

Holy Ground

April 22, 2018

Bellingham Unitarian Fellowship ~ www.buf.org

Rev Paul Beckel with Rachel May

Happy Earth Day! Welcome to Bellingham Unitarian Fellowship. All who come in the spirit of goodwill are welcome here. I am Rev Paul Beckel, a conscious living organism, part of an intricate ecosystem which is a singular self-sustaining organism of sorts, a goddess of sorts, whose very being is *us*... her forests our lungs, her collection of peoples and cultures and stories a sort of collective consciousness into which we join whether we mean to do so or not. I'm a part of that. I believe that you are a part of that. And in this sense we are interdependent, and inseparable. In this sense neither you nor I exist as individuals.

Today I invite you to consider surrendering your ego to the void. Shed the illusion of separateness and fall back into this miraculous web that not only sustains *us*, but will continue to sustain herself for time unimaginable.

LIGHTING THE CHALICE

GATHERING SONG	<i>#163 For the Earth Forever Turning</i>
CHILDREN'S FOCUS	<i>The Rainforest Song</i>
ERACISM MINUTE	Cat McIntyre
PHOENIX ENSEMBLE	<i>Benediction</i> , by Kathleen Skinner
MESSAGE, Part 1	Rachel May

Last week I shared with you a bit about my mother's difficult death and how I have come to terms with it through my work in hospice and through what I have found to be a very deep and sustaining sense of connection to the natural world. For Earth Day, Paul asked me to share how my naturalism ties in with my ongoing experience of death as I've progressed in my training to be a geriatric Nurse Practitioner. How do I use my understanding of our interconnectedness with the natural world and the sufficiency of this existence to help me as a nurse face suffering and loss? Is naturalism ever not enough?

At 20, I went on an Outward Bound course in the North Cascades. I hiked over 140 miles in 21 days. It remains the most harrowing, searingly beautiful, and spiritually profound experience of my life. I was the pale, skinny, book worm daughter of a librarian, out of shape and terrified as we traversed fields of boulders that tipped under my feet while my 40-pound pack threatened to pull me over. We waded across rivers with our pack belts undone so we could wriggle out of them if the current pulled us under. I crawled along a razor sharp ridge of shale with 1,000-foot drops on either side, roped together with ten other people, terrified because I thought if even one of us fell, we would all be torn to ribbons.. Every night I dreamed of falling and being devoured by an infinite and malevolent void. Mortality was suddenly very real. I woke in the morning to

the sun rising over crystalline alpine tarns or misty green meadows or peeping between the reaches of great-grandfather cedars and was pierced with an intense love for this life.

Toward the end of the trip we underwent the solo. Each of us had a solitary patch of ground by a stream, a tarp, our clothes, some sleeping gear, and a water bottle. We were to fast in solitude for three full days. The first day I was hungry. The second day I was hungry and bored. But on the third day I awoke and saw sunlit cobwebs gilding the ancient, slow-breathing trees. I fully grokked the dry, sun warmed antiquity of the boulders. I knew the life-giving, light-catching tumble of the stream, breathed the cleansing, resinous alpine air into my very cells, and I felt completely at one with all of it. For the first time in my life I needed nothing. I had no concept of future or past. I felt no worry, no loneliness, no yearning. I felt whole, fully present, and at one with a reality that was infinite and absolutely perfect. My body and spirit were made of the same stuff, continuous with all of existence. I suddenly realized that was enough. Reality was enough. This beautiful world, our immense and mysterious universe, every cell and molecule and quantum particle of it is magic and mystery and meaning enough for me.

The first thing that connection to nature does is give me perspective. Life is persistent, but fragile. Death is the only certainty, and it doesn't care if you're ready or if your loved ones are ready. It doesn't care how young you are or how many people need you. In life you are part of an interconnected web of roles and relationships, as all living things are. Like all living things woven into that tapestry, your thread has a beginning and an end, but the tapestry goes on. When I am struggling with a death that is especially troublesome, painful, unjust, or just plain wrong, I throw myself into nature like a stone into a pond, all sharp angles and dry planes. With a little time out there my anxiety and pain dissipate into that magnificent infinity like outward spreading concentric rings and I sink down to a stillness that allows me to breathe again. Pain is part of life, but it isn't all of life. The end is also part of life. Sometimes it isn't what we want it to be, but that doesn't diminish the life that person had or the love we felt for them.

