

Simple In Means, Rich In Ends

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Living as if Nature Mattered

Robert Keim, Unitarian Universalist Church In The Pines April 22, 2012

This past Wednesday, I took advantage of a special opportunity. Rollins College, in Winter Park, invited Joel Salatin (of Polyface Farm in Virginia, whom some of you may remember was written about by Michael Pollan in his book, The Omnivore's Dilemma) to speak and essentially open their Earth Day celebration with a talk entitled "**Folks, This Ain't Normal.**"

I have to admit that he was quite the "show for the evening," for while I expected to hear certain things from Mr. Salatin – such as "Eat seasonally and from nearby," or "Don't eat anything that won't rot or was invented after 1900" – there were a few ideas that he spoke to that left a dent or two in my approach to everyday life:

(1) "Processed food = cadavers; it takes life to give life." Think about that one for a moment or two.

(2) Our bodies are about 2/3 bacteria – you know, all those microscopic living beings processing the everyday parts of our world (such as food, drink, or medicine – not to mention what to do with the waste we generate), so be careful with that anti-bacterial soap or spray you might have in your house;

(3) The notion that our current President, whom many of us believe to be reasonably progressive, recently signed into effect a law that permits the Food and Drug Administration to spend more time overseeing and harassing organic and "natural" farms such as Mr. Salatin's than corporations such as Monsanto or Archer-Daniels-Midland; and

(4) The idea that "**In a time of opportunity when we can do things in new ways, we need ethical and moral systems developed that can speak to the changes we're encountering with our operative scientific, agricultural and industrial environments,**" before what's happening in these worlds gets away from us.

It was enough of an evening to leave us driving home slightly dazed! Here was someone who sought to live "simple in means, rich in ends," and it's as if much of our world does not know what to do with him, or is afraid of what he might mean to the rest of us.

And that's not to mention the fact that the event was part of Winter Park's FIRST Earth Day celebration. Where have they been the last 41 years? I mean, this day of recognition was launched in 1970 by then-Senator Gaylord Nelson, and has become an event now held in 175 countries to increase awareness and appreciation of Earth's natural environment. For heaven's sake, in 2009 the United Nations designated April 22nd International Mother Earth Day.

And it was Winter Park's first?!?

So, to begin **our** celebration of this Day, let us start by recognizing how we Unitarian Universalists have acknowledged the bond with our home planet. I ask you to consider our 7th Principle. Found in our hymnals immediately before Hymn #1, it reads as follows (and should you feel so inclined, please join in):

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“We, the member congregations of the Unitarian Universalist Association, covenant to affirm and promote Respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part.”

Now, while the spirit of independent personal thought and ethics is absolutely precious to us, the fact that this Principle is an essential component of what we stand for invites closer examination. How we understand and carry it out is, I believe, critical to the definition of being Unitarian Universalist – not to mention human.

Let us begin, then, by coming to an understanding of the very core of this Principle.

“Covenant to affirm and promote...”

This seems simple enough. We promise (or, “covenant to”) one another that we will stand together as one, and do whatever is required to support the grounds of a particular principle.

“Respect for the interdependent web...”

It starts to get a little bit tougher as we add meat to the bones. “Respect for” is probably a pretty agreeable phrase. “The Interdependent web?” Well, Webster’s Encyclopedic Unabridged Dictionary of the English Language defines interdependent as **“mutually dependent; dependent on each other”**. While this part might feel just a bit circular, “web” has nineteen separate definitions, but there is a common thread that runs through most of them. It is a recurring referral to the word **woven** – such phrases as “woven fabric, woven strip, interweaved, intricately woven” and so on apply.

What these two leave us with is the perception, at this point, that we are talking about a reality that is tightly bound-together and highly related. It is of one cloth, though each thread may be a different material or color, and each is woven in its own fashion.

But before proceeding, we must address one itsy-bitsy, little word – one that just might be full of meaning in this case. “The.” Again, to Webster’s: **“Used, especially before a noun, with a specifying or particularizing effect, as opposed to the indefinite or generalizing force of the article *a* or *an*.”** Thus we are addressing the **only** interdependent web we will ever know or experience.

“...of all existence of which we are a part.”

There are two components to this section. The first, “of all existence” does not leave much room for debate. All existence stretches over the surface of the earth, down into the ocean’s depths, and across the firmament overhead. All means all – not just some portion thereof.

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But it's that second section that's, frankly, much more interesting. "Of which we are a part," at first glance would appear simple enough. What we must note, however, is that it does not state "of which we are in charge," but "of which we are a part." Unlike understandings which base themselves on a human-centric perspective, such as the words found in Genesis 1:28 - "...**Have dominion over...**" - our Principle stands otherwise. Indeed, we envision a world of a completely different order: one "of which we are a part." We are not God, in charge of everything we see. This is not our place to just do with as we please and not worry about what we leave behind. We human beings are one family here amongst the community of Earth, and finding our way to live within this "interdependent web" is ultimately one way of how we shall define who and what we are and might be.

So, thus do we covenant with one another to stand together, supporting the whole family of this planet, of which we are a part.

The implications of this truly radical principle can be most intriguing and challenging. To give you a bit of a feeling for its meaning, let me quote from Humboldt State University professor Bill Devall's work with George Sessions entitled Deep Ecology. It describes his sense of awareness relative to the creation of a bit of a national park:

"Instead of thinking like a watershed, that is thinking about the relationships among logging, road building and sediment load of Redwood Creek, Congress had included only a narrow band of trees along the creek, up to the Tall Trees grove in the boundaries of the new park."

