

Earth Day Sermon
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First Unitarian Congregation, Toronto
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Good morning.

It is a pleasure to be returning to your congregation, via Zoom, to share some reflections as we mark Earth Day.

Let us all, collectively, take a deep breath, a deep breath in, and a deep breath out. Let's take another deep breath in, and a deep breath out. As we breath let us think about the exchange of our breath with the trees and forests around the world; as we breath out CO₂, the trees inhale our CO₂ and breath out Oxygen, which then fills our lungs. It is a deep sharing the human and the forests have had for millennia, an exchange of life-giving reciprocity. Breath in. Breathe out.

Earth Day reminds that us that we must not simply reconnect with the earth, but that we *are* the earth.

We are hardwired for the earth.

Billionaires like Elon Musk, when not taking a chainsaw to government workers, are pouring millions into bizarre and misguided dreams of terraforming Mars and having us leave the planet, our home, to live on Mars, after rendering life on our home uninhabitable, and especially unliveable for those who are the marginalized economically and socially around the world.

This is a policy of “trash and dash.”

This talk of clearcutting our planet and simply moving to another is part of what geologist Thomas Berry termed a “cultural pathology.”

The word Human is derived from **humus**, which is a Latin **word** for earth or dirt. It is also the root word for humble.

Moreover, the word *soul* is derived from animus, a Latin word for soul or mind; it is where we get the word animal.

We are thus humble, inspired animals of the soil, of the Earth.

We grow from this soil and we return to it. The breaths we take today include molecules that were shared by the earliest microbes, extinct dinosaurs, ancient

cedars, and blue whales. Our psychological, physical, mental, and spiritual centredness is rooted in and dependent on this planet, our home, the Earth.

Earth Day reminds that us that we are encouraged to not simply reconnect with the earth, but that we *are* the earth, so in reconnecting with the earth, we are reconnecting with ourselves.

We lose our way, and our wisdom, when we forget who we are.

Earth Day is a day of recognizing ourselves as earthlings.

When we use our time, talent, and imaginations to besmirch and escape rather than befriend and embrace the Earth, might we lose the wisdom that comes from being in connection with the planet? Earth Day might be an invitation to reinhabit the wisdom of our planetary home.

Earth Day is also an invitation to hope.

“For me, hope is embedded in our stories and in the land....”

--- Anishnaabe artist Chief Lady Bird, Rama First Nation

This insight accompanies Chief Lady Bird’s stunning mural, “Bgosendmowih (Hope),” which graces the historic Leuty Boat House in Toronto’s East End. This suggests to me that hope needs to take a form, whether in our dreams, our aspirations, or in the stories we tell.

In keeping with this understanding, here are four personal stories that speak to the wellsprings of my own hope.

Grandma “Mirth”

My grandma loved to “cut up.”

This involved a frolicsome exchange of stories, shared memories, joy, and laughter. Lots of laughter. Consequently, my father dubbed my Mom’s mom “Mirth.” The name fit.

I have a vivid memory of my grandma, enveloped in knee-slapping laughter, removing her glasses to wipe away tears as all of us were caught in her contagious delight.

But these were no Pollyannish tears. My grandma had passed through many hard spaces in her lifetime.

She was a young woman during World War I, witnessing many of her friends march off to the mustard-gassed trenches of that ghastly conflict.

As a working mother of three, she endured devastating financial hardship during the Great Depression, married to a caring but alcoholic husband.

During World War II, her 17-year-old son, lying about his age, joined the U.S. Marines and was shipped off to the savagery of the South Pacific theatre.

She endured the ambient anxiety of the Cold War, the political and cultural upheaval of the 1960s, and the growing gap between the haves and have-nots inaugurated by the Thatcher-Reagan-Mulroney “greed -is -good” era.

Yet, through it all, it was her joy that served as her indelible trademark, a joy sustained by a rock-ribbed faith.

“Never underestimate the power of positive thinking,” she would urge us, “or the power of prayer.” And whenever we faced our own challenges, she would instruct us to “always trust in the Holy Spirit.”

In heeding her own words, her nearly century-long life became a graced space where hope and joy embraced--and “cut up.”

