

For the Beauty of the Earth
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First Unitarian Congregation, Toronto
Sunday, April 12, 2026

We gather today, observing, albeit a bit early, Earth Day. We are held by a planet that does not belong to us— a planet that was here long before us, and will continue long after we are gone.

I have a love-hate relationship with Earth Day. One year I was in a beautiful urban park with thousands of people, eager and committed to care for the planet we call home, some making music and others planting trees. And I also want to share that I've frequently made it a practice to stay home when Earth Day services were happening in my home congregation. I know I'm not alone in having a capacity to switch to existential angst mode, quite readily. And when I go 'there', I can be overcome with feelings of shame and of fear. Research shows that fear might result in a short-lived boost in motivation, and that shame causes most people to disengage and sometimes to self-sabotage, to conclude, there is something wrong with me. I've known, for myself, that well intentioned Earth Day services have left me without any sense of my own capacity and have left me depressed and feeling paralyzed. So yes, I've got a bit of a love-hate relationship with this Earth Day business. I've spent time asking myself, how I can connect meaningfully, and helpfully, with the concept of Earth Day. It's a work in progress.

But special days on the calendar aside, we do have a relationship with the earth. It is our home. It is a wonder. I think many of us, even those among us who don't lean in the direction of 'religious language', might use the language of sacred or divine, when hearing a loon cry on a misty lake, or hearing a baby laugh, or watching a cardinal at the feeder early in the morning – I could go on, I think each one of you could too. Our Unitarian Universalist principle of interdependence reminds me that we are not separate from these things that take our breath away. We are all part of the wonder. You take my breath away. For me, that sense of interdependence is where my sense of wonder and care can arise. But not all moments have the potential to take our breath away, right? Think again. Take house dust, annoying, it represents a never-ending chore, and most of it is nothing to get excited about. Most house dust is made of skin cells, fabric fibres, pollen and soil – but not all of it. A small percentage of the dust on our windowsills is quite literally star dust – bits of comets, asteroids and interplanetary dust clouds. Even something as mundane as house dust is quite literally awesome. Everything on earth is related to everything else on earth, and earth is related to the cosmos.

And I want to stay there for a moment—right at that threshold between the ordinary and the astonishing. Because if Earth Day only lives in the realm of the extraordinary—only in the moments of mass gatherings, inspiring speeches, tree plantings, and declarations of urgency—then it risks becoming something that floats above our actual lives. Something we visit briefly, emotionally, and then leave behind unchanged.

But the Earth does not live above our lives. It is our lives. Too often, partly rooted in the Judeo Christian creation story, in which translations have asserted that humans have dominion over the other elements of creation, we have thought of ourselves as separate from everything else. The teaching that we now find so terribly flawed, Terra Nullius, claimed that if land was not being used in a way Europeans recognized, for settled farming, colonial style governments and more, it could be treated as “empty” and therefore available for occupation. Imagine if you will, with me, the human and Euro centred arrogance that made it possible for anyone standing on this land, as people found it at the time of contact with Europeans, to believe that this land was empty. The animals, the plants, the people, the fish, the birds – all our relatives were here, and Europeans declared it empty. It was they believed, ready for discovery and domination – over relationship and reciprocity. What a sad, harmful way of seeing the world.

The same dust that settles on our shelves is the same dust that settles on ancient stones and forest floors. The same air that fills our lungs has been cycled through forests, oceans, animals, and time itself. The same water that we drink has likely been through rivers, clouds, glaciers, and living bodies countless times before reaching us. There is nothing separate here.

And yet—knowing that can go two ways.

It can tip us into overwhelm: *If everything is connected, then everything is at risk, and I am too small to matter.* That is where shame and fear like to take hold. They narrow the world down until all we can see is our insufficiency.

But there is another direction this awareness can take us.

Interdependence is not only a moral burden. It is also a form of belonging.

It means that nothing is lost from the system without being felt. It also means that nothing small is ever truly small. A breath matters. A decision matters. A patch of restored soil matters. A conversation matters. A seed matters. Not because any of these things alone will “fix” everything, but because they participate in a living system that is always responding, always adapting, always becoming.

This is where I find myself returning to something quieter than urgency, but more sustaining than despair: attention.

Attention is a spiritual practice. To notice the world without turning away. To let ourselves be moved by both beauty and grief without collapsing into either numbness or panic. Attention says: this matters enough for me to stay present.

And presence, I think, is where care begins.

Because care that is born from fear alone burns out quickly. Care that is born from shame collapses inward. But care that is born from belonging—that deep sense that we are already part of what we are trying to protect—has a different texture. It can be steady. It can be imperfect. It can be repeated.

We do not need to become saviours of the Earth as if we are outside of it, looking in. We are the Earth, becoming conscious of itself. That is both humbling and freeing.

And if we are still becoming together, then perhaps we can let go of the idea that we must arrive at some final version of environmental awareness or moral clarity. Instead, we can practice something more human and more sustainable: a faithful willingness to return again and again to relationship.

Because relationship is what the Earth offers us constantly. Not as an abstract idea, but as lived reality. The air meets us without asking permission. The ground holds us whether or not we are paying attention. The seasons continue their turning even when we are distracted, discouraged, or overwhelmed. The Earth keeps its covenant with us, even when we forget ours.

And so maybe the invitation of Earth Day is not primarily to feel more—but to notice more.

To stay connected enough to keep noticing.

To pay attention to the choices we make, to the language we use.

To stay open enough to keep caring, even in small and imperfect ways.

To stay in relationship, even when it is complicated.

Today I invite you, if you would like to, to take a small envelope of wildflower seeds, especially suitable for pollinators. A small gift you can make to the earth, wherever you travel in the next few weeks. Apparently waiting a bit longer, when a frost is less likely, is advisable.

Love looks different at different times, it is not only awe in a beautiful park where people are planting trees.

Love is also the quieter practice of returning—returning to the Earth under our feet, the air in our lungs, the living world that sustains us even when we are not paying attention.

We do not belong to this world because we have earned it, or because we control it, but because we are made of it.

We are already inside this web of life—already held, already connected, already part of its unfolding.

And if that is true, then perhaps our task is not to carry the Earth alone, but to learn how to live as if belonging is real.

To choose, when we can, what tends toward life.

To do the small, necessary things.

To begin again when we need to begin again.

For the beauty of the Earth is not only something we admire.

It is something we are made of.

Something we are made for.

Something we are still becoming, together.