

## **“THE INTERCONNECTED WEB”**

The First Parish in Wayland, Massachusetts

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The Rev. Ken Sawyer

Ours is a movement that has long been closely associated with a love of nature, a respect for the planet’s rhythms and life forms, a reverence for life (as Albert Schweitzer put it), and a sense of responsibility for the care of our earthly home.

Newcomers who are just getting to know Unitarian Universalism may not have guessed that from the selection in the pamphlet racks, but any of you who have been around for a while have heard me mention this association more than once.

For instance, eleven years ago I said that “In church and out, UUs commonly understand themselves to be people who regularly draw spiritual sustenance from nature.

“I suppose there are Presbyterians, too, and Mormons and Jews who excuse their absence from worship services on occasion with a line to their clergy about finding God outdoors, about having attended church or temple the previous week in the White Mountains or sailing around Cape Ann. But for UUs, given our history, given the place nature commonly plays in our personal theologies, the contention might be partially a jest, but only partially. Among us it is not fatuous to speak of a hike or a sail or just an evening’s half-hour spent staring at a star-flecked sky as communion with God or as worship.”

Just so, these words of Kathie Lee Sather, our minister in St. John’s, Newfoundland:

“As a canoeing instructor and guide, I have spent a lot of time in the wilderness ... lake paddling in the Canadian Shield, a place of wind and rain, sun and shadow, lakes and portage trails. The difficulties of portaging and paddling into the wind on a lake forced me truly to engage with my surroundings. My senses became sharper: I saw and heard and smelled things I would have ignored at home.

“I have finally identified the call of the wild, also known as the singing wilderness or the song of the paddle, as a call from God. It is a call to return to life lived in the present as ... a canoe trip carrying the barest of essentials ... forces you to live. It is a call to join the mystical connections already there, a call to heed one’s inner voice proclaiming connections to the

world all around you, and indeed, a call to live in harmony with that natural world.

“Wilderness is a place sacred.... I begin with the wilderness trail I paddle. The habits of the trail become my ritual; it is like living in a monastery, for the day is measured by the hour and its attendant sacrament. Upon my return home, I carry ... with me the strength of having lived in ritual harmony for that period of time. I carry with me the strength of divinity within.”

I know many of us can identify with Kathie Lee’s experience of the sacredness of the natural world, some of us in wilderness canoeing, and many more of us in a variety of other ways, including ones as near at hand as gardening, bird watching, and a walk on conservation land.

So it has seemed strange to some people that there was not a pamphlet on UU Views of Nature and the Environment. Even the president of our denomination, John Beuhrens, commented on that absence, noting that while we had people at headquarters devoting themselves to a number of important good causes, no one was assigned to supporting the one issue that no doubt most engaged our membership at the local level, which was the celebration and defense of the environment, of our fellow creatures, and of the planet’s well being – those matters referred to in a sweeping way by the seventh of our basic principles, the affirmation of the web of all existence of which we are a part.

John said this to me, as I was about to become the third person to attempt to produce such a pamphlet. I did not succeed, nor did my successor. So there is still no pamphlet on the racks of this great nation, though a fifth person is now giving it a go.

My tactic was to solicit short manuscripts from across the continent, the best of which would illustrate the breadth of UU reverence for, concern for, and commitment to nature and the environment. I got a lot, but not enough that were good enough to convince the Pamphlet Commission to proceed. I passed copies on to my successor; a few may eventually see the light of denominational day.

Meanwhile, I was left with the originals of pieces like Kathie Lee Sather’s, and no one to share them with.... And then along came a request from the folks in the other building for a ceremony blessing the animals, i.e., a Sunday to celebrate (if you will) the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part, guinea pig and kitty cat, katydid and mocking bird, marigold and spiderwort, the Sudbury River and the Canadian Shield.

It is a big part of our particular way of understanding religion, a reverence for nature, along with a passion for justice, a love of beauty, and a striving for knowledge and wisdom, all in the context of a commitment to creating and sustaining a community of common care.

One of the other people who submitted a piece for the pamphlet caught nicely the way our religion values both the sacramental wisdom of our wilderness trails and the sustaining power of our UU community of faith.

Truth is, he submitted it because I asked him to, knowing that as an outdoorsman he would bring to the pamphlet a somewhat different viewpoint than others might offer. The writer is my only brother, David, who lives in Colorado. Like Kathie Lee Sather's, yours, or mine, his faith expresses a religious understanding – a UU understanding -- of nature:

“All of my truly religious experiences have struck me outdoors. I treasure people and our places. My church is an important place to reflect on my spirituality, and share this wonder of life with others. But Unitarianism has always meant to me not just the unity of the godhead, but of the mind and body, and of all things. These things can be reflected upon, shared, and appreciated inside a church, but must be experienced outside.

“I am often at one with everything while watching the flight of a well-struck golf ball; while walking along a forest stream; while sitting on a mountain top; while sailing out of sight of land; while seducing a fish to take a dry fly....

“I acknowledge my humanity. Through the course of my life I have fought, prayed, killed, and above all, loved. I love the forests, the oceans, and all creatures. I love people and the good we try to do. I love animals and the good they are without trying.

