

**White Bear
Unitarian Universalist Church**

The Care of Magical Creatures

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Sunday, April 28, 2019

READINGS from Mary Oliver

from Blue Iris

Teach the children.
 We don't matter so much, but the children do.
 Show them daisies and the pale hepatica. Teach them the taste of sassafras and wintergreen.
 The lives of the blue sailors, mallow, sunbursts, the moccasin-flowers.
 And the frisky ones – inkberry, lamb's-quarters, blueberries.
 And the aromatic ones – rosemary, oregano. Give them peppermint to put in their pockets as they go to school.
 Give them the fields and the woods and the possibility of the world salvaged from the lords of profit.
 Stand them in the stream, head them upstream,
 rejoice as they learn to love this green space they live in,
 its sticks and leaves
 and then the silent, beautiful blossoms.

Do you think there is anything not attached by its unbreakable cord to everything else?
 Plant your peas and your corn in the field when the moon is full, or risk failure. This has been understood since planting began.
 The attention of the seed to the draw of the moon is, I suppose, measurable, like the tilt of the planet.
 Or, maybe not –
 maybe you have to add some immeasurable ingredient
 made of the hour,
 the singular field,
 the hand of the sower.

from Red Bird

Red Bird Explains Himself

Yes, I was the brilliance floating over the snow
 and I was the song in the summer leaves, but this was
 only the first trick

I had hold of among my other mythologies,
 for I also knew obedience: bring sticks to the nest,
 food to the young, kisses to my bride.

But don't stop there, stay with me: listen.

If I was the song that entered your heart
 then I was the music of your heart, that you wanted and needed,
 and thus wilderness bloomed there, with all its
 followers: gardeners, lovers, people who weep
 for the death of rivers.

And this was my true task, to be the
 music of the body. Do you understand?
 for truly the body needs
 a song, a spirit, a soul. And no less, to make this work,
 the soul has need of a body,
 and I am both of the earth and I am of the inexplicable
 beauty of heaven
 where I fly so easily, so welcome, yes,
 and this is why I have been sent, to teach this to your heart.

What is the greatest gift?
 Could it be the world itself-the oceans, the meadowlark,
 the patience of the trees in the wind?
 Could it be love, with its sweet clamor of passion?

Something else- something else entirely holds me in thrall.
 That you have a life that I wonder about
 more than I wonder about my own.
 That you have a life-courteous and intelligent-that
 I wonder about more than I wonder about my own.
 That you have a soul - your own, no one else's - that
 I wonder about more than I wonder about my own.
 So that I find my soul clapping its hands for yours more than my own.

Attention is the beginning of devotion.

The Care of Magical Creatures

As often as I can, which is usually about a twice a year, I travel to Florida to visit my mother and her partner, to check on them and help out a little and look at old pictures and take them to appointments. They live near the beach, and when I'm there I try to walk early in the morning and also late at night. They're in a crowded, noisy city near Cape Canaveral, so it's not like this is a nature preserve or wilderness. But the sea is big and the tide roars in and out, seagulls and pelicans gather in great flocks; there are dolphins there, and sharks, and sea turtles, and bright blue jellyfish, fragile grasses on the dunes and translucent yellow crabs. Very few people are on the beach before the sun comes up or after it goes down. To walk there, for me, is a centering spiritual practice; rain or shine, it's always changing and always the same. It restores my soul.

At mid-day it's another story. If I go down there in the afternoon, it is spring break on steroids, no matter what the season. Thousands of people, brown and black and white bodies glistening with sweat and sunscreen and salt, with their umbrellas and their red plastic party cups and coolers and diapers and Frisbees and music, surfboards and sunhats and headscarves and saris; people playing football, volleyball, bocce; toddlers and lovers and children and old people on folding chairs swaddled like babies in beach towels and blankets, reading their books amidst the chaos; and here, in the midst of it all, a yoga class with a loudspeaker; and over here, almost always, a barefoot wedding; and metal detectorists, and fat tire bikes and giant tricycles, and lifeguards blowing their whistles - thousands and thousands of people, all on my quiet sacred stretch of coastline. After all these years of going there, and resenting them all bitterly and silently, in a very un-pastoral way, one day last summer, it shifted. I got hit with a football - not for the first time, but something in the way these two guys bounded up to me smiling and concerned, *as if it were their beach* and I were a guest there, something just shifted and I saw all the people not as an intrusion on the pristine landscape, not an interruption in my experience of the natural world, but fully part of it, part of the wholeness and the holiness of earth.

