

World of Wonders
Rev. Rita Capezzi
UUFM—February 13, 2022

Homily

Shakespeare said, “One touch of nature makes the whole world kin.” Oh, that this ultimate connection, the kinship of each of us with all that is, oh, that it were once and done. A wave of a wand, a spell cast, a mind made up, and final. And, we would **know** our kinship. And our kinship would call us into caring relationship. Our kinship would call us to interdependence. Our kinship would call us to harmony with all beings and all people. Oh, that it were so.

But our human understanding does not generally work that way, does it? So much about our human relations pits us against the planet, pits us against animal and plant beings, pits us against other human beings. Climate crisis is evidence of the adversarial quality of our existence. Structures that perpetuate oppression are evidence of the antagonistic character of our collective lives. Feelings of apathy and helplessness are evidence of our hopelessness and despair in the face of such challenge to be in kinship. “One touch of nature makes the whole world kin.” I do so wish. The best we might hope for is that a touch of nature calls us again, over and over, to our kinship with the whole world. The best we might hope for is an effort to rediscover this kinship through attention to the small, beautiful manifestations that we all experience every day. If we pay attention.

Poet Ross Gay describes poet and essayist Aimee Nezhukohaitoa and her book *World of Wonders* in this way: “Sometimes we need teachers who remind us how to be flabbergasted and gobsmacked and flummoxed and swooned by the wonders of the earth.” That is a good description. Among other observations on plants and animals, Nezhukohaitoa writes two chapters on fireflies. Some of us know these phosphorescent insects, lighting in synchronized flashes the roadside bushes and garden shrubs during the height of summer. But more than the flashes, Nezhukohaitoa gives us the insect’s life, and wonderfully weird it is. Living their strange and lively life, fireflies are underground larvae for nearly two whole years. During that period, fireflies are pack hunters. In groups, they hunt and chase down juicy worms and snails. The flashy moments in the life of a firefly come only as their individual lives are ending. That synchronous behavior is what ensures that they find mates and reproduce. And it is the life cycle of the species that is of concern.

Our human behavior, however, in the form of pesticides and light pollution, cause the fireflies to lose their synchronous behavior, their ability to find mates and reproduce. The dwindling numbers of these flashy bugs make them infinitely precious, one part of the vast web of variety currently being torn away. As she searches for their presence, they signal to Aimee Nezhukohaitoa “*I am still here, you are still here, I am still here, you are still here, I am, you are, over and over again. [. . .]*” And the writer asks, “What is lost when you grow up not knowing the names for different varieties of fireflies?” [. . .] Those fireflies are simply one canary in the coal mine, one species signaling their demise even as they signal their diminishing life signs. Nezhukohaitoa asks, “Where does one start to take care of these living things amid the dire and daily news of climate change, and reports of another animal or plant vanishing from

the planet? How can one even imagine us getting back to a place where we know the names of the trees we walk by every single day?"

In one of her two chapters on this beetle, Nezhukumar-tathil provides a list of the common names of the fireflies she knows—Shadow Ghost, Mr. Mac, Murky Flash-train, the Texas Tinies, the Single Snappy, the Treetop Flashers, a Slow Blue, a Tiny Lucy, the Sneaky Elves, the Heebie Jeebie, the Wiggle Dancer. Just to name a few. By making this list, the writer notices and cares about the wee beasties. It is a list as glorious and meaningful as any that Walt Whitman penned in *Leaves of Grass*, a poem meant to catalogue all the human things and ways the poet could think of:

"Victory, union, faith, identity, time, The indissoluble compacts, riches, mystery, Eternal progress, the kosmos, and the modern reports. This then is life, Here is what has come to the surface after so many throes and convulsions. How curious! how real! Underfoot the divine soil, overhead the sun. See revolving the globe, [. . .] See, vast trackless spaces, [. . .] See, projected through time, For me an audience interminable."

And more than lists, Nezhukumar-tathil explores and invites us to explore how parts of the natural world interact harmoniously with other parts. As a child, I grew up on stories of predation—dog eat dog, predators and prey, eat or be eaten. But there is another way to understand the relationships of nature. If you are a coffee lover, as I am, you might know about the Asian palm civet and a variety of Indonesian coffee called Kopi luwak. The civet eats the Kopi luwak coffee cherries, the digestive juices of the animal positively affecting the flavor of the coffee beans. The beans are then pooped out by the civet, collected, roasted, ground, and drunk up by the humans. In another example of such harmony, Australian forests depend upon a bird called the cassowary to spread the seeds of all the fruits it eats. The cassowary is a strange, not cute bird called "The Living Dinosaur." Seeds from the ryparosa, a highly prized Australian tree, are more likely to sprout after a ride through a cassowary's digestive track. Closer to home, our common varieties of squirrel all remember where they have buried 90% of their seeds and nuts. They do this through a combination of proximity to their habitations and of sorting seeds by size as well as nutritional value. The other 10% of the seeds, those they don't recover, are ones they have carried farthest away from their own stomping grounds. These seeds become not food for the squirrel but instead grow into new trees and plants. Other squirrels don't find them, and they get the space away from parental competition that is necessary for their growth.

Here is another example on a larger scale of the unexpected harmonies of nature. In 1995, wolves were reintroduced to Yellowstone National Park, years after hunting wiped them out. And something interesting happened: the most remarkable "trophic cascade" occurred. Trophic cascades are powerful indirect interactions that can control entire ecosystems. In Yellowstone, the presence of wolves substantially changed the behavior of large grazers. "Elk stopped munching their way through the valleys and gorges where wolves could easily hunt them. The vegetation was able to re-establish and re-grow, thereby increasing biodiversity by providing food and shelter to a larger variety of plants and animals. Remarkably, the presence of wolves also changed the rivers. Riverbank erosion decreased so the rivers meandered less, the channels deepened, and small pools formed. The recovering vegetation stabilized the riverbanks, which in turn changed the geography and microclimate in the park."

