

Earth Spirituality Is a Many Splendored Thing

A Sermon by Steve Maier

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Reading

The following reading is from Ron Engel. You may remember his name from last fall. He is the UU theologian I spoke about who had such an important role in the drafting of the Earth Charter language. He is also the inspiration for this service and for a series of services and events happening here over the coming weeks. In the 1960's, living in an ethnically diverse urban neighborhood in Chicago, Ron began to develop his theories on the relationships between spirit and the environment. He writes of his early efforts to work with others to transform this neighborhood into a healthy and thriving metropolitan regional community:

Each one of the eight forms of engagement that we are [discussing] was alive there, thirty years ago, casting its radiance over our lives. It meant everything to us, for example, that we personally lived as members of this neighborhood, citizens of this little urban bioregion that we took this whole community as our parish, and called our community organization, the "Neighborhood Commons." Even in this biologically impoverished landscape, the natural ecosystem was important to us, and I vividly recall the day we took a group of young people for a canoe trip along the north branch of the Chicago River to help get a better sense of our turf. I also recall the day [my wife] and I discovered a neighbor from Eastern Europe picking the grape leaves off the vine in our yard, the roosters that used to crow in the morning, the food co-op we sponsored, and the great community potlucks we shared. [I discovered] that these strangers loved gardens, and a trip out of the city, as much as I did! (Never since that time have I had tolerance for the claim that "the environment" is only a "white" person's or elitist issue.) Our ministry was about embracing bodies, especially the bodies of children, and in the parlance of the civil rights movement, putting our bodies "on the line." I could go on at some length about the resurgence of the "community arts" in our neighborhood, and the

efforts at stewardship and sustainable co-creativity through a community development corporation that rehabilitated and built low-income housing and which continues to prosper to this day.

Sermon

“How are we to live under the conditions of life as they are given to us here and now on this planet?” Ron Engel says this is the central religious question of human life. It seems pretty simple: “how are we to live under the conditions of life as they are given to us here and now on this planet?” The hard part, though, is that this question demands answers from us. “How are we to live...” means that we have choices to make. The rest of the question suggests that those choices make a difference, both to ourselves and to the world around us.

Ron Engel made a number of choices in the Chicago neighborhood where he lives. We have all made similar choices. We live here in Vermont, near both people and wild places. We make decisions about what we do – how and where we work and play, what causes we support, and what things we buy – all based on some set of criteria. These criteria, I would like to suggest, include impulses from our bodies that tell us when something feels right or wrong, or good or bad. Such impulses are what I have come to think of as the human spirit.

Today, I would like to talk about the human spirit – where it comes from and what nurtures it ... pretty presumptuous of me, don't you think? If someone had suggested to me a year ago that I would be standing here today with something interesting and important to say about the human spirit, ... well, let's just say a lot has happened in the past twelve months.

Last spring, I began a quest. Of course, I didn't realize I was beginning a quest. It all began with a fairly simple question. What was the Unitarian Universalist Association, or more generally, what were UUs doing about environmental issues and causes? At first, my research was rather discouraging. For example, on the UUA web site, you can find an alphabetical listing of all the programs and services of the UUA. But when you look under “E”, the listing proceeds from “endowment fund resources” to “estate planning” – no listing for

"environment." None either for "ecology" or other similar words.

Before long, however, my research started paying off. One path led me to the origins of the Seventh Principle, the UU's environmental principle – "respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part" – I wrote an article about this for the most recent CVUUS newsletter. Another path led me to the "Reverence for Life" ideas, which I spoke about here in February -- that profound adoring awed respect for all Life on Earth.

A third path led me to Ron Engel. My first encounter with Ron's work came when I found an article of his on the Internet, the title of which I have stolen for this sermon – "Earth Spirituality is a Many Splendored Thing." This article, and a few other things I've read over the past year, has profoundly affected my ideas about the human spirit.

