

# “Braiding Sweetgrass”

16 April 2023  
Earth Day Sunday

## Meditation

## “Grounding” – Jess Reynolds

On my worst days, it is gravity I am most grateful for: the way the earth pulls at me from her core, yearns for me, keeps me pressed tightly against her surface. When my own core is hollowed out, when I have no more mass than a leaf dead on the branch, still this is enough for the earth to find me. She reaches for what little I have and says, *stay*.

Every meditation I have ever done begins by asking me to ground myself. This is not so much an action as it is inaction. Surrender. A voluntary abandonment of my own edges and tidy packaging.

Sit with me now. Press the soles of your feet back into the ground you sprang from. Feel the weight of your body and know that it is glorious. You are born of soil and sun, and all the heaviness of the earth is a call to you. The earth is reaching for you. Reach back. Reach back.

## Responsive Reading

## “Beginners” – Denise Levertov

But we have only begun to love the earth. We have only begun to imagine  
the fullness of life

How could we tire of hope? – so much is in bud.

How can desire fail?—we have only begun to imagine justice and mercy,

Only begun to envision how it might be to live as siblings with beast  
and flower, not as oppressors.

Surely our river cannot already be hastening into the sea of nonbeing?

Surely it cannot drag, in the silt, all that is innocent?

Not yet, not yet – there is too much broken that must be mended,

Too much hurt that we have done to each other that cannot yet be  
forgiven.

We have only begun to know the power that is in us if we would join our solitudes in the communion of struggle.

So much is unfolding that must complete its gesture, so much is in bud.

### **Sermon: “Braiding Sweetgrass”**

You know the photograph.

We all do—its image  
is forever imprinted on our collective memory.

It’s been called the most significant photograph of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century,  
if not of all time.

Typical of tourists, it was a snapshot, a Kodak moment—  
the one taken of the whole wide world  
from the window of the Apollo VIII module on Christmas Eve, 1968.

From the time of the mythic stories  
of Icarus flying fatally close to the Sun  
and the divinely thwarted Tower of Babel,  
humanity has reached for the heavens,  
longing to slip “the surly bonds of earth.”

Within living memory of people in this room,  
we first defied the gravitational pull of our planet,  
escaping the confines of Earth and gaining for ourselves—  
for the first time in human history—  
a God’s-eye glimpse of our terrestrial home.

No generation living before us had ever beheld  
the awesome sight of our tiny, spinning blue-green planet  
shrouded in delicate clouds of white  
and enveloped by the dark depths of space.

While scientists and artists had, of course,  
rendered images of our planet in  
the centuries before the Apollo missions,  
only these photographs helped us to see the Earth as it truly is:  
a planet teeming with life amid the relative solitude of space.

In a single snapshot, we see the home of every human being in history,  
the cradle of our deepest longings and our highest aspirations.

Such a view changes things.  
And it has changed us.

In both subtle and not-so-subtle ways,  
this journey beyond our own atmosphere  
has forever altered our understanding  
of what it means to be citizens of this planet.

From space, the borders between our countries  
and the boundaries between our beliefs melt away.

This iconic image of the globe makes clear like nothing else  
that we're all truly in this together.

It puts us in our place  
and causes us to reevaluate  
our sometimes overblown sense of self-importance.

I think it no coincidence  
that within two decades of that photo being snapped,  
the Principles of Unitarian Universalism were revised  
to include our Seventh Principle:

“Respect for the interdependent web of all existence  
of which we are a part.”

Indeed, the view of our fragile planet from space  
has had both ethical and theological implications for us as Unitarians.

I'm grateful that ours is and has been  
a faith flexible enough to integrate our ever-changing understanding  
of ourselves and our place in the universe.

Shortly after the Seventh Principle was adopted,  
the cultural sociologist Robert Bellah noted  
that this principle is the most distinctive  
and perhaps most promising contribution  
Unitarian Universalism has made to the modern world.

With our theological emphasis on the here-and-now,

our faith strives to say that our lives—and our destiny—  
are tied up in a “single garment,”  
as Martin Luther King so often reminded us.

The children’s version of our Seventh Principle  
could not state this fact more clearly:  
“We care for Earth’s lifeboat.”

While there are many rich meanings to be mined  
from that snapshot of the Earth, I believe that, perhaps,  
the most enduring lesson of our journeys into space,  
is to be found, as with all travel,  
in what it teaches us about ourselves.

Astronaut Jim Lovell, who piloted the command module,  
said gazing out the window of the spacecraft  
that, “The vast loneliness is awe-inspiring  
and it makes you realize just what you have back there on Earth.”

