

Quest

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Noah's Ark

BY ANA LEVY-LYONS, SENIOR MINISTER, FIRST UNITARIAN CONGREGATIONAL SOCIETY OF BROOKLYN, NEW YORK

Those of you who went to Sunday school or Hebrew school when you were kids may have happy images in your head of Noah and the Ark: smiling giraffes and cows and lions going two by two up the ramp into the big boat; Noah and his family waving like they're going on a cruise; and, of course, the end of the story when the flood subsides and you have that post-rain wet sidewalk smell, and everything is all sparkly, clean and new, with a beautiful rainbow in the sky. This is how it always looks in the kids' picture books.

But the reality of how it's described in the text, and the reality of modern day floods, is not so happy. As we've recently seen in Texas and Florida and Puerto Rico and the Virgin Islands and India and so many other places around the world, we are getting storms and floods today that are increasingly biblical in their proportions, and nobody is smiling and waving (unless for help).

We tend to think of the sixth UU source of our living tradition, the one that refers to "Earth-based religions," as being the spiritual source that connects our UU theology with the earth. It's an important one, but it's not the only one. There is, for instance, plenty of theological material about our relationship with the earth in our first source, "Jewish and Christian teachings." Judaism and Christianity are the grandparent and parent of our faith. Our ideas about the relationship between humans and the earth were birthed in those traditions.

One idea in particular has resonated through the millennia: that at root, humans and the earth are one and the same. In the beginning of the Biblical origin myth, God takes a handful of earth (in Hebrew, *adamah*) and breathes life into it to create the first human (*adam*). *Adamah*, *adam*. The *adam* has no gender, no race, no language, no religion, no political affiliation. Neither a Yankees fan nor a Mets fan, it is simply an earthling—a creature made out of earth and infused with the spirit, the breath of God.

The *adam* later splits into two and does all kinds of things, good and bad. But it's important to remember that the Jewish and Christian traditions envision that there was a pre-social time—a time before we created culture or were shaped by culture—when we were literally one with the earth.

Through the generations we've sensed that the earth is our essence. It is our home, our origin and our final resting place. Ashes to ashes, dust to dust. When we bury a loved one's body or sprinkle ashes in a sacred place, we feel that we are returning them to their source. And it's true, of course. Earth becomes plants, which become our bodies either by our eating the plants directly or indirectly through our eating animals who ate the plants.

And when we die the remains of our body become the earth again. Even if it takes a thousand years (because we've embalmed and encased the body in caskets with-in caskets, trying to fend off the inevitable), eventually we return to the earth. The late Unitarian Universalist minister Forrest Church pointed out that English has the same connection as Hebrew does between the words for "human" and "earth." He used to say, "The most beautiful of all etymologies is human, humane, humility, humble, humus."

So what happens to the earthling in the Genesis story? The earthling is given a garden, the text says, with every kind of tree that is beautiful and good for food. There are four rivers running through it to water the garden—a kind of natural irrigation system. It is a paradise where the earthling, like a baby, is given everything that it needs. The earthling is also given limits on the use of these natural

There are no passengers on Spaceship Earth. We are all crew. —Marshall McLuhan

A monthly for religious liberals

THINKING ABOUT EARTH

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elements. *Use only part of what's here, which will be more than enough for you, God says.*

As most of us know from the story, that doesn't go so well. The earthling becomes two earthlings and they succumb to temptation to take more than the bounty they've been given. They get cast out of the garden, and life for the first time becomes hard. Now they have to work the earth to grow food.

And things just get worse from there. Jealousy and greed crop up. Brothers fight. Cain murders Abel and then refuses to take responsibility for it, saying the famous dismissive line, "Am I my brother's keeper?" The earth itself speaks up, as God says to Cain, "What have you done? The voice of your brother's blood is crying to me from the ground!"

And then there's the flood. The Genesis text introduces the flood story by saying:

And God regretted having made humankind in the earth. And God's heart grieved. And God said, "I'll wipe out the adam whom I've created from the face of the earth, from human to animal to creeping thing, and to the bird of the skies, because I regret that I made them."

