

“The Interdependent Web”

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N.B. These sermons are made available with a request: that the reader appreciate that, ideally, a sermon is an oral/aural experience that takes place in the context of worship, supported and reinforced by readings, contemplative music, rousing hymns, silence, and prayer and that it is but one part of an extended conversation that occurs over time between a minister and a covenanted congregation.

To begin, three stories.

Three stories about garbage.

In the early days after the Berlin Wall was erected, tensions were running high between the people on either side.¹

At one point, truckloads of rotting garbage were dumped, unceremoniously, from East Berlin into West Berlin.

Piles of the stinking stuff were tossed over the wall.

The office of the mayor in West Berlin was flooded with complaints.

The people wanted revenge.

They wanted to retaliate.

They wanted to hurl their own garbage over the wall in response.

But the mayor had a different idea.

He asked that every flower in the city be brought to a certain spot in the wall.

Basket upon basket of flowers were then heaved over the concrete barrier that cut the city in half.

¹ Anne Bryan Smollin, *God Knows You're Stressed: Simple Ways to Restore Your Balance*, p. 149-150.

As the avalanche of fragrant flowers fell to the ground,
a banner was erected for all to see—on both sides of the wall.

On it were the words:

“We each give what we have.”

* * *

This month, back in 1973,
NASA launched the final Skylab mission.

The goal was to learn whether humans
could live and work in space for long periods of time.

The first mission lasted 28 days.
The second 59.
The third, 89—
a record that held for over two decades.

“Skylab served as a solar observatory,
a microgravity lab, a medical lab,
and an Earth-observing facility.”

“NASA had originally planned for Skylab
to continue orbiting for up to ten more years
while the Space Shuttle was being developed,
but unexpectedly high solar activity—
which heated the Earth’s atmosphere
and created excessive drag on the space station—
caused Skylab to malfunction in 1977,
and[, as many of you may recall,]
it eventually fell back to Earth in 1979,”
causing a certain amount of pandemonium.

Pieces of the spacecraft landed in the Indian Ocean and
in southwestern Australian,
near Perth, in a little town called the Shire of Esperance.

The town promptly fined the United States
400 Australian dollars for littering.

The US ignored the bill for over 30 years.

Eventually, though, a man named Scott Barley, a radio host, raised the required funds from the listeners of his morning show, and settled the fine on his country's behalf.²

* * *

The third garbage story hits much closer to home.

In fact, it's still ongoing.

Perhaps you've heard that Rodrigo Duterte, the President of the Philippines, recently threatened to declare war on Canada.³

It appears, in 2013, that a Canadian waste management company sent six shipping containers to Manila.

They were supposed to be full of plastics that could be recycled.

Instead, well, let's just say that someone wasn't very skilled at sorting their recyclables from their garbage.

Perhaps you can empathize.

(I can. I'm a bit embarrassed at how often I have to double check the City of Toronto recycling guide.)

A third of the contents of the six shipping containers is, as promised, recyclable plastics.

The rest is made up of electronic parts and household garbage that includes diapers and kitchen scraps.

² Nick Greene, "NASA's Unpaid \$400 Littering Ticket For *Skylab* Debris in Australia," *Mental Floss*, 3 November 2015.

³ Mia Rabson, "The great big Canada-Philippines garbage dispute could be over—Canada will take its trash back to Vancouver," *National Post*, 2 May 2019.

No wonder the president was ready to declare war on us.

I mean, don't we all get a bit steamed
when we notice our neighbours not recycling properly?

People thoughtlessly putting their black plastic containers
or hot beverage cups in a Blue Bin?

After six years, Duterte has had it.

Twice, he's met with the Prime Minister to resolve the problem.

Not satisfied with the slow progress being made in recently-launched talks,
the president let loose.

To be fair, international law is on the side of the Filipinos.

Under the Basel Convention,
we are obligated to take back the garbage,
as that treaty mandates that developed countries
cannot dump their waste on developing nations.

Happily, I can report that we are not at war.

At the eleventh hour, this week,
as the president's deadline loomed,
Global Affairs Canada announced
that an offer had been made to pick up our garbage
and bring it back to the Port of Vancouver.

While it didn't take us the thirty years
it took the US to pay their fine,
it's arguably taken long enough.

And there's something to that banner from West Berlin
that we might ponder—namely,
that “we each give what we have.”

