

**DISTANT CONNECTIONS**  
The Rev. Julie Stoneberg  
Unitarian Fellowship of Peterborough  
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**OPENING WORDS**            *Morning*        #438     ~ Clinton Lee Scott

From the east comes the sun, bringing a new and unspoiled day.

*\_\_It has already circled the earth and looked upon distant lands and far-away peoples.*

It has passed over mountain ranges and the waters of the seven seas.

*\_\_It has shone upon laborers in the fields, into the windows of homes, and shops, and factories.*

It has beheld proud cities with gleaming towers,

*\_\_And also the hovels of the poor.*

It has been witness to both good and evil, the works of honest men and women and the conspiracy of knaves.

*\_\_It has seen marching armies, bomb-blasted villages and "the destruction that wasteth at noonday."*

Now, unsullied from its tireless journey, it comes to us, messenger of the morning,  
ALL: Harbinger of a new day.

**STORY FOR ALL AGES**            *Amos and Boris*     ~ William Steig

*(A mouse and a whale befriend one another in dire circumstances.)*

**READING**                    *The Butterfly Effect*<sup>1</sup>            ~ Dana Capasso

The delicate, flapping wings of a butterfly have the power to set molecules of air in motion, in turn moving more molecules of air – a tiny act that is eventually capable of affecting weather patterns on the other side of the planet. This notion comes from a concept within Chaos Theory called the Butterfly Effect. Simply, the Butterfly Effect refers to a phenomenon in our world in which a small change in one place can result in equal or greater changes elsewhere. This may seem crazy – a tiny butterfly changing global weather patterns? Not only is the Butterfly Effect a real scientific theory but it's also an intriguing philosophical idea. I say all this because the Butterfly Effect affects the way I live my life and the decisions that I make in a way that no ideas about God ever have.

I'm no meteorologist, nor am I well versed in entomology, but ever since learning about the Butterfly Effect, I have been attracted to it because it demonstrates an important principle that is often forgotten. Namely, each of our actions has effects that are more profound than we think. Interconnection is a major theme found in nearly all of the world's religious and philosophical traditions. The interconnectedness of our universe is also one of the most significant revelations of physics: All components of matter are interconnected, interrelated, and interdependent. As Unitarian Universalists, we affirm and promote our responsibility to remain aware of interconnection through our seventh Principle: respect for the interdependent web of all existence.

Attention to interconnectivity reminds me, despite the many sociopolitical forces that work to divide us from one another, that I'm never alone in this world. It reminds me

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<sup>1</sup> Source: "Becoming: A Spiritual Guide for Navigating Adulthood"

that each decision or action I make has reactions, and that those reactions reverberate as waves moving back and forth across our globe. This compels me to live my life aware of the consequences of my daily actions, from the purchases I make to personal interactions with others. I certainly do not always succeed, but I try. My awareness of interconnectivity and efforts to work against the illusion of division remain my most significant spiritual practice.

This spiritual practice also gives me the ability to stand in awe of interconnection, in awe of the Butterfly Effect and the power that comes with it. On rare occasions, I am reminded to stop and appreciate the divinity of interconnectivity revealed before my very eyes. This to me is awe-inspiring. This to me is divine.

## MESSAGE

There's a story told of a small girl standing with her grandfather and looking up in awe at an airplane flying overhead. She has never flown, and her grandfather tells her that one day they'll be able to fly somewhere together, traveling in a plane just like the one so far above them. The girl looks puzzled and asks, "But grandpa, how will they make us so small?"

