

“The Rock of Togetherness ”
A Homily by the Rev. Dr. Stephanie May
First Parish in Wayland
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I am a rock, I am an island.

As a teenager yearning for a sense of independence, the refrain of Simon and Garfunkel’s classic song called to me like a ballad of defiance. (I was never too good with lyrics beyond the chorus.) I too would become my own woman. I would follow in the footsteps of those who beckoned to be oneself. Like Oscar Wilde who wrote, “Be yourself. Everyone else is taken.” Or Emerson who counseled, “To be yourself in a world that is constantly trying to make you something else is the greatest accomplishment.”

Why listen to others? The true, sacred calling is to be oneself. To be an individual. As Eleanor Roosevelt said, “Remember always that you not only have the right to be an individual, you have an obligation to be one.”

I am a rock. I am an island. I am an individual. I am my own self.

And a rock feels no pain;
And an island never cries.

Today, I am full of pain—grieving the loss of Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg, scared for even more political divisiveness, horrified by the devastation of wildfires and hurricanes, angry for the relentless march of names of black folks killed by police, and heartbroken as the death toll from Covid-19 in the United States soon surpasses 200,000 lives.

Being an island is an illusion. We are all impacted by the events surrounding us.

And doesn’t this get us closer to what Simon and Garfunkel are *actually* saying? You can try to wall yourself off with books and poetry. You can try to hide from friendship, from others. But there is a cost. No touch. No emotion. No love.

On the one hand, many of us may be feeling too much like an island right now—a little too isolated and socially distanced from others due to the pandemic. And, it is true that the *physical* distances between us are greater right now. This distance costs us many valuable experiences of connection, including human touch and hugs.

On the other hand, physical distancing does not erase the many, many inextricable ways we *are* connected. For example, the recent disruptions in the supply chain of goods as well as in the wider economy make clear how linked we are to others. Indeed, it’s nearly impossible to be entirely self-sufficient . . . no matter how many cans of tomatoes we store

from our garden or how many solar panels are on our roof. We need others for the multitude of products and services that enable our lives. We need others to simply survive.

We are not islands. As the 7th Unitarian Universalist principle affirms: we are part of an interdependent web of all existence.

Not everyone thinks so. There is a deep belief in individualism in our culture. In a Medium column entitled, [“On Whiteness and Individualism.”](#) D.L. Schultz explains the distinction between an individualist view of the human person and a collectivist understanding. To illustrate, he writes,

“Consider how someone who climbed a mountain might say that they “conquered the mountain.” Such a phrase implies that the speaker perceives themselves to be not just separate from but more powerful than the mountain, having “conquered” it by traversing its slopes. Another way to look at the act of climbing a mountain is to consider that one reached *union* with the mountain by *adapting* to its slopes. There is no competition in this latter framing, only unity between person and environment in relation to one another.”

In this example, Schultz illustrates how there can be two ways of perceiving the relationship between climber and mountain. One in which the individual climber is separate from the mountain. The second where the climber and mountain are a collective in an adaptive, interactive web .

Schultz goes on to quote author Alan Watts who similarly questions the phrase, “I came into this world.” Might it be more accurate, suggests Watts, to say “I came *out* of this world as leaves from a tree.” Continuing in this vein, Watts suggests that “as the ocean ‘waves’, the universe ‘peoples.’” In other words, Schultz explains, “A single wave is an expression of the entire ocean just as individual people are an expression of the entire universe.”

How do you understand your connection to others? To the earth? Are we individuals interacting with other distinct entities like mountains, peoples, cars, the wind? Or are we ocean waves, a fleeting form of a much larger reality?

The wave metaphor might feel unsettling—we are used to thinking of our individual selves and of our particular experiences of conquering mountains. So why think differently? Because as in Simon and Garfunkel’s song “I am a rock,” there is a cost to thinking oneself a distinct island.

Individualism is a value that places the self apart from and very often above others. It is a value that would command persons to “pull yourself up by your bootstraps”—which is actually a physically impossible feat. We need others; we are not separate. We come from other people biologically. Our languages emerge only from others who use it and teach it to us. There is no *ex nihilo* creation of human life. Only human life emerging from the wider web of life—a wave taking shape in an ocean.

To think otherwise can be dangerous.

We see this danger when a person values their individual freedom to choose to be unmasked at the cost of other's health. And, we see this in the refusal to look only at individual "bad actors" with a gun rather than at systems of bias, prejudice, and injustice.

Centering the value of the individual over the collective is a deeply held value in the dominant U.S. culture. (Just think of all those quotes on the internet about finding oneself!) Schultz suggests that as a value of the dominant white culture, individualism is "the seat of many white (mis)behaviors." Centering the individual erodes a sense of collective accountability—to the past, the present, and the future.

What if we thought instead within a collective framework? What if we considered ourselves finite waves in an infinite ocean? How might we live differently if our actions were centered on the common good—a commons that began before us and will continue after we are gone? Such questions may beckon us to reframe our sense of what matters most in how we spend our time, our money, our energy. And, such questions will likely put us in conflict with family and friends who see the world very differently.

I know we are all full of pain as such questions about what to do can feel overwhelming.

Before this year, I would read history with a sense of detached admiration for those who acted courageously to side with the 'right' side—for example, those who hid runaway slaves in defiance of the Fugitive Slave Act, or those who smuggled Jews and dissidents out of Europe, or those who walked across the Edmund Pettus bridge in Selma. Such choices of how to be in a time of crises felt both distant and extra-ordinary. I imagined that people living in such times *knew* clearly what was at stake and the exceptional need of their moment.

Lately, I have been wondering if people acted without knowing how the story would end, if they acted only from a sense of moral conviction or simple human compassion. In other words, what if they didn't act with a sense of being a hero, but just as being a person in an ugly time trying to do something good?

Our time is ugly and difficult. Becoming an island to avoid the pain might seem like a tempting strategy. But this isolation, this individualism, comes at a cost of denying our very real connections to others. Being an island costs us the understanding of all the ways we are fundamentally, metaphysically interdependent with one another, with the earth. We are part of an infinite ocean of life.

What does this mean practically? I'm not sure—we all have to answer together. In one sense we are distinct waves, each positioned uniquely in a particular time and place. From our particular places in the web, we each have our choices to make. But what we choose emerges from a shared history and will impact others in the moment and in the future.

As a congregation, this is also true. We are a collective—a congregated body that predates us all and, I hope and expect, will continue on beyond us all. We are waves in the ocean of the life of First Parish impacting one another in the present and in the future. We gather because together we need to find meaning amidst the upheaval, we need to care for others and to receive care to sustain us, and we need to work for a world that is better than the current divisiveness, injustices, and environmental destruction.

How will we do this concretely at First Parish? Here's a list Alex and I created to help us consider some options. [Show list] In no way is the list comprehensive, but we hope that there is something here for everyone. We'll share the list with more details through our various communication channels. And, we hope you'll add your ideas to the chat, to the Social list-serv, and in conversation with one another. We are in this together—as a congregation, as a community of people, as human persons whose waves have crested in this place and time.

However we may live out these coming weeks and months,
I close now with a words written by Jennifer Nordstrum¹ as she dreams of what the world could be:

“In this community of human and nonhuman beings,
we live in integrity with each other and the Earth.
We work together to nourish and sustain life.
We live in tune with the rhythms of the Earth; the seasons, day and night.
We live in tune with each other.
We live in tune with the rhythms of our own hearts.”

May it be so.
Amen.

¹ Jennifer Nordstrum in *Justice on Earth*, eds. Manish Misrah-Marzetti and Jennifer Nordstrum, (Boston: Skinner House Books, 2018).