As we consume more and more stuff,
there is new reason for us to consider what we do have—
and, perhaps more importantly,

what we will do with it when it is no longer of use to us.

As you may have heard over the last year or so,
China and several other countries
are now refusing recyclables from the West.⁴

The industry isn't all that profitable any more,
so no one wants to take in the world's tossed-out plastics.

In fact, most municipalities
are now struggling to figure out what to do.

As the costs to take recyclables off their hands skyrocket,
some cities are deciding they can no longer afford
to run their recycling programs.

And all of that stuff—all of that plastic and all of that paper—
is now being sent directly to land-fills.

Now, I'm thinking this may not be such a bad thing.

It's not that I want us to keep building up mountains of garbage.

But I can see value with our being forced
to become more familiar with the things
that we've been discarding,
perhaps without much or enough thought.

I can sense a powerful lesson to be learned
by coming to understand—
through a more intimate relationship with our garbage—
that there truly is no “away”
where we can safely and easily throw things—
no magical place where what we cast off truly disappears.

As the poet Wendell Berry reminds us:

“There are no unsacred places;
there are only sacred places and desecrated places.”

⁴ Alana Semuels, “Is This the End of Recycling?”, *The Atlantic*, 5 March 2019.

Though we may deeply wish it otherwise,
our lifestyles as modern, urban people
do daily damage to our planet.

Unthinking or not, we are desecrating
the only home we will ever have.

How different things might be
if we were confronted with our own garbage on a regular basis.

How different our choices might be
if we had no choice but to manage our household waste ourselves.

* * *

The Seventh Principle of Unitarian Universalism—
respect “for the interdependent web of existence,
of which we are a part”—was added in 1995.

It was a critical and timely amendment
to the highest aspirations that guide our tradition.

This principle balances our First Principle,
which affirms the “inherent worth and dignity of every person”.

Taken together, these are the two pillars that uphold all the rest—
the Second through Sixth Principles, which call us:

to justice, equity, and compassion;

to acceptance of one another and
encouragement to spiritual growth;

to a free and responsible search for truth and meaning;

to the right of conscience and the use of the democratic process;

and to the goal of world community
with peace, liberty, and justice for all.

All of these principles rest on the foundations
of the first and the seventh,
which call us to honour every individual,
while respecting our radical interdependence.

This is the core of our theology:
that while each person is inherently valuable,
everyone is also part of the greater whole—
an inseparable strand of the web of life.

* * *

Often when we speak of the Seventh Principle,
when we speak of our dependence on the web that sustains us,
we tend to follow an uplifting, feel-good approach,
with images swirling in our minds
of dandelions, breaching whales, and towering redwood trees.

In other words, we tend to default to the idealized image of nature.

Anything with an eco-friendly label,
anything marketed as natural these days,
usually shows little green leaves and abundant blue skies.

Less often depicted is what the poets termed
“nature, red in tooth and claw.”⁵

Most of the branding of the environmental movement
has, for the past fifty years, invited us to picture what we cherish:
mountain streams, and fields strewn with flowers.

The only exception I can recall is a TV commercial
I watched as an American child of the ‘70s.

Anyone remember the Chiffon Margarine
ads that showed Mother Nature
could be testy at times?

⁵ Attributed to Tennyson, though the phrase was in use before he used it in 1850 in *In Memoriam A. H. H.*

As thunder clapped and lightening struck,
she would say:
“It’s not nice to fool Mother Nature!”

But, of course, the natural world
is so much more than rainbows and tranquil rivers.

With our growing concern about climate change,
those images are being replaced for many of us
by scenes that point to the dangers that abound on this planet.

Ferocious tidal waves that sweep away life,
and violent tornadoes that upend it.

Fires and floods that leave only devastation in their wake.

Years ago, Bob and I, after seeing mudslides in California
and the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans,
resolved that we never wanted to live
where we had to fret about our home being washed away.

We are all, obviously enough,
relatively fortunate in this corner of the world.

Last week, I saw an article in *The New York Times*
that showed on a colour-coded map
where different types of natural disasters strike.

This being an American news source
the map, of course, stopped abruptly at the US-Canada border,
as though there was nothing north of it.

But, even still, given our proximity,
I could suss out that Toronto sits in a spot on the globe
relatively untouched by the devastation that affects other places.

