

First Unitarian Universalist Church
Web of Life
Rev. Sandra Fees
April 1, 2007



I like to watch the birds from my office window at home. Mostly there are sparrows and finches at the feeder. The feeder is designed for the smaller birds and squirrel-proofed. This doesn't mean the squirrels don't still try pretty hard. I find I am as fascinated by the gathering beneath the feeder as I am by what is happening above.

On the ground, the mourning doves calmly enjoy what falls their way. Squirrels and rabbits often gather too and forage the area. And on an occasion or two a groundhog has shown up. They all seem to have an understanding, a pecking order if you'll forgive the pun. So there isn't any fighting – none at least that I've witnessed.

Watching them I remember my small part in their world. Filling the feeder and birdbath is a daily ritual. I feel grateful and humbled. My heart opens. I feel more alive and more joyful as I watch them. I discover I am smiling. I have a sense of connection to the natural world.

These are sacred moments. They are the sacred moments of my everyday life. These are times when I experience the divine presence. What I mean by that is that for me nature is one revelation of the divine – of life's awe and magnificence. It is one way I experience God.

For many of us, the earth, nature, is the first place we look for an experience of the Holy. We follow in the footsteps of our Transcendentalist forebears in doing so. Like Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau, we look to creation for the experience of the sacred.

Our seventh Unitarian Universalist principle reflects our understanding of the power and grandeur of creation. The seventh principle calls on us to affirm and promote respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part.

This principle was adopted in 1985. It was not included in the 1961 version at the time of merger of Unitarians and Universalists. What it provided that was not explicitly named in the other six principles was our relationship with non-human life.

It probably won't surprise you that a recent 2005 survey of UU theology shows this relationship now holds a primary place in our faith. The largest piece of common ground was this statement: "The natural world is a web of interdependent connections, of which we are inescapably a part." Over 90 percent of ministers and laypeople said this was highly important to their faith ([Engaging Our Theological Diversity](#), Commission on Appraisal).

One person in the survey expressed the web of life as: "the experience of the presence of life within me, within the present moment, within all people and creatures, and intuition that we all share this life and are intimately interconnected in a fragile and durable network of love."

Another person said it this way: "When we have a felt connection to the interdependent web of existence, we trigger a natural inclination to become our best selves. I call the fact of

Unraveling the Gender Knot (cont'd.)

Rev. Sandra Fees

interconnectedness and our inclination to be our best selves God” (in Engaging Our Theological Diversity).

Part of an awakened human consciousness, it seems to me, is to understand the interrelatedness of life. Part of an awakened human consciousness is to understand our place in the web. We are one part of creation, not its centerpiece.

This is a radical departure from traditional Christian and Jewish theologies that position humanity as the crown of creation. In those traditional views, the rest of creation exists for humanity. Even broader interpretations within those traditions tend to hold that we humans are stewards of creation, but still responsible and, more importantly, central to life.

The Enlightenment and scientific revolution brought these beliefs into question. Darwin’s The Origin of Species challenged a human-centered understanding of the physical world.

Taking it one step further, it is extraordinarily humbling to remember what renowned biologist E.O. Wilson said. He observed, “If all humanity disappeared, the rest of life (except for pets and houseplants) would benefit enormously.” If we were to disappear, forests would restore themselves. Endangered species would make a comeback.

Contrast that to what would happen if the ant suddenly went extinct. According to Wilson, the extinction of ants would spell “major extinctions of other species and probably partial collapse of some ecosystems” (Turning to One Another, Margaret J. Wheatley). It is a humbling perspective indeed.

Our liberal tradition has taken evolutionary theory seriously and incorporated it into our religious life. Many of us respond to the idea of interdependence with gratitude and a sense of celebration. We enjoy the beauty of the earth and its creatures.

We love to be outdoors hiking or riding our bikes, spending time in our gardens, or sailing or kayaking. I know someone here is going kayaking because they bid successfully on a beautiful kayak in our recent auction.

To be truly moved by the beauty of the natural world, to truly recognize and respect our interrelatedness with all life, however, is not a trivial matter. At the deepest level, this principle asks us to conduct our lives in a way that acknowledges our impact on the world. This principle fuels our social justice efforts. It is a catalyst for our commitment to the earth, to animal rights, and to economic justice.

It means we need to treat all creatures with kindness. We can work to protect endangered species and endangered cultures. When violence erupts in families and communities, this principle challenges us to recognize that it is happening to all of us. What happens to children who are abused, hungry, and unloved happens to all of us. Our lives are linked.

Unraveling the Gender Knot (cont'd.)

Rev. Sandra Fees

In the living of our lives, we are challenged by this principle to tread lightly on the earth, leaving the smallest footprint we can. Our interdependence is a reminder to us to be cautious and intentional about our use of natural resources.

This morning the Pre-kindergarten class is exploring the theme “My World Has Water.” They are learning that the water we drink and wash in is the same water that falls as rain. It is the same water we find in our lakes and streams.

Through their exploration, they will become more aware of our interconnectedness with nature. They are undoubtedly also getting a bit wet.

Water is a great example of our interdependence. All living beings require water to survive. Beyond survival, water is a source of play. It also holds tremendous spiritual significance for cultures throughout the world.

How we use water has a tremendous impact on human health and well-being and on whole ecosystems. Humans need water to drink, but also for a whole range of other fundamental uses. We use water for cooking and sanitation as well as irrigation, industry and development.

Human demand on water supplies resulting from things like population growth, consumption, development of highways and dams, deforestation, and agricultural chemicals has the potential to alter the integrity of freshwater ecosystems irreversibly.

The availability of clean water is fast becoming one of our most significant human rights issues. The United Nations warns that “fierce competition for fresh water may well become a source of conflict and wars in the future.” Competition for water as a resource is expected to intensify within countries in the next 15 years with the rural poor being the biggest losers. This is especially true in areas like Asia where the balance between population and available water supplies is most disparate.

The potential for tension over water between countries is also growing. However, there are large potentials for gains if countries choose to cooperate rather than compete (2006 Human Development Report from the UN).

As with the gentle creatures at my feeder, cooperation rather than competition means that everyone is nourished. When competition ensues, when larger birds show up to dominate the feeder, all the others suffer. When the squirrels have free range of the feeder, they devour all the seed within hours.

The seventh principle calls on us to strive to be in right relationship with all life. It means allowing our hearts to be opened to the web of life, to live cooperatively.

Our seventh principle reminds us we are part of the natural world not separate from it or superior to it. Our interdependence is the condition of our being. We do not live in isolation from each other or from the natural world.

Unraveling the Gender Knot (cont'd.)

Rev. Sandra Fees

Sometimes we may act as though we are separate, an island unto ourselves. But we can't escape the reality that our lives are interwoven. Even a small action can have large consequences.

When we embrace our interrelatedness with all living beings, we can experience a deeper, more intimate, connection to the earth community. We can reach out to each other and have more meaningful relationships.

We can be reminded once again that we are not alone.

Amen.