

“You Are This Universe”
Sermon by Sharon Wylie
For the Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Marin in San Rafael, CA
August 21, 2011

READING: “Remember” by Joy Harjo

I want to reflect this morning on some of the wisdom of Earth-centered traditions and their particular emphasis on the interconnectedness of all life. I want us to see with some clarity our interdependence. I want us to reflect on our seventh Unitarian Universalist principle: Respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part.

For many of us, the notion of our interdependence is more of an intellectual idea than it is something we really understand in our hearts and in our bodies. The dominant culture of the United States is absolutely founded on the primacy of the individual. We admire self-sufficiency above all else. We glorify the “self-made” man and woman. Our language is filled with words and idioms that positively portray independence: to stand on one’s own two feet, to freelance, to be self-employed, self-determining, self-directed, self-reliant, self-governing, distinct, unique, unfettered, unhampered, unimpeded, unobstructed, and unbound.

This world view is supported by the physics of Isaac Newton. Now, I need you to hang in here with me, because I’m going somewhere interesting. Newton believed that atoms were the smallest bits of matter and that they were solid and impenetrable. No atom could get inside another atom, and all atoms obeyed the same laws. In other words, the world is understood as made up of fixed and predictable individual parts. As congregational consultant Peter Steinke describes it, “To explain

the principles of Newtonian physics, teachers often use the example of billiard balls. They bump into each other, suffer collision, but they cannot connect. They are wholly impervious to one another. Billiard balls knock into each other, but they don't 'meet.' Like Newton's atoms, the balls are separate, compacted masses always operating according to ironclad laws." (*Congregational Leadership in Anxious Time*, p. 21)

This view of things extended beyond physics and became a paradigm for thinking about society. In this view of the world, you and I are like individual billiard balls. We bump into each other, and we might move in a different direction afterwards, but we remain separate from each other, isolated.

This way of thinking has influenced Freudian psychology, with its emphasis on the Self; Western medicine, with its division of the body into specialties; Western education, with its teaching of separate subjects; and even the business world, where companies are frequently divided into separate departments and subdivisions. This idea that division and separation provide optimal results pervades our world.

But about a hundred years ago, scientists discovered particles that were smaller than atoms. As Steinke tells us, "These particles became so small that there were no particles—only relationships. Subatomic particles can only come into being because of the presence of other particles. Elementary particles are in essence a set of relationships" (*CLAT*, p. 23). These ideas are known as quantum physics, which contends there is NO world composed of solid, individual parts unaffected by and unrelated to one another.

In other words, quantum physics suggests we're not billiard balls at all. We are more like...well, it's hard to describe. We don't have good language for it.

Physicists have been unable to provide a satisfactory metaphor for the quantum world. Physicist Danah Zohar calls it “a vast porridge of being where nothing is fixed or measurable...somewhat ghostly and just beyond our grasp” (*Leadership and the New Science*, Wheatley, p. 32). This is a SCIENTIST talking now: “ghostly porridge.” Physicist Fritjof Capra calls it “dynamic patterns continually changing into one another—the continuous dance of energy.” Astronomer James Jeans uses quantum physics to explain that “the universe begins to look more like a great thought than a great machine.”

Perhaps, when all is said is done, poet Joy Harjo has said it best in our reading this morning, “Remember that you are all people and that all people are you.”

We are not billiard balls. We are each other. How’s that for interdependence?

We have almost no language for describing this degree of interrelationship and connectedness, and fewer still for describing these things as POSITIVE. My thesaurus finds the following synonyms for interdependent: co-dependent, addicted, attached, hooked. We get closer with terms like collaborative, complementary, and correlative, but these aren’t quite the same things. It is hard to capture the idea that we are simultaneously separate AND not separate at all.

We are each other.

Organizational systems thinking is another modern theory with a profound understanding of our interconnectedness. Systems thinking posits that groups of people—like families and congregations—are one emotional unit characterized by complex interactions. Systems thinking recognizes that how you react to me, for example, depends not just on how I behave toward you, but also how the people

around us are behaving, toward us and toward each other. We are not isolated billiard balls cracking into each other. We are more like dynamic patterns continually changing into one another in a continuous dance of energy.

