

“Awaken to the Web”
All Souls Unitarian Universalist Congregation, New London, CT
April 2, 2017

Some of you have read “The Hidden Life of Trees,” - it’s one of those books that can give you goose bumps. For one thing, you are enlightened to the intelligence of trees. You learn, for example, that when a giraffe starts feeding on the umbrella thorn Acacia tree, the tree can pump a distasteful chemical through its leaves, to send the giraffe away. Scientists noticed that the neighboring Acacia tree started pumping those chemicals into their own leaves before a giraffe even got to them. This is one of the ways we’ve learned that trees can communicate warnings to each other through their root system underground. Author Peter Wohlleben refers to this as the “wood wide web.”¹

The average person doesn’t pay that much attention to trees because the work that trees are up to is slow and for that reason, not that entertaining. Trees outlive us by hundreds of years. *They are playing the long game*. But Wohlleben reminds us that trees are not just “organic robots” here to meet our lumber needs. They transform massive amounts of carbon dioxide into our oxygen, they receive rain water and pump it back out to drier lands that need it, and they feed and house countless species that make up the ecosystem that sustains us. They pay attention to each other and collaborate to regulate their shared climate. Our shared climate. In short, *trees take care of business*, quietly and slowly, for each other, and for us all...while we’re not watching.

In a chapter entitled, “Friendship,” Wohlleben says “nutrient exchange and helping neighbors in times of need is the rule, and this leads to the conclusion that forests are **super-organisms** with interconnections much like ant colonies.”²

He has seen cases where one tree is struck by lightning and dies, and in time, ten nearby trees die because they were so interconnected. He marvels at the fact that even after a tree is a dead stump, the community continues to send nutrients to the stump. We don’t entirely know why. But he notes that “young spruce trees sprout particularly well in the dead bodies of their parents.”³

Notice the very human language he uses. He is sometimes criticized for that. But in his defense, he has drawn a best selling audience of non-scientists to take note of the life and work of trees by making them sound a bit more like us.

¹ Wohlleben, Peter. *The Hidden Life of Trees: What They Feel, How They Communicate – Discoveries From A Secret World*. Van Couver/Berkeley: Greystone Books, 2016.

² Wohlleben, 3.

³ Wohlleben, 135.

When we really pay attention to the life and work of animals and plants, we learn that they are living by smarts that are astounding. Take the orchid: over time, there's a type of orchid that has evolved to mimic the appearance and smell of a female wasp. Because of this, the male wasp lands on the orchid *looking to flirt*, and he ends up picking up the orchid's pollen and carrying it to the next orchid he mistakenly tries to flirt with. And so the orchid specie lives on. What's amazing is that this orchid exists on several continents and evolved independently, separately in this same way: developing hairs and coloring and a specific scent to match the female wasp perfectly.⁴ Wow!

Now, the God believer looks at all this and says, "wow! God has organized this world so beautifully." The atheist looks at all this and says, "wow! Nature has organized itself so beautifully." And while I know that the difference between these two reactions is meaningful, *the awe they both inspire is made of the same stuff*. It's humility for the fact that YOU didn't figure this out. It's a sense of WONDER at the intricacy and power of each life form. And it's a sense of SECURITY, perhaps, to realize that *so much is in place*, so much is working well.

And all of this awakening ideally inspires in us a respect and concern for our natural world. Our 7th Unitarian Universalist principle (respect for the interdependent web of all existence, of which we are a part) doesn't demand a particular reason for you to care about nature. It simply demands that you do. As we said when we lit the chalice earlier, "Many paths lead from the foot of the mountain, but at the peak, we all gaze at the single bright moon."⁵

And how do we live once we've awakened to that bright moon?

In a piece on UU theology, Marilyn Sewell says, "For Unitarian Universalists, the question is never "What do you believe?" but rather "What kind of person have you become? What are the fruits of your living"⁶...because of what you believe?

If you walk out these doors and stand, let's say in the parking lot, you look straight out to trees that lean on and sustain each other...you stand on surface, under which worms, ants and bugs are digging tunnels, feeding their young and fertilizing new growth. And you look up to a sky whose molecules coalesce to create clouds that feed the life below your feet *and* the trees *and* YOU. And it's all happening all the time.

⁴ Evans Ogden, Lesley. (2015, February 4) "Three Tricks orchids use to lure pollinating insects," Retrieved from www.bbc.com/earth.

⁵ Attributed to Ikkyu, 15th Century Japanese Buddhist monk.

⁶ Sewell, Marilyn. (2011, August 5) "The Theology of Unitarian Universalists," Retrieved from www.huffingtonpost.com.

To be awakened to that web that you stand in is, I suggest, a religious experience. And the Unitarian Universalist question is, What kind of person does being awake to the web make you? What are the fruits of that awakening?

Well, you might look into things like the **Healing Harvest Forest Foundation** mentioned in this book. It seeks to work with trees to be able to use their resources while also letting them live as they were meant to.