But while this is true at present, it may not always be the case.

As climate change continues,
as temperatures climb and sea levels rise,
as storms, and fires, and floods intensify,

as animals and people migrate in search of safety,
Toronto will become a very different place
from what we now know.

Indeed, according to anecdotes I've heard from a few of you,
the weather here already isn't what it once was.

And we adapt, though we may not care
for hot summers or wet winters.

On one hand, as the old quip goes,
there's no such thing as bad weather,
only unsuitable clothing.

There's something to that.

A water-proof parka when it's sleeting
can make a huge difference in our level of comfort.

But there comes a point where clothing can't solve for everything.

That's where we're headed on this planet,
and that includes Toronto, even in our relative bubble.

That's the reality, and it's the challenge
that now dwells with alarming urgency
at the heart of our interdependent web.

What touches the life of one of us on this planet
eventually affects us all.

This is something that our relative safety,
and our relative privilege,
so often keeps us from recognizing.

As with our garbage that seems to go away,
out of sight, out of mind.

Our brains weren't designed very well
to hold the realities of climate change.

We are better equipped to contend with immediate threats.
“Lions, and tigers, and bears, oh my!”

Harder to wrap our heads around
is a threat that looms on the horizon—
a threat that may seem, at this point, half a world away,
or something that won’t become catastrophic
until long after we’re gone.

The truth is that climate change is already well underway.

And what once seemed like distant threats
are becoming more urgent and closer to home.

This, too, may not be such a bad thing.

Not if it moves us to action over despair.

Not if it leads us to love over indifference.

Not if it summons our courage to respond
that we may serve life
and help to alleviate the suffering
of generations still to come.

I know this is an overwhelming challenge.

I know it is easy to disengage
and try to avoid the topic altogether.

I know it is easy to become numb
and stuck in hopelessness.

And while all of that is natural and perfectly understandable,
it’s not an ultimately helpful response.

I promise that taking action will make you feel better.

I promise that doing something over doing nothing,
that being awake rather than filled with apathy,
will help you to feel more deeply connected to life—

and that, as always, is the path to healing and wholeness.

* * *

Like many of you, I have in recent months been inspired by Greta Thunberg, the quiet sixteen-year old from Sweden, who started skipping classes on Fridays last September so that she could sit in protest outside the Parliament buildings in Stockholm, with a sign calling the world to wake up.

Her efforts have grown now into a worldwide school strike for the planet.

Millions of young people have started leaving their classes on Fridays in solidarity, including thousands across Canada.

In recent months, Thunberg's message has gone truly viral.

She was on a panel at the global climate conference in Warsaw in December, and, last month, addressed the European Parliament, spoke before members of the British House of Commons, and had an audience with the pope.

She has been nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize by the Norwegian Parliament.

She is also being viciously attacked.

There are powerful people who are losing their minds over her.

People who are losing their... cool, calling her names, belittling her voice and her manner of dress.

Which really, I think, speaks to just how powerful she has become.

I believe she is the most powerful person on the planet right now.

Because she speaks with such clear moral authority—

as the voice of the generation who will live into
the reality of climate catastrophe if we fail to act now.

Not everyone can be Greta, of course.
And not everyone need be.

In this great web of life,
each of us has our own part to play.

Be it big or small.

Whether it involves giving up meat or travelling less.

Not wasting food and water
or canvassing for your party in the next election.

Whether it means putting the Environment Minister on speed dial,
or chaining yourself to the doors of Queen's Park
until there's meaningful climate change policies in place.

Your challenge is to discern whatever it is you can do.

To listen for what may be stirring in your heart.
To consider how you might be helpful.

To know yourself to be part of the great web of response,
what Joanna Macy calls "the Great Turning".

* * *

As I close, I invite you into a time to reflect on your next move.

To consider what work is ahead of you
on this changing planet.

To ponder how you can move towards hope
and put your faith into action.

After Adam's musical reflection,
I'll invite you, with the sounding of the chime,
to move about the sanctuary

and speak to someone you don't know, or don't know well.

My hope is that you'll share briefly
what you feel is tugging at your heart,
what you may be wrestling with,
what you feel may be calling to you as your next move.

In all of this, may we dedicate ourselves anew
to the service of life
and to the well-being of this, our only home.

Amen.