As Devall might have put it, **"Thinking like a watershed stretches our thought boundaries; it asks us to see the world more broadly, more environmentally. Don't just think about those few trees over there - remember all of the other parts of this place that feed the very ground on which they stand."**

And so does our 7th Principle nudge us to understand the world as being more integrated, more a vision of interwoven life. What Devall was trying to express, as I understand it, is a major building block of what I will dare to call "Unitarian Universalist Environmentalism."

The importance of this moment, to me, cannot be overstated. Allow me to just sort of tingle your spine a little bit with a quote from the book Totem Salmon, by Freeman House:

"I am smack in the middle of the beautiful off-handed description of our field of being that once flew up from my friend David Abrams' mouth: that we are many sets of eyes staring out at each other from the same living body. For an instant, there is part of that living body which is a cold, wet darkness, containing a pure burst of salmon muscle and intelligence, and also a clumsy, desiring human pursuing the ghost of a relationship."

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What House had come to realize while counting salmon in Washington state was that there is a bond, however chipped or broken, however distant, however earnestly sought, between himself and the fish that passed through his hands. It was not just a matter of touch or the pursuit of statistical information. It was one set of eyes from the same living body looking back at another – it was the very essence of life itself.

And so I want to challenge each of us to be in such a state of awareness, to knit together what we say and do. Let us learn to live this 7th Principle. And let me stress such notion's importance. For having become more an everyday part of the environmental movement, I have come to realize that if we cannot do this, we will remain creatures of creeds, not deeds, and our pursuit of that "**ghost of a relationship**" of which House spoke will be just a dust scattering before the wind.

But when we put the vital needs of other beings on an even playing field with our own conceived self-interest, then we discover that we have broader and deeper spiritual dimensions that will be fed by responding to the "other." As we stretch and enfold ourselves to include the "other," we become more than we are by ourselves. From Thomas Berry's The Dream of the Earth:

"The ecological age fosters the deep awareness of the sacred presence within each reality of the universe. There is an awe and reverence due to the seas and the continents; to all living forms of trees and flowers; to the myriad expressions of life in the sea; to the animals of the forests and the birds of the air. To wantonly destroy a living species is to silence forever a divine voice. Our primary need for the various life forms of the planet is a psychic, rather than physical, need. The ecological age seeks to establish and maintain this subjective identity, this authenticity at the heart of every being."

And so, there is much to do – and sometimes, much to endure. To be trained as an ecologist, Aldo Leopold wrote nearly fifty years ago, "**is to live alone in a world of wounds.**"

And yet, it need not be so. Living our 7th Principle gives us roots to stand on to help us out of this predicament. How, you ask. Well, maybe it's like Freeman House said in Totem Salmon: "**We invent our strategies as we go along.**"

For while we might immerse ourselves in population control projects throughout the world, helping to meet this question head on, we should also remember to celebrate the possibilities of every child.

For another, while we might get our feet wet in environmental battles popping up across the globe, from coming water wars to the consumption of genetically engineered corn, we must learn to take the time to become immersed in such wonders as the emergence of the

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nation's newest National Preserve – the Northern Everglades, near the headwaters of the Kissimmee River.

And then there's the mixed joy of questions, such as: What is the quality of organic food products? Are they equivalent to or superior in any way to conventionally grown crops? Or are they a threat? Why is there such opposition to them in so much of the agricultural and food marketing communities? And meanwhile, **how do I find them locally?** When is Beasley's farm open for business? And how **does** Bob grow such good carrots, and do you think he'd plant some for me next year?

At while we're at it, let's at least acknowledge that we should recognize what our incessant desire for "toys" and communication can mean to Earth. An article from Harper's Magazine in 2005 contained an article concerning the development of a continental network of power lines feeding both the United States and developing countries to our south. One of the most intriguing points in the article was that in the coming ten years, the majority of residential power consumed in the U.S. will not be for cooking, heating, cooling, hot water or lighting. The true drains: home computers, computer-based games, and computerized security systems. Surging in their demand for electricity, electrical experts and theoreticians believe that such items will soon consume more than 50% of residential power use.

Do we really need them?

And what of climate change? To be truthful, the signs are not encouraging; as someone attuned to the number 350, frankly, the problem seems to be accelerating. I have begun to truly fear for Polar Bears, not to mention some Pacific island nations whose coastal elevation lines look like Florida's. And speaking of our home-state – will we get more hurricanes, more stormy weather, hotter, drier summers, or will this land just go back to the sea?

If we let it, this is OUR children and grandchildren's future. We're not talking about some other world. It comes down to us. The time to act is now.

From Thomas Berry's The Dream of the Earth:

"We are like a musician who faintly hears a melody deep within the mind, but not clearly enough to play it through. This is the inner agony we experience, especially when we consider that the music we are creating is the very reality of the universe."

In addition to activism of whatever flavor you choose, I want to suggest a simple, personal step that you can take to become an amazingly effective part of a wave of change.

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In a culture that seems to measure worth by possessions and status, we have the rare opportunity as a community to affirm the value of standing apart – of just letting go. That is, rather than being defined by the things we have, we take the radical step of insisting on being measured by who we are and how we live. Real **“Conversion means letting go – letting go of a preoccupation with material wealth.”** It means **“knowing when you have enough”** says Kathy Thornton, national coordinator for NETWORK, a Catholic social justice lobbying group.

Simple in means, rich in ends, we have the opportunity to become members of a restorative community, one that helps Earth begin to heal itself. Again from Totem Salmon:

“The fish arrive to feed us and they do so at the same time every year, and they do so with an obvious sense of intention. They come at intervals to feed us. They are very beautiful. What if they stopped coming? – Which they must if we fail to relearn how to celebrate the true nature of the relationship.”

The choice is ours.