I stumbled on a video this week, a clip from a show which I have never seen called *Father Ted*. A priest is trying to explain a similar optical illusion to a particularly thick-headed companion. The two men are sitting at a table in what appears to be a farm kitchen. The priest holds up a couple of small plastic cows, presumably from a child's barnyard set, and says, "See. These are small. But the ones out there (nodding toward the window) are far away. Small. Faraway." His companion remains confused.<sup>2</sup>

A story of my own. As most of you know, I had something of a personal crisis at the end of last year...a cancer scare which resulted in surgery and many fear-riddled weeks waiting for what was ultimately a good result. For much of that time I couldn't see past my own nose. What was up close loomed large, and anything outside of me was so far away as to be invisible. After coming out of that fog, I have wondered about this phenomenon...how it is that I could have been so disconnected from the world around me, and how my personal, and relatively minor crisis, overpowered news of, or concern for, things outside of my limited field of vision. The spark that provided inspiration for my message today is this quote from Thomas Moore:

"Technologies of the soul tend to be simple, bodily, slow and related to the heart as much as the mind.

Everything around us tells us we should be mechanically sophisticated, electronic, quick, and informational in our expressiveness – an exact antipode (opposite) to the virtues of the soul. It is no wonder, then, that in an age of telecommunications – which, by the way, literally means "distant connections"--we suffer symptoms of the loss of soul. We are being urged from every side to become efficient rather than intimate."

Now, I have a vocational proclivity to take notice whenever anyone implies a "loss of soul." And you might think that this quote would have led me to talk about our addiction to the internet and our devices and their affect on our ability to connect eye-to-eye and heart-to-heart. But I've gone off in a different direction.

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nmfLS1hWO94>

Our theme for February is interdependence...being a community of interdependence. Being interdependent by inter-being with all that is. Another way to think about interdependence is through the lens that the Jewish philosopher/theologian Martin Buber called the "I-thou" relationship.

Buber's main proposition was that we can think about our existence in one of two ways:<sup>3</sup>

- either we think of ourselves as an "I" that is separate and relates to everything else as an "It" which we either use or experience;

- or we see ourselves as an "I" always in relationship with a "Thou" which cannot be separated from us by definable boundaries.

Buber believed that human life finds its meaningfulness in relationships. One might say, in the language of Thomas Moore, that relationships and connections help us to find our lost souls.

(I'm not going to get into semantics around the idea of 'soul'. Let's simply say that to be connected to one's soul is to be able to touch and be nourished by a life energy that is generative and sustaining.)

But in this age of instantaneous tele-communications and 24-hour news and twitter and social media...of nonstop information and video-feeds about unrelenting and disturbing and violent events around the world...we become overwhelmed. How are we to feel connected to 'all that is' when it is so very far away from us? And when it is so painful? How can we possibly connect and CARE about everything? How can we inter-be with all of that?

Undeniably there are persistent world problems. Sometimes they appear as 'events', but more often they are a slow process of apparent disintegration...the UN lists the world's problems as: the general conditions in Africa, the world's aging population, AIDS, atomic energy, the need to achieve sustainable development goals, children's and women's and human rights, climate change, decolonization, threats to democracy, hunger, health, international justice, the life of our oceans, peace and security, population growth, the refugee crisis, and the right to fresh water. We've been told about all of these things, and could probably add more to that list. We are aware. Perhaps too aware. And we're supposed to care, right?

Perhaps you've heard of compassion fatigue? It is particularly an issue for those in the helping fields who have to confront pain and distress every working day, but I think it is becoming more universally common. The news cycle, if we're paying attention to it, forces us all to confront pain and distress and violence in nearly every moment. Those with empathetic hearts...and I know that's all of you...get swept up in the emotions of other people. We FEEL their pain.

When we FEEL too much, we experience somatic empathy. Our mirror neurons cause us to feel in our own bodies what another is feeling, and we become less and less able to help others; we actually hurt and we fear being hurt more.<sup>4</sup> We become anxiety-ridden and depressed, combative, unable to focus...which can actually jeopardize our ability to show compassion.

