

April 19, 2009
UUFTC, Sonora

Honoring our Mother: Celebrating the Earth

In this morning's reading, Thich Nhat Hanh shares with us his Buddhist vision of the world and our place in it. The world, he shows us, consists of interconnected systems. "I am the mayfly, and I am the bird that eats the mayfly." "I am the frog, and the I am the snake that feeds itself on the frog." "I am the starving child in Darfur, and I am the arms merchant." "My joy is like spring, my pain is like a river of tears." "Call me by true names," he says, because only by seeing the interconnections of the world can we truly wake up. And only by waking up, can we open our hearts in compassion.

Next Wednesday, April 22nd, is Earth Day. We have been celebrating Earth Day since 1970, and over that time, much progress has been made. Our consciousness has been raised, many of us are taking measures to reduce our own impact. But we know that much remains to be done, if we are to leave a healthy world for future generations. Last year, our global warming group presented a series of skits that lifted up many of our concerns about climate change and its effects. This year, a group within the fellowship have been studying a curriculum called "Menu for the Future." How is our food grown? How is it processed? How does it get to us? These are important questions, and they show us how far we have drifted from systems that are sustainable. Two weeks ago, our parents and children gathered at our Hess Avenue Property to begin small-scale gardening project at our Hess property.

We teach our children, so that they might learn how to live in the world sustainably. We teach our children what we have had to re-learn – that all things are connected; that we depend on each other; that we are but a small part of vast systems that have grown through the miraculous system of evolution into the complex world that we inhabit today.

The poet Mary Oliver writes:

The turtle breaks from the blue-black
skin of the water, dragging her shell
with its mossy scutes
across the shallows, and through the rushes
and over the mudflats, to the uprise,
to the yellow sand,
to dig with her ungainly feet
a nest, and hunker there spewing
her white eggs down
into the darkness, and you think

of her patience, her fortitude,
her determination to complete
what she was born to do –
And then you realize a greater thing –
She doesn't consider what she was born to do.
She's only filled

with an old blind wish.
It isn't even hers but came to her
in the rain or the soft wind,
which is a gate through which her life keeps walking.

She can't see
herself apart from the rest of the world
or the world from what she must do
every spring.
Crawling up the high hill,
luminous under the sand that has packed against her skin.
She doesn't dream
She knows.

She is a part of the pond she lives in,
The tall trees are her children,
The birds that swim above her
Are tied to her by an unbreakable string.

Interconnected – the turtle is a perfect part of the world around her – the product of an evolutionary process that has made her the perfect engine to grow and to sustain her species.

In the Hebrew Bible, the author of the Book of Job sets the stage with the story of Job, the righteous man, who nonetheless suffers catastrophe after catastrophe. Job rages at the injustice of it all, and demands a hearing. And suddenly, out of a whirlwind comes the voice of Jahweh, the Hebrew God. The voice begins to proclaim in some of the most beautiful poetry ever spoken or written. "Where were you," the voice demanded, "when I laid the foundation of the earth." And the voice goes on to describe the wonders of the natural world, of creation itself. The oceans, the rising sun each morning, the light and the darkness, the storehouses of snow and hail and rain, the stars and the clouds.

Have you seen where the snow is stored or visited the storehouse of hail,
Which I keep for the day of terror, the final hours of the world?
Where is the west wind released and the east wind sent down to earth?

Who cuts a path for the thunderstorm and carves a road for the rain –
To water the desolate wasteland, the land where no man lives;
To make the wilderness bloom and cover the desert with grass.

Job stands awestruck by the beauty of this description of the natural wonders of the world. And then, this voice, this unknowable, unnamable presence goes on to describe members of the animal kingdom:

Do you hunt game for the lioness and feed her ravenous cubs,
When they crouch in their den, impatient, or lie in ambush in the thicket?
Who finds her prey at nightfall, when her cubs are aching with hunger? . . .

And do you show the hawk how to fly, stretching his wings on the wind?
Do you teach the vulture to soar and build his nest in the clouds?
He makes his home on the mountaintop, on the unapproachable crag.
He sits and scans for prey; from far off his eyes can spot it;
His little ones drink its blood. . . .

