

Claire Feingold Thoryn  
April 6, 2014  
Theme: Nature  
Sermon: Stewardship

**Reading: “Shaking the Tree” by Jeanne Lohmann**

Vine and branch we’re connected in this world  
of sound and echo, figure and shadow, the leaves  
contingent, roots pushing against earth. An apple

belongs to itself, to stem and tree, to air  
that claims it, then ground. Connections  
balance, each motion changes another. Precarious,

hanging together, we don’t know what our lives  
support, and we touch in the least shift of breathing.  
Each holy thing is borrowed. Everything depends.

**Sermon: Stewardship**

“Each holy thing is borrowed. Everything depends.”

We are borrowing this sanctuary for a short time.

We are borrowing these bodies for the years we are given them, before we return them to the Earth.

We are borrowing the air we breathe, returning it to the Universe with each exhale.

And we are borrowing the Earth on which we live, stewarding this planet until the next generation takes over its care.

Unitarian Universalism claims seven principles by which we live. And the seventh principle is: Respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part. Just living on this earth is a spiritual practice.

And so what is our spiritual response to climate change? Something like 97% of climate scientists agree that climate change and global warming is happening.<sup>1</sup> There isn't actually a real debate about that any more.

The debate, or perhaps the spiritual and practical question we are asked to grapple with, is what we can and should do about it.

I am not sure what specific choices are the right ones to solve this seemingly unsolvable problem. All I know is that

Connections balance,  
each motion changes another.

Our connections are amazing and awe-inspiring, and terrifying and overwhelming. Our power lies in our connection, if we can harness it.

Recently I saw a video about the results of the reintroduction of wolves into Yellowstone National Park, in 1995. And just that one act, bringing back a natural predator that humans had essentially decimated, had a dramatic effect on the park.<sup>2</sup>

The wolves had been gone from Yellowstone for 70 years. In that time many generations of deer had built up and built up. Humans had tried to control the deer population but simply couldn't make a real effect.

Deer graze all day long and they reduced vegetation all over the park to almost nothing. The video shows that:

[A]s soon as the wolves arrived, even though they were few in number they started to have the most remarkable effects.

First, of course, they killed some of the deer... but [m]uch more significantly, they radically changed the behavior of the deer. The deer started avoiding certain parts of the park – the places where they could be trapped most easily – particularly the valleys and the gorges and immediately those places started to regenerate.

In some areas, the height of the trees quintupled in just six years. Bare valley sides quickly became forests of aspen and willow and cottonwood. And as soon as that happened, the birds started moving in. The number of songbirds and migratory birds started to increase greatly.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.nytimes.com/2014/03/18/science/scientists-sound-alarm-on-climate.html>

<sup>2</sup> Watch the video here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ysa5OBhXz-Q>

The number of beavers started to increase because beavers like to eat the trees. And beavers, like wolves, are ecosystem engineers. They create niches for other species. And the dams they built in the rivers provided habitats for otters and muskrats and ducks and fish and reptiles and amphibians.

The wolves killed coyotes and as a result of that, the number of rabbits and mice began to rise which meant more hawks, more weasels, more foxes, more badgers.

Ravens and bald eagles came down to feed on the carrion that the wolves had left. Bears fed on it, too.

[The bear] population began to rise because there were more berries growing on the regenerating shrubs, and the bears reinforced what the wolves were doing.

But here's where it gets really interesting.

The newly regenerating forests and recovering vegetation stabilized river banks and stopped soil erosion so that they collapsed less often. Steadily, the rivers became more fixed in their course.

The wolves changed the behavior of the rivers.

The rivers began to meander less. There was less erosion. The channels narrowed. More pools formed. All of which were great for wildlife habitats.

So the wolves, small in number, transformed not just the ecosystem of the Yellowstone National Park – This huge area of land... but also, its physical geography.

I love this story of how a few animals, working together can cause a cascade of environmental impact. And predators, at that: the animals that we might think of as killers. Yet these animals, in the act of hunting and killing, gave life to many others.

Connections balance,  
each motion changes another.  
Precarious, hanging together,  
we don't know what our lives support.

These connections, this interdependent web, make it hard to find black and white solutions, solutions that don't cascade into other consequences.

One example that comes to my mind a lot is humanity's hunger for oil and how that affects our environment. So it might seem easy to say the oil industry is altogether bad, is evil, is a killer.

But sometimes killers can give life, too. Our Unitarian Universalist congregation in Shelter Rock, NY has harnessed the power of Big Oil over the past 60 years. In 1953, a woman named Caroline Veatch, a longtime member of their congregation, passed away.

In her will she left the church all of her shares in the North European Oil Company.<sup>3</sup> As I remember their former minister describing it, "she left us an oil well, located just off the coast of Germany."