Or being awake might lead you to make decisions about recycling and carbon foot prints and the trees in your yard a little differently. Or being awake might send you to the March for Science on the 22nd or the People's Climate march on the 29th. Check out our newsletter for info on both...

Can you hear that Melissa Ethridge song from "An Inconvenient Truth?:

*And I need to move, I need to wake up
I need to change, I need to shake up
I need to speak out, something's gotta break up
I've been asleep and I need to wake up now.*

The powerful, conscious, activist fruits of being awake...

And now I want to touch on the internal fruits to this awakening.

For me, to know that I stand in a web that's been hard at work for centuries creating the climate I navigate, is to know I am *cared for*. I realize that's a human word. All the same, consider that the trees, the air, the water, and the plants are holding you in their network. Holding you, maybe not with *affection*, but certainly with a discipline and devotion that never tires. Do you feel a little more at peace with your world when you remind yourself that you're in this embrace? I do.

Gravity won't let us drift out of the sphere of this earth – won't let us wander into space – won't let us disconnect. It's wild to ponder the bond between Sun, earth and moon, how the earth orbits the sun and the moon orbits the earth with just the right balance of gravity and centripetal force to stay in relationship.

Now...transitioning a little, I remember distinctly my first big breakup as a young adult. The pain was so intense. I thought, "oh, okay, so this is what all those songs are about. Wow."

On my drive the morning after the breakup, wondering if I'd be able to hold it together among people, I turned on the radio to calm my nerves and, no joke, this line from a Paul Simon song is what came on: "And I say losing love is like a window

in your heart. Everybody sees you're blown apart. Everybody feels the wind blow."
– I mean, are you kidding me? I had to turn it off and regroup, and I did get through that day and those that followed.

The boyfriend and I had made a good choice together, but all the same, it was awful, for a good while, awful. I felt like the whole human race was saying to me in chorus, "Hi Caitlin, welcome to the full experience of being human! We've been waiting for you!"

And somewhere in that grief journey, I had a vision. It was an image in my mind of the planet and its interconnections, its containment. *Its containment*. The words that went with that image in my mind were "There are no total goodbyes. We don't leave one another completely."

I've added flesh to that vision over the years since: someone you miss still moves in this world, still breathes the same air, *looks up at the same single moon*, and they remember you and you remember them. You both make decisions marked by each other's influence. You both laugh or feel sad to remember something you shared. And you're both held in the same world's embrace, both responsive to the same gravity's pull, both unable to leave.

And in the case of missing someone who has died, I still hold this vision. My family and I shook my father's ashes out onto the dunes of Cape Cod. And every summer, my children (whom he never met) frolic in those dunes. *And like the trees that send sugar to the deceased trunk in their family*, I lay a flower at a small shrub and I take note of how it is bigger and fuller each year ...and how his grandchildren are bigger and fuller each year, living out his traits received through genetic material and stories that come from him. There are no total goodbyes. Nobody can leave completely.

And there's another layer of persistent presence that some of us imagine and hope for, and some of us don't. And that is that in addition to the many ways we biologically cannot leave, and through narrative, cannot leave...our Spirits might live on, vibrating at a different frequency, traversing different realms. Maybe drawn to connect with the living -- in subtle and mysterious ways. Another way that *perhaps* there are no total goodbyes.

We are surrounded in every direction by elements of a world we can't ever leave completely. Though I don't believe in fate, I do know for a fact that participation in this natural world is a destiny we can't opt out of, whether alive or deceased.

As our children's story this morning says,

*It never gets lost, never fades, never ends...
If you're working...or playing...or sitting with friends.*

*You can dance til you're dizzy...paint til you're blue...
There's no place, not one, that my love can't find you.⁷*

Now, as a mother of young children, hiding from the “love” of this inescapable web can look pretty attractive at times. Opting out just for a while is something I wish for. I mean, the best gift you could give me is one night in a hotel room all by myself. Nobody asking for anything, nobody talking to me at all...and just slip a protein bar under the door and I'll be all set. *There are times when being always connected gets to be too much.*

But in this imagined hotel room scenario, once I have had a good long sleep and taken an uninterrupted shower, I will be looking again for community. I will be peaking out my window and wondering what my kids are up to, what All Souls is up to, and what my world is up to...

Because, like the trees and their “wood wide web,” we are wired to connect. Whether for you it's through biology, stories, spirit, or all of the above, the response is the same:

Awe for the world we did not make, which holds us, and hustles every day to sustain life, death, and life again. A world that is **jaw dropping-ly smart**, efficient, and beautiful *in every direction*. A world that holds us with a gravity grip and a web so thick – that it seems wise to stand up for its care and to trust in its embrace...

And maybe even to translate that embrace as a kind of “love.”

As the children's story says,

*“In the green of the grass...in the smell of the sea...in the clouds floating by...**at the top of a tree**...in the sound crickets make at the end of the day...*

“You are loved. You are loved. You are loved,” they all say.

Amen.

⁷ Tillman, Nancy. *Wherever You Are, My Love Will Find You*. New York: Feiwel and Friends, 2010.