

Ritual and Homily—When Nature Is You
UUFM—Rev. Dr. Rita Capezzi

Ritual: And now it the time to unpack our Worship Bags! It was so good to see in person those of you who came to the Fellowship to pick up your bags. Most of you would not be looking into these bags if it were not for the members of our congregation who delivered them to you, who have delivered to you at other times during this period of distance and isolation. Thank you to delivery organizer Nancy Cramblit, and to drivers Denny Cramblit and Deb Fitzloff, to Barb Franchino and Mae Gagnon, to John Knox and Karen Knox, to Jeff Lowry and DeeAnn and Tom Nelson. Your hearts and hands make our Fellowship possible.

You can pull out that coloring page and spend some time with that during our hour this morning. I will invite you later to show your artistry to everyone. And you will find this strip of paper with “MOBIUS” printed on it. Hang on to that for later as well. And then you will find lots of black sunflower seeds and a ball or two of dirt.

What is this, you are asking? Where are the cookies or cakes or bread? No food here this morning for human consumption. Today, we will feed the earth symbolically with food for the birds and a ball of seeds for planting Minnesota wildflowers. Our Director of Children’s Faith Development Macey Forsyth coordinated a team to create the seed bombs. She consulted birding and gardening experts Henry Panowitsch and Sue Chambers about healthy seed for the birds and sustaining seeds for the seed bombs. Deb Fitzloff, Lee Ganske, the Chapman Family, and the Rossow Strasser Family made the bombs of clay and soil and seed, ready for you to cast them onto a bare patch of ground—in your yard, in a barren stretch along the highway, or into a vacant lot. The native wildflowers will provide nutrients for the soil, and sustenance for insects and birds and bunnies, and beauty for our human eyes and minds and hearts. With this bag of seed and soil, you may return to earth something in return for what we all take from earth.

In the Haudenosaunee way, may we bring our minds together now. May we each imagine ourselves casting with care seeds and soil. May we imagine that we are offering a gift to the earth as we do this, co-creating the natural world as beings who belong to earth, who are of earth itself. May we know ourselves to be creatures of the earth and so nurtured by it and responsible for it. May our imaginings and our knowings call us to disrupt the destruction of our world—the extraction, the pollution, the overcrowding, the domination. May we each dig down into the rich loam of our beings and imagine one more way we can stop the pillage and commence the restoration. May casting these seeds be a new beginning of awareness leading to action.

May it be so, and Amen.

Homily: As we begin here in this moment, let’s show each other our coloring pages. Let’s see your version of the beauty sleeping under the visible layer of earth. In the earth she is, and of the earth she is, as the tree emerges from her. Here’s mine. And thank you all, for imagining the beauty of the earth.

Yesterday, the vernal equinox happened for the northern hemisphere. For Mankato, at 4:37 in the morning. Not only the earth forever turning but the earth in relationship with its star, our sun, the source of heat and light without which the earth would not be a living organism. And this equinox, true of all such events, it was a brief and fleeting moment of celestial balance, as we move from the time of darkness and rest and recovery and fecund-in-the-groundness to increasing light and emergence and growth. Attending to the equinox is to acknowledge our place in the universe, larger and more expansive than we can imagine it.

Ever since science taught us that we are not the center of the universe, since space travel showed us the earth as a big blue marble distinctly beautiful and alone, we humans have confronted our smallness in the vastness of space. And at the same time, we **know** that we are connected to all that vastness in the very elements that make up our bodies. "Almost 99% of the mass of the human body is made up of six elements: oxygen, carbon, hydrogen, nitrogen, calcium, and phosphorus. Only about 0.85% is composed of another five elements: potassium, sulfur, sodium, chlorine, and magnesium." All eleven elements are necessary for life.

These are the elements in stars and in rocks, in gases and in dust. We are, as Carl Sagan famously said, made of star stuff. Even that barely measurable 1% of our bodies, the so-called "trace elements," is necessary for life. At the cosmic level, at the level of all existence, we are connected to everything else. And even knowing that, it is knowledge hard to hold beyond the realm of thought. It is hard to hold in our hearts and hands. We are, all of us, star stuff, and yet we don't always feel and act like that.

Closer to our sense of being, perhaps, on the planet, we are made of the same molecules as plants and animals, of the earth itself. We are made of water. We are made of protein. Fat and bone and carbohydrate. Our DNA, and the DNA of every living thing, made of the same four amino acids, generates a genome. 99.9% of my genome is exactly like the genome of every single one of you. We share 98.8% similar genomes with chimpanzees, 98% with pigs, 94% with cats and 90% with dogs, 60% with chickens, 50% with trees, 44% with honeybees, 25% with a daffodil. At a genetic level, we share significant similarity with all the other living beings of earth.

Yet how do we live, how do we really live, within such intimate proximity, our bodies literally made of the same elements and composed by infinite and beautiful combinations of the same four amino acids? How often do we consider this relationship? How often do we think about it? How often does it move our hearts and hands into sympathetic action?