This is really an astounding thing to appear in the opening chapters of the foundational text of Jewish and Christian traditions. It's so painful, like a parent saying, "I'm sorry I had you." It's the worst condemnation possible. The text says that God saw humankind's "badness" on the earth such that "every plan devised by humanity's mind was nothing but bad all the time." And when God explains the flood to Noah, God says it's because "the earth is filled with violence."

Noah is an exception. It is said that Noah "walked with God." He's described as a "righteous man, blameless in his age." Now, that's an interesting way to put it. Blameless in his age. The "in his age" sounds like a qualifier, like when people say that so-and-so is hon-

est—for a politician. It's not entirely a compliment. Noah isn't blameless in an absolute sense; he isn't perfect. He's just pretty good relative to his times, which apparently are pretty bad. He's real. He's good but he's real. He walks with God. He's trying. And so God chooses him and his family to survive and pass those pretty good genes on to the rest of humanity.

But God chooses him for an even more important function as well. God choos-

It is only through the actions of imperfect people willing to take responsibility for cleaning up a mess that we did not make that life can be saved.

es Noah to build the ark. Now, in those children's picture books, the ark is always a pretty wooden boat with lots of windows, but what Noah is instructed to build is really just a giant box. God gives very detailed specifications: so many cubits wide and long and tall, seal the edges with pitch, three stories, one window, and a door on the side. And bring in two of every living creature to be protected from the storm. Two elephants, two mosquitoes and two of everything in between.

Noah is also supposed to bring in every type of plant that is good for food—presumably food for humans and animals, which would pretty much include every type of plant. Every kind of seed would need to be there so that the plants could regenerate. So Noah is given the responsibility for bringing the entire living biodiversity of the earth into the safety of the ark.

You would think Noah might find this a little burdensome, even a little unfair. You would think he might complain, "Hey, I'm not the one who ate the fruit from the tree I wasn't supposed to eat! I'm not the one who was jealous and manipulative! I haven't been violent!

I'm not the one who killed my brother and then denied it! Why should I have to clean up a mess that I did not make?" That is the \$64,000 question for today's age as well. Why should we have to clean up a mess that we did not make?

The parallels between this ancient myth and our real life story today are chilling. In each, it is human wrongdoing, misuse of natural elements and violence that brings the threat of destruction to the earth. In each, the destruction threatens not only the humans who caused it, but also all living creatures. In each, the destruction is to be carried out by means of flood—storms, a deluge of rain, and a powerful rising of waters. And in each, it is only through the actions of imperfect people willing to take responsibility for cleaning up a mess that we did not make that life can be saved.

If Noah is a hero because of anything, it's because of this. He takes responsibility even though he isn't guilty. He does everything he can to make things right again. We haven't singlehandedly made the choices that caused the past year's devastating hurricane season. But it was likely made more severe by the choices of our age, our time. We haven't personally polluted the earth or the oceans. But the economic systems in which we participate have. None of us by ourselves caused global warming. But the people of our generation and our parents' generation did. And it's up to us to take responsibility for it.

There is no singularly evil person who deserves all the blame. And there is no saint, no one blameless in an absolute sense, no one perfect or singularly qualified to fix it all. There is only us—good in our age. We each walk with the God of our understanding in our own way and we try.

In the modern version of building an ark we don't have the benefit of detailed instructions. It's a lot more complicated these days. But we do have the wisdom of the stories of our traditions—stories that paint for us a

picture of a different relationship with the earth. We have the ancient teaching that we are *adam*—made of earth and not separate from it. We have the vision of a beautiful garden in which we live simply and in peace, taking no more from it than we need.

