

“Nothing Exists Alone: A Celebration of Darwin Day”

by Rev. Dr. David Breeden

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at First Unitarian Society of Minneapolis

When you light a candle, you also cast a shadow.

~ Ursula K. Le Guin (see readings below)

## **INTRODUCTION: Resilience and Connection**

Rachel Carson was a marine biologist born in the early years of the twentieth century. She was the best-selling author of a lyrical trilogy about the sea when she turned her attention to the dangers of synthetic pesticides. This focus led to her 1962 book *Silent Spring*, which is credited with beginning the environmental movement that led directly to the National Environmental Policy Act of 1970 and the Environmental Protection Agency.

Carson’s insight, developed in her years as a working marine biologist, is well summarized in one short snippet from *Silent Spring*: “In nature nothing exists alone.”

(Note that I found so many good quotes for this morning’s talk, that we made an insert so that you can re-read some of them if you wish.)

Today, I will be considering resilience and our connection to the whole that is larger than ourselves. This concept is summed up in the Seventh Principle of Unitarian Universalism, “Respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part.” One claim that I will make is that a feeling of connection on a cosmic scale answers the question that human religions (and many philosophies) ask.

Whence comes this insight, and what are its implications?

## **ONE: Seeing Our Shared Reality**

Here’s one way of seeing our shared reality; it comes from the first book of Hebrew scripture:

Then God said, "Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth."

So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them. God blessed them, and God said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth."

In the Western world, its monotheist religions have taught the superiority of human beings to all other forms of life; in those religions, that has seemed self-evident—because human beings received the “breath of life” from a creator god. The monotheistic god made the earth, its creatures, and humanity. Humanity is just a bit lower than the angels, and the earth itself and its animals are the raw material for human purposes.

The classic metaphor for the earth in Western monotheism is the potter and the clay. The clay is raw material; the potter takes the clay and, with skill, shapes the clay into an object with value. The Western assumption is that the object that the potter creates has more value than the clay.

But is that true?

This paradigm, unfortunately, has remained the truism among most people in the Western World, to the misfortune of first peoples, animals, and the planet itself.

And the beat goes on . . . In the “line three” controversy. In the Boundary Waters and mining standoff. And around the planet.

I hasten to point out that this view of the planet and its living things as material for our human use is *not* what most human cultures through time have thought.

The Daoists in China; the First Nations in New Zealand, Australia, and North, Central, and South America didn't see the earth and its living things in this way. The people of Africa did not see reality in this way.

As a matter of fact, the earth-as-raw-material view—stuff to be made into commodity-stuff—is very specifically a frame of mind from the agricultural kingdoms that

developed in what is now Iran and Iraq and spread throughout the Middle East and into Eurasia. These areas happen to be where the world-dominant monotheisms developed, and thus a bad idea spread.

It doesn't have to be this way. Take, for example, one of the insights leading to the enlightenment of the Buddha.

It was a moment in his childhood when he looked around and realized three things. He saw a farmer utterly exhausted from plowing. He saw the oxen the farmer was driving bound in their yokes, thirsty and uncomfortable, and, under the plow, Gautama realized the suffering of worms being ripped apart by the plow. . .

Notice that factory farming wouldn't be acceptable in a culture that embraced Gautama Buddha's idea.

If you haven't done that much plowing, you may not know just how violent plowing is. You start out in the spring just as soon as the soil is dry enough to turn over. That time of spring is when everything is coming back to life. So, you plow through wildflowers sprouting, snakes, frogs, lizards (where I come from), turtles, mice, rabbits, and ground-nesting birds. The Scottish poet Robert Burns wrote a great poem apologizing to a mouse for plowing through its home. One verse goes like this:

I'm truly sorry Man's dominion  
Has broken Nature's social union,  
An' justifies that ill opinion,  
Which makes thee startle,  
At me, thy poor, earth-born companion,  
An' fellow-mortal!

There's no domination in the Buddha's view. Only interconnection and suffering.

Nowadays, most farmers do a lot of what's called "no till" farming, but fact is the earth has to be ripped open to put seeds in, and in no till, we use a lot more chemicals . . . .

Refer back to Rachael Carsons.

## **TWO: Attitudes Evolve Too**

Slowly, some products of monotheist thinking have begun to rethink the paradigm. First secular and humanist thinkers, and then more liberal traditions within monotheism. For example, early in the twentieth century the Lutheran physician Albert Schweitzer wrote,

True philosophy must start from the most immediate and comprehensive fact of consciousness, and this may be formulated as follows: "I am life which wills to live, and I exist in the midst of life which wills to live."