The next thing nature gives is a sense of belonging and connectedness. Intellectually I know that I am part of the web of life. In very real and measurable ways I am connected with my family, my community, and my ecosystem. But I tend to forget that. As I run around day-to-day, working, studying, and knocking items off my perpetually expanding to-do list I can feel very isolated and insulated from the natural world. I'm in the habit of running at least a few times a week, either to Marine Park or down the Interurban. I do that all year round. In the summer I hike and kayak, too. I get a regular nature fix at least every other day, and that doesn't even count watching the bird and squirrel show out my dining room window or feasting my eyes on the sun rising behind Mt Baker as I drive the kids to school. It doesn't include locking eyes with a deer crossing my yard or studying with a warm fur ball of a cat in my lap. Each of these connections to nature grounds me, makes me feel at home in the world, and reminds me I'm not alone. I'm not disconnected from nature.

From perspective, belonging, and connection flow comfort and a stillness at my core that gives me strength. Is it ever not enough? Of course. I don't think any belief system or spiritual practice cures the pain of losing someone you love or watching them suffer, and I do often wind up

loving my patients and their families. But maintaining my connection to nature allows me to bear what I have to bear with a peaceful heart. It helps.

There are some implications of this philosophy. One is that every life is precious. It is important to fight injustice and relieve suffering. Another is that the natural world is sacred. When we corrupt it in our greed and shortsightedness, we corrupt our own hearts. Finally, we are all connected with each other and every living thing. So we have a duty to care for and support the integrity of the tapestry. We must be good citizens of our communities and our natural world.

GUIDED MEDITATION

Today's guided meditation is adapted from the poem, the prayer, the promise on the cover of the order of service. I invite you to follow along, if you wish, while I'm reading it through, but then you may wish to close your eyes and allow yourself to imagine... being one... with this journey of perpetual transformation.

To Be of the earth is to know

The restlessness of being a seed
The darkness of being planted
The struggle toward the light
The pain of growth into the light
The joy of bursting and bearing fruit
The love of being food for someone
The scattering of your seeds
The decay of the seasons
The mystery of death
And the miracle of birth

John Soos

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To Be of the earth is to know

The restlessness of being a seed

Imagine someone you know who is restless. It may be you or someone else you love. They may be young or not so young. Have you known this restlessness?

Do you remember what it is about? Could it simply be about an urge to grow...an urge for that seed to become all that it has the potential to become?

To be of the earth is to know

The darkness of being planted

You are a restless seed. You feel the urge to grow. You've heard that it's a frightening process. And now you are being planted. It is dark. You think about turning back. But you're a seed, you don't have that option.

To be of the earth is to know

The struggle toward the light

You got used to the darkness more quickly than you expected. Even got fairly comfortable with it. But the urge to grow remains, and a part of you splits through your protective shell. You leave it behind, and begin to scratch upward, through the dirt, with anticipation...

To be of the earth is to know
The pain of growth into the light

You were once a seed. You were born in the light and were once accostomed to it. But now you've grown used to the dark. You've forgotten what it's like out there in the sunshine. It's a shock.

Sometimes a shock will stop us or send us backwards. This time, without your understanding how, the light seems to propel you forward. You grow. You become what you had always known you could become.

To be of the earth is to know
The joy of bursting and bearing fruit

It all happens so quickly. In the summer sun and rain you have reached maturity, and in one last rapturous explosion of self, you put forth fruit containing...to your amazement...tiny little near-copies of your infant self.

To be of the earth is to know
The love of being food for someone

You are through. Spent. Exhausted. But it is not over. You find that you have become more than yourself, you have become a part of a chain of life. You are integral to something larger than yourself.

To be of the earth is to know
The scattering of your seeds

A breeze or a passing animal takes your fruit, your nourishment, and your gift to the chain of life. You are gone now. You can only gaze from the place of spirits as your fruit is broken into thousands of pieces and scattered to unfamiliar lands.

To be of the earth is to know
The decay of the seasons

Those bits that are no longer you lie waiting, now. It is hard to watch. You gave them, as dreams, to the seasons, but you were unprepared to see your dreams stepped on in the rotting leaves.

To be of the earth is to know
The mystery of death

From your perch in the land of the spirits, your future is no longer visible. Every bit of you has been absorbed by eternity.

To be of the earth is to know
the miracle of birth

The cycle continues, without us. The earth is stirring, again.

I invite you now to enter the stillness for a few minutes. Knowing the cycle, loving the cycle, finding yourself within the cycle. Do not attempt to force yourself into the station labeled: “happy ending”—the miracle of birth. Rather...find yourself and feel yourself wherever you are, and know that—there you are...swaddled in the full expanse of being ... a unity that cannot be grasped, but only loved.

MESSAGE, Part 2

Paul Beckel

The earth — *in and through which we travel the universe* — is a planet, of course. And yet on Earth Day we tend to be tuned in to a small sliver of the planet, her biosphere — and in particular we tend to be interested in the stuff and the action *above* the ground level.

