

## Threads of Connection<sup>1</sup>

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Allen Avenue Unitarian Universalist Church

### Readings

[In respect of copyright, the following are short excerpts from the readings we used for worship.]

From *The Color Purple* by Alice Walker--

... I believe God is everything, say Shug. Everything that is or ever was or ever will be. And when you can feel that, and be happy to feel that, you've found It. ...

She say, My first step from the old white man was trees. Then air. Then birds. Then other people. But one day when I was sitting quiet and feeling like a motherless child, which I was, it come to me: that feeling of being a part of everything, not separate at all. I knew that if I cut a tree, my arm would bleed. And I laughed and I cried and I run all around the house. I knew just what it was. In fact, when it happen, you can't miss it.<sup>2</sup>

From *One River, Many Wells*, by Matthew Fox

We now know that matter is trapped light: slow-moving light; or "frozen light" as physicist David Bohm puts it. Yet, because for every particle of matter in the universe there are one billion particles of light, we are amazed to learn how special matter is, how rare matter is, what a rare gift it is to be flesh or matter, that is, slow-moving light. This is not just true of human flesh but of all flesh, the oranges we eat and the tea we drink, the grasses and the animals, the birds and the stars--all are slow moving light. Matter is light. It is very special light.

...Light is everywhere! That is today's creation story and it is a story told by many ancient traditions as well.<sup>3</sup>

### Sermon

This week, the daffodils began to bloom in our front yard, and the first bright yellow dandelions popped open behind the house. The forsythias were earliest, they began to flower last Sunday. But it was Wednesday morning when the first daffodil broke through its luminescent green casing, and by evening it opened up pale yellow to reveal an orange center. I kept taking short walks down the street and around our yard to see what would happen next. The small wild strawberry flowers. The green buds of bushes opening into curled leaves. The leaves of the violets coming up out of the bare ground where I thought they might have perished in the fall. And Thursday, down the road, the first fiddleheads of the ferns beginning to poke through the ground that a day ago had been fern-less.

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<sup>2</sup> *The Color Purple*, (Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1982), p. 166-7.

<sup>3</sup> Matthew Fox, *One River, Many Wells*, (Tarcher/Putnam, 2000) p.52-3.

This awakening seems to happen all at the same time. One week there are the bare branches and brown grasses, and then suddenly, everything is green and lush and colorful. How do they know to break through, all in the same week? It helps me to understand what I have read about evolution--that species co-evolved with each other. That flowers emerged along with their pollinators, and each flower with its particular pollinator, so interdependent that we do them a sort of injustice to think of them as separate entities. And of course, the insects also come out with the flowers here in the spring, small ground bees hovering over the grass as if waking from a long sleep. The hummingbirds arrive when the pink flowers of the vibernum open near our kitchen window. I can tell they are getting ready. It is our signal to put out the feeder, so we can join in.

All around us, like a choreography of dance, like a vast symphony, the beings of the earth move in harmony. And in this particular week of the year, this beautiful season of awakening, we can see it and hear it and smell it and feel it, if we pay attention. We can feel the threads of connection that make of many beings, one indivisible whole.

During the past two Sundays, I have been exploring with you the concept of God. I hope I have helped us to move past the old images of the big man in the sky with a beard and white robe, the judge, the king, these all too human inventions that people have created in the quest for understanding, or more often, in the quest for power. The mystics of almost every tradition tell us that our images cannot come close to what divinity might be all about. But the mystics also speak to us of something, or no-thing, that is not a being, but more like a process, more like an energy that permeates all beings, an energy of which we are a part, and of which we can come to greater awareness.

Zen Buddhist teacher, Thich Nhat Hahn invites people to do an exercise, to begin to grasp with our minds this symphony of the larger whole. Take an object--any object. Say for example, this piece of bread that I am holding in my hand. Then, let yourself imagine what has conspired in order for this bread to be here in my hand. First of all, let us think of the wheat. In order for it to grow, it needed topsoil, with its fungal and bacterial components, its minerals and small worms. It needed the decomposition of the plants of many years, decades, and even centuries to create this fertile soil.

Think about the sun that shines on the earth, and the rain that falls, and the earth itself turning round in its orbit of seasons, and the moon that shapes the tides and the weather, all utterly necessary. Think about the wind, which helps the plants to self-pollinate, and the ancient peoples in the Middle East who began to cultivate the grain during the seventh pre-Christian millennium, and those who developed it and carried it to many continents through the intervening centuries. The wheat in bread co-evolved with human beings, and does not thrive in the wild.