Slowly, Albert Schweitzer moved away from conventional Lutheran Christianity toward a more "naturalistic" way of seeing things. He became a vegetarian. He opposed colonialism and patriarchy. And he served as a physician to the oppressed in Africa.

Rachel Carson was raised conventionally Presbyterian but came to admire the thought of Dr. Schweitzer and the psychologist and humanist philosopher Eric Fromm, who I've talked about a few times as central to the thinking of Post-World War Two Humanism.

Eric Fromm took Karl Marx's theory of "alienation" and expanded it. Fromm's take on "alienation" is that it occurs when we begin to see our own actions and the very being of others as disconnected from the self. We begin as it were to "worship" what we *do* rather than what we *are*; as a result, we begin to "worship" doing rather than being. And thus we make objects of others—people, living things, and nature, valuable to ourselves only for what they can "do" for us. In that case we have, quite literally, taken "dominion."

We have forgotten the interconnected web of existence.

Rachel Carson took Eric Fromm's warning to heart and committed herself to pointing to the web of existence. Once in a speech she said,

I am not afraid of being thought a sentimentalist when I stand here tonight and tell you that I believe natural beauty has a necessary place in the spiritual development of any individual or any society. I believe that whenever we destroy beauty, or whenever we substitute something man-made and artificial for a natural feature of the earth, we have retarded some part of man's spiritual growth.

So, the perception of interconnection—the realization that we are parts of an interconnected whole—is essential to a spiritual life, to a deeper sense of living.

I suspect she's right about that.

In her bestselling book *The Sea Around Us*, Carson wrote:

It is a curious situation that the sea, from which life first arose should now be threatened by the activities of one form of that life. But the sea, though changed in a sinister way, will continue to exist; the threat is rather to life itself.

Carson was writing about the threat of synthetic chemicals. Today, we face an even larger challenge in the global climate crisis. Yet, the insight holds. The fragility of life is its interdependence; yet, the *resilience* of life also lies also in its interdependence, *if* we pay attention to how it works.

We are capable of changing even our preconceptions and prejudices. We can stop seeing Being as substance—raw material—and begin seeing Being as responsibility.

We are *life living life*. We exist not in a potter's "creation" but in an organic whole "produced by laws acting around us," as Darwin describes it— that "tangled bank."

We are *life living life*.

Soon enough, each of us *won't* be life living life anymore—at least not in the form we exist in now. Yet, we know that *life will go on living life* if conditions for living remain favorable.

Rational conclusion: we should *live life* and, as we live, aid the living of life for other lives; and aid the conditions by which life may go on living into the future.

### **THREE: A Thing is Right When . . .**

The Third Humanist Manifesto puts it succinctly:

Humans are an integral part of nature, the result of unguided evolutionary change. Humanists recognize nature as self-existing. We accept our life as all and enough, distinguishing things as they are from things as we might wish or imagine them to be . . .

As Charles Darwin said, "There is grandeur in this view of life."

Author Ursula K. Le Guin wrote,

The law of evolution is that the strongest survives! Yes, and the strongest, in the existence of any social species, are those who are most social. In human terms, most ethical . . . . There is no strength to be gained from hurting one another. Only weakness.

*Dao de Jing* chapter 64 says,

(the sage) aids the ten thousand things to find their own nature

We have a theatre called Ten Thousand Things in Minneapolis. In Chinese thought the term means "all the things." Everything on the planet.

(the sage) aids the ten thousand things to find their own nature

Wise people aid in the flushing of the planet and living things.

Many of you know about Aldo Leopold and his book *A Sand County Almanac*. Nowadays there is an Aldo Leopold Foundation. He's considered the father of wildlife ecology. In the last essay in that book, Leopold proposes a "Land Ethic" that goes like this:

A thing is right when it tends to preserve the integrity, stability and beauty of the biotic community. It is wrong when it tends otherwise.

That saying has caught on because it's simple enough to remember and sums up an ethical stand:

A thing is right when it tends to preserve the integrity, stability and beauty of the biotic community. It is wrong when it tends otherwise.

Sounds like it's right out of the *Dao de Jing*:

(the sage) aids the ten thousand things to find their own nature

## CONCLUSION

Or, as Rachel Carson put it, "In nature nothing exists alone."

