starts to roar, and the rain coming on against the rocks and leaves (and on his face) and the thunder – and all the while he's just lying there with his waterproof microphone listening to the planet talking to itself with no one interrupting. A love like that can border on religious love, that fierce faith – and you might even feel moved to do everything you can to save the special place that's touched you – that scenic waterway, that national park, that patch of ground behind your house. But the fact is that nothing that you do, nothing that we do, will matter, except symbolically, except in a very isolated and even slightly selfish way, until and unless we accept and bow to the reality that **no patch of ground exists apart from any other patch of ground. The whole thing is a whole thing, all water is one river, all soil the same ground.** Every inch of it is sacred ground, which is why Earth Day matters and every day has to be earth day.

I remember when we lived in New England, Ross and I were driving once on a rural road in western Massachusetts, a dirt road bordered on one side by dense woods and the other by a pasture. A mountain lion crossed right in front of the car, so close we had to brake and so fast that we just looked at each other as if to say, *You saw that, right?* It was a holy visitation. At that time the Commonwealth of Massachusetts was denying the cougars had come back. There had been no reliable sightings, no plaster casts of paw prints. Official reports acknowledged that the big cats had returned for sure to the state of Vermont, but said they were not extant in Massachusetts – as if the animals had passports, or maps, or carried border-crossing documents.

I think also of friends we knew who'd been organic farmers in that place for years, on land that had been in the woman's family for generations, at least 150 years without any chemicals at all. One year they had their potatoes tested, and they were filled with pesticides that had drifted on the air and through the soil and water from other farms around them. After all those generations of land stewardship and love, they sold that place and moved away with broken hearts. Everything's connected and love alone -though I believe it is required, that fierce religious love of earth and sky and rain -love alone won't save us. We have to want to understand how everything coheres. It's ancient intuition and it is also the best science. Neither of these most reliable ways of knowing is held in any esteem right now by people in power who couldn't care less – and so resistance matters, the resistance of a Rachel Carson, or a Galileo (who died for science) matters.

A poet writes about what's saving her through the ignorance and damage of this darkening time. Susan Kinsolving's poem is called "Trust:"

*Trust that there is a tiger, muscular
Tasmanian, and sly, which has never been
seen and never will be seen by any human
eye. Trust that thirty thousand sword-
fish will never near a ship, that far
from cameras or cars elephant herds live
long elephant lives. Believe that bees
by the billions find unidentified flowers
on unmapped marshes and mountains. Safe
in caves of contentment, bears sleep.
Through vast canyons, horses run while slowly
snakes stretch beyond their skins in the sun.
I must trust all this to be true, though
the few birds at my feeder watch the window
with small flutters of fear, so like my own.*

Our resistance and fierce love all matter more than ever.

45 years after the first Earth Day someone keeps bees in her backyard. Someone else is planning a community garden on her St. Paul street, with everything planted in plastic malt bags cast off by local brew pubs – and anyone in the neighborhood who wants to can come and pick the produce. Someone else here is a world-renowned climate scientist, who has mentored many young people here, including his own children, who became scientists as well. Someone who was once part of this circle and in many ways still is, though she died in 2005 – someone, Janie Olyphant - banded more wild birds in her lifetime for the fish and wildlife service than any other volunteer in the entire United States. Someone founded the local chapter of the Izaak Walton League. Others keep it going now.

One member who hated politics ran for the Mahtomedi Planning Commission in the 1970's and won a seat for no other reason than to protect green space against development- which is partly why Mahtomedi looks the way it does and unlike any other suburb in the east metro.

Someone chairs our Land Stewardship Committee on which that former member sat; others serve on the Global Climate Crisis Committee, or will come to lunch later today to talk about shaping new work.

One couple here is getting ready this week to plant 6,000 seedlings on their Christmas tree farm.

One member is a retired director of Pheasants Forever;
another a major benefactor of the Friends of the Boundary Waters.

Others go there every year to restore their souls, to remember what's holy and to strengthen their resolve.

One person here, an engineer, worked with the local watershed district to win a grant to build our porous parking lot;

others installed at their own expense the solar array on the roof of this building.

Yet another conceived the phenology board, so that every month children and adults can share what they find in the wild world with all of us.

(There was a fox out here this week, and three pileated woodpeckers, dozens of white tail, a Cooper's Hawk, a bald eagle, 4 mallard pairs, a fat sleek mammal swimming in the stream after it defrosted, and a flock of hungry robins – truly angry birds.)

One person comes to work and watches this for hours at your expense from her window in the minister's study.

Others render what they see in paintings, stories, music, sculpture and beautiful photographs.

One person who went to church with all those murals, and banded birds with Janie Olyphant, went on to direct the ornithology lab at Cornell University.

Some travelled last year to Standing Rock in solidarity with native water protectors;

others were too old for that, having been part of the first Earth Day in 1970, when 20 million Americans were in the streets, and within months the Environmental Protection Agency had been established (*and it will rise again*).

Some have learned to compost;

others camp and fish and hike with their small children or the grandkids.

One catalogued every native herb and tree and flower on this 4 ½ acre parcel.

One was a distinguished soil scientist at the U but was also known, within Minnesota's native community, as a curator of rare and ancient seeds, and those seeds are still producing food at Dream of Wild Health Farm.

Some with means have bought electric cars;

others will not own a car at all on principle.

Some refuse to fly in airplanes because the carbon cost is unacceptable and truly un-offset-able.

Some have chosen green burials for their loved ones and themselves and are looking forward to it happily.

Some here have worked for state and local governments fighting every day for conservation and wild spaces.

One member manages the deer herd through the DNR for the entire state of Minnesota;

another just diligently hauls out his recycling, rain or shine, though he's 85 years old; his weekly bag of tomato cans and exactly seven newspapers is vanishingly small, and it is valiant, and it is critical. Who can say how much any of this matters, how much a holy sacrament can matter? Joy Harjo writes,

*We are a small earth. It's no simple thing.
Eventually we will be dust together;
can be used to make a house, to stop a flood or grow food for those who will never remember
who we were,
or know that we loved fiercely.
Laughter and sadness eventually become the same song
turning us toward the nearest star --
a star constructed of eternity and elements of dust barely visible in the twilight ...
I imagine a promise made when no promise was possible.*

It's the promise of creation to every creature on the globe, the great mystery made manifest in mystical glimpses and the hard evidence of the best science. It is the promise, the vow, the diligent intention and the sacred covenant that we keep with our lives.