As Dorothy Gale put it in the *Wizard of Oz*,  
“there’s no place like home.”

And it’s true.  
Though we sometimes forget.  
And we though we often fail to treat this home  
as though our lives depend on it—which they most certainly do.

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In 1961, when the Unitarians and the Universalists  
merged into a single association,  
of which the Canadian Unitarian Council was a part at the time,  
there was a felt need to establish a set of clear organizing principles.

Here’s what they came up with  
(sit back and see how these words settle on your ears):

In accordance with these corporate purposes,  
the members of the Unitarian Universalist Association,  
dedicated to the principles of a free faith, unite in seeking:

1. To strengthen one another in a free and disciplined search for truth  
as the foundation of our religious fellowship;

2. To cherish and spread the universal truths taught by the great prophets and teachers of humanity in every age and tradition, immemorially summarized in the Judeo-Christian heritage as love to God and love to man;
3. To affirm, defend and promote the supreme worth of every human personality, the dignity of man, and the use of the democratic method in human relationships;
4. To implement our vision of one world by striving for a world community founded on ideals of brotherhood, justice and peace;
5. To serve the needs of member churches and fellowships, to organize new churches and fellowships, and to extend and strengthen liberal religion;
6. To encourage cooperation with men of good will in every land.<sup>1</sup>

By the 1980s, there was a feeling that these words no longer accurately represented the association anymore.

(And, of course, the sound of them is shocking to our present-day sensibilities.)

It should come as no surprise that women led the way in bringing about reform, especially given the gendered and sexist language that was so common at the time.

A major revision was undertaken in the early 1980s, resulting in 1985 in new statement of six principles, which, with almost completely new wording carried forward the concepts of the earlier principles.

These are the Principles we know today.

The process was long and complicated. But it involved grassroots input and multiple revisions before being voted on at successive General Assemblies.

It was an intentional and inclusive process.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.uuworld.org/articles/uuas-original-principles-1961>

And, in the end, the Principles were overwhelmingly adopted, and with only a single dissenting vote.

In 1987, a new principle, the seventh, was added, this time recognizing the interdependent web of life, of which we are a part.

And, at the same time, earth-based traditions were added as a source that informs our faith, alongside the authority of personal experience, ethical teachings, the insights of modern science, the historical religions from which we descend, as well as the wisdom of the world's religions.

As most of you are well aware, in recent years, UUs have been in the process of adding an 8th Principle focused on working for racial justice and against systemic oppressions of all kinds.

This principle was adopted by the CUC in 2021.

The UUA itself has debated adding a similar 8th Principle, while many individual congregations there have already adopted a version of the principle on their own—such is the freedom exercised by individual congregations in our associations.

In response to this debate, and others concerning the 5<sup>th</sup> Principle (revisiting how inclusive our democratic processes actually are) and the 7<sup>th</sup> Principle (considering an amendment to expand its scope), the Board of the UUA established a task force to explore whether a new rethink of the Seven Principles was needed.

This launched a multi-year process to explore revisions to “Article II” of the UUA’s by-laws, which contains the Seven Principles.<sup>2</sup>

Now, it should be noted that these same by-laws call for a re-evaluation of this article every fifteen years; this regular review hasn’t taken place now in over a generation, so it is more than timely that the UUA undertakes this process now.

While the UUA process has unfolded over several years and has involved consultations and surveys and revisions based on input from thousands of people, there is still some anxiety about what these proposed changes will mean

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.uua.org/files/2023-02/article-II-study-report-2021-23.pdf>

for the UUA—and, in the Canadian context, for us here in Canada.

While we and the congregations of the CUC form a separate denomination—and did so intentionally more than two decades ago—we are also deeply influenced by the actions taken by the UUA.

It's a bit of the classic elephant-mouse problem, in terms of difference in size between the US and Canada.

But a more apt metaphor would actually be an elephant and an ant.

The UUA is roughly 47 times the size of the CUC, in terms of members.

And the role they take in publishing materials that speak to UUs has an outsized influence on us here.

Which is to say that there's reason that we will want to remain curious about how the UUA process unfolds.

What they are proposing is, I think, exciting in many ways.

They are considering a shift to an articulation of six core values, which, hopefully, will be easier to recall and convey to others.<sup>3</sup>

These are: Interdependence, Justice, Equity, Generosity, Transformation, and Pluralism.

Each of these values is given a more expansive description.

The draft of the one for Interdependence reads:

We honour the interdependent web of all existence.  
We covenant to cherish Earth and all beings  
by creating and nurturing relationships of care and respect.