Last weekend, my spouse and I drove to the Pipestone National Monument. We drove within a landscape of corn and soybean fields, monocultures created to feed the stupefying numbers of pigs and chickens housed in sunless warehouses, ripening for slaughter. Monocultures of corn and soybeans mitigating the ratio of petrochemicals that go into our gas tanks, though not reducing one iota the number of miles we drive. From Mankato, the only way to get to Pipestone is through this expansive industrial factory.

We went to Pipestone to divert ourselves from the monotony of our COVID lives. We went to Pipestone to learn more about the lives and beliefs of the Dakota people who once inhabited all this land—Mankato land, Pipestone land, and all the ravaged land in between. We went to Pipestone to experience something of the sacred infusing Dakota experience and the lands of southwestern Minnesota. The sacred, the more than ourselves, and the world as much more-than-human. The sacred, the connectedness, the relationship among and between everything.

I felt the sacred there. I felt it buzzing in the dry grasses waving in the breeze. I saw it in the stacked blocks of Sioux quartzite and the softer layer of rich red pipestone below. I sensed it in the stories of quarrying, in the past and now, the stories of labor to extract the stone malleable for carving, suitable for sacred ceremony, the blood of the earth and the smoke of tobacco linking the peoples as they prayed and as they deliberated about disputes and as they shared wisdom for how to live.

I heard the sacred in the gurgling waters, smelled it in the minerals as evaporated vapors rose by the heat of the sun. I felt a sense of mystery, and I loved it. And everywhere, everywhere, there were the warning signs: don't drink the water, don't swim in the water, don't touch the water. The water is significantly and tragically polluted by the fertilizer and herbicide runoff from the farming industry all around this sacred place. Our extractive and excessive human activity pollutes the land, pollutes the water, wantonly destroys the lives of animals, and alters into sterility the plants. Toxic compounds leach out of shuttered landfills. Our poisonous ways of living cannot be contained.

At the macrocosmic level, at the microcosmic level, we are like everything in the universe. Science has revealed all this connection, all this similarity expressed through its distinct and beautiful diversity, in the very the traces of ourselves. We are, all of us, star stuff, and yet, so often, too often, we don't feel and act like that.

All over the entire earth and now into the space of our solar system, the image of human beings is inscribed. Everywhere we look, we see *homo imago*. The image of man. Once, there was the image of god. Once there was the vital, biologically diverse, with life perpetually adapting within the earth environments and microclimates created by its variety. Now, everywhere we look, we see ourselves. We carve mountains into statues or blow the tops off them. We treat the water with chemicals to counteract other chemicals so we can drink it. We pour compounds into the air which later rain down acid upon us, eroding concrete and bleaching the life out of the coral reefs. We turn the plant and animal fruits of the earth into products with strange shelf lives and call it "food," food that does not nourish our imaginations or our tastebuds any better than it nourishes our bodies. We create through mineral mining nightmarish landscapes of toxic pools and erupted layers of shale. We leave hunks of metal and toxic substances in space. We leave hunks of metal and synthetic materials and dead bodies on the slopes of the highest mountain peaks, mountains sacred to the people living in proximity to them.

And so much more. So much more extraction, so much more destruction, so much more domination. As some of us dominate others of us, though oppressive racist systems and labor-theft, so we dominate the earth. In the words of liberation theologian Leonardo Boff, “The logic that exploits classes and subjects peoples to the interests of a few rich and powerful countries is the same as the logic that devastates the Earth and plunders its wealth, showing no solidarity with the rest of humankind and future generations.” Boff goes on to say, “Such a logic is shattering the fragile balance of the universe, built up with great wisdom by nature throughout fifteen billion years of labor. It has broken humankind’s covenant of kinship with the Earth and destroyed the sense of connectedness with all things” (xi). We have lost our solidarity with the earth. We have lost our sense of kinship, of connectedness, our sense that the earth is both human and more-than-human, and that we are all related.

What I am describing to you is the age of earth called the Anthropocene, a time when human activity is inscribed on every part of the earth, when humans have dominated and effected change to every natural system, somehow imagining that the image of man imprinted on everything would not affect us in ultimate ways. And just as we have reached the so-called stage of progress or development, just as we can’t now drive to Pipestone without moving through an industrial landscape, we find that we, too, are *terra bestia*, creatures of the earth. In dominating earth and now space, we have dominated ourselves. All the domination of the earth system, all the extraction and destruction, that now is hurting all of us. Artificial county and state borders, jurisdictions, they are meaningless against water pollution, air pollution, disease vectors. Because we, too, are of earth, made of it. We, too, are of universe. We are, all of us, star stuff, and whether we like it or not, whether we feel it and act as if it is so, we are all connected with everything.

