

Respect for the Interdependent Web©

Sermon by Rev. Duffy Peet

Shared with the Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Bozeman on May 13, 2018

As today is Mother's Day, I want to acknowledge the mothers who are among us this morning. Without mothers, none of us would be here. With that in mind, I say thank you mothers for making each and every one of us possible. Today is a time for mothers to be recognized, honored and shown the respect that they deserve every day.

My sermon last Mother's Day, as those of you who were present at that service may recall, had a more expansive perspective on Mother's Day than was intended when the holiday was originally established. Today I intend to expand the concept of mother even further. I intend to expand the concept of mother as large as it can possibly be taken. And I will do this by considering our Seventh Principle, "respect for the interdependent web of existence of which we are a part." My hope is that in taking this larger perspective, all of us, mothers and children of mothers, will discover ways to expand our ability to feel and show respect.

As I think about my own mother today, I am grateful to her for many things. I am grateful that she brought me into existence. I am grateful that she supported and nurtured me so that I could become the person I am. When I think about the interdependent web of existence of which I am a part, I recognize that this is my ultimate mother and I am grateful to be a tiny part of it. The interdependent web of existence isn't just my mother. The interdependent web of existence is the mother of all of us. It is the mother of everyone, of every living being, and of every inanimate object. It is the mother of everything that is, was or ever will be. If the concept of mother can be expanded any further than that, well, my fist-sized brain doesn't have the capacity to imagine it. In fact, as I begin to imagine the interdependent web of existence, my brain begins to swirl. I just can't comprehend the immensity or the intricacy that this phrase alludes to.

Images and memories begin to pop into my consciousness when I try to imagine the interdependent web of existence. These images and memories are of things I have experienced and can comprehend. The images are of webs I have seen. Webs that were coated with mist and set aglow by the sun's rays. It is as if my brain has a slide show of such webs. Maybe you have some images that come to mind as well. When I recall these images I find myself engulfed in the beauty and the intricacy that is present. When I focus on and attend to the beauty and the intricacy of such a sight, a feeling of awe and wonder washes over me and flows through me. And as I experience this awe and wonder I know that I am willing and able to exhibit, at least momentarily, the respect that our Seventh Principle mentions.

Recall that I mentioned experiences as well as images would pop into my consciousness. The experiences were also of webs. Often these experiences occurred out in nature just as the images of webs bathed in mist and sunlight did. I don't have any images of these webs though. There are no images because I had a physical encounter with these webs before I saw them. I don't know how many times I have been hiking along a trail in the woods and walked into a web that then covered my entire face. Any of you who have had such an encounter know that my reaction was very different than the feelings associated with the images I just mentioned. When my face was

covered with tiny, sticky filaments I had no interest in taking in or enjoying all of the beauty and intricacy of the web. I wanted to get it off my face and body as soon as I could, or even sooner. Today I would describe walking into a web as awful in contrast to awe inspiring. Such experiences have tended to leave me feeling uncomfortable, irritated and even resentful. I definitely didn't want to walk into another web if there was some way I could avoid it. The experience was, to say the least, unpleasant for me. But while it was unpleasant for me, it quite probably absolutely ruined some innocent and unsuspecting spider's day. After having walked face-first into such a web, the spider and I were interconnected and interdependent on a physical level that we had never been previously. The experience changed both of us. From that point of the hike on, I can tell you that I would be much more attentive to what was before me on the trail. Sometimes I would notice a nearly invisible web just before walking into it. When I would see another web I would walk around or under it if at all possible. I will admit that I would go to the extra effort of avoiding the web for selfish reasons. I didn't want to experience the feelings associated with having the sticky strands stuck on my face or other parts of my body. In reality though, when I would avoid walking into the web, I was also respecting the spider and its incredible and intricate work. My demonstration of respect however was motivated by feelings very different than awe and wonder.

