

ENTANGLED AND ENTWINED
The Rev. Julie Stoneberg
Unitarian Fellowship of Peterborough
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OPENING WORDS *The Breath Of Life Is Not Mine Alone* ~ Kristen L. Harper

I do not wish to breathe another breath if it is not shared with others. The breath of life is not mine alone.

I brought myself to be with you, hoping that by inhaling the compassion, the courage, the hope found here, i can exhale the fear, the selfishness, the separateness i keep so close to my skin.

I cannot live another moment, at least not one of joy, unless you and i find our oneness somewhere among each other, somewhere between the noise, somewhere within the silence of the next breath.

Come, let us find our oneness, and the ways in which we are entwined, together.

STORY FOR ALL AGES *The Great Kapok Tree* ~ Lynne Cherry

(A human walks into a rainforest and begins to chop down a tree. As he naps, the creatures of the forest tell him why they need the tree.)

READING *The Heart of Understanding* ~ Thich Nhat Hanh

If you are a poet, you will see clearly that there is a cloud floating in this sheet of paper. Without a cloud, there will be no rain; without rain, the trees cannot grow; and without trees, we cannot make paper. The cloud is essential for the paper to exist. If the cloud is not here, the sheet of paper cannot be here either. So we can say that the cloud and the paper inter-are.

“Interbeing” is a word that is not in the dictionary yet, but if we combine the prefix “inter” with the verb “to be,” we have a new verb, inter-be. A cloud and the sheet of paper inter-are.

If we look into this sheet of paper even more deeply, we can see the sunshine in it. If the sunshine is not there, the forest cannot grow. In fact, nothing can grow. Even we cannot grow without sunshine. And so, we know that the sunshine is also in this sheet of paper. The paper and the sunshine inter-are. And if we continue to look, we can see the logger who cut the tree and brought it to the mill to be transformed into paper. And we see the wheat. We know the logger cannot exist without his daily bread, and therefore the wheat that became his bread is also in this sheet of paper. And the logger’s father and mother are in it too.

When we look in this way, we see that without all these things, this sheet of paper cannot exist. Looking even more deeply, we see that we are in it too. This is not difficult to see, because when we look at a sheet of paper, the sheet of paper is part of our

perception. Your mind is in here and mine is also. So we can say that everything is in this sheet of paper.

You cannot point out one thing that is not here – time, space, the earth, the rain, the minerals in the soil, the sunshine, the cloud, the river, the heat. Everything co-exists with this sheet of paper. That is why I think the word inter-be should be in the dictionary. “To be” is to inter-be. You cannot just be by yourself alone. You have to inter-be with every other thing. This sheet of paper is, because everything else is.

Suppose we try to return one of the elements to its source. Suppose we return the sunshine to the sun. Do you think that this sheet of paper will be possible? So, without sunshine, nothing can be. And if we return the logger to his mother, then we have no sheet of paper either. The fact is that this sheet of paper is made up only of “non-paper elements.” And if we return these non-paper elements to their sources, then there can be no paper at all. Without “non-paper elements,” like mind, logger, sunshine and so on, there will be no paper.

As thin as this sheet of paper is, it contains everything in the universe in it.

MESSAGE

Friday night, after a wonderful evening of learning and connecting together, hearing from folks from Curve Lake about the history of our treaties, I was putting away the sound equipment. I wound up three long identical black microphone cords, and then put them all one hand to carry upstairs. Two of them are stored up on our ‘sound deck’ in the balcony and one of them belongs here in the sanctuary, so when I got up to the foyer, I tried to separate them.

Not so easily done. I passed the loops of cords from hand to hand, but try as I might, they just seemed to get more and more entangled with one another. I couldn’t tell which was which. Pulling on an end didn’t help; they just got more messed up. I had visions of an inextricably tangled ball of yarn, or even a backlashed fishing tackle, so before making it worse, I put them all on the floor and painstakingly rewound them into separate bundles.

When I lived in Thunder Bay, my dog Tillie and I would sometimes go to a conservation tree farm north of the city and walk the paths through the rows of trees. One path crossed over a little river dam, and on it was one of those interpretive educational plaques...they have some special name that I can’t remember...

Anyway, this one featured an image of a drop of water, inside of which were several other illustrations...of micro-organisms, and bacteria, and light, and oxygen...you get the picture. And all with the heading...A Universe Inside Each Drop. In the early morning light, as Tillie ran back and forth from me to the river’s edge, paddling into the water, shaking out on shore, and me standing there seeing it all, I felt we were that drop...a whole universe contained within those few moments. Entangled. Entwined. Impossible to separate.

