

Imperiled Together: Toward a Planetary Pluralism via Mindful Interdependence, Authentic Curiosity, and Courageous Love

David R. Weiss – May 19, 2024 – Merging Waters Unitarian Universalist Congregation

NOTE: I shared this message at Merging Waters UU (previously named Michael Servetus Unitarian Society) as part of a series of Sunday reflections on their May theme of pluralism. Because I work as a theologian around climate and other ecological concerns, I chose to speak on “planetary pluralism.” I’ve been attending here since March 2023 and just became a member in May 2024. In order to make my message resonate with this particular community, I chose to develop my reflections around the three “shared values” they embraced during a 2019 congregational workshop. These values—Mindful Interdependence, Authentic Curiosity, and Courageous Love—are displayed on a beautiful green banner which stands at the front during Sunday services. The congregation’s mission, flowing from these values, is “to celebrate an actively examined faith, challenging one another with loving kindness to be our best selves and work for a flourishing world. I also lift up that final phrase, “to work for a flourishing world” in my message. I consider this reflection to be my first writing as an (aspiring!) Unitarian Universalist theologian.

These were my chosen readings before I spoke:

A reading from Henry Beston, a writer and naturalist, who observed the world with stunning clarity. (Rachel Carson credited Beston as the only author whose writing shaped her own.) This passage, lightly adapted, comes from *The Outermost House*, written in 1928, when he lived on Cape Cod.

“We need a wiser and perhaps a more mystical concept of animals. Having made ourselves remote from nature, we survey the creatures only through the lens of our knowledge, but thereby distort the whole image. We pity them for their incompleteness, for their tragic fate for having taken form so far below ourselves. And precisely there do we err. For the animal shall not be measured by the human. In a world older and more complete than ours, they move finished and complete, gifted with the extension of the senses we have lost or never attained, living by voices we shall never hear. Neither siblings nor underlings: they are other nations, caught up alongside ourselves in the net of life and time, captive as we are to the splendor and travail of the earth.”

A reading from the contemporary Sikh activist and human rights lawyer Valarie Kaur. It appears in her 2020 book, *See No Stranger: A Memoir and Manifesto of Revolutionary Love*.

“Wonder is our birthright as children. And the wellspring for love as we grow. The call to love beyond our own flesh and blood is ancient. It echoes down to us on the lips of indigenous leaders, spiritual teachers, and social reformers through the centuries. [The founder of Sikhism] Guru Nanak called us to see no stranger, Buddha to practice unending

compassion, Abraham to open our tent to all, Jesus to love our neighbors, Muhammad to take in the orphan, [Hindu mystic and saint] Mirabai to love without limit. They all expanded the circle of who counts as one of us, and therefore who is worthy of our care and concern. They spoke of a common vision of our interconnectedness and interdependence. What has been an ancient spiritual truth is now increasingly verified by science: We are all indivisibly part of one another. We share a common ancestry with everyone and everything alive on earth. The air we breathe contains atoms that have passed through the lungs of ancestors long dead. Our bodies are composed of the same elements created deep inside the furnaces of long-dead stars. We can look upon the face of anyone or anything around us and say—as a moral declaration and a spiritual, cosmological, and biological fact: You are a part of me I do not yet know.”

My message:

In good UU fashion, the title for my message today is a mouthful: “Imperiled Together: Toward a Planetary Pluralism via Mindful Interdependence, Authentic Curiosity, and Courageous Love.” (That said, *half* of those words come right off the green banner, so that’s kind of on you.)

But really, my message is a *love story*. Of sorts. It involves heart break, and homecoming. Which is not to say there will necessarily be a happy ending. But I promise, love will get the final word.

Imperiled ... Together

In the spring of 2016, I was beginning to shift my focus as a theologian toward climate change. So, I was following the climate headlines in the newspaper with extra interest. One Sunday the headline declared 2015 as the hottest year on record since 1880. It was almost certainly the hottest year since *before* 1880, but 1880 is the first year with sufficient records from around the world to calculate an average annual global temperature.

A chart showed the warmest sixteen years on record over that 136-year span. They were listed in order of heat, so at first glance they seemed a random set of years. Looking closer, I saw that, as of 2015, of the last 136 years—ALL 16 of the hottest ones had occurred *during my youngest daughter's lifetime*—in fact, since she was just a toddler. Susanna turned 28 this spring. Now ALL 25 of the hottest years on record fall *in her lifetime*.

