

Resources for Communities of Ongoing Religious Exploration

V. 2 Unit 6

Earth

Suggested Chalice Lighting

We see the world piece by piece, as the sun, the moon, the animal, the tree; but the whole, of which these are the shining parts, is the soul.

Ralph Waldo Emerson

Introduction

February 12 is the birthday of Charles Darwin. It is a time when many congregations hold services and other events on the topic of evolution and science.

Although I am a signatory of the Clergy Letter Project, “an endeavor designed to demonstrate that religion and science can be compatible and to elevate the quality of the debate of this issue,” I have not led a service for this particular occasion because it falls during Black History Month.

That feels like an unfortunate omission, so I thought that natural science would be the focus of this month’s CORE. When I came across the latest issue of *Quest* from Church of the Larger Fellowship, their senior minister’s essay touched and inspired me.

Portions are reproduced below, and I hope that it will have a similar effect for you.

Readings

Robin Wall Kimmerer writes, in *Braiding Sweetgrass*:

Maybe it was the smell of ripe tomatoes, or the oriole singing, or that certain slant of light on a yellow afternoon and the beans hanging thick around me. It just came to me in a wash of happiness that made me laugh out loud.... I knew it with a certainty as warm and clear as the September sunshine. The land loves us back. She loves us with beans and tomatoes...by a shower of gifts and a rain of lessons. She provides for us and teaches us to provide for ourselves. That’s what good mothers do.... Suddenly there was no intellectualizing, no rationalizing, just the pure sensation of baskets full of mother love. The ultimate reciprocity, loving and being loved in return.

Reflecting on this, Rev. Meg Riley writes:

Does the earth love me? Do I really know that? I think it would feel wonderful to know this kind of love, but my mind keeps twisting. “Isn’t it kind of anthropomorphic?” I asked a friend, who says she knows in her very cells that the earth loves her. (In other words, “Isn’t that attributing human traits to something that is not human?”) My friend drew herself up and said, quietly but with clear and focused anger, “I absolutely hate that

question. Do you see the arrogance of that question? That question presumes that humans are the ones who know how to love, that love begins with us. That we invented love. How dare we presume that?"

That stopped me, and set me to ruminating more. My friend is right. I stand firmly in my committed belief that love is the strongest force in the universe, and that human ability to love is a gift we are given, not something we invented. I don't care if people call its source God or life or just affirm love without worrying about its source. So why am I so stopped by fear when I consider publicly naming Earth as the biggest source of love I know? Why do I worry about ridicule, about being thought simple, for believing this when I have so much tangible evidence, starting with my very breath and body, of the earth as a source of love?

Ultimately, unable to stand my own mental contortions on the subject, I decided to approach the question in a different way. Kimmerer suggested this, after she found graduate students who hit the same wall of rationality and freezing that I did when confronting the question. She asked them: "What do you suppose would happen if people believed this crazy notion that the earth loves us back?"

She describes what happened when she framed the question this way: "The floodgates opened. They all wanted to talk at once. We were suddenly off the deep end, heading for world peace and perfect harmony. One student summed it up, 'You wouldn't harm what gives you love.'"

So, I can hypothetically imagine what it would be to believe the earth loves me, loves all of us earthlings. Still, I want to go deeper with this. My friend who knows the earth loves her spent several months in deep meditation, simply feeling that love. I am shy about this, but I want to know that kind of love. In these winter months, when gardening is not a daily experience for me, I am instead committed to exploring whether I can feel the love of the earth. Kimmerer, again: "Knowing you love the earth changes you, activates you to defend and protect and celebrate." (Yes. This I know in my bones.) But then she continues: "But when you feel that the earth loves you in return, that feeling transforms the relationship from a one way street into a sacred bond.... It is medicine for broken land and empty hearts." I want to know that sacred bond enough to struggle for it, if need be. Even more than I need the approval of my scientist father and rational readers here, who I imagine shaking their heads disdainfully now.

Questions for consideration and discussion

1. Were you, like Meg Riley, challenged by the idea of earth loving us back?
2. Is it meaningful to you, to think of love in this way? Or do you think it is really just anthropomorphic (assigning human feelings to things)?
3. Does the earth love us in general? Does the earth love you specifically?

4. Kimmerman suggests that this understanding of love, as the earth's relationship to us as humans, would completely alter the way we humans behave towards the earth. Do you agree?
5. The Christian scripture contains a claim that, "God is love." If you consider the idea of God, is this a definition that makes sense to you?
6. "God is Love" speaks of love as a thing or attribute defining God. This essay uses the idea of love as a relationship, rather than a thing that exists apart from other things. Might this be a more effective or compelling way to understand Love as the ultimate Good or all-excelling force/entity/power in existence?

Taking it home

Notice the earth as you travel on it. Notice the ground. Notice that the earth has provided everything that you require for your existence. It generates the air, with all of its necessary components, for you to breathe. It creates the plants and animals necessary to feed all of the humans. It gives up the elements for creating things of stone and metal.

The earth adapts and adjusts itself in many ways to the violence and harm we do it. We know that we have abused the earth beyond all reasonable limits, and perhaps even beyond its ability to survive the damage for much longer.

Leave that sadness or remorse behind for now. As you move in the world, notice it with gratitude. Offer the earth appreciation for its generosity. Allow gratitude to soften or brighten how you perceive the world.

Conclusion

Was the discussion interesting? Or did it get bogged down or off track? Did it feel relevant to your life and religious journey? How might you have approached the topic differently? Were there moments in which you felt uncomfortable? Confused? Anxious? Affirmed? Eager? Hopeful? Surprised? What other feelings did you encounter?

If people in the group would like, allow them to share these things, without interrogation or challenge.

Suggested Closing Words

Nothing divine dies. All good is eternally reproductive. The beauty of nature reforms itself in the mind, and not for barren contemplation, but for new creation.

Ralph Waldo Emerson