It was one of those moments in which I could really feel that I am made of stardust. Astrophysicists now tell us that 'our bodies are made of remnants of stars and massive explosions in the galaxies. All the material in our bodies originates with that residual stardust, [which] finds its way into plants, and from there into the nutrients that we need for everything we do – think, move, grow.'¹ Entangled. Entwined with all that is.

Can you conger up an image of Indra's net? Indra is a Hindu deity and this net is said to be hung over his heavenly palace. It stretches out infinitely in all directions, and at each intersection in that infinite net, at each crossroads, there is a single jewel, shimmering. Each jewel is multi-faceted, so each facet of each jewel reflects all the other jewels in the net, also infinite in number. And each reflection of each jewel reflects all of the reflections of all of the other jewels. An infinitely reflective connective process.

In Buddhism, Indra's net is said to be a metaphor for interdependence. In the Ava-tam-saka Sutra, the 30th book is named "The Incalculable" because it focuses on the idea of the infinitude of the universe saying, "all phenomena come from interdependent origination. They know all world systems exhaustively...interrelated in Indra's net." Another section of that same Sutra says:

If untold buddha-lands are reduced to atoms,

In one atom are untold lands,

And as in one, So in each.

The atoms to which these buddha-lands are reduced in an instant are unspeakable,

And so are the atoms of continuous reduction moment to moment

Going on for untold eons;

These atoms contain lands unspeakably many,

And the atoms in these lands are even harder to tell of.

Is this how you see the world? As the atoms of stardust continually remaking itself? Or perhaps as an entwined network of strings or vines? Do you maybe see yourself as one 'point of light' in an infinite web of connections? One drop in an ocean, as well as an ocean that contains all possible drops?

These are just a few word pictures through which we might visualize our deep connection with all that is. And today I want to tease out what interdependence might mean in the context of this connectedness.

As I wrote in my article in this month's theme packet, 'interdependence' has come to be a central theme in modern day Unitarian Universalist theology. We love that this understanding...that we are part of all, and that 'all that is' is contained within us...has the support of the scientific community at the same time as it gives us meaning...a way to

¹ <https://news.nationalgeographic.com/2015/01/150128-big-bang-universe-supernova-astrophysics-health-space-ngbooktalk/>

understand who we are as humans within the bigger picture...a picture that's both grounded in reality and mystical in its scope.

Take sermon preparation. I broadly title the weekly services based on our monthly themes, but it's often Friday or Saturday before I really hone in on what I want to say. Up to that time, I've caught just glimpses of the reflections of the web of possibilities...in your words, in the agendas of our team meetings, in my reading, in a spur of the moment conversation, in a news story, in a facebook post...and I have to trust that it'll coalesce into a shimmering jewel of a message. Or something approximating that.

But some weeks, on Saturday afternoon, I throw myself, spread eagle, on the indra's net of our connections, praying for inspiration, begging for the spirit of the muse to arrive and 'connect' with me. 'What can I share that will matter?' I wail. It's all just 'blah, blah, blah'.

This week might have been like that. Interdependence is a beautiful concept. A central understanding to Unitarian Universalism. But so what? What could I possibly say that is new, or thought provoking, or that might touch your hearts?

And then our web...and I don't mean the internet...saved me. On Friday, Steph Curtin messaged me about a book that she's reading, and then stopped by to share it with me. I was totally dependent on something 'showing up'; and it did. (I truly believe that if it hadn't been Steph, there would have been some other inspiration...and a different message today...because the possibilities are limitless.)

The book Steph shared is Brene Brown's "Braving the Wilderness." In general, her book is about having the courage to stand up for one's authentic self, and how that ability is 'connected' to our sense of belonging. It's a book about our human relationships, which she says are inextricably connected.

To be inextricable is to be impossible to be untangled. Always linked. And Brown says it is our belief in the very existence of those connections that provides a firm foundation for living. Trusting that we are connected is a renewable source of courage, and resilience, and hope.

I serve as an advisor for a group of students in our Ministerial Formation Network. We had a webmeeting yesterday, and each one of them told of a very difficult personal trial in their lives. After listening deeply to one another, we shared something of our personal theologies...because this is what student ministers do. And each of them spoke of feeling connected to something larger than themselves...though not using the same words to describe it. And when I asked how it is that those theologies had offered support or understanding for the rough times, they all spoke of being reminded of how and to whom they are connected...of how the 'web' has shown up for them. And of how much it has mattered in their coping and their healing.