And we have an inkling of what it means to care so much for every person, every species, every form of life on this earth, that we bring every single one into our circle and into our ark of compassion. May we be blessed, like Noah, with the courage to clean up messes that we did not make, and with the strength to weather whatever storms may come our way. ■

To Praise the Earth

BY ARMIDA
ALEXANDER,
MINISTER, UU
CHURCH OF
STOCKTON, ILLINOIS



We gather to praise the Earth,
to honor the soil, the sea, the
swimmers and crawlers,
the four-leggeds and the winged
ones;
we give thanks for the beauty and
glory of the Earth.
We seek new ways to understand
our place in the universe
—not at the center,
nor at the end of creative
evolution,
but a humble and balanced place
somewhere between and among
all Earth's children,
where every step we take
becomes a blessing,
where every word we say
becomes a prayer
of thanksgiving and praise. ■

Dear Mother Earth

BY THICH NHAT HANH

Dear Mother Earth,

You are the great Earth, you are Terra, you are Gaia; you are this infinitely beautiful blue planet. You are the Earth Refreshing Bodhisattva—fragrant, cool, and kind. Your immeasurable patience and endurance makes you a great Bodhisattva. Even though we your children have made many mistakes, you always forgive us. Every time we return to you, you are ready to open your arms and embrace us.

Whenever I am unstable, every time I lose touch with myself, or am lost in forgetfulness, sadness, hatred, or despair, I know I can come back to you. Touching you, I can find a refuge; I can reestablish my peace, and regain my joy and self-confidence. You love, protect and nurture all of us without discrimination.

You have an immense capacity to embrace, handle and transform everything that is cast at you, whether it be great asteroids, refuse and filth, poisonous fumes, or radioactive waste. Time helps you to do this, and your history has shown that you always succeed, even if it takes millions of years. You were able to re-establish equilibrium after the devastating collision that created the Moon, and have endured at least five mass extinctions, reviving yourself every time. You have an extraordinary capacity to renew, transform and heal yourself—and also us, your children.

I have faith in your great power of healing. My faith comes from my own observation and experience; it is not something others have told me to believe. That is why I know I can take refuge in you, dear Mother. As I walk, sit and breathe, I can surrender myself to you, trust wholly in you, and allow you to heal me. I know I don't have to do anything at all. I can simply relax, release all the tension in my body, and all the fears and worries in my mind.



Whether I am sitting or walking, lying down or standing, I allow myself to take refuge in you, and allow myself to be held and healed by you. I entrust myself to you, Mother Earth. Each one of us needs somewhere to come back to, a place of refuge, but we may not know where it is or how to get there. Looking deeply today, I can see that my true home, my true place of refuge is you, my beloved planet. I take refuge in you, Mother Earth. I do not have to go anywhere to find you: you are already in me and I am already you.

Dear Mother, each time
I sit in stillness on your
Earth, I will be aware
that because you are in
me, it is possible for me
to embody your
wonderful qualities....

Dear Mother, each time I sit in stillness on your Earth, I will be aware that because you are in me, it is possible for me to embody your wonderful qualities of solidity, perseverance, patience, and forbearance; of depth, endurance, and stability; of great courage, and non-fear, and inexhaustible creativity. I vow to practice wholeheartedly to realize these qualities, knowing that you have already sown these potentials as seeds in the soil of my heart and mind. ■





I am a Denizen of the Earth

BY JAY LEACH,
SENIOR MINISTER, UU
CHURCH OF CHARLOTTE,
NORTH CAROLINA

On Christmas Day, 1832, Ralph Waldo Emerson, newly resigned from the burdensome constraints of ministry, rather impulsively boarded a freighter bound for Malta. He had declared in writing: “I will not see with others’ eyes.... I would be free.” Over the course of many weeks, he slowly wandered up through Italy and into France. A half-a-year into his trip, he visited Paris’ botanical gardens, a place of major scientific research.

It was an experience that would redirect the course of his life. Exhilarated by the scientific classifications demonstrating relationships between species, he noted, “How much better things are in composition than alone.” And that’s when the insight arrived, a perception that, in time, would not just reorient his life, but would also introduce a new way of thinking about our human relationship to nature.

Gazing intently upon the gathered species, he felt—intuited, really—that they were not just related to one another but were somehow linked to him. “Not a form,” he’d write, “so grotesque, so savage, nor so beautiful but is an expression of some property inherent in the observer...” And, in his ecstatic state, he would affirm: “I feel the centipede in me—cayman, carp, eagle and fox. I am moved by strange sympathies; I say continually, ‘I will be a naturalist.’”

