

The 7th UU Principle:

**Respect for the Interdependent Web of All Existence
of Which We Are A Part**

February 22, 2009

Talks by Lyn Ferguson and Mim Neal

Talk One: "Tracking Wonder by Lyn E. Ferguson

We are full of life; We are full of death, our responsive reading concludes. I've had difficulty with the death part of life. I've needed to grow in this area, to gain new perspective.

To an already immense enjoyment of the natural world, I have been learning about animal tracking - observing animal behavior and their interconnectedness with one another, their habitat, and with me. Here's one experience from my poem, Tracking Wonder.

TRACKING WONDER

Hours after watching them kneel,

then gently lower furred bodies

onto the snowy pine needle forest floor,

we followed.

Cloven hooves wound carefully, sweetly

through the snow

past ponderosa, lodge pole, juniper,

down and back up the steep sides

of an icy streambed,

the delicate snow ridge

between the cloves of hoof prints,

still standing.
We walked slowly
along the same unhurried, winding path,
as if part of the small herd,
sensing their intention, feeling their bonds.

In the snow where they had rested
like fawn colored rocks,
were three melted ovals,
cool now.

Yet we could almost feel
the steam rising from warm bodies,
the life force coursing
through beating hearts,

the sacredness of their creation. [Lyn E. Ferguson, 12/31/05]

In his book Wild Within, author Paul Rezendes writes about his work as an animal tracker and teacher of tracking techniques. How to deeply experience the interdependent web - to become silent, slow down, listen, smell, learn to look deeper - and deeper - into the woods, to become the animal he is tracking.

We have come to understand that this quality of contact with the physical world, the “more than human” world, shakes us out of the trance of separation from and air of superiority over the natural world.

Rezendes writes about finding a coyote circling a doe at dusk one evening. He watched the coyote charge the doe who valiantly whirled and fended him off time after time. Suddenly, Rezendes saw the doe’s rear leg dangling, broken, and he knew how this would play out.

The next morning, he found the doe’s carcass, and the tracks of the many forest creatures who had begun converting the doe’s flesh into their own.

The organic mass of the deer, which grew from 4 to 8 pounds at birth to approximately 100 pounds at death, had come from thousands of elements, from all directions in the forest, to this one point at the kill site. The organic mass contained in the trees and shrubs, in the light, air, water, soil, microbes, is the living forest. The deer had literally materialized from *this*. The deer *was* the forest - breathing, walking, mating, living, and dying - and the forest *was* the deer – both were inextricably part of the web of life.

Now the deer was returning to the forest in every direction through the animals feeding on its carcass. “Weasels, bobcats, ravens, snowshoe hares, and chickadees will all feed on the doe’s carcass,” Rezendes says. “Birds will build their nests from its hair. Head, spinal column, bones of the lower legs – everything will eventually be carried off and eaten.”

Rezendes had witnessed an ancient and sacred ritual, something that could not and must not be interfered with. The doe was now the coyote’s pups and the hawk circling above. The death of the doe gave birth to new forms of life.

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I have been teasingly accused of having the ability to “anthropomorphize a rock.” But I think we need to be careful not to minimize or demean our own or others’ experiences when we witness startling behavior in nature. We simply don’t yet fully know what animals experience, what plants experience.

As a loon warden in Massachusetts, Rezendes was to protect nesting pairs of loons. He observed one pair for three years. The first two seasons, raccoons found and ate the loons’ one egg. The third year, the egg hatched, and a chick began its life under the careful protection of both parents. But when a speeding motorboat passed by close to the nest, the loon bolted from the nest in fear, and accidentally crushed its chick. When the parent returned to the nest, it began to tremolo and wail, wail and tremolo. From across the water, an answering tremolo, and the other parent flew in. Both birds were agitated, tremoloing in unison.

Many would say the loons’ behavior has nothing to do with love or grief as we know it. Their monogamous relationship and commitment to family have to do with perpetuating their species, and any *distress* they exhibit is biological programming. But haven’t most of the ways humans think about and experience love also been programmed?

The speeding motorboat reminds us that we are too often oblivious to the impact we have on our world *just by existing*. Every ounce of our consumption is preceded by an ounce of death. Our food is possible because of herbicides and thus the eradication of small mammals, construction of roads through wetlands, decimation of woodlands. We must take responsibility

for this, recognize and acknowledge all those deaths - to be conscious of the life we're taking so that we may live. *Life takes life*. We must embrace the magnitude and sacredness of this – then live life to the fullest to honor these deaths.

Rezendes writes about an encounter with a bull moose where they gaze into one another's eyes at close range for some minutes. "There was wonder and curiosity in both of us," he says. We were both saying, *What, what is this being?* A state of pure inquiry."