But here's a reality behind what they told me. While each of them is currently blessed with having connections that are loving and supportive, the mere fact of being connected doesn't

mean that we'll show up for one another. The fact that we are connected does not make us good or loving or healthy. Our connections can be used for good or ill...or they can simply be ignored.

And this is where interdependence comes in. Connections are a structural fact of reality...one thing butts up to another thing, one hand holds another hand. Interdependence goes a bit further...it's about how we actually influence, or are influenced by, that to which we are connected. To live as interdependent beings is to truly understand that we inter-be with everyone and everything. We play a role in what comes into being and what passes away. We inter-be with everyone we come into contact with, even if that's just passing on the sidewalk. Everything we touch. Everything we think. Everything we say and everything that we hear. We inter-be. In order for us to know love, we need to have been shown it in some way. In order to show love, we need to believe in it...even EXUDE it...so that another being might know love, so that they can in turn show love to others, and believe in it.

Too often, people express to me their despair...the sense that their lives don't matter, and that there is no reason to live. I can feel this despair myself sometimes. Daily we hear stories of heroes and superstars and super-athletes and those who have made a really big splash. And if we don't measure up to that, we can't see how who we are matters. I suppose we think only big splashes matter. Only perfect beings, as if there were such a thing, deserve to exist.

But think of it this way...without all of us...without all of our little drops, there would be no pond in which to make a big splash, and no ripples carrying the effect of that splash. Without the participation of each snowflake, the snow would not pile up in sparkling fluffly drifts.

We have an important role in the interdependent web of existence of which we are part. You see, distrust can be spread as easily as belonging. Lies can be spread as easily as truth. Hate can be spread as easily as love. Our web of interconnection depends on us to do all that we can to ensure there is more love, more belonging, more joy. It takes all of us to show up for all of us.

Brene Brown says that our trust in our inextricable connection is constantly being tested...that it is when we believe that the connections have been broken that we isolate ourselves and turn to hate and fear. So, how do we cultivate our belief in inextricable connection?

Here's the good news. You're doing it right now! Brown says we have to show up for 'collective moments of joy and pain so we can bear witness to this connection.' Being together in face-to-face community allows us to catch enough glimpses of connection that we believe it's true and possible for us. We need collective moments of singing and crying and laughing to know, and to know deep down inside, that we are inextricably connected. To feel that we are a part of something much bigger...an ocean of love, a universe of light, a web of interdependence.

Brown's book introduced me to a concept put forward by Emile Durkheim almost one hundred years ago...the concept of 'collective effervescence.' Isn't that great? Collective

Effervescence. Durkheim said that this happens when we realize that we are part of something much larger than ourselves...when we shift our focus from the self to the group. And this 'coming together' contributes to a life of meaning, increased positivity, more belonging, decreased loneliness...all components of a happy life.

I believe that this is the reason we gather here...to create collective effervescence...to experience our common joy and pain...to see our humanity plainly...to know our responsibility within this web of connections...and ultimately to contribute to more joy, more love, more peace...rippling out and through us. Our interdependence calls us to 'inter-be' with all of our hearts and our minds and our spirits.

I am so blessed to 'inter-be' with you, and have been changed by your presence here today. I hope that you have been similarly blessed and changed. Let us take these moments, and go forth and effervesce. Collectively. Interdependently.

So be it.

READING *The Stream of Life* (#529) ~ Rabindranath Tagore

The same stream of life that runs through my veins night and day runs through the world and dances in rhythmic measures.

It is the same life that shoots in joy through the dust of the earth in numberless blades of grass and breaks into tumultuous waves of leaves and flowers.

It is the same life that is rocked in the ocean-cradle of birth and death, in ebb and in flow.

I feel my limbs are made glorious by the touch of this world of life. And my pride is from the life-throb of ages dancing in my blood this moment.

CLOSING WORDS ~ Jean Shinoda Bolen

I have often felt myself to be a point of light, connected to everyone I have ever loved or mattered to, each also being a point of light,

in turn connected to those they love, so that somehow we are all part of a vast web of twinkling lights. ...

It feels as if everyone who acts compassionately, works to raise this consciousness, to save the planet, to make a difference in some significant way is linked to everyone else who also does.

Let our lights be linked, let our lights shine brightly in the days to come. Go in peace.