Robert Richardson, in his biography of Emerson, *The Mind on Fire*, reports: “He did not become a scientist or even a naturalist.... But from now on he acknowledged an unbreakable tie between his own mind and the natural world.” And that way of thinking would launch the Transcendentalist movement.

As theological descendants of that Transcendentalism, how do we understand the relationship between humankind and the natural world? Are we necessary caretakers of a less-well-equipped natural order? Is nature our gigantic big box store, a place for us to roam up and down its aisles, taking, using, drilling, harvesting at will? Is nature something we are apart from, and therefore something we need, at least on occasion, to get back to?

“Meantime within [us] is the soul of the whole; the wise silence; the universal beauty, to which every part and particle is equally related; the eternal ONE.”

There are dramatic implications for how we imagine the way humans and nature are related. Our view of it and us and how the two do or don’t correlate will have significant consequences in the commitments we make, in the habits we attempt to break, in the concerns we raise, and in the things we find to celebrate.

I suggest that Emerson offers us a very good place to begin. His “original relationship” is the key. We should experience nature for ourselves, and our experiences should be trusted. Emerson was an inveterate walker, setting out in all kinds of weather to observe, to apprehend, to encounter, and to draw conclusions for himself.

To be sure, he regarded science with deep respect. He read and studied and talked often with the scientists of his day. His deepest experiences, however, were not found in books or laboratories, but rather in the woods and the streets and farms, alongside the streams and ponds all about him. Emerson bemoans: “We live in succession, in division, in parts, in particles. Meantime within [us] is the soul of the

whole; the wise silence; the universal beauty, to which every part and particle is equally related; the eternal ONE.”

That’s it. That’s the relationship: “universal beauty, to which every part and particle is equally related.” “We see the world piece by piece, as the sun, the moon, the animal, the tree; but the whole, of which these are the shining parts, is the soul.” The botanical garden thrilled Emerson because he discovered not just a whole new world of science there; he discovered himself.

We don’t escape to nature. Rather, there is no escape from nature; it is within us. We don’t get away to nature. Rather, there is no place to get away from nature; we are forever being drawn into that deep connection. A cardinal’s single chirp, a frog croaking in the night, the shrill cry of a hawk, the haunting call of an owl. A dogwood in bloom, an iris bursting with shameless color, a simple wildflower, a red bud gone from pink to green.

Susan Griffin put it this way: “We are nature. We are nature seeing nature... Nature speaking of nature to nature.” And in the words of Emerson’s friend and fellow Transcendentalist, H. D. Thoreau: “The creaking of the crickets seems at the very foundation of all sound... It is a sound from within, not without. It reminds me that I am a denizen of the earth.” ■

The most powerful weapon on earth is the human soul on fire.

—Ferdinand Foch

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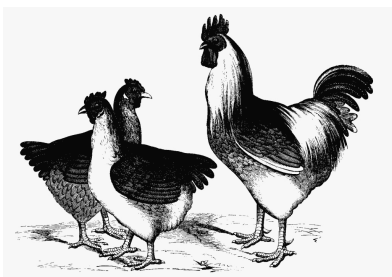
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A Sacred Act

BY MYKE JOHNSON,
MINISTER, ALLEN AVENUE
UU CHURCH OF
PORTLAND, MAINE



How do we live in honorable relationship with the other beings who share our planet? We can start by thinking about our food. If we eat meat or fish or eggs or milk, who are the animals that give us their lives, so we can have food? In our society, it is difficult to honor the animals who are most important to us. Chickens, cattle and pigs are the most widely eaten animals in the United States. Most of them are raised in horrible conditions. When we begin to open our hearts to our connection with other animals, we have to ask ourselves about the animals we eat for food.