Our Unitarian Universalist faith calls us to seek and to see the connectedness. We are called to commit to the inherent worthy and dignity of everyone, to the notion that every singular being matters. We are called to acknowledge the interdependent web of all existence, of which we are a part and never apart from, the ultimate relational nature of reality. Ultimate connection is so much to hold, especially when so many of us live a western lifestyle, with extra cars and houses and clothing, with extra plastic bins and sets of dishes and bottled water. We know the right ideas. Getting our hearts and hands to follow is harder.

And so, we turn toward the light of community, to the comforting and the familiar, the circle holding us in care, where we are known to each other. We turn to a circle of healing, a circle of friendship. A human circle. Home. How do we make “home”?

I ask you to reflect now, to search your own minds and spirits. [Holding up the Mobius strip]. If you want, write your name and whose you love below the word “MOBIUS.” Maybe draw some pictures on the other. You are on one side of this symbolic wall. You are on one side and everything else is on the other. [Create a circle with the MOBIUS strip.] And when you create a circle, you are inside, and you bring into the circle some people—people you know and love, people in this religious community and in other affinity communities. But who remains on the outside? What is on the outside of your circle of concern, your sense of humanity and of community? Is it people who work as sex workers? Is it

transpeople? Is it incarcerated people? Is it police? Is it men? Or women? Is it Black people? Republicans? Democrats? Asian people? The plants and the animals? The rocks and the water and the soil? The planetary system? To live into the value of our First Principle, we have to do much more than circle the wagons.

In Starhawk's words, "We are all longing to go home to some place we have never been—a place half-remembered and half-envisioned we can only catch glimpses of from time to time." We catch glimpses of home, and yet home eludes us. Why is that? Perhaps because our sense of circle too often is so extraordinarily small. We share 99% of our genome with each other, yet so many, too many, are too often outside the circle of community. Inside and outside. Human and not human. One of us and not like us. These binaries, they are just not working anymore. What can we do besides create opposition? How do we create an image of home, a sense of connected community that is more than fleeting, more than memory, more than dream? If we are to stop living as if the earth is our supermarket and our garbage can, we need more than a circle.

In the Anthropocene, everywhere we look we see *homo imago*, the image of man, destructive and threatening. But we can't help but see also that we are subjects of our own destruction, threatening ourselves. We are creatures of the earth, *terra bestia*. And that is an opportunity as much as a threat. American professor of religion and politics Michael S. Hogue writes, "As mortally threatening as it is, the Anthropocene also has a natural aspect: the beginning of the human age for the Earth is also the ending of the idea of humans as separate from the rest of nature" (154). How can we begin to feel and to act as if this is so?

Let's play with our MOBIUS strip one more time. [Holding up the strip] I do not live, you do not live, on one side of a wall with everything else on the other side. [Holding up the circle] I do not thrive, you do not thrive, within a circle, narrow or wide, where more is part of your sense of community but still much is on the outside. Rather, there is no "inside" and "outside." We are on a continuous reality. You have the ends of the strip overlapping to make the circle. Well, now take one end, and turn it over. There is no "inside" and "outside" of the strip. Just one continuous plane as you run your finger over the strip. One inside-outside. One more-than-binary. Our communities are all part of the same plane. We are all of the web. May we not only know this, but feel it and move our hands to action, to build, as Hogue puts it, "more 'world-loyal' ways of being human in a more-than-human world" (154), more loving life ways in a reality that holds us all.

Your Green Sanctuary Team has been preparing materials for self-study and for group learning. Have a look at the offerings posted on the website. Think about what you can do. And do it. The circumstances may seem hopeless and overwhelming, yet so much now hangs in the balance. As Ursula K. LeGuin wrote, "The only thing that makes life possible is permanent, intolerable uncertainty, is not knowing what comes next." Life is perpetually perishing. Our lives are inherently vulnerable, tender as the shoots emerging from cold winter to warming spring. Let us not despair. Let us bring our minds together, in the ways our Haudenosaunee siblings teach us. Let us take our place in the more-than-human world. Let us

begin to bring our knowing and our feeling into action for the life of the planet, our only home, in the here and now, the only moment of which we can be certain.

As earth turns and turns, successive equinox and solstice beyond what any of us will know directly, may our bodies, our minds, our spirits learn the old rhythm anew, a rhythm paced by the rhythmic pulse of the whole created order. May we sing works songs for peace, for fairness. May we sing work songs of connection and compassion, as you remember, today and every day, you are loved, you are worthy, you are welcome, and you are needed. May you feel it so, may it be so, and may the people say "Amen."

[Composition of the human body - Wikipedia](#)

[Spring Equinox – Vernal Equinox, Southern & Northern \(timeanddate.com\)](#)

[The Spiritual Significance of Spring Equinox \(exploreddeeply.com\)](#)

[How much DNA do humans share with other animals? \(thednatests.com\)](#)

[https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/what-makes-us-different/pipestone national monument - Bing](https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/what-makes-us-different/pipestone-national-monument)

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