Jane Goodall and a Graduation “Hoo-Hoo”-tenanny

Convocation Hall, University of Toronto, spring 2009. I had just finished reading the citation for Dr. Jane Goodall, the famed primatologist, who was being awarded an honorary doctorate for her pioneering scientific and conservation work in Tanzania and beyond. I was about to sit down when Jane called me back to the front of the stage.

“Stephen,” she said. “I want to thank you on behalf of the chimpanzees.”

“And in the way the chimpanzees would,” she added, with an impish smile.

Arching her arms around my shoulders without touching them, she instructed me to do the same to her. “This is not a spectator sport,” she laughed. “This is how the chimpanzees would thank you.” She quickly began to move her arms back and forth in a pincer movement, uttering with increasing volume, “Hoo Hoo Hoo Hoo HOO HOO HOO,” instructing me to do the same.

This was done in full academic regalia, on film, in front of the university Chancellor, President, Provost, dozens of faculty, the 500-plus graduating class and their assorted guests.

As the simian “Hoo Hoo Hoo HOOs” began to crescendo, so did the laughter from the audience, bouncing off the august, domed roof of Convocation Hall and encircling us all.

It was Jane Goodall in frolicsome splendour, enlivening our campus with her ebullient spirit. Though she had been on the frontlines of unspeakable animal cruelty, and witnessed first-hand the ravages of climate change in Africa and other parts of the global South, her sense of hope and humour were intact, and riotously infectious. She too knew how to “cut up.”

Prize Tomato

“This whole class, I’ve been trying to see the connection between the environment and social justice.”

Fernando, a student in my environment course at the University of Notre Dame, shared this during his oral exam. He had completed an immersion experience with an urban agricultural group for at-risk youth; he was now trying to relate his field experience to the course material.

He had been working with Alfonso, age 10, whose brother had already entered a gang. The hope was that Alfonso would follow another path.

Through a community garden, Alfonso had raised an award-winning tomato.

“When I saw Alfonso’s beaming face as he received the award, and sensed the pride and joy he had in this tomato, it clicked,” Fernando recounted. “I finally saw the connection between ecology and social justice.”

A connection of hope and joy.

The D-Day Beaches of Normandy

During a recent research junket to England, my wife Hilary presented me with an unexpected 40th wedding anniversary gift. “We’re going to Normandy,” she declared. “I’ve made all the arrangements.”

It was a wonderful surprise. Ever since watching John Wayne in *The Longest Day* as an eight-year-old kid sprawled in front of our Zenith TV set, I had wanted to visit the D-Day beaches. And now we were going. (Given the current threats to democracy unfolding in the US, with parallels to the rise of fascism in Nazi Germany, the visit seemed particularly timely.)

After touring the stirring Juno Beach Centre, and the rows of white crosses at Omaha Beach’s Normandy American Cemetery, Hilary asked me how I felt.

I replied that I felt surprisingly centred, and quietly hopeful.

A novelist and anthropologist, she responded she had felt the same, and shared with me the following reflection:

I have found a centeredness here—walking with the water.

I expected to find all the strange and difficult traumas of place-harm: the tragedies and horrors of the war strewn across the long, seemingly endless stretches of beach. All the blood spilled here... every grain of sand stained...the very foam of the waves forever tinged... the wind itself a restless and anguished captive to memories of unimaginable suffering.

No doubt all that trauma is here. I was afraid of it; fearful of being wounded by coming too close.

Yet walking with the water—listening—it struck me that there are many kinds of presences who might be here, not just the disturbed ones.

There is a wisdom here, too—the steady singing of the waves, hoarse today, yesterday sweetly hushed. A wisdom which has faced the horrors and bravely grieves. A wisdom which eschews forgetfulness as a solution and yet will not surrender joy, or beauty, or mystery; will not give up mirth and mischief—even danger—to trauma. Somehow the beaches, the water, wind and sky have moved on. They have kept faith with God and steadfastly honour the dead. It is

sobering and yet healing to be here. As if place-harm can yield a quiet, persistent courage—turning rock into stone; stone into pebbles; pebbles into sand—

As if there is no final “put out the light.” God would never say it.

A mirthful grandmother, an inspired primatologist, a prideful urban gardener, a steadfast coastline....

These stories, as Chief Lady Bird observes, “embed” hope. It is also my belief that they can engender hope in their telling--hopefully.

Happy Earth Day!