As I recall these images and experiences with you today I find myself reflecting both on the interdependence our Seventh Principle mentions as well as the respect it calls us to demonstrate. Interdependence is present in unique and amazing ways in every moment. Respect, on the other hand, may or may not be there. Respect is something that may arise spontaneously, or we may make a decision to exhibit respect, or respect may be absent altogether. And when respect is present it might be motivated for a variety of reasons. When I think back on my life I can recognize that my respect for my mother was motivated by different feelings at various times and points in my life. Today I realize that I place a higher value on certain feelings that underly my respect than I do on other feelings. I will come back to this topic later.

But now I want to focus on the concept of interdependence that the Seventh Principle mentions. As I asserted earlier, the interdependent web of existence is the mother of all that is. Just as each of us was conceived within, birthed from, and nurtured by our biological mothers, so to is the interdependent web that which has conceived, birthed and nurtured us. And it seems to me that just as we may at times take our mothers for granted, we often take the interdependent web of all existence for granted as well.

I know there have been too many times in my own life when I took it for granted that my mother would provide me with the things I needed or wanted. Things such as food, water and shelter. And there have been even more times when I have taken it for granted that the interdependent web would meet my needs, and not only my needs but my wants and desires as well. For example, in this very moment I unconsciously expect that the oxygen I need to survive will be present in the next breath of air I inhale. When I take a breath I don't typically take time to recognize just how incredible the experience of taking such a breath is. I don't stop to imagine how the air I breath is continuously being replenished with oxygen by the plants that are turning a vibrant green this time of year. And I don't typically consider that the air I am breathing in this moment may have been in your lungs just moments ago, or will be sustaining your life a few moments from

now. When I focus my attention on my breath and imagine what makes each breath life sustaining for me, for you, and for the green plants, I find myself being filled with awe and wonder. And I experience a type of respect that is both powerful and at the same time quite incredible. I find myself filled with more than just the breath I need. I am filled with appreciation, gratitude, love and respect for life and all that sustains it.

And this brings me back to the point I said I would return to—that I place a higher value on some of the feelings which motivate me to experience and exhibit respect than I place on others. Here I would offer an example that any of us could experience if we chose to. I am well aware that every person in this room who decided to could quite quickly gain a sense of respect for each breath they take. If any of us was somehow deprived of a breath for a period of time as short as one minute, it is almost certain that the person would feel respect for the next breath they were to take. The feeling of respect which would arise might have a few different feelings as its foundation, feelings such as anxiety, fear, desperation, panic or relief. The respect such feelings might generate would certainly be profound, but it would also be very different than the respect that arises from awe and wonder.

You might be wondering at this point how all of the various threads I have been talking about this morning weave together. And what difference might any of this make in our lives? To pull this all together, let's go back to where I began. Today is Mother's Day, a day to honor and respect mothers. Without mothers, none of us would be here. And today, like every day, we are part of an interdependent web of existence that is the mother of all of us and of all that is. Mothers and the interdependent web are givens. What isn't a given is the respect we experience and demonstrate to our birth mother or to our ultimate mother, the interdependent web of which we are a part. Each of us can decide to feel or exhibit respect or not. My experience leads me to believe that having and demonstrating respect is better than not having and demonstrating respect. But there is another decision, another choice we have as well. Do we allow our respect to be motivated by feelings such as anxiety, fear, selfishness, indebtedness, relief or guilt to name just a few? Or might we make it a practice to strive to have the respect we feel and show be nourished and sustained by the feelings that we hold to be of highest value—feelings such as awe, wonder, love, compassion and joy. The choice, it seems to me, is ours to make. And whether we recognize it or not, each time we make the decision to feel or show respect, and each time we move the feeling that is the foundation of our respect up a level, we make a positive difference, a difference that affirms and honors our mothers, and a difference that will be of benefit to the web that supports us all. So may we seek, again and again, to find awe and wonder in every moment and every experience. For awe and wonder are ever present if we will take the time and the effort to discover them along our path. And may we strive to increase the love, compassion and joy in our daily encounters. For love, compassion and joy are like brilliant rays of sunlight that make the web of existence shimmer and glisten.

So may it be.