“Religion at its best peddles love. To love ourselves, and our part in the great life of our earth, we take our roles with vigor, pleasure – and with love. To be human is not just to think. It is to play, hike, fish, hunt, and -- love. Good relevant religion teaches us not just to love our human neighbors, but to love all our neighbors, and our common home. Unitarian [Universalism] is this kind of religion. I love my home, my earth, my church.”

Even as the world awaits its pamphlet, though, there are other sources of denominational writing on animals, nature, and the environment, like a little book called *A Green Sound: Nature Writing from the Living Tradition of Unitarian Universalism*. Included in it are works by people with UU

connections, some stronger than others, like Emerson, Robert Fulghum, Beatrix Potter, Bret Harte and Linda Weltner.

Gary Kowalski, my colleague in Burlington, Vermont, has authored two books for the general audience, *The Souls of Animals*, just re-released in a revised, paperback edition, and *Goodbye, Friend: Healing Wisdom for Anyone Who Has Ever Lost a Pet*.

Gary also wrote one of the UUA's meditation manuals a couple years ago, called *Green Mountain Spring and Other Leaps of Faith*. I got him to write a piece for the pamphlet. As you can gather, Gary's our guy when it comes to appreciating our kinship in the family of all animals, and all we can learn from animals.

Three readings:

“Under the skin...”

“Dog Days”

“And the River Flows On”

Having been somewhat in the middle of the denominational effort to make itself known as a movement that cares deeply about matters environmental – and I am still the person who is overseeing the efforts of pamphlet-preparer #5 – I am keenly aware of how true that claim would be.

There are UU theologians writing book after book on the central place of nature in their understandings of religious faith. There are UU laypeople writing well about the sources in nature of their own sense of the sacred. There are UU environmentalists eager to convince us of the ways our living patterns must evolve if we are to have a habitable planet to bequeath. There are UU social activists concerned with the injustice visited on the poor by our current ways of producing and consuming. And others, just as fervent, just as informed. I will mention two before I close.

I was impressed at the effort of the environmental task force of one of our congregations – the Oak Park Church in Chicago -- to produce a pamphlet for use among its own members that defined the practical issues and some steps toward solution. The fancy part of it said this:

“We believe that all created existence is an interdependent web, and that our respect for the delicacy and beauty of this creation compels us to tread lightly on the earth. We believe that environmentalism is not an act or a series of acts but a process – a daily approach to living. When we live with respect for our surroundings we benefit in many ways – spiritually, emotionally, and economically. Our society has developed a carelessness with resources which is not only costly in the damage it does, but costly in

other ways. It robs our spirit, equating human worth with material worth. It robs our pockets, wasting resources [and] weakening our economy.... The future of our country cannot be secured until we reckon, in each decision, the true, complex cost of what we do to the environment.”

And then they offered a list of things we each might do, like when it comes to gardening, do so in harmony with the earth, growing local plants, using non-toxic pesticides, herbicides, and fertilizers; and composting. Buy infrequently and responsibly, considering the materials used. Use sparingly and use up. Reduce energy and water consumption. Convert to fluorescent light bulbs. Turn things off when not in use. Use the sun to dry clothes. Use hand-powered alternatives to power tools. Keep appliances in good repair. And insulate!

If all this seems new and trendy, I assure you, this thing we seem to have about the natural world has been a penchant ours for a very long time. Indeed, I close with a reading that points us back over four hundred years, to the first Unitarian of modern times, Michael Servetus, a Spanish physician.

The reading is an excerpt from a sermon by Ron Engels, a faculty member at our theological school in Chicago, Meadville/Lombard. Ron writes,

“We Unitarian Universalists have a special responsibility for a ministry to the Earth.... I believe it has been the genius of our faith to witness to the Holy manifest universally on Earth.... At our best ... we have joined those who protested any and all attempts to identify the Holy with some exclusive or single manifestation – whether it be a particular gender, nation, race, class, sect, creed, or species.

“A case in point: Michael Servetus, whose voice is remembered as the first anti-Trinitarian martyr, was burned at the stake in 1553 at the hands of the religious authorities of Geneva. Of the several charges against him the most damning was not his anti-trinitarianism but his pantheism. Wrote Calvin afterwards, ‘When he [Servetus] asserted that all creatures are of the proper essence of God..., I, wounded at the indignity, objected: ‘What, wretch! If one stamps the floor would one say that he had stamped on your God? Does not such an absurdity shame you?’ But he [Servetus] answered, ‘I have no doubt that this bench or anything you point to is God’s substance.’

“Can we be surprised, then,” Ron goes on, “at the positive reception to eco-feminism, process theology, animal rights, and the Pagan revival in our churches; the enthusiasm for the [seventh] principle in our UU Statement of Purposes and Principles – ‘respect for the interdependent web of all

existence of which we are a part'; the overwhelming approval given ... to the [addition of] 'teachings of Earth-centered traditions' to our sources of spiritual wisdom for these Purposes and Principles?

“All of this points, it seems to me, to tremendous potential [among] Unitarian Universalists for assuming leadership in the growing worldwide movement to minister to the Earth.”

And so may it be.