I'll just say here that I know: the fact that I travel on a plane to walk on this beach with the dolphins at sunrise and the endangered turtles in moonlight is a more than disturbing hypocrisy: flying by plane, driving to the airport in a car. Like so many things that I do without thinking - and also fully aware - in a year, in a month, in a week, every day, like so many things, it makes me inextricably complicit. We are complicit no matter how much carbon we offset or bottles we recycle or petitions we sign or Priuses we drive or self-righteousness we harbor. Our complicity is given:

if you touch plastic;
 if you eat anything at all not grown in Minnesota;
 if your dollars support in any way, directly or indirectly, the capitalist, multinational fossil fuel economy;
 if you drive a car or dry clean your clothes, or use a phone or a computer manufactured overseas and filled as they are with those rare and precious metals, taken from mines in the jungle often at great risk by people who are very poor;
 or if you fly twice a year to see your 97 year-old mom and her 99 year-old boyfriend because they're old and need help, and you love them, and there's no way you're moving to Cocoa Beach

to live with them, and so you have to go and in fact *want to* because they need you, and you need them, and when you go, the sea restores your soul...

Our complicity is given – so we have to put our purity aside, our insufferable and ineffective insistence on perfection and purity (because there isn't any), and put aside at least some of our constant judgement and self-judgement. There are things that we can do, things that we must do, things we must do better, changes we must make, tiny, incremental, household changes that add up; and large-scale, global, tipping-point changes, legislative changes, international commitments, political action, direct action – all crucial now - but all of it begins with reverence. The environmental crisis is a spiritual crisis before it is anything else – that's how it began, so long ago, with spiritual dis-order - and repair will begin with humility and hope, and gratitude for the gift of life, and wonder, and love - not only of pretty, sentimental landscapes, or serene open spaces we visit on vacation if we can afford to- but love of the great family of things, including one another. It begins with an orientation of the spirit.

Notice.
Cherish.
Protect.

Attention, says the poet, is the beginning of devotion.

Something shifted in my spirit on the beach last summer, and I saw the people not as something in the way of nature or apart from nature, nor even as a threat to nature, but a complicated, necessary dimension of it, and myself a part of them, and all of us together, very salty, briny, the salt water of our bodies separated from the water of sea only by the thinnest stretch of skin, and a only for a little while, wrapped around our bones which are in fact the same as sand, and which will be sand before long. My father's ashes were scattered on that beach, and a portion of my brother's. Where does one person leave off and another begin? Where do the people leave off and the calcium -rich sea shells begin, and the coral and the turtle shell? On a hot, crowded, sweaty day, I saw us all in all of it; my heart was softened somehow toward everyone and everything.

Any care for the earth must take into account, must bring to the center, the care of these magical creatures, these delicate, perplexed, perplexing humans. At J.K. Rowling's Hogwarts School of Wizardry and Witchcraft, the "Care of Magical Creatures" is a class for 3rd year students, not beginners, who learn to cherish and protect the most exotic, fragile and mysterious animals: wondrous, powerful, inscrutable living things. To fail to take the time to know them deeply, on their own terms, to step back and give them space to flourish and not try to tame them or control them, can be dangerous. They are beautiful and elegant and capable of doing unspeakable damage – just like us. Any care of the earth must bring to the center our care for each other as magical creatures– in our grief over climate change and desecration and extinction, for example, so that sorrow does not calcify into intractable despair.

In this time of crisis, this Anthropocene era of tornadoes, draughts, mudslides, fires, glacial melting, we need to care more carefully for one another - in the faithful discipline required, for example, to complicate a complex crisis even further, with the willingness to notice which

humans are doing the most damage, and which (not in the far-away future, but right now) are the most affected; which ones are displaced and endangered and dying right now. We care for one another, magical creatures all, by centering on purpose the voices of those least responsible for and most affected by the devastation.