To give you an example, here we all are worshipping together, like any other Sunday morning. Now think of someone whose presence here would surprise you. Maybe it's someone you're angry with, someone who's hurt your feelings. Maybe it's someone whose politics you disagree with. Maybe it's just someone you haven't seen in a long time, and they're sitting in your row. For me, I'm imagining what it would be like to have my parents here; they've never heard me preach. I would be thrilled and happy and NERVOUS to have them here. Wouldn't the mere presence of these people in the room change our whole experience of worship? We might not be able to listen well, we'd be distracted, thinking about what we'll say or not say after worship. But on the surface, there's no reason for worship to be any different than it was without that person here.

Tennis champion Andre Agassi FAMOUSLY lost a match he'd been easily winning after the arrival of former president Bill Clinton seemed to fluster him. Agassi's performance improved when Clinton left the match in the middle, and then deteriorated again when Clinton returned. Even more interestingly, Agassi later insisted he did not see Clinton arrive or notice he was there.

On the surface, we're just 50 billiard balls in the room together. But the reality is our interconnections run so strong and deep that even one more person in the room can change our entire shared experience.

We are each other.

It shouldn't be a surprise that these ideas have also influenced modern theology and dreamings of the nature of God. In traditional or classical theism, God was seen as the supreme, unchanging being, but all that changed in the early 20th century. Philosophers Alfred North Whitehead and Charles Hartshorne conceived of a process-based or neoclassical theism, where God is seen as supreme BECOMING, a never ending series of events and processes acting and reacting to the always unfolding series of events and processes acting and reacting that is human life. Rather than God being SEPARATE and STATIC, perhaps God is around us and between us, perhaps God is a VERB, not a noun.

Perhaps God is not a billiard ball, bumping up against us.

Perhaps WE are God.

The idea that we are deeply connected and interconnected to each other and the world around us is, of course, ancient. But the Earth-centered traditions of Native Americans and other Pagans have historically been derided, seen as primitive, simple, and quaint, not to be taken seriously.

In January of this year, a man named Carlos Gonzales gave a Native American blessing at the memorial service for the six victims of the tragic shooting in Tucson, Arizona. Mr. Gonzales began by naming his lineage, his ancestors, and his ties to the land. He named his connections to the university where the memorial was held, and he named that he had permission from tribal elders to give the blessing. He identified his neighborhood and described his upbringing. He called the seven directions of his tradition: east, south, west, north, above, below, and center. He asked for blessings for his son in Afghanistan, and for creatures of the air, earth, and

water, including we two-legged creatures, asking for harmony and balance. He asked for a final blessing for ALL his relations.

This is a man who knows and understands the interdependent web of which he is a part. Connections to ancestors, to land, to institution, to neighborhood, to elders, to offspring, to fellow creatures of all types, to ALL his relations. He understands the importance of knowing WHERE HE IS, where is north, east, south, and west, what energy to invoke from the ground beneath his feet and the sky above his head, and what the comingling of that energy may bring, there in the center. In an eight-minute blessing watched by millions of people, we may know more about Carlos Gonzales than we know about friends of many years.

This blessing was ridiculed in the press. It was completely foreign to our predominantly white, predominantly Christian culture. Why is he wasting so much time, people wondered, talking about the land and the elders and his own history? When is he going to start talking about God?

WE know, of course, that he WAS. Just as subatomic particles exist only in relationship, Earth-centered traditions know that WE exist only in relationship. God exists only in relationship. To know and understand ourselves we need to know and understand ourselves in relationship to everyone and everything around us.

Who we are sitting alone at the edge of a lake is different from who we are sitting in a car in rush hour traffic. Is different from who we are in a disagreement with a family member, is different from who we are on Christmas Eve at church.

The work we are called to do is to learn about ourselves and who we are. What is our lineage? Where is our land? Where are we now? Who is this dynamic, shifting

BEING / BECOMING in relationships with the Earth and the past and ancestors and the neighborhood and north, east, south, and west.

If you imagined yourself independent, if you imagined yourself sufficient, if you imagined yourself unbound, I am here to suggest you are wrong.

Remember the sky you were born under.

Remember the moon.

Remember your birth and your father.

Remember the earth whose skin you are.

Remember the plants, trees, and animals.

Remember the wind.

Remember that you are all people and all people are you.

Remember you are this universe and this universe is you.

Remember that all is in motion, is growing, is you.

Remember.

Blessed be.

BENEDICTION

We are not separated. We are not divided. We are not billiard balls.

May each of us here be blessed with the knowing of our interconnectedness.

May each of us here be blessed with the understanding of our becoming.

So may it be.