And since then, well, as you know, oil has been booming. And those shares have made a LOT of money for the church. Millions. And tens of millions. And the congregation created the Veatch Foundation, which gives away millions each year to social justice and Unitarian Universalist causes.

Just last year, they gave away a total of over 11 million dollars, mostly in amounts around 30 or 40 thousand dollars, to grassroots organizations.<sup>4</sup> One of the main focuses of their philanthropy is Environmental Justice; last year they gave away almost 600,000 dollars towards that issue alone.

In addition, they give millions to support civic engagement, civil rights, and citizen advocacy groups. They support organizations working for economic equity and sustainable communities.

They take the money from oil—that top of the food chain, big money predator—and redistribute it to the little grassroots guys trying to make the world a better place.

We don't know what our lives support.  
Everything depends.

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<sup>3</sup> <http://www.uuworld.org/life/articles/1806.shtml>

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.uucsr.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/12/2013-VEATCH-Annual-Report-2013.pdf>

In the Bible there is a story about the tower of Babel. In that great tale, humankind thinks that it can build and build and build, higher and higher, mightier and faster and bigger and stronger, without ever facing any repercussions.

But there are repercussions. And the worst consequence of all is the breaking of connections. In the tower of Babel story, people are scattered, and given different languages. Our connection as one people is broken.

In the story we are living today, humanity is facing dis-connection again. Our planet can face global warming and survive. Earth isn't going to die. Earth will still be here, floating, a blue and green marble in space that perhaps, as oceans rise, will become even more beautifully blue.

But humanity could be disconnected from Earth, fatally. And it is the low-lying, low-income countries that face the worst flooding, hurricanes, even elimination as waters rise. Humanity needs to reconnect to each other for our own salvation.

I think the hardest thing for me when thinking about climate change is how small I feel in the face of this massive train barreling down the tracks. I feel disempowered.

And actually, as individuals, we are small. And most of the things that we find in the media reinforce small, individual choices. Corporations use advertising to try to downplay our role as citizens and play up our role as consumers.<sup>5</sup>

Advertisements tell us to buy some eco-friendly soap, to change our light bulbs, to get a hybrid car. There aren't advertisements telling us to increase our advocacy work for environmental justice; to call our senators or send them emails; to lobby legislators for rules that govern how much natural resources corporations can use and pollute; to fight for the democratic process.

We are told to embrace small individual solutions like: take shorter showers. Yet a single golf course uses the same amount of water in one DAY that an American family of four uses over the course of four YEARS.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> <http://www.orionmagazine.org/index.php/articles/article/4801/>

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=91363837>;

And here is an environmental study paid for by Golf associations that points out how little water golf courses used compared to total American use:

<http://www.ngcoa.org/pdf/advocacy/Environmental%20Impact%20Fact%20Sheet.pdf>

In Palm Springs alone there are 57 golf courses.

And on top of that, golf courses are a tiny percentage of total water use in America: more than 90% of American water use is by big agriculture and industry. (So if this is industry, *arms wide*—and this is golf, *one big pinch*—and this is everybody in America's personal water use, *a pinch*.)

The status quo has a lot invested in trying to help us forget our roles as citizens and stay stuck in our roles as consumers.

Now, collectively, our consumer choices can affect the market. Those choices do matter. But our power is not only our buying power. Our power is speaking up. Our power is in our connection, not just our consumption.

Everything depends.

Anne Engelhardt sent me this quote from a recent book by biologist and environmentalist Carl Safina.<sup>7</sup> Safina says, about the plight of our planet:

To the extent that connections have been severed, ligaments cut, and our understanding thus hobbled, the coming endeavor must be one of reconnection.

[The Latin root of the word “religion is] *Religare*, which means to re-tie, or to gather to bind, as with a sense of obligation...

Ecology, family, community, religion—these words all grope toward the same need: connection, belonging, purpose.

[Safina goes on to say, as] a secular person and a scientist, I believe that our relationship with the living world must be mainly religious...religious in the sense of reverent, revolutionary, spiritual, and inspired.

*Reverent* because the world is unique, thus holy.

*Revolutionary* in making a break with...outdated, maladaptive modes of thought.

*Spiritual* in seeking attainment of a higher realm of human being.

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<sup>7</sup> The View from Lazy Point by Carl Safina, 2011. Italics added.

*Inspired* in the aspiration to connect crucial truths with wider communities.

*Religious* in precisely this way: *connection, with a sense of purpose.*

Connection, with a sense of purpose.

And so I say, to our new members and those who have been with us for five, ten, twenty, thirty, forty years: I pray that our connection with each other helps us be

reverent, revolutionary,  
spiritual, and inspired.

May we act not only as consumers, but as citizens, stewards of the planet we are borrowing from the generations to come.

Vine and branch we're connected in this world  
Each holy thing is borrowed. Everything depends.

Everything depends on us, on you. May we be worthy of this great task, to heal the world.

*Amen.*