What is the greatest gift? asks Mary Oliver, who walked the beaches of Provincetown and so many other sacred spaces just about her whole life long, following her own commandment: *Pay attention. Be astonished. Tell about it.* She asked in another poem,

*What is the greatest gift?
Could it be the world itself-the oceans, the meadowlark,
the patience of the trees in the wind?*

*... Something else- something else entirely holds me in thrall.
That you have a life that I wonder about
more than I wonder about my own.
That you have a life-courteous and intelligent-that
I wonder about more than I wonder about my own.
That you have a soul - your own, no one else's - that
I wonder about more than I wonder about my own.
So that I find my soul clapping its hands for yours more than my own.*

I'm not saying humans are the best part of nature – not at all. We're way done with that old theology. The license given us in Genesis to dominate the earth has long expired – the deadly license that morphed along the way from permission to colonize the animals and plants to entitlement to colonize each other, to dominate, enslave, objectify each other, make property and waste of one another. It is one of the origins of whiteness and white supremacy, that Biblical license, that skewed perspective, which privileges one species among thousands above all the others, “grants dominion,” meaning plunder, to one people or one kind of person over and against all others. That license to call unholy what is inherently holy, to tear apart the web, was never valid and it is not now. I'm not saying that humans are the best or most worthy or most dignified part of nature – not at all. I'm just saying that we are one part of it: magical creatures, a little lower than the angels, like all the other miraculous, luminous things.

Notice.
Cherish.
Protect.

I have seen in the past two weeks, here at church, three different foxes on three different days: one a golden red on the bridge over there, exactly where I saw another one last year (or maybe the same one), with a live rabbit in its mouth; one smaller one, and scraggly, with a ragged tail, slinking near the Alcove window; and a third one, thick and gray, defiant, full of attitude, one night on the sidewalk by the front door as I was coming out. It was the night of the full moon, and it felt a little like a fairy tale, “The Tale of the Fox and the Moon and the Minister.” He stood so long staring at me that finally I had to speak to him.

Are you going to move off this sidewalk, or am I, because my car's over there?

He barely looked up.

I'm not moving, he said.

So I walked around him, way onto the grass by the Social Hall, giving him a wide berth, and when I looked back he was still there, staring at me, glaring at me. He spoke again.

You think you own this place, he said. *But you don't. You're wrong about a lot of things concerning foxes.*

And then he swaggered off.

There are two mallard pairs now swimming in the stream, and one lone male, and a silky mink. The peepers are a full orchestra at night. There are many woodpeckers, all sizes, Cooper's Hawks and eagles, and a heron in the marsh, and egrets. The little birds are back, and everywhere, thanks to rain and sun and mystery, this week you could see what a young friend of mine calls the "green shadow," the faintest mist, a scrim of greening buds. *Attention is the beginning of devotion*, says the poet. And I don't know a lot (the fox is right), but you don't need to be a biologist or ornithologist to look and be astounded. Noticing will lead to cherishing, and we humans are known to protect what we love. We can be as fierce as foxes, and almost as smart.

One thing I noticed all winter was a cardinal pair in the smaller trees around that cottonwood, singing their hearts out in the mornings and late afternoons. Mary Oliver writes of a similar red bird:

*Yes, I was the brilliance floating over the snow, and I was the song in the summer leaves, ...
If I was the song that entered your heart
then I was the music of your heart, that you wanted and needed,
and thus wilderness bloomed there, with all its
followers: gardeners, lovers, people who weep
for the death of rivers.*

*And this was my true task, to be the
music of the body. ...
for truly the body needs
a song, a spirit, a soul. And no less, to make this work,
the soul has need of a body,
and I am both of the earth and I am of the inexplicable
beauty of heaven
where I fly so easily, ...
and this is why I have been sent, to teach this to your heart.*

We have taught ourselves to think about environmental action and environmental justice in ways that may not serve us any longer going forward. I think of our Unitarian Universalist principles, honoring the worth and dignity of every person and the interconnected web of life. What if we thought also about the interconnected, interdependent lives and livelihoods of communities of people and the dignity of animals, the worthiness of plants and land and water?