Compassion is different than empathy. According to the Greater Good Science Center, compassion is "concern to enhance the welfare of another who suffers or is in need." So, while empathy is feeling, compassion is action.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/I\\_and\\_Thou](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/I_and_Thou)

<sup>4</sup> Jeremy Adam Smith [https://greatergood.berkeley.edu/article/item/what\\_happens\\_when\\_compassion\\_hurts](https://greatergood.berkeley.edu/article/item/what_happens_when_compassion_hurts)

<sup>5</sup> Jeremy Adam Smith, [https://greatergood.berkeley.edu/article/item/what\\_happens\\_when\\_compassion\\_hurts](https://greatergood.berkeley.edu/article/item/what_happens_when_compassion_hurts)

Action. If one believes in the butterfly effect, that belief influences the way one lives and the decisions one makes. Steph read these words from Dana Capasso earlier:<sup>6</sup> “It reminds me that each decision or action I make has reactions, and that those reactions reverberate as waves moving back and forth across our globe. This compels me to live my life aware of the consequences of my daily actions, from the purchases I make to personal interactions with others.”

She goes on: “As Unitarian Universalists, we affirm and promote our responsibility to remain aware of interconnection through our seventh Principle: respect for the interdependent web of all existence.” Being responsible within that interconnected web suggests that we need to act, which is a function of compassion. And so, compassion fatigue is to be expected.

It’s a modern-day puzzle. A conundrum. An illusion even. What is far away feels larger and larger, rather than smaller and smaller. While we feel the pain, it seems there is nothing we can do to really help. And then you come here and I tell you that we must inter-be with all of this...?

Like you, I struggle. When there was an earthquake in Haiti, I wondered if I should sell everything, and go there to live my life as a compassionate worker. As my eyes have opened to the white colonialist society in which I live and from which I benefit, I have wondered if my best course of action is to give the house and land that I ‘own’ back to the people who first occupied this territory. When the not-guilty verdict came down in Colten Bouschie’s death, I wondered if the most important thing I could do with my time and energy, to the exclusion of all else, would be to protest and advocate. When there was yet another mass shooting at a school, this time in Florida...well, my heart just broke. It is too heavy. Too much. I FEEL it, but I don’t know what to do.

I believe that feeling of helplessness only contributes to compassion fatigue. We don’t know what to do, which makes it harder to do what we ARE able to do.

We are able to do something. One Huffington Post writer, Martin Rossman, says that while it feels counter-intuitive, there’s a hidden opportunity in our worrying.<sup>7</sup> He wrote at the time of the earthquake in Japan in 2011 that there are several ways to make the best use of our reactions to tragedies far away.

First, he wrote, honour your feelings. Express them in safe ways by writing, talking, playing music, even punching pillows.

Then do something. Be helpful in whatever way you can. It might be by donating money, but there are lots of ways to contribute. Consider what is happening and come up with some way, however small, to act. (Here’s an example; when Philando Castile was shot in his car by police in Minnesota while reaching for his wallet, a friend of mine designed a clip for a car’s visor where one could place their ID, so that, if apprehended, when reaching for it, one’s hands would remain in plain sight.)

And sometimes, all we can do...and an important thing to do...is to sit others in their pain. When fear and pain are palpable, a calm and loving presence is an antidote.

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<sup>6</sup> Dana Capasso, “The Butterfly Effect” in *Becoming: A Spiritual Guide for Navigating Adulthood*  
<https://www.uua.org/worship/words/reflection/butterfly-effect>

<sup>7</sup> Martin Rossman, [https://www.huffingtonpost.com/martin-rossman-md/japan-earthquake\\_b\\_839319.html](https://www.huffingtonpost.com/martin-rossman-md/japan-earthquake_b_839319.html)

A new meme has surfaced in the days since the Florida shooting. It reads, “Why not just ban guns and when people are upset about it, just send them thoughts and prayers? If ‘thoughts and prayers’ are good enough for people who’ve lost their families, then it’s good enough for people who’ve lost their guns.”

