

The Sacred Earth©
Sermon by Rev. Duffy Peet
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“How can you buy the sky? How can you own the rain and the wind? My mother told me, every part of the earth is sacred to our people.” These are the words in our story for all ages this morning. They are attributed to Chief Seattle, leader of the Duwamish tribe in what is now the state of Washington. The words were not his, they were actually written by another. While these may not have been the words of Chief Seattle, I believe if he was present to hear this story with us today, he would have been gently nodding his head in agreement. My confidence in stating this belief comes from two sources, my own years of experience with the spiritual traditions and sacred ceremonies of the Sioux, as well as extensive study of the spiritual beliefs and practices of the native peoples of this continent. The idea that the earth is sacred is a concept that is commonly held among the indigenous people of this country.

But I didn't learn this way of thinking about and relating to the Earth early in life. When I was a child my mother didn't tell me the Earth is sacred. As far as I have been able to discover there are no Native American ancestors in my family background. My ancestors came to this country from Western Europe and their religious beliefs were connected with the Bible. With that ancestral heritage, along with growing up in a predominantly Caucasian community as a youth, I didn't have the opportunity to consider such ways of relating to the Earth until I was a young adult. Today I feel deep gratitude to the Sioux elders who invited me to sit with them and take part in their sacred ceremonies. These elders patiently and gently taught me, often through stories, a new way of perceiving and relating to this Earth, this place we all call home. So with the Earth as our focus, as well as our foundation, let's consider together some stories about Earth and our own concepts about it.

I would imagine the stories about Earth that are most commonly accepted and believed among us are those that come from the scientific community. Science provides us with the facts about Earth that we need and appreciate. I have found that we UU's really like the facts, and that is good, it is very good. Yet while I appreciate the facts and what I have come to learn through the stories that science offers, I have often found the facts to be cold and somehow lacking. The facts speak to my head but often not to my heart. Therefore, I am thankful that the living tradition of the Unitarian Universalist Association draws from many sources. Along with the results of science, we draw from “Jewish and Christian teachings,” “spiritual teachings of Earth-centered traditions which celebrate the sacred circle of life,” as well as others. I have found that stories from some of these other perspectives touch my heart and move me in ways that facts typically don't.

I will use the reading from Genesis as an example. Those of us who accept the current commonly told scientific story about the origins of our Earth don't believe the Earth was created just as this ancient scripture describes. For some, the story may lose all credibility with these three little words, “And God said.” Yet while we may not believe the story as fact, there may be parts of it that we, both as individuals and as a culture, have been living out even though we are not aware of it. How so, you may wonder?

Here is more of the story that comes a bit later in Genesis about what God did and said after creating the first two humans:

“God blessed them, and God said to them, be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it: and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth.”

From my perspective, it seems that this is the story line that is not just prevalent but is pervasive and dominant within our culture. It is a story line that is unsustainable and may have devastating consequences on the earth and most of the living things on the planet. It seems that our ancestors who looked to the Bible for guidance and direction attributed too much importance to this part of the story. In my estimation, they didn't give enough weight to other portions of the story that are repeated over and over, “And God saw that it was good.” In the first chapter of *Genesis* this phrase occurs six times. The last verse of the first chapter states “God saw everything that he had made, and indeed, it was very good.” For me those words assert that this Earth is holy ground. It would seem then that those who are of the religious traditions which hold the Hebrew Bible as a sacred text have a basis for viewing the Earth as both holy and sacred. These traditions include Judaism, Christianity and Islam.

I am quite aware, however, that significant numbers of people in our UU congregations do not identify with these religious traditions. Quite a few people I know have put aside the concept of God altogether. For these people, this story and its message of earth as holy would hold little relevance. Yet if we as humanity are to continue to thrive, it is imperative that we find a way to live out our seventh principle of “Respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part.” When God is no longer in the picture, the concept of holy earth vanishes as well. What options then might we have that offer us the ability to hold a deep reverence for this precious and life sustaining Earth? One possibility is to look to the stories and teachings of the native peoples of this country, stories and teachings that speak to the sacredness of all that sustains our life.

Notice that I have shifted here from the word holy to sacred. I mention this because I have learned that Unitarian Universalists tend to be particular about words and what each word means. While holy and sacred are at times used interchangeably, they do not mean exactly the same thing. The word holy is directly associated with God. The term sacred has a bit more latitude. Here is a statement that exemplifies a difference between these two words. God makes things holy, humans decide what to consider sacred. We have the ability and the responsibility to determine what is sacred.

Now I return to the spiritual teachings of the native people of this continent. Unlike religions that have one or more religious books that are considered “holy and sacred,” traditional Native American religions have none. Instead, they have objects that are considered sacred and, even more importantly, they hold that all the earth is sacred. In his book *God Is Red*, Vine Deloria Jr. points out a significant contrast in perspective between many who are of Native American heritage compared with people whose ancestors immigrated here from Europe. Deloria writes:

“When the domestic ideology is divided according to American Indian and Western European immigrant, . . . , the fundamental difference is one of great importance. American Indians hold their lands—places—as having the highest possible meaning, and all their statements are made with this reference point in mind.” (pg. 61)

His assertion points to the value the land has in the hearts and minds of those he identifies as “American Indians.” Considering his statement with the concept of sacredness in mind I would propose that one way to think of sacredness is that which we hold to be of highest value. Deloria then goes on to say:

“Immigrants review the movements of their ancestors across the continent as a steady progression of basically good events and experiences, thereby placing history—time—in the best possible light.” (pg. 61)

As I read this paragraph for the first time many years ago, I recognized the simple yet profound truth that spoke to me from the page. While I had not been specifically or directly taught to value time more than place, I had clearly learned that time was what mattered most. At first this awareness simply rattled around in my head. But as its implications became clearer to me it started to ripple through my body, the place I live in. And it began to change my heart. As it shook up my thinking I thought about family and friends I knew who talked of a time beyond this life, what they called the afterlife, a time when all cares and concerns would be set aside. I came to realize that, whether they were aware of it or not, they were placing a higher value on time than on place. Their orientation was to the future and to the bliss they believed it would hold. With this new understanding, my heart seemed to be more open than before. I found a level of compassion that hadn’t been present in the past. Now I don’t want to imply that I have compassion for all things at all times. I still smack mosquitoes and black flies when they bite me. I now understand that these people have a very different value system than I do. Place, it seems doesn’t mean as much to them as it does to me.

In the years since I first began learning about the Native ways and perspectives I have sought to elevate the value I assign to place. I seek to recognize what is sacred in whatever place I may be. Even more importantly, I have come to view this Earth, my home, as sacred. I have come to learn; “All things are connected like the blood that unites us. We did not weave the web of life, we are merely a strand in it. Whatever we do to the web, we do to ourselves.”

So as we go forth today may we strive to see with new eyes and hear with new ears. May our hearts and minds be open to the sacredness of the ground we walk upon. May we seek to love this earth as a newborn loves its mother’s heartbeat. May we do our best to give to the rivers the kindness we would give to any brother or sister. And whether or not we have any Native American ancestry, may we be able to learn from the wisdom the indigenous peoples of this land have to share. Let us hear again the beginning words of *Brother Eagle, Sister Sky*.

How can you buy the sky?
How can you own the rain and the wind?

My mother told me,
Every part of this earth is sacred to our people.

It is my hope that someday everyone will come to recognize the sacredness of the earth. And when we recognize that the earth is sacred we will respect and honor the earth as we would respect and honor our closest and dearest loved ones. What a wondrous day that will be. On that day we will all say,

Blessed be.