Sophia Betancourt, a UU theologian, says we have inherited a theological vision of environmental engagement that romanticizes pristine landscapes emptied of humans, except perhaps some solitary and cerebral mystic, an Emerson or a Henry David Thoreau, who might wander there and report to us how sublime it is, how special. “It is all too easy,” she says, “to erase the wisdom of communities silenced by economic injustice, land theft and racism when the idea of spiritual communion with the wilderness never once includes the presence of the indigenous people removed from our lands,” or the black people treated like livestock to work on them. “This encourages the dominant assumption that communities of color in the US are not only disengaged from environmental concerns, or any appreciation of the natural world, but are defined by their concentration in urban centers. It is no wonder that the mainstream environmental movement is predominantly white, economically privileged and frequently focused on justice for the Earth to the exclusion of all else.”

What are we willing to notice? Who gets to decide what we should cherish? What and whom are we willing to protect?

This work is hard and exhausting and fearsome. The place to look for inspiration, restoration, amazement, gladness love, may be in your garden or your backyard, especially in springtime, among the tiny shoots all poking up now, even through gravel, even (in my case) through last November’s unraked leaves. The place to look may be in your own backyard, and it may also be in the small villages of the countries all around the Arctic Circle, where climate change and glacial melt and the rising sea are already forcing community displacements, uprooting lives and livelihoods, tribal homelands and traditions, with no hope ever of return. Find your love of the earth in the faces of the people, in their urgency. They are part of it no less than the caribou and polar bear, and they are gathering now, gathering their powers and their intelligence and strategy. The hope we need and the changes we require are in the wisdom and the voices of the people of earth.

The place to restore your soul may be deep in the Boundary waters this summer, paddling and portaging in the solitude you’ve dreamed about all winter, or on the north shore in a cabin or a tent, or the Superior Hiking Trail, or the Apostle Islands - but the place to ground your spirit may also be in the words and images, the testimony, rising right now from Malawi, Zimbabwe, Mozambique, where two monster cyclones in a span of weeks have affected more than *3 million people*. Find your love of the earth in the faces of the people, in their urgency; the hope we need and the changes we require are in the wisdom and the voices of the people of earth.

The place to breathe deep and feel our deepest connection to nature may be by the sea at sunrise, or in mountains, or the desert, a national park - but the place to breathe the breath of life might

also be in downtown Flint, Michigan, or southern Louisiana, or Standing Rock, North Dakota, where no one has to imagine what the impact of environmental degradation will be someday, because they know right now: it's killing people; it's layering their children's brains and blood with lead from the water, oil in the water, filth in the water, and the waters are rising over people's homes. If our love of the earth is real, we will find it in the faces of the people, in their urgency, their strategies, their power; the hope we need and the changes we require are in the wisdom and the voices of the people of earth, who, no less than the lady-slipper and the gray wolf, are made of soil and salt and holy water.

This is a spiritual practice and a moral requirement: to know a small patch of a place, and love a place so deeply, its foxes, turtles, birds and grasses, the way the wind moves and the light, to hold it as a touchstone to your heart, and then to close your eyes and take a breath, and try to understand, try to believe, that other people elsewhere in this same moment everywhere, are loving their small places also, where their lives and livelihood unfold, where their parents were born and are buried, and their children and dreams, where their spirits are at rest. Those places and those people are part of what we must also love, just like this cardinal, just like this cottonwood, or any lake in Minnesota on any morning, shrouded in mist and sanctified by silence.

Do you think, asks the poet, *there is anything not attached by its unbreakable cord to everything else?* I'm telling you: No glass of water from a faucet in Flint, no plastic cup of water from a faucet in Flint is less worthy of prayer and protection than the St. Croix Scenic Waterway or the Brown's Creek Watershed, or the Quetico or a stretch of shoreline that you know by heart.

Pay attention, to everyone, to everything.
Be amazed, by everything, by everyone.
Tell about it.

Notice.
Cherish.
Protect.

The quote from Sophia Betancourt is from *Justice on Earth: People of faith working at the intersections of race, class and the environment*, Skinner House Press.