I think about the chicken—the animal most eaten in the United States. Sometimes they have been given a bad reputation in our culture—we call someone *chicken* when they are lacking in courage. But chickens lay eggs that feed us, and their bodies feed us. When allowed to roam a yard, chickens will kill and eat the ticks that can cause Lyme disease. They have their own nobility and beauty and give so much to us. If we respected the chickens, how could we tolerate the agricultural practices that confine them to torturous cages?

To eat is a sacred act. Often, we eat mindlessly. We don't pay attention. When we eat, we take one part of Mother Earth, and unite it with another part of Mother Earth—our

own bodies. Eating is necessary for life, and yet includes death of some kind, whether of animals or plants. The great mystery of life and death can be present to us every single day in the ordinary communion of eating a meal. But most of the time we are separated from that mystery because we can pick up our food from the grocery store, heedless of the reality that this food is from living beings.

To eat is a sacred act.

Some people, seeking to give greater respect to our fellow creatures, make a choice to refrain from eating meat. That can be a powerful practice. For my part, I try to honor the sacredness of all beings by thanking the creatures who have given their lives that I might eat. I try to buy meats of animals who have been raised without cages, without chemicals, with some ability to live out their natural lives before they become our food. In our culture it is challenging, but becoming more and more possible. It begins by making that one simple change—to recognize and celebrate the beings who provide our food at each meal.

Excerpted from Finding Our Way Home: A Spiritual Journey into Earth Community ■

The Way Your Dog Lies Down

BY ZANN CARTER, POET AND FIBER ARTIST,
TERRE HAUTE, INDIANA



Lie down on the grass with your dog
the way your dog lies down,

stomach and heart flat to the ground.
Move yourself into the soil, grab onto

the dignity of dirt until you feel brave,
brave Earth. Listen.

Her grass has a thousand stories
and her roots speak the great tree mind.

You may get up freed.
You may get up defined.

You may get up redeemed, your talk
and walk and spine all aligned.

So lie down on the grass with your dog
the way your dog lies down,

stomach and heart pressed flat
to the sacred. To the holy,

holy ground. ■



The CLF Invites GA Delegates

Would you like to represent the Church of the Larger Fellowship at General Assembly (GA) this summer? The CLF is entitled to 22 delegates at the UUA's General Assembly in Kansas City, MO, on June 20-24 2018. You will also be able to attend workshops, concerts, programs, and worship services galore, while meeting Unitarian Universalists from near and far. And as a delegate you will be able to vote during general sessions. You can also meet our minister, Rev. Meg Riley, and members of the CLF Board and staff.

Our delegates are asked to attend and usher at the CLF Worship Service and to work a minimum of two hours in the CLF booth. CLF delegates vote their conscience in general sessions and are responsible for their own expenses. If you'd like to participate in GA 2018 in this role, please fill out the online application at clfuu.org/delegate-application. Visit the UUA's General Assembly website at www.uua.org/ga for details. ■



From Your Minister

BY MEG RILEY
SENIOR MINISTER,
CHURCH OF THE
LARGER FELLOWSHIP

I have described in earlier columns the deep and abiding joy I felt when I began to read Robin Wall Kimmerer's book, *Braiding Sweetgrass*. Both a scientist and an enrolled member of the Potawatomi Citizen Nation, she describes her relationship with the earth as one of mutuality, generativity and respect. She articulates better than any other writer I've ever encountered my experience of deep peace when I am in my garden, where I feel most at one with nature.

However, I should also tell you that I hit a point in the book where I could no longer easily accompany her; where my upbringing as a dualistic white westerner became an obstacle to allowing her to accompany me anymore. In a chapter called, "Epiphany in the Beans," she describes coming to a profound and fundamental realization:

Maybe it was the smell of ripe tomatoes, or the oriole singing, or that certain slant of light on a yellow afternoon and the beans hanging thick around me. It just came to me in a wash of happiness that made me laugh out loud.... I knew it with a certainty as warm and clear as the September sunshine. The land loves us back. She loves us with beans and tomatoes...by a shower of gifts and a rain of lessons. She provides for us and teaches us to provide for ourselves. That's what good mothers do.... Suddenly there was no intellectualizing, no rationalizing, just the pure sensation of baskets full of mother love. The ultimate reciprocity, loving and being loved in return.

