

**Common Ground**  
First Unitarian Congregation of Toronto  
April 22<sup>nd</sup>, 2012

Fiona Heath, Intern Minister

We honour many gods in this time and place.  
I may have mentioned some of them before:  
Lady Media, Lord Auto, Kid Stuff.  
One of the lesser gods we worship is Mr. Clean.

Tall, with a shiny, bald head, and strong arms.  
Dressed in pristine white clothes.  
Mr. Clean.  
He tells us we must scrub, sanitize and make all objects sparkle.  
We honour him with our Swiffer brushes and Lysol disinfectant.  
He's a good god to have around.  
I worshipped him at every hand sanitizer station I passed when I was a hospital chaplain.  
Cleanliness really does prevent infection.

But in our adoration of the man in the white t-shirt,  
we have forgotten how to honour dirt.

By dirt I mean the ground we walk on.  
The fertile soil from which we grow our food.  
Living as we do so much indoors,  
dirt just becomes the annoying stuff on the bottom of our shoes,  
tracking in on our nice clean floors.

But real dirt is so much more than mess.  
Dirt is, as writer Bill Logan says, "the ecstatic skin of the earth".  
It is this thin layer of topsoil – only about five centimetres thick - which creates life as we know it.

Dirt is made up of minerals – which are really just tiny particles of rocks, humus – the final compost of once living matter,  
and living organisms, worms, bugs and teeny tiny creatures.  
In just a handful of dirt there are thousands and thousands of good bacteria, protozoa, and micro-arthropods.  
There are more living organisms in the earth than on top of it,  
billions and billions.  
Scientists can only identify about 5% of them.

Without dirt, without soil, without all that life in the soil,

there would be no food,  
there would be no us.

There would be no life as we know it if soil had not begun forming billions of years ago on our planet earth.

We are utterly dependent on it, as are all living things.

The first man in the bible was named Adam, which comes from the ancient Hebrew word adama, meaning “earth” or “soil”.

Creation stories from many cultures tell of humans being carved from wood or shaped from seeds or being moulded out of cornmeal. In some, people climb out of the depths of the earth.

Whatever the image, these stories all share a common truth:  
**we are formed from earth.**

We come from earth, and in the end, we return to it.

Dirt is the ultimate matrix of life, so much so, that farmer Wes Jackson suggests that humans are really just a stopover between dirt and more dirt.

Humans are so much more than that, of course,  
but remembering that people are deeply dependent on plain old dirt might keep humanity a little more humble.

It might slow us down a little,  
encourage us to pay attention to the ground beneath our feet.  
It might remind us to respect and honour this life giving soil.  
We might even learn something.

A careful examination of soil reveals an intricate web of relationships,  
as climate, minerals, nutrients, organic matter, worms, and other creatures work busily together to create the conditions for more life.

Healthy, fertile soil is soil which is rich in organic and mineral diversity, although its actual composition depends on the particularities of the land where it is formed.

Some bacteria break down decomposing materials, others fix nitrogen, some creatures help water move through the soil, while others help break down rocks.

The soil is a busy place!

Gardener Carol Williams notes that soil is the “stuff of transformation”, always changing.  
**The transformation we yearn for may be illuminated by the study of soil.**

Dirt shows that transformation requires diversity – many active elements in conversation – some in cooperation, some in competition.

Dirt shows that transformation is an on-going, living process.

I find hope in the earth’s quiet, ever present reminder that transformation does not happen in isolation, but in connection,  
that it can be a process of on-going small changes.

For us, as well as the soil, transformation happens in diversity, in relationship, and is always in process.

It may seem a little odd to find spiritual guidance in learning about soil.  
It is just dirt, after all. And the spiritual, well,  
the spiritual is beyond us, pure and transcendent, beyond the horizon.  
Except that it isn't. Not always.

We light our chalice in honour of the spirit within each of us.  
We sing each week of the spirit of life, with its wings that set us free, but also its roots that hold us close.  
The spiritual is entwined in the living of life.  
In being alive.  
In being our very ordinary, our very extraordinary,  
very human selves, creatures of the earth as well as the sky.

And the soil, the ground beneath our feet, is the source of all life as we know it.

Every particle of soil, every atom of earth, is alive with mystery.  
**It is the living, breathing matrix of all life.**  
A source of both physical and spiritual nourishment.

My favourite smell in springtime is the scent of good earth after a rainfall. It smells so green and alive. The freshness of this scent lifts my spirit, reminding me that life is irrepressible.

Life is irrepressible. The earth pushes up through the cracks in the sidewalk and offers us clover and dandelions. Plants emerge wherever they can find a space to grow.

As city dwellers, it can be hard to know the land on which we live.  
We have paved over paradise and put up parking lots and skyscrapers and shopping malls.

There is fabulous, creative, beautiful life in human creations  
– except maybe for parking lots –  
and it is worthwhile celebrating our human inventiveness.  
Leonardo da Vinci pointed out that we know more about the stars than we do about the soil,  
and that is still true today.  
We are visionaries who dream big.

But perhaps dirt deserves just a little of our attention.  
It's not too hard to find.  
In our secret garden. In the park on the corner. In roof top gardens.  
In the flowerbeds. In the ravines. In Hyde Park. On the shore of Lake Ontario. Even in the cracks in the sidewalk.

Even in the biggest of cities there are many opportunities to experience the life of soil.  
Two weeks from now, on May 6<sup>th</sup>, after service I will be leading a SpiritWalk through this

neighbourhood.

What we can see when we walk mindfully and with careful attention?

What stories can we see? What life is emerging?

I have spoken about common dirt today because I believe as Unitarian Universalists we are dedicated to seeing the sacred in the everyday.

We are immersed in the world, part of the interdependent web.

We base our spiritual lives on six sources, one of which calls us to learn from the cycle of life and live with harmony within the rhythms of nature.

We are oriented to living in the here and now, celebrating the best in humanity, cherishing the earth.

Our rituals use earth symbols: lighting the chalice, pouring the waters, sharing the flowers.

We find our common ground in a faith based in honouring scientific knowledge while experiencing the mystery of the whole.

Out of values of our spiritual tradition, we write love letters to the earth and send them to the Secretary General of the United Nations.

Participating at the level of world community is important, by shifting political policy we can effect widespread change.

We need great vision. We also need great presence to live attentive in each moment.

In a little while we will welcome a baby into our congregation.

As Unitarians, our most profound hope is that Anna and all our children grow up in a world of peace, one with justice and mercy, one that cherishes the earth.

And while we work towards this vision, may we also be present with our children, attentive to the wonders beneath our feet.

The cycle of life begins and ends with the fertile soil of this planet.

“The soil is the great connector of our lives, the source and destination of all” (Berry, W.).

Let us cherish this source of life.

Let us protect it and nourish it with love. Let us delight in it.

When my son was very small, we had a community garden plot just behind our house in a church yard.

He would sit beside me as I dug and weeded our tiny patch of land.

One day he plunged his hands into the earth and came up with two fists of soil

which he thrust into the air and let spill all over himself,

laughing delightedly.

Now I won't suggest everyone go out and plunge your hands in the soil.

Taking off your shoes and simply feeling the grass beneath your feet may be enough.

My hope for you this morning is you may find spiritual nourishment within the good rich earth of this land.

May it be so.

### **Closing Words**

*from Mary Rose O'Reilley*

Each of us opens our eyes on space and time:  
here is my life.

I have seen that awakening look – now that I know it for what it is –  
on the faces of my newborn children and grandchildren.

This potential to split with wonder.

This immanence.

This inbreath of images that will fill us for a life,  
this mystery of our loves, our personal music.

Our place.