Such a universe, such a world is simply beautiful. Beautiful, and a specific definition of beautiful. Beautiful, but not beautiful in the sense of pretty or lovely or glamorous. Not that kind of beauty. Rather, such a universe, such a world is beautiful because of the potential inherent within it for wholeness and transformation. In a universe full of diversity, full of variety—so many kinds of starfish, so many kinds of sparrows, so many kinds of fireflies—through such multiplicity, so much interdependence and symbiosis and reciprocity become possible, even necessary. Mathematician and philosopher Alfred North Whitehead defined Beauty as “intense harmony.” Not just intensity—power, concentration, passion. Not just harmony—congruence, agreement, accord. Whitehead means a harmony that brings opposites into creative and unexpected relationship. He means a harmony that takes all the differentiation and fractures of the evolutionary world and the human-built world and holds them together in a larger frame than we can ever conceive. In Whitehead’s philosophy, the Universe orients itself toward the production of Beauty, and Beauty lures us toward this intense harmony—calls us to see ourselves as intimately and intricately woven into the fabric of vast variety. There is a kinship between things that are like and things that are not alike, because differences harmonize. There is the potential for transformation in the guts of the civet and the cassowary. There is potential for transformation where animal and plant relationships are recognizable as beyond predation, beyond one eating another.

All these examples demonstrate the necessity of biodiversity and the fundamental intense harmony, the beauty, of the world. The richness and possibilities are glorious, intriguing our minds and our senses. Indeed, in Whitehead’s philosophy, we sense these intense harmonies before we conceptualize them. In his words, “The foundations of the world are to be found, not in the cognitive experience of conscious thought, but in the aesthetic experience of everyday life.” We feel our way to the hidden wholeness underneath the apparent contradictions and brokenness of this world through beauty. We can perceive by our experiences with the natural world the ground of being, the ultimate reality of the Universe. Our real home. And if we can learn again to seek such Beauty, we can once again be “flabbergasted and gobsmacked and flummoxed and enswooned by the wonders of the earth.”

And we should seek such Beauty. But how? Nezhukuma-tathil suggests that “[. . .] Maybe what we can do when we feel overwhelmed is start small. Start with what we loved as kids and see where it leads us.” We widen our circle by falling in love, again and again, with the world of wonders, full of human and more-than-human beings. Still, how might knowing this good provide a lesson to us concerning our religious community? We Unitarian Universalists are a truth-seeking people. If we can perceive the reality of Beauty luring contradictions and variations into intense harmony among civet and coffee beans, between wolves and elk, we surely can learn, or remember, that intense harmony is possible in our human relationships. From our very first breath, we reach out. Co-regulation, not self-regulation, is in our nature. We find our place in this great turning planet, by turning to one another. Our life’s journey is part of something greater, this Universe of luring Beauty inviting us to mad creativity and wild connections, with room for all beings, all identities, and many ways of experiencing reality. Within our religious community, we learn to seek intense harmony among our variations. Within our larger community, we learn to seek intense harmony among our variations. Within the world of all-nature, we learn to seek intense harmony among our variations. We seek kinship, relationships reciprocal and

mutual between subjects, between “I and you.” In Nezhukuma-tathil’s words, in the flashes of a firefly, “*I am still here, you are still here, I am still here, you are still here, I am, you are, over and again. [. . .]*” until we see ourselves, in harmony, as equal subjects, as we are meant to be.

Reflection

“Did you see that? A single firefly is [still trying to tell us something]. Such a tiny light, such a considerable task. Its luminescence could very well be the spark that reminds us to make a most necessary turn—a swing and a shift—toward cherishing this magnificent wondrous planet.” Somewhere over the rainbow, where trouble melts like lemon drops, where dreams come true where blue birds fly, that somewhere is here, only here. What a wonderful world it is—full of such beauty, such intense harmony possible from honoring all the variations and varieties of Is-ness there is.

We can, together, imagine harmony between our human beingness and the earth in its intricacy. We can, when we cultivate I-thou relationship, as equals. Do mountains have bones? Are trees the sky’s legs? Are branches the tree’s arms? Is dirt the world’s skin? Is the ocean the world’s bath? Are rivers the earth’s veins? Is wind the world breathing? Is rain the day’s tears? For this world, this beautiful world we raise our voices, the home that gives us birth, the blue green hills of earth.

My prayers alone cannot stop any of the bad things from happening—the loss of animal life and plant life and human life. “But, my prayers can gently break the silence of despair, [. . .] can channel my rage at the machine, [. . .] can embolden me to be the hands and feet of The Divine.” “[M]y prayers can encourage others of faith to awake, arise and act. I am because you are and only together, with a radical belief that a paradigm shift is possible, [when] active hope and faithful resolve to be the change we seek, can we make it stop.” “[. . . And] you might think [that’s] a kind of love. And you’d be right.” May we be the friends shaking hands, singing, ‘How do you do?’, really singing, “I...I love you,” as we harmonize all of our individual resources toward the Beauty to which the Universe lures us in an expression of our truest being. Remember this, today, and every day, as you remember also that you are loved, you are worthy, you are welcome, and you are needed. May you feel it so. May it be so. And may we say together, “Amen”!

<https://www.spiritualityandpractice.com/blogs/posts/process-musings/494/b-is-for-beauty>

<https://www.the-philosophy.com/buber-i-thou-summary>

<https://truenaturefoundation.org/research/how-wolves-change-rivers/>

Nezhukumatathil, Aimee. *World of Wonders*. Minneapolis, MN: Milkweed Editions, 2020.