I have been wrestling with this idea since I first encountered it. Does the earth love me? Do I really know that? I

think it would feel wonderful to know this kind of love, but my mind keeps twisting. "Isn't it kind of anthropomorphic?" I asked a friend, who says she knows in her very cells that the earth loves her. (In other words, "Isn't that attributing human traits to something that is not human?") My friend drew herself up and said, quietly but with clear and focused anger, "I absolutely hate that question. Do you see the arrogance of that question? That question presumes that humans are the ones who know how to love, that love begins with us. That we invented love. How dare we presume that?"

The land loves us back.

That stopped me, and set me to ruminating more. My friend is right. I stand firmly in my committed belief that love is the strongest force in the universe, and that human ability to love is a gift we are given, not something we invented. I don't care if people call its source God or life or just affirm love without worrying about its source. So why am I so stopped by fear when I consider publicly naming Earth as the biggest source of love I know? Why do I worry about ridicule, about being thought simple, for believing this when I have so much tangible evidence, starting with my very breath and body, of the earth as a source of love?

Ultimately, unable to stand my own mental contortions on the subject, I decided to approach the question in a different way. Kimmerer suggested this, after she found graduate students who hit the same wall of rationality and freezing that I did when confronting the question. She asked them: "What do you suppose would happen if people believed this crazy notion that the earth loves us back?"

She describes what happened when she framed the question this way: "The floodgates opened. They all wanted to talk at once. We were suddenly off the deep end, heading for world peace and

perfect harmony. One student summed it up, 'You wouldn't harm what gives you love.'"

So, I can hypothetically imagine what it would be to believe the earth loves me, loves all of us earthlings. Still, I want to go deeper with this. My friend who knows the earth loves her spent several months in deep meditation, simply feeling that love. I am shy about this, but I want to know that kind of love. In these winter months, when gardening is not a daily experience for me, I am instead committed to exploring whether I can feel the love of the earth. Kimmerer, again: "Knowing you love the earth changes you, activates you to defend and protect and celebrate." (Yes. This I know in my bones.) But then she continues: "But when you feel that the earth loves you in return, that feeling transforms the relationship from a one way street into a sacred bond.... It is medicine for broken land and empty hearts." I want to know that sacred bond enough to struggle for it, if need be. Even more than I need the approval of my scientist father and rational readers here, who I imagine shaking their heads disdainfully now.

I can say I love you, easily and without hesitation, to the life that unfolds before me in my garden. I love the earth as I plant and weed and tend and harvest and tuck in for the winter. Now I need to take time to be quiet, to receive love.

Winter in Minnesota and other northern climates is a good time for listening to the earth. Without the distraction of all that activity, with the garden in a time of deep rest and hibernation, perhaps I will find something deeper in myself, a pathway I haven't felt before, that can receive the earth's love. In the meantime, I'll bring out beans and corn and tomato sauce from the freezer, and remember the earth's generosity that allowed them to grow. ■



REsources for Living

BY LYNN UNGAR, MINISTER FOR LIFESPAN LEARNING, CHURCH OF THE LARGER FELLOWSHIP

It is, I strongly believe, well worth it to make a direct, intensive study of earth-centered spirituality.

For my part, I've spent many hours working in the garden, becoming grounded, as it were, in the earth. For instance, I know that the earth in front of my house is veined with tan streaks of clay, which, true to its nature, bakes hard as pottery in the sun. By contrast, the soil in the back yard flowerbeds is loose, crumbly. Once I have painstakingly retrieved it from the crabgrass and dandelion roots that have been laying claim there, it becomes utterly yielding, and I can dig holes for my new plants like a kid in a sandbox, without even needing a shovel or hand trowel.

Poking about in the dirt is one way of practicing earth-centered spirituality, but I would advocate even beyond that, for earth-centered theology. I find that earth-centered religion provides both the best description of my system of beliefs that I can find, and it also provides a constant challenge to live my life in accordance with those beliefs.