The irony is not lost on me, but still, if you can do nothing else, pray. Practice ‘positive worry.’ By directing energy toward positivity and health, you are taking action on the spiritual and energetic levels.<sup>8</sup>

When we tire of doing, when we suffer compassion fatigue, the antidote is taking care of ourselves. The best metaphor I know for this is the instruction to put your own oxygen mask on first. Show yourself some compassion by recognizing that you are suffering and act to alleviate that bit of suffering, for it too contributes to suffering in the world. And addressing our own pain IS something we can do. So, if you’re having trouble breathing, do whatever you can to get oxygen for yourself.

Finally, we need to forge a community of compassion around us.<sup>9</sup> And this is what this community, this congregation, strives to be. A real, tangible, interdependent community of compassion. Acting in support of one another. Acting in support of our values and our principles. Acting for a just and sustainable world. We don’t do it perfectly. But we act. And we don’t have to do it alone.

Empathy and compassion function at their best...that is sustainably, without experiencing fatigue and anxiety...when we are connected with one another. It’s about getting proximate...up close...seeing things without illusion. Yet paradoxically, being interconnected with all that is, and working to erase illusions of separateness, can also lead to overwhelming helplessness at the size of the work.

But if we truly believe the butterfly effect, we have to believe that every way in which we contribute to a better world, and stronger relationships, matters...no matter how small, no matter how seemingly distant or insignificant.

When we can drop the illusion that we are separate from the rest of creation, we begin to treat all of life as a ‘thou’...something with which we are inextricably connected.<sup>10</sup> And within that interconnection, I have faith that we will find the support that makes it possible for us to continue the work of alleviating suffering at home, and around the globe.

I am intimately connected with everything in creation. Even the hard stuff. It is ‘all my relations.’ Mitakuye-Oyasin (Mee-TAH-koo-yay Oy-yah-seen.)<sup>11</sup> And you’re connected with it too. I’m connected with you, and you with me. And within that connection lies the opportunity to find our lost souls. Circumstances may be out of our control, but almost always, we are in control of how we respond.

In the words of a Unitarian minister of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Edward Everett Hale:

“I am only one, but I am one. I cannot do everything, but I can do something. And I will not let what I cannot do interfere with what I can do.”

I pray that may be so. Amen.

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Jeremy Adam Smith, [https://greatergood.berkeley.edu/article/item/what\\_happens\\_when\\_compassion\\_hurts](https://greatergood.berkeley.edu/article/item/what_happens_when_compassion_hurts)

<sup>10</sup> Dick Rauscher, <http://stonyhill-nuggets.com/compassion-empathy/>

<sup>11</sup> <http://traditionalnativehealing.com/all-my-relations>

**READING***The Web of Life ~ Robert T. Weston*

There is a living web that runs through us to all the universe  
Linking us each with each, and through all life, on to the distant stars.  
Each knows a little corner of the world, and lives as if this were [theirs] all.  
We no more see the farther reaches of the threads than we see of the future, yet they're there.  
Touch but one thread, no matter which;  
The thoughtful eye may trace to distant lands its firm continuing strand, yet lose its filaments as they reach out, but find at last it coming back to [them] from whom it led.  
We move as in a fog, aware of self, but only dimly conscious of the rest as they are close to us in sight or feeling.  
New objects loom up for a time, fade in and out;  
Then, sometimes, as we look on unawares, the fog lifts  
And there's the web in shimmering beauty,  
Reaching past all horizons. We catch our breath;  
Stretch out our eager hands, and then  
In comes the fog again, and we go on,  
Feeling a little foolish, doubting what we had seen.  
The hands were right. The web is real.  
Our folly is that we so soon forget.

**CLOSING WORDS***Participants of the Universe ~ Norman Naylor*

Reminded that we are part and participants of the Universe,  
let us go forth from the quiet of this hour  
encouraged to strive toward faithfulness to the best in ourselves, in others, and in the whole creation.  
Go connected. Go in peace.  
Blessed be.