With humility and reverence,  
we acknowledge our place in the great web of life,  
and we work to repair harm and damaged relationships.

All of this is still being revised as input pours in.  
I'm not even sure this is the latest language.

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<sup>3</sup> <https://www.uua.org/uuagovernance/committees/article-ii-study-commission>

Such is life in what we call a “living tradition.”

There are many people I know, trust, and respect who are engaged in leading this work.

They are, in my view, doing so with openness, commitment, and great care.

So, I’m very curious to see what finally emerges.

Because I have, for a while now, been feeling that a new and different understanding of ourselves is seeking fresh expression.

While all of this works its way through, there are many who are understandably anxious.

And some are concerned about what might be lost in the process—whether the principles as we know them will fade away, whether key concepts will fall out of favour or completely disappear.

I appreciate those concerns.

But here’s the thing. I’m not sure this revision is going far enough.

I welcome a regular assessment of our statements of faith, these ways that we find to give voice to our deepest commitments.

But, if I were in charge—which obviously enough, I am not—not least that I am a Canadian UU and not part of the UUA—I would want to do even more to signify that our radical interdependence on this planet is the starting place of everything else we have to say, all of our commitments to one another and the wider world, everything we aspire to be and become.

Life as we know it hinges on respect for our place in this world—on whether this earth—our “lifeboat”—remains a viable planet to sustain life for generations still to come.

I say this, of course, because we are living in peril of destroying the viability of life on this planet.

And I say this because I believe the only path



to making meaningful change that truly upholds and sustains life comes through inculcating a deep and enduring reverence for the earth in every human heart.

We have a very long way to go.

I don't know about you, but my heart isn't fully there.  
Not in the way it needs to be.  
Not in the way that it longs to be.

I don't think that I'm alone in this.  
I sense this is true of many of us.

And it's not just about recycling more or flying less often.

It can't merely be about personal choices, though important, in the face of the self-destructive ways that humankind has collectively structured our modern world.

I think that real change has to come from a deeper place. A place grounded—to echo the meditation Margaret shared earlier—in a felt dependence on, and a felt connection to, this good green earth.

How we go about this, how we get there, is the pertinent and urgent question.

And this brings me to *Braiding Sweetgrass*, the stunningly beautiful book by Robin Wall Kimmerer, of the Citizen Potawatomi Nation in present-day Oklahoma.

There is, some would say, a risk in overly romanticizing the relationship Indigenous Peoples have with the land.

I think the greater risk, though, is not seeking to learn from the wisdom they are willing to share with the rest of us living in this world that is so out of balance.

So much of that wisdom is found in Kimmerer's book.

It is at once simple, accessible, and, given the state of things, radical.

How might our world be transformed—or restored—if we were to embrace principles of faith akin to what Kimmerer and others call “The Honorable Harvest,”

a practice both ancient and urgent, that, she says,  
“applies to every exchange between people and the Earth.”<sup>4</sup>

Its protocol is not written down [she says,]  
but if it were, it would look something like this:

Ask permission of the ones whose lives you seek.  
Abide by the answer.

Never take the first. Never take the last.

Harvest in a way that minimizes harm.

Take only what you need and leave some for others.

Use everything that you take.

Take only that which is given to you.

Share it, as the Earth has shared with you.

Be grateful.

Reciprocate the gift.

Sustain the ones who sustain you, and the Earth will last forever.

Friends, the earth will last forever,  
or at least until our sun burns out.

The question is how long life will endure.

And the answer hinges on whether human hearts  
can be turned to truly reverence the gifts we have been given.

Paraphrasing the poet:

...we have only begun to love the earth.  
We have only begun to imagine the fullness of life

We have only begun to envision how it might be

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<sup>4</sup> Braiding Sweetgrass, p. 96.

to live as siblings with beast and flower, and not as oppressors.

We have only begun to know the power that is in us  
if we would join our solitudes in the communion of struggle.

For so much is unfolding that must complete its gesture,  
so much is in bud.

And indeed it is.

Amen.

### **Benediction**

Our Mother, whose body is the Earth,  
Sacred is thy being.

Thy gardens grow,  
Thy will be done in our cities,  
as it is in nature.

Thanks be this day  
for food, and air, and water.

Forgive us our sins against [the] Earth,  
as we are learning to forgive one another.

And surrender us not unto extinction,  
but deliver us from our folly.

For thine is the beauty, and the power,  
and all life, from birth to death,  
from beginning to end, Amen.

So be it.  
Forever.  
Blessed be.

- Henry Horton