Job wants divine justice, and the voice speaks to him about tiny vultures drinking blood! Job wants a nice, neat world in which a personal God sits on a distant throne and hands out justice; a world of order in which outcomes are predictable, in which the good are rewarded and the evil are punished. But the voice tells Job about a much more ambiguous world, a world of unpredictability, of chaos; a world in which suffering may have no explanation or vindication, a world of limitless beauty and power. Job begins to see the vulnerability of human existence, and to see that everything is connected, in an unpredictable, but miraculous world. Job experiences the beauty and the wildness of all of creation, and he realizes that the world is much vaster than our human conceptions of a simple system of divine control and justice. Humans – and all the other creatures -- are set loose in a chaotic, sometimes terrifying, sometimes awe-inspiring, world, and it is up to us to make meaning out of the turmoil.

The most sacred text for Hindus is the *Bhagavad Gita*, which is considered to be one of the world's greatest religious classics. It was studied and admired by Emerson and Thoreau, and Mahatma Gandhi referred to it as his "eternal mother." It consists of a dialogue between Arjuna, the heroic leader of a clan and his charioteer, who turns out to be Krishna, the Hindu God. As they survey the battlefield before an epic battle between two clans, Arjuna drops his weapons and refuses to fight because he is overwhelmed with dread at the imminent deaths of so many brave warriors, who are his kinsmen. This is Krishna's cue to begin teaching about life and death, duty, nonattachment, how we should live our lives, and the inconceivable depths of reality. Krishna evokes a vision of a universe filled with elemental, undifferentiated energy; a universe much like that conveyed by the voice from the whirlwind in Job. Thus Krishna teaches:

I am the taste in water,
the light in the moon and sun,
the sacred syllable *ôṃ*
in the Vedas, the sound in air.

I am the fragrance in the earth,
the manliness in men, the brilliance
in fire, the life in the living, . . .
I am the primal seed within all beings.

I am the beginning and the end,
origin and dissolution,
refuge, home, true lover,
womb, and imperishable seed.

I am the heat of the sun,
I hold back the rain and release it;

I am death, and the deathless,
and all that is or is not.

And in the climax of the dialogue, Krishna appears to Arjuna in the form of radiant, pure energy. Arjuna sees

the whole universe
enfolded, with its countless billions
of life-forms, gathered together . . .
in the measureless, massive, sun-flame
Splendor of its form.

This vision of the transcendent as undifferentiated energy is hard for people in the west to accept. Jewish and Christian scriptures tend to split the universe into good and evil and to place “God” on the side of good. The only exception I’m aware of is the voice from the whirlwind in Job. What we see in these texts, and in Thich Nhat Hanh’s poem as well, is a vision of infinite intelligence in the universe that contains within it both the creative and the destructive. This is no white-washed, goody two-shoes version of the universe! This is a universe that includes death and destruction along with goodness, much like nature itself. This is “nature red in tooth and claw.” The lion springs to kill its prey without malice. The torn antelope suffers and lets go. Each plays its role in the sacred game. And whatever we think of as divine presence in the universe is present in each of them, is present in birth and death, is present in creation and destruction. “I am the frog, and I am the snake that arrives to eat the frog.” “I am the lioness giving birth, and the baby vultures drinking blood.” “I am the universe enfolded, with its billions of life-forms.” “I am the turtle, crawling up the bank yet again to plant my eggs in the sand.”

And the other point of commonality among these texts is the vision of the interconnectedness of all things. The turtle, the child in Darfur, the antelope giving birth, the radiance of pure energy in the universe – all are connected. And we too are woven tightly into this web of interdependence.

So as we celebrate yet another Earth Day, may we remember that we are not separate from the world around us.

May we remember that the earth is not there for us to exploit; it is our nest; our den; our home; and we are inextricably bound up with it.

May we remember that when we experience this sense of connectedness, we are also experiencing the presence of sacred transformational power that exists in the universe. When we experience our interdependence, we encounter reality in its purest, most radiant form.