It is in this state of pure inquiry that we connect and the door of our heart swings open to the other. Here we have compassion – an understanding of the unity of all things - an awareness that *I* is not separate from *thou*, that whatever is happening to the planet, to another person, another species, is happening to me. True compassion is not circumstantial or okay to have for one person but not another – for one species but not for another – for one region of the planet but not for others.

May we each be blessed with this spirit of pure inquiry.

May the doors of our hearts swing wide open.

Talk Two: Holons and Anthropocentrism by Mim Neal

Before I began preparing for this service, I had never run into the word 'holon'

(h-o-l-o-n). After working on this service, I realized that *holon* was exactly the right word to use to talk about the seventh principle.

A holon is a whole (w-h-o-l-e) that is part of a larger whole and is itself composed of smaller wholes. We are holons – we are part of our species and are in turn comprised of a multitude of smaller wholes including atoms. And atoms are holons comprised of subatomic particles. Our earth is a holon: part of a galaxy that is in turn part of the universe.

[We are circles within circles.]

What has this to do with the seventh principle?

Before I began preparing for this service I thought that I really 'got' its message. I knew the interdependent web. Trees need the carbon dioxide that I exhale; I need the oxygen they

produce. We are connected by necessity. Perhaps by design. I cannot survive without plants and animals. My soul would shrivel without the beauty of the non-human world. So cool. That's the interdependent web. I got that.

Then I began reading some books about the UU principles. There is, it seems, more to the seventh principle than I had thought.

My original concept, basically ecological, acknowledges the interdependent cycles of what we call the natural world. There are other interdependent cycles, and one of them is human.

Unitarian Universalists aren't as good about acknowledging human interdependence. For all our wisdom in rejecting most forms of dogma, UUs tend to fall victim to excessive individualism.

I love this quote: "We have a tendency to think of ourselves as the 'great exception' ... 'You may be part of the grand design, but because of my family of origin, or my fragile temperament, or my ethnic heritage, or my sexual orientation, or my terrible tragedies, or my physical limitations, or my dramatic mood swings, or the place I grew up, or the schools I attended, or whatever, I am the great exception.'

In other words, everyone else can be part of the community of life; I'll just stay in my room. Well, that won't work. I've been divorced for more than 30 years. I spend a lot of time writing -- a lot of time in the solitude that I once (when I was raising my kids) believed was the condition most devoutly to be wished. But if that is all of my life, then I have violated the inherent nature of being human.

I believe that the inherent nature of being human is to be in community -- community in the sense, not only of relatives, hometowns, and countries but also in the sense of the entire human family.

The circles within circles of our species.

If we fail to understand that we are a component in the planet's six point seven billion member human holon, we might find ourselves (we do find ourselves) divided into varieties of 'us and them.' When we get lost in that, we get lost in conflict. We lose the possibility of solutions.

As I worked to understand the Seventh Principle, I began to see that we are holons that are part of other holons and all of them are connected, integral to the Universe.

So to go a step further, we need to step out of our anthropocentrism -- the concept that human beings are the whole point of creation, that all other forms of matter are lower than us.

If we can begin to see the interdependent webs of what we call 'Nature' and of our particular species, then perhaps we can begin to see the interdependent web of all existence.

Although he used the wrong pronoun, Albert Einstein found a way to express this when he wrote: "A human being is part of the whole, called by us 'Universe,' a part limited in time and space. He experiences himself, his thoughts, and feelings as something separated from the rest – *a kind of delusion of his consciousness*. This delusion is a prison, restricting us to our personal desires and to affection for a few persons nearest to us. Our task must be to free ourselves from this prison by widening our circle of compassion to embrace all living creatures and the whole of nature in its beauty."

When we get over our anthropocentric self-cherishing, we can begin to see that we are components of an astounding conglomeration of matter, all of which is of equal value and equally essential.

We can move toward a different kind of consciousness, one in which neither you nor I nor any other human is an outsider, alienated from the other components of creation.

If we could do that -- and it is admittedly hard to let go of the idea of being 'number one' -- we could begin to live with *respect* for all the components of creation.

What a difference that would make in what we consume, what we throw away, what we destroy! And ultimately, how we treat each other.

What a joy it would be to acknowledge the value of everyone and everything else. To be motivated by awe and wonder. We are an expression of the Universe. Ancestral stars are part of our genealogy.

Einstein also wrote, "There are only two ways to live your life. One is as though nothing is a miracle. The other is as though everything is a miracle."

So. The seventh principle is an environmental idea. It is also a sociological idea, a cosmological idea, and, ultimately, a theological idea.

It is just possible that by affirming and promoting respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part, we can actually begin to heal our world.