The evidence is all there. Treating nature as a thing; treating nature as a "resource;" will . . . well, it will land you exactly where we are.

But back to the "why" of religion. We gather here to reconsider our thinking. Our unconsidered beliefs. And to examine the human religious impulse. I think the French philosopher Georges Bataille gets it right about what religion is when he says that religion is about connection and intimacy. These are the things we long for: connection and intimacy. With other human beings. With other living beings; with the planet and with the cosmos.

Intimacy. Connection. That's what religion is about. It's what Humanism is about. It's only that we of a naturalistic bent connect with a different sort of shared reality. A reality outlined by Charles Darwin but as old as human thought itself.

The British novelist Terry Pratchett sums this intimacy and connection up nicely:

Once we were blobs in the sea, and then fishes, and then lizards and rats and then monkeys, and hundreds of things in between. This hand was once a fin, this hand once had claws! In my human mouth I have the pointy teeth of a wolf and the chisel teeth of a rabbit and the grinding teeth of a cow! Our blood is as salty as the sea we used to live in! When we're frightened, the hair on our skin stands up, just like it did when we had fur. We *are* history! Everything we've ever been on the way to becoming us, we still are.

...

I'm made up of the memories of my parents and my grandparents, all my ancestors. They're in the way I look, in the colour of my hair. And I'm made up of everyone I've ever met who's changed the way I think. (*A Hat Full of Sky*)

In the end, this interdependence is our resilience. "In every outthrust headland, in every curving beach, in every grain of sand there is a story of the earth."

## READINGS

Vanessa Tharp, a staff writer for *The Guardian*, writes,

For Isaac Newton, it was an apple tree; for Archimedes, a bath of water; and for Charles Darwin, scientific inspiration struck while staring at a 'tangled bank' of undergrowth, earthworms and weeds.

Or at least, that's what he wrote of so eloquently in *The Origin of Species*. Scholars and biographers have speculated for years about this famous visual prompt. Was it a metaphor, or did it exist?

Now a new study of Darwin claims that the oft-quoted description of a 'tangled bank' at the end of *The Origin of Species* was based on a ridge in Bromley, Kent. Now the obscure site is a candidate for World Heritage Status as a cultural shrine equal to the Taj Mahal and Stonehenge.

The great, great grandson of Charles Darwin, Randal Keynes, is preparing a book of fresh evidence uncovered in the family's former home. Documents found by Keynes directed him towards Down Bank, in Kent, and a hillock called the Orchis Bank.

'This was well within Darwin's daily range and he walked around it for the 40 years he lived and worked in the area,' Keynes told *The Observer*. 'There is strong evidence to suggest that the wonderful passage at the end of *The Origin of Species* refers to this bank of foliage. It is a description that is easily remembered because it encapsulates everything Darwin was trying to say about his theories of natural selection and the struggle for life.'

In his great work of 1859 he proposed the idea that all species gradually evolved by diversifying. The vulnerable in any species do not survive, while helpful traits are repeatedly selected. It is known that Darwin formulated his revolutionary view - his 'one long argument' - as he walked in the grounds of his home, Down House, in Kent in the mid 1800s. He spent his early life in South America and the Galapagos Islands, but when he came to write, he saw in the English countryside examples of natural selection and animal behavior.

Here is how Charles Darwin ended his 1859 book, *The Origin of Species*:

It is interesting to contemplate an entangled bank, clothed with many plants of many kinds, with birds singing on the bushes, with various insects flitting about, and with worms crawling through the damp earth, and to reflect that these elaborately constructed forms, so different from each other, and dependent on each other in so complex a manner, have all been produced by laws acting around us.

These laws, taken in the largest sense, being Growth with Reproduction; inheritance which is almost implied by reproduction; Variability from the indirect and direct action of the external conditions of life, and from use and disuse; a Ratio of Increase so high as to lead to a Struggle for Life, and as a consequence to Natural Selection, entailing Divergence of Character and the Extinction of less-improved forms.

Thus, from the war of nature, from famine and death, the most exalted object which we are capable of conceiving, namely, the production of the higher animals, directly follows.

There is grandeur in this view of life, with its several powers, having been originally breathed into a few forms or into one; and that, whilst this planet has gone cycling on according to the fixed law of gravity, from so simple a beginning endless forms most beautiful and most wonderful have been, and are being, evolved.

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