

All Things Are Connected

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Reading: from “Respect for the Interdependent Web of All Existence” by Barbara Merritt (in *With Purpose and Principle* (ed. Edward Frost))

The interdependent web of life is not simply a poetic metaphor. The interdependent web is a fact of our existence; it is an essential way of understanding the world in the [twenty-first] century. The reality of this web has been directly observed by the eye and the senses throughout human history. . .

Few, if any, fields of academic study . . . are not aware of the importance of connections and context. Family therapists know how dramatically a family system affects the outlook and behavior of individuals. Economists acknowledge the impact of a global economy. Historians increasingly include in their study not only events and prominent leaders, but also the cultural forces, the silent participants, and the multidimensional forces that have affected the course of human activity.

When the secular sciences and disciplines clearly recognize the “interdependent web of all existence,” what does it mean for Unitarian Universalists to declare it to be one of the principles of our religious faith? It should be obvious to everyone that we are all part of the interdependent web. But what does this interconnection say about the conduct of our life, or the aspirations of the human spirit? . . .

As Unitarian Universalists, we have clearly stated our commitment to do what we can to repair, restore, and promote the web of life. This commitment necessitates the development of our humility, compassion, respect, and a heightened awareness of the consequences of our actions. Yet all of these fine principles are ultimately meaningless if they do not show up in our daily life, if they are not incarnate in our ordinary actions. The cost of affirming our relationship with all of existence is high and demanding. We must sacrifice our self-centeredness if we want to give our attention to a creation that is much larger than our own individuality. This immense sacred relationship in which we find ourselves requires a lifetime of labor.

Sermon

One version of the song *Dem Bones* tells us “The foot bone connected to the leg bone. The leg bone connected to the knee bone. The knee bone connected to the thigh bone. The thigh bone connected to the backbone. The backbone connected to the neck bone. The neck bone connected to the head bone.” We are one bunch of connections that hold our bodies together into a cohesive whole. Our skeleton, with all those connections, gives us structure and allows us to move about in and act on the world around us. Without those connections and that structure, we would be but ineffectual blobs of protoplasm.

As was intimated in our reading this morning, connections exist at every level and in every area of life and existence. In the physical and natural sciences; in the social sciences, and even in ordinary, everyday life. So I’d like to spend some time this morning reflecting on the nature and role of connections, and some of their implications for how we might approach life.

Going back to the bones that make up our skeleton, I’d like to lift up what I think may be the most important quality of connections. That is, creating a higher level of wholeness or identity. Each bone in our skeleton has its own individual identity. It has its particular role to

play. For instance, the leg bones may take pride in the part they play in locomotion. They're what allow us to walk. And yet, they can't do that on their own. If they were not connected to the feet below and the spine above, we would go nowhere.

And consider a finger. A finger, all by itself, can't do too much beyond poking. And yet joined together into two hands, guided by two arms, and a complex nervous system, our fingers can grasp and twist and manipulate pieces of their surroundings. They can shape and build and create beauty. They can also touch and caress and support. But only because they are part of a larger system that is connected in meaningful, functional ways; a whole that is immensely greater than simply the sum of its individual parts.

Before I move on to focus on lessons to be learned from connectivity with respect to how we should live, I'd like to pause and consider another role to be played by our recognition and understandings of connections at all levels. What I'm thinking about here is the awe and wonder that we can not help but experience when we observe and think about the magnificently interconnected universe in which we reside.

For instance, consider the planet earth. In recent decades, especially since the availability of photographs from space, there has been a shift to thinking of the earth as an integrated whole. Even as a living organism, a complex system complete with self-regulatory processes. That isn't really such a new idea. Italian philosopher Giordano Bruno was burnt at the stake four hundred years ago, in part for maintaining that the Earth was alive. In the late eighteenth century, geologist James Hutton and biologist Thomas Huxley saw the Earth as a self-regulating system. [*The Revenge of Gaia*, James Lovelock, p. xv]. But it has been the work of James Lovelock over the past three decades on his Gaia Hypothesis that has brought a more holistic view of the Earth and its workings into the popular and scientific mainstream. Initially ignored and ridiculed by the scientific community, by 2001 the perspectives championed by the Gaia Hypothesis were clearly gaining greater acceptance, as reflected in a declaration published after a meeting of scientists from four international global research programs, which said, in part:

The Earth system behaves as a single, self-regulating system, comprised of physical, chemical, biological and human components. The interactions and feedbacks between the component parts are complex and exhibit multi-scale temporal and spatial variability. [Lovelock, p. xvi]

Even if the Earth is a living organism only in the metaphorical sense, it is clear that it is indeed a complex, holistic system of many interconnected, mutually interacting parts. And this "Truth" has implications both for our apprehension and understanding of the world, and for the role of our behavior as one of the key components of the system. Humanity has been described both as the nervous system of the planet, and as a virus destroying its very fabric. As we continue to grapple with issues like climate change, it's up to us as a species to determine whether our connections with our planet will be healing or harmful.