This bread is made from organic wheat, so we don't have petroleum fertilizer, but it took petroleum in the form of gasoline to harvest it and ship it to the bread makers. Petroleum is created from the remains of ancient plants, so this bread is also dependent on them. Think about the metal in the trucks that drove the wheat and that mixed the bread, and the mines it came from and the factories where the machines were made. Think about the yeast, and the process by which human peoples discovered and developed the properties of yeast to raise the dough of bread. The honey, and the bees that work tirelessly to make it, and the flowers and their nectar. Think about the water that enabled these ingredients to be blended together. Think about the fuel to heat the ovens.

Think about the farmer, and the miner, and the bread-maker and the factory worker; think about the food they needed to eat, and the clothing they needed to wear in order to do their part of the work that brought this bread to my hand. The trucker, the grocery stocker, the clerk. The houses they live in, the schools and the doctors and the dentists. Think about their parents, and their grandparents and their great grandparents, and what kept them alive, to bring forth their children, that these people who work might be here today. Think about the growing environmental consciousness, that created a market for organic whole wheat bread, after many farmers, bakers and corporations had abandoned the old methods for the soft white appeal of *Wonder-bread*.

I could keep talking all day if I followed all the threads of connection just linked to this one piece of bread. Thich Nhat Hahn would say: "If you grasp the [bread's] reality then you see that in the [bread] itself are present all those things which we normally think of as the non-[bread] world. If you took away any of those non-[bread] elements and returned them to their sources...[the honey to the bees, the metal to the mines, or the farmers to their parents], the [bread] would no longer exist. A person who looks at the [bread] and can see the universe, is a person who can see the way."<sup>4</sup>

As long as we think of God as "up there" somewhere, like a father or a king or some other kind of person, we imagine that we are separate from God, we imagine that we can think or not think about, believe or not believe in, pray or not pray to that God. But in the spirituality of the mystics, the gaze shifts to understand that there are no truly separate things, that there is no separate self or separate God--that our "own life and the life of the universe are one."<sup>5</sup>

In the Buddhist tradition, there is not much discussion about God--in fact, Buddhism has been called a religion without a God. But more to the point, the Buddha was said to regard such questions as irrelevant. The point of his teaching was to enable people to overcome suffering. By the practice of meditation, we might come to understand ourselves from the perspective of the larger whole--once we gained such a perspective, we would no longer be attached to the pains and desires of the individual life of the individual self. We would reach nirvana.

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<sup>4</sup> *The Miracle of Mindfulness*, p. 47-48.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 48.

However, the theologian in me can't fail to notice that this experience of transcending the self to encounter the unity of everything is common to the mystics of most traditions--and in many of those traditions, that experience of the larger unity is described as the experience of God. J.D. Salinger, who was a student of Zen Buddhism and Vedantic Hinduism, wrote an account of a moment of such insight in his short story "Teddy."

"I was six when I saw that everything was God, and my hair stood up, and all," Teddy said. "It was on a Sunday, I remember. My sister was a tiny child then, and she was drinking her milk, and all of a sudden I saw that she was God and the milk was God. I mean, all she was doing was pouring God into God, if you know what I mean."<sup>6</sup>

There are many paths to the awareness of the larger whole. Some paths use the word God, and others do not. Using the word God is one way to express the beauty and awe we encounter in the mystery of the interconnected universe. But the word God is not a proper name. We could just as easily call it Mystery, or Light, or the Evolving Universe, or Love.

Sometimes I think we should abandon the word God, because of all the oppression and abuse that have been engendered by those who claim to be acting on God's behalf. But at other times, that is the very reason I want to use that word. I know how healing it can be, for someone who has been banished from the realm of the holy, to recognize that they too are part of ultimate reality and value. How better to say it, in our world, than to claim that they belong to the realm of God?

The Jewish mystics suggest that God is a verb.<sup>7</sup> Instead of thinking of God as a being, we might think of it as Be-ing. Instead of using the word "God," we might use the verb, "God-ing." This process in the universe, this God-ing energy, is evolving, creating, transforming the universe, always changing, always leaning toward greater perfection. Or perhaps we should say it is leaning toward greater beauty, since perfection implies that there is something out there we are trying to copy. But God-ing, the activity of God the verb, includes the birth of newness and unpredictability within the wholeness. And all of us are a part of this God-ing.

Jewish mysticism sees a particular dignity and purpose in the lives of human beings. It describes it in the form of a story--the Kabbalah speaks of sparks of divine light that were trapped in the husks of all things in the universe when this material world was created. The purpose of life is to raise the sparks, and bring together the separated light into one whole. Part of how we do this is through becoming aware of the larger whole. But what makes humans significant is that we exist with free will. So not only are we a part of the harmonious symphony of the all, but we can actively shape the music. Whatever we choose has an effect on the larger whole.