Engel's basic idea is that the human spirit flourishes when it engages with the natural world. He says that "Human beings have evolved a plurality of ways of **engaging spirit, nature, and one another so as to enable their mutual flourishing.**" The word "evolved" suggests that these ways or paths are innate, part of and emerging from the long process of human evolution. "Mutual flourishing" means that all of these things together (spirit, nature, and humans) are required for the flourishing.

Engel outlines eight different, though interrelated, ways that humans engage with nature and, in so doing, enable the mutual flourishing of humans and the natural world. He says "we need to be critically faithful to each of these ways, separately, and in interplay with each other, if we are to set our species on a just, sustainable, and spiritually fulfilling path of planetary evolution." The eight are:

- Wilderness encounters
- Bioregional participation
- Embracing the body
- Respect for the rights of individual beings
- Compassion for the sufferings of life

- Tending the garden
- Stewardship
- Artistic co-creation

I have included in today's Order of Service a description of these eight ways or modes of engagement with the natural world. (*Web editor's note: included at end of sermon*) It helps, I think, to be able to read these descriptions several times. So, I'd like to suggest that you take this paper home with you and, over the next several weeks, think about these eight ways in the context of your own lives.

Here on Sunday mornings through May 12th, we are going to be examining many of these forms of engagement. For example, next week we will look at artistic co-creation in the context of a fun intergenerational service honoring Earth Day (bring your imagination and your instruments!). Steve Trombulak will examine wilderness encounters and stewardship on May 5th. And on May 12th, for Mother's Day, we will celebrate embracing the body and tending the garden and their connections with women and mothers.

Today, though, I want to look at some of Engel's general ideas, to demonstrate why they seem so important to me.

Not so very long ago, I would have looked at this list of eight and said, well, that's nice, but why do I need to concern myself with such ideas? I was doing my part. I had a career in environmental protection, gave money to environmental causes, voted Democratic, and, most important of all, I lived in Vermont! I liked to garden and exercise and go for a hike every once and awhile. Did I really need to look at these things more deeply?

According to Engel and other spiritual ecology writers, the ways in which we interact with the natural world reflect our most fundamental human characteristics and feed our innermost needs. Most of us know at least the rudiments of the science of evolution. Life on Earth began in the sea billions of years ago and over time, more complex creatures evolved, crawled out of the sea, and here we are today.

But as we look more closely at things like human consciousness and spirit, things are not so easy to understand. Where does that thing I refer to as my “gut feeling” come from? Why do certain things make me laugh or cry or feel good or not so good about myself? Do you have the same kinds of feelings as I do? Do we all? Are these things simply learned behaviors or is there something intrinsic to human beings that enable us to think and feel in the ways that we do?

Well, Engel believes there is something intrinsic; that there is something in our genetic code, inherited through the ages from the incredible process of evolution, which defines and enables what we now refer to as the human spirit. And, here’s the important part, having evolved from nature, this spirit requires a continuing connection with the natural world to be nurtured, to feel at home and right with the world.

This may or may not resonate with all of you. For some of us, something special happens, physically and emotionally, when we are out in nature, working in the garden, taking care of our bodies, or creating works of art. Others, though, may be less sure of such fundamental connections between spirit and nature. If you find yourself even just a little intrigued by these ideas, however, I would invite you to consider the different possible impacts our individual and collective choices may make over the coming decades.

Engel, and many other writers, lament the loss of the ability, in our modern world, for people to engage with the natural world in one or more of these eight ways. Engel writes:

*We all feel these losses, I believe, even if we are often too embarrassed or inarticulate to say so, and spend most of our energies at cross-purposes with ourselves perpetuating the very processes that destroy the things we love. I believe most people truly yearn to participate in these **paths of earthly salvation**, and many are eager to find ways to embody them more richly, more justly, than the conditions of the past have allowed.*

So, at a personal level, we may feel lost or disconnected if we don’t make the time and space to engage with nature on a regular basis.

On a societal level, we have routinely made decisions that have reduced the abilities of people to connect with nature. We have used up land and natural resources for human commerce; we have increasingly made job and life-style demands on people that have taken them away from the natural world. Large inequities in income and in life's opportunities result in unequal access to the nature.