Of course connections are at play not only at the levels of organisms and the planet. They are also crucial at both the atomic and subatomic levels, and at the cosmological level. Physicists tell us that there are four fundamental forces that connect and govern the interactions of elementary particles: the strong and weak nuclear forces, electromagnetism, and gravitation. It is a great source of awe and wonder, at least to me, that these four basic forces, combined with the mere handful of elementary particles account for all the wonders and complexities of the

physical universe. The way things interact and are connected is the source of virtually unlimited creativity. Am I the only one who finds that awesome? [Can I hear an “amen”?]

Just to broaden the picture of connections in the world and in our lives, I’d like to consider connections across time as well as across space. In particular, as a part of biological life on this planet, we are directly connected, through the processes of genetics and reproduction, back to every one of our ancestors. And of course we are likewise genetically connected to every one of those ancestors’ descendants. In other words, we are literally, not just metaphorically, connected to all of life in one great biological network through space and time. Just think about what it would look like if you could draw the entire family tree of every living thing. That is one complex web, and awesome indeed!

Now, before we consider connections at a more personal, day-to-day level, I want to take a moment to acknowledge that “connection” is not always a completely positive phenomenon. For instance, think of connection as the intermediary link in situations of cause and effect. There are clearly negative as well as positive effects that grow out of the behavior of those around us or out of the physical processes of our environment. And so our connections with other people and with the world can be a source of pain as well as pleasure.

Perhaps one of the life lessons here is captured in the formulation of my core beliefs that I have shared with you before. Namely: All things are connected. Everything affects everything else. Therefore, it matters what I do. I have the freedom to choose whether I will be a blessing or a curse.

One possible consequence of experiencing the negative side of connection is to choose a life of isolation over a life of connection. If you don’t get too close to anyone else, then they can’t hurt you. And yet, to withdraw from potentially painful connections is also to remove ourselves from potentially life-enhancing connections. To isolate ourselves is to separate ourselves from the very essence of life: namely, connection.

And so I encourage us to take up the kind of commitment mentioned in our reading this morning. That is, commitment to a lifetime of labor dedicated to repairing, restoring, and promoting the web of life which is our home. That means connecting with the world and other people in healthy, life-affirming ways.

As I was surfing the Web looking for resources for this sermon, I came across a site devoted to the World Day of Interconnectedness. [Had any of you heard of that? I hadn’t.] The timing was almost right on, as the World Day of Interconnectedness was set for just eleven days ago: September 9 (09/09/09). So we just missed it. But the vision of the sponsors, and their encouragement to action are really timeless, and needn’t be relegated to a single day.

A part of their vision is that

A deep sense of interconnectedness, or oneness, is at the core of decisions and actions that are life affirming and good for the whole. In other words, it will bring forth an environmentally sustainable, fulfilling and socially just human presence.

And in pursuit of that vision, they invite “all people who are aware of interconnectedness and who are committed to translate that awareness into action . . . to practice interconnectedness as much as possible throughout [the World Day of Interconnectedness].” And of course I’m sure they would join me in extending that invitation to every day.

So how do we make that translation from awareness to practice? Barbara Merritt, author of this morning's reading, presents some questions we might ask of ourselves as a way of monitoring how well we are upholding our commitment:

- How do we meet the stranger in our midst?
- Are we kind and compassionate to other living creatures?
- Do we attempt to promote and affirm the well-being of others, especially those who have fewer resources than we do?
- Do we actively seek new ways to reestablish our connections with those people we might have previously dismissed, belittled, or disparaged?
- Do we work not just the soil in our gardens, but also the ground of our hearts; paying attention to those circumstances which break us open, that call us to go deeper, that challenge us to be more responsive to [others]?

Unitarian novelist Herman Melville once wrote,

We cannot live only for ourselves. A thousand fibers connect us. . . .
And among those fibers, as sympathetic threads, our actions run as causes,
and they come back to us as effects. On a daily basis, we affect the web of
all existence, just as we are affected by it.

May we savor and cultivate our connections with those we know and love, and with the planet that supports and sustains us. And may we further seek to cultivate additional meaningful, healthy, life-affirming connections with those who are not already a part of our lives, but with whom we might find mutually enriching relationships. In so doing we open our arms and our hearts to life and together build an ever richer web of existence.

So may it be.