As I understand it, earth-centered theology refers, at heart, to a way of mapping out the world. For centuries the western world has operated under the assumption of a map of the universe that became entrenched during the middle ages as the Great Chain of Being. In this worldview the cosmos is seen as vertically linear—God is on top, beneath Him are the angels, all ranked in order, and beneath them are men, then women, and beneath them are animals, then plants, and so on. Everything is neatly in its place, the pope stacked above priests, and lions above lambs, birds above bugs.

Earth-centered traditions, however, see the universe arranged in a web of relationships. All beings stand in



relation to all others, whether intimately or distantly, and all of us hold responsibility for those relationships.

The divine, in this scheme of the universe, is not a supreme being who is "watching us from a distance," as the old pop song asserts. Rather, the sacred is nearer than breath, present in all beings, in all moments. The bear carries divinity, but so does the dragonfly and the white pine, granite and sandstone. Each being has its power, its story, each different from the other, all necessary for the balance of the world as a whole.

Unlike the simplicity of the Great Chain of Being (which I picture as sort of a straight hose, through which all power and authority flows from God the Faucet), the world from an earth-centered view is complicated, tangled. In a linear world view you know who you have control over, and who has control over you. Relationships between men and women (the Great Chain doesn't really recognize non-binary genders) are "simplified" by clearly declaring the head of the household and the head of society. As a human being, fulfilling your needs is simplified by knowing that the rest of the earth belongs to you as "natural resources" to be utilized in the most efficient or convenient way possible.

Life in an interdependent web is a lot more complicated. It requires of us that



we come to know each other beyond the scheme of up and down, mine and not mine. It demands that we learn each other's stories, know each other's needs and gifts. It declares that the community we inhabit consists not only of our friends and family, but also our environment, the animals, plants and minerals with which our lives are entwined. It reminds us that the

threads which connect us reach back into our past and forward to the future we are creating.

And whenever you try to keep that web of connection in mind, the decisions become hard. Say I need lumber to build a house but the spotted owl needs old-growth forest in order to survive. If we are both beings who matter, then what now? I eat the flesh of animals who have not only lost their lives to serve as food, but have also spent those lives treated like components in a factory. Do I have the right to be part of that bloody business? The rainforests are being decimated, often by people who are very poor and are doing whatever needs to be done to survive. How do I respond?

These are the kind of questions that an earth-centered spirituality demands we grapple with, questions thorny as blackberries, tenacious as dandelions. Questions without easy answers, which demand of us that we go deeper, look closer.

Honoring the interdependent web means respect for all my relationships, with whatever sort of being. It does not mean, however, that all those relationships are of equal weight. I think of the interdependent web as being built like a spider's web, a series of concentric circles, connected by spokes that weave through them all. Like any animal, my first allegiance is to my family, my friends, my tribe. I don't value a mouse or a mosquito the way I value a human being. But acknowledging that my circle of concern radiates out from a center that starts with my family, the human race, does not mean that I can forget those larger circles. The spokes of the web pass all the way through, and when any piece vibrates, like the spider, I feel it.

Living in this web of relationships is not simple or clear-cut. It isn't always possible to know the right thing to do, let alone to do it. Giving up on the Great Chain of Being means releasing a whole lot of being right. However, it also opens the complicated, tangled, always-shifting possibilities of being in right relationship. ■



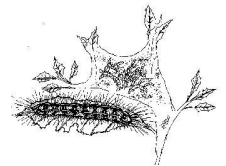
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From dust thou art, and to dust returneth.

I've never been quite comfortable with the dryness of this expression. Moreover, it always seemed somehow slightly demeaning: don't go putting on airs, don't expect too much—dust to dust is all we are.

But if I take those words and just add water, everything changes: “From out of the life-giving, carbon-sequestering, precious soil of the Earth, made rich by eons of life abundant cycling on before you, thou art generously made, and to that home your vibrant life returneth, and will be gratefully received.” ■

by **Jill Heaberlin**, member, White Bear UU Church,
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