Even larger questions loom. At a talk two weeks ago at Middlebury College, environmental author Bill McKibben spoke about genetic engineering and its possible consequences for the future. He touched all the bases you might expect, including the fear of unintended impacts on fragile ecosystems and all of life. But then he came to the point he really wanted to make. He is concerned that we are headed into the realm of changing what it means to be a human being on this planet. If, through genetic engineering, we can extend human life by several times or even indefinitely, what will that mean for our species and how we look at ourselves and the world around us?

All of which brought me back to Engel's central religious question – "how are we to live under the conditions of life as they are given to us here and now on this planet?" The wonderful, but, frankly also scary thing, is that each one of us must answer this question.

We can help each other out along the way (and this is a journey), but ultimately the choices are ours alone to make.

I would like to share with you some of the choices that I have made for how I want to live:

I want to see the light of the setting sun over the Adirondacks, and stand in awe of the sun and moon and stars and our place in the universe.

I want to work in my garden this afternoon, watch the bursting forsythia, and know (amidst wonder) that those peas I just planted will actually come up.

I want to go for a run and feel the exhilaration of breath, strength, and sweat, all the while

marveling at the healing scar down the front of my belly.

I want to leave to my children and their children, and all children, a good life on a healthy planet Earth.

I want to be part of a community of people, a congregation, and a religious movement that encourages understanding of the basic connections between spirit and nature, and that supports one another in our quests to make a difference in the world.

I want all these things for all people.

I want all people to have a profound adoring awed respect for all Life on Earth.

And, what I believe is that human spirits are uplifted whenever we make choices that work in these directions and, ultimately, that's what makes life worth living.

Closing Words

Over the next several weeks, I would ask that each of us take stock of those moments when you feel really good about yourself, when your spirit has been uplifted, and consider whether you have made a connection with nature in some way. Let me know what you find out.

Ron Engel's 8 Ways of Engaging the Human Spirit with the Natural World

1. Wilderness encounter: the experience of being overwhelmed and possibly transformed through experiences in wild, even hostile environments ... leading to a deep and abiding identification with the evolution of all existence.

2. Bioregional participation: the experience of belonging to an interdependent natural community or ecosystem, inclusive of human society, that is small enough to understand and

maintain, yet large enough to provide for the needs of its members. Leads to a sense of moral and political obligation to cooperate in maintaining the ecological integrity and species diversity of the "bioregion."

3. Embracing the body: an intimate awareness of the generative powers of our physical being, our capacity to give birth and be reborn throughout the cycles of life, leading to solidarity with all other physical beings and a concern for organic well being and healing.

4. Respect for the rights of individual beings: the experience of the unique individuality and intrinsic value of other beings – human and non-human – leading to a respect for their equal right to exist and to be free to pursue a life of their own, and efforts to legally institutionalize such rights, with special concern for the equal rights of the oppressed.

5. Compassion for the sufferings of life: the experience of sympathy for the ways in which humans and other sentient beings can be violated and feel pain, leading to a benevolent concern to remove unnecessary suffering in our treatment of persons and animals, with special concern for the suffering of the weak, the abandoned, and the excluded.

6. Tending the garden: making a home and a livelihood through the cultivation of plants and animals and the practice of the domestic virtues, including sowing the soil and reaping the harvest, keeping a hearth, preparing and sharing nourishing food, and nurturing a marriage (or partnership) and family, leading to fidelity to place and local community, and perseverance in the ordinary, life-sustaining tasks of human dwelling.

7. Stewardship: the experience of being treated fairly, and having one's basic needs met, in spite of scarce resources, leading one to assume responsibility for membership in a moral community that seeks the equitable, efficient, and sustainable use of the wealth of the community, including the management of its natural resources, for the most persons over the longest time.

8. Artistic co-creation: the exercise of the human capacity for co-creativity through

realizing the potential of nature for new forms of perfection, and the potential of human beings for self-realization through esthetic sensitivity and skill in the making of works of art – leads to efforts to make all human action and production, technical skill, and kinds of work more esthetically fulfilling for humans and the environment.

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