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<sup>6</sup> J.D. Salinger, "Teddy," 1954

<sup>7</sup> See Rabbi David Cooper, *God is a Verb: Kabbalah and the practice of mystical judaism*, Riverhead Books, 1997. p. 69. This idea was developed by Rabbi Zalman Schachter-Shalomi.

Rabbi David Cooper tells a story about Rabbi Schlomo Carlebach, one of the great mystical rabbis of the twentieth century. He was always late everywhere he went, because every time someone asked him for help, he stopped and responded. He would not simply give money, but also have a short conversation. “Each person was treated as if he or she were a saint. ...Reb Shlomo believed that the world was balanced on our ability to help one another. Should someone fail to assist another person, the world could be destroyed.”<sup>8</sup>

As human beings, then, our actions have ultimate value. We are not here to follow a bunch of rules, or to pass a test, or to clear a kind of judgement, to get into a personal heavenly afterlife. Rather, by the choices we make, we are shifting the essence of the universe. When we choose selfishly and with egotism or cruelty, we keep the world broken and dissonant. We cover up the light within ourselves and others. When we expand our hearts and choose acts of loving-kindness and compassion, we are releasing the divine sparks of light in ourselves and others. We transform the universe as we transform ourselves.

This is a huge responsibility, and it has the power to make me shudder. When I take seriously the interconnected web of all existence, when I begin to try to experience it, I also come face to face with my own attachment to separation. There is more to awakening than a mystical appreciation of the beauty of the larger whole. Something within me, and I believe within all of us, is afraid of opening the heart. I am afraid of feeling the pain of other people, I am afraid of letting go of my illusion of control, I am afraid of being hurt by other people, or emptied out by other people. It seems easier to distract myself than to pay attention to the fear around my heart.

But this too is a part of the dance. We have to be aware of our separateness in order to come to awareness of our unity. Because here we are. Here I am in this moment, alive and part of the great circle of life. All the feelings I feel, including fear and separation, are part of the universe at this moment. And, what I have learned from many teachers, is that somehow the only task that matters, the only dance I must do, is to pay attention to the task of the present moment. I am asked to take one step forward, to make the one next choice.

There are many teachers of meditation, in many different traditions. Last week I mentioned that I did not have a formula which anyone could use to experience the divine. But many of the mystical systems within the world traditions actually do teach a practice, the purpose of which is to help us to work with our fear, and our attachment to separation, and to bring us to that experience of higher consciousness. The Buddha encouraged people not to believe what he taught, but rather to try it out and test it for themselves.

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<sup>8</sup> *God Is a Verb*, p. 23-24.

But even without a formal practice, we can take small steps. If we can notice the thread of connection between ourselves and one other being, that is a step. When I eat a piece of bread, I might call to mind that I am joining this bread together with my own body--it is becoming human in me. Why do people pray before eating, in so many cultures? There is something about the process of eating that reminds us of our threads of connection.

Even as you sit here in this sanctuary, you might notice the sounds that send vibrations across everyone in the room. If you are near a window, you might feel the sun on your cheek, and realize that you have a thread of connection across thousands of miles of space--its light is reaching you. You might notice the gravity pulling your body to the ground, attaching you to the chair and the floor beneath your feet. Notice your breathing, the air going in and out of your nose and mouth.

When you go into the fellowship time, and drink a glass of water or a cup of coffee, think about how your body is also a form of water--70% water, and imagine that your hand is pouring water into water. When you talk to a stranger, you might imagine the divine spark inside of them and inside of you, and see how that affects the greeting you bring.

In the end, it doesn't matter if we use the word God, or God-ing, or light, or love. It doesn't matter what we call it. What we are reaching for is larger than language, larger than thought. But it is already deep within us--closer than breathing, closer than a song, closer than the DNA of each cell of our bodies. The threads of connection already weave their way into the center of our being, and hold us one to the other. There is a blessing in it, when we can feel it and see it. There is a sense of coming home and a feeling of belonging. May it be so. May we awaken like the spring flowers.

### *Meditation*

*Our closing words are from the poet, Joy Harjo:<sup>9</sup>*

Remember the sky that you were born under,  
know each of the star's stories...  
Remember that you are all people and that all people are you.  
Remember that you are this universe and that this universe is you.  
Remember that all is in motion, is growing, is you.  
Remember that language comes from this.  
Remember the dance that language is, that life is.  
Remember.

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<sup>9</sup> Joy Harjo, "Remember," in *How We Become Human*