But the word “earth,” of course, is also used to mean soil, which is dirty, which is ok, because she is — in her every revelation — holy ground.

The components of this holy ground are minerals, water, gasses, microorganisms, and decayed organic matter — all parts interacting: both with each other... and with the organisms above... who dig, plant, compact, extract, and redistribute the minerals, water, gasses, microorganisms, and organic matter below. Again and again, and again and again, and again.

This holy ground is habitat for macro organisms too — from millipedes to marmots. She is the source of nutrition and hydration and warmth and protection for many a seed, and many a root.

Having sprung from her body ourselves, it’s not surprising that we find Earth abounding with metaphors that we understand intuitively... and images that so readily take on spiritual significance.

So, speaking of roots, we have no trouble envisioning our own roots to be the pathways through which our DNA has journeyed and has been filtered through countless generations. It’s easy to visualize how our UU principles are *rooted* in human experience. And even our words, when we want to look more deeply at their meaning, we look to their origins, which we also call their “roots.”

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Another word for fertile soil is humus. And humus is the root word of a particular human virtue that can help us to stay grounded. Humus is the root of “humility,” which is what it takes, I think, to be of the earth... to recognize dirt as holy ground, and compost as well as holy ground, and even the soil we clean from a baby’s bottom, and from our own, which we can recognize, with humility, to be one with holy ground.

More precisely, humus is that component of soil made up of decayed organic matter. And the humus is just a small portion, it is in dynamic relationship with every other component of this living concoction. Just as the soil, as a whole, is in dynamic relationship with its physical and temporal context.

Our holy ground is in dynamic relationship, for example, with the weather, which is profoundly influenced by the way terra firma holds onto warmth. And the influence goes the other direction as well: as the soil-dwellers undergo profound structural changes when the thermosphere decides that they shall freeze or dry out. Or when, through the workings of the troposphere — wind and rain — we see holy ground transformed through erosion.

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Soil is an intricately interconnected ecosystem in itself. Our holy ground contains the majority of Gaia’s genetic diversity. A gram of soil can contain billions of organisms, belonging to thousands of species, mostly still unexplored. The living component of an acre of soil may include 900 pounds of earthworms, 2400 pounds of fungi, 1500 pounds of bacteria, 133 pounds of protozoa and 890 pounds of arthropods and algae.

As we know from the Rainforest song, the ecosystem of any one layer is deeply intertwined with the ecosystems of the others. For example, holy ground depends on the upper layers for falling leaves to produce more humus. And the other layers too depend upon the underground in that most organisms living above ground are rooted in, or spend part of their life cycle below-ground.

So preservation of the health of soil is as important as preservation of whales, wind, and water.

Ecosystem services are the countless benefits that human beings enjoy without cost within a healthy ecosystem. For example, the pollination of plants, disease control, recreational opportunities, medical therapies, and countless other benefits we fail to quantify in our gross domestic product — that other god.

Soil provides irreplaceable ecosystem services such as killing disease agents, and providing a tremendous range of biological niches and habitats. We rely on her holy ground not only for the cultivation of our food, but also for the degradation of pollutants, and sequestration of carbon, a natural process that removes carbon dioxide from the atmosphere, thereby holding back the pace of climate change.

Our holy ground absorbs rainwater and releases it later, preventing both flooding and drought.

Soil is tremendously important as a filter for storm water runoff. For the past few weeks the City of Bellingham has been doing extensive work on the storm water drainage system. Jane and I are thrilled that the City is installing a raingarden right in front of our house. The raingarden is essentially a hole in the ground designed to temporarily hold storm water runoff from the street so that it will soak into and be filtered by the soil instead of heading straight into the sewer, carrying toxins from the street into the Salish Sea. I think this is an experimental phase of construction and if it goes well we will see more raingardens installed throughout the city.

They're called gardens, rather than puddles, or holes in the ground, because they are planted with vegetation which can hold up well both in dry and saturated soil. They are worth the trouble and expense because they enable our holy ground to do some of the things she does best.

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We human creatures are not inherently evil inhabitants of Mother Earth. Even as we put down roots, we have opportunities to interact with and care for her. We have opportunities to mitigate our impact, and appreciate her gifts.

With humility, then, may we be of the earth. With joy and gratitude today, may we be of the earth. With one another, intimately, and intricately, inextricably inter-being... may we be of the earth.

SHARING OUR GIFTS

SENDING SONG

#203 All Creatures of the Earth and Sky

EXTINGUISHING THE CHALICE

CIRCLE 'ROUND