Two things struck me that day. First, that the peril was both greater and closer than I had realized. And second, that, with Susanna (and the rest of my children and grandchildren) in mind my response to that peril *was going to be driven by love*.

Since then, I've read thousands of pages. I've written hundreds of pages myself. I've learned the peril we face is much more than "just" a warming planet. That warmth drives raging wildfires, super-charged hurricanes, unremitting drought, longer tornado seasons, devastating floods, and disappearing coastlines. It's linked as well to habitat loss, species extinction, ecosystem collapse, new pandemics, and crop failures. And we live in *human societies* that feel all these ecological strains and fractures directly or indirectly—and with increasing intensity.

And I've learned how we humans—first world cultures in particular, and our systems of extraction and wealth—have *staggered* planetary systems themselves. These large interlocking systems are the foundation, not simply for modern civilization, but for organized human societies of any sort at all. Together they've held Earth's climate in a sweet spot that has allowed human life to flourish. But we have flourished so recklessly that we're wrecking those

systems themselves. To our own great peril. There's heartbreak.

Now, homecoming. And there will be more of reach along the way.

If there is a Golden Rule to the cosmos itself, it is that *nothing exists on its own*. You could even say: *there is no such thing as a "thing."* The very idea of an isolated, solitary "thing" anywhere in the cosmos is an *unscientific fiction*. We are, every one of us, merely tongues of flame that have momentarily leapt upward from the base of burning embers that have gone before us. Or merely transitory eddies in a great stream of vibrations and relationships ("merging waters," one might say)—both human and more than human—that have allowed us to be.

But those "merely"s are hardly dismissive. They offer an essential humility to the *ennobling* awareness that in our blood moves the iron echo of stardust. That our DNA holds the memory of a humanity eons in the making. That the water that comprises some 60% of our bodies ... is the *same water* that has collected in great underground aquifers, surged in tsunamis, drifted in snowbanks, and playfully pelted us in the rain. That the carbon in our bodies has at some point carried magnificent dinosaurs ... and made moss. As Reverend Laura quoted from Rumi last week, at some level, "even the phrase 'each other' doesn't make any sense."

Still, togetherness is a *complicated* truth. We are forever tempted to think we stop at the end on our skin. That our community ends at the edge of our agreements or our likenesses. That our species ends somewhere before the next one begins. Yet if togetherness is truth, then both theologically and ecologically, we live in covenant with all creation. *We are all in this together*. And right now *this ...* is a fast-warming, unstable planet.

Of course, I mostly notice the temperature rise and fall, morning to night, day by day, season to season. My awareness doesn't easily stretch across years or decades. (Unless, perhaps, my awareness is directly tethered to the planet's health by research or by work farming or fishing.) For most of us though, the numbers on a thermometer tell something too

abstract for our own good. If our body temperature rose from 98 to 101—that’s about how much we’ve warmed the planet since the start of the industrial era—we’d feel feverish. All the time.

And that warmth is creeping inexorably upward across the globe. In these parts it creeps at about 315 feet per day. Which is to say that during today’s service, the weather from Saint Louis will crawl 13 feet closer to us. After the 13 feet it already crept during your drive here. And right before the 13 feet it will crawl during lunch. All day. Every day. By the time my kids are my age, the climate of *Saint Louis will be here*.

Just last Thursday, Pat and Merle and I helped plant trees at the Crosby Farm Regional Park. We heard about some test plots in the park. They’re planting new trees from several hundred miles south of Minnesota to see if they fare better in our changing climate than the trees already here. Because when Saint Louis’s climate reaches Saint Paul, a whole bunch of the flora and fauna that are finely adapted to a climate that’s been relatively stable in this land of 10,000 lakes for about 10,000 years—that *flora and fauna is going to need to push northward—or potentially perish*.

The Guardian just published the results of a survey of nearly 400 scientists who helped write the reports by the UN’s Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change. Arguably they represent the TOP climate scientists worldwide. More than three-quarters of them anticipate that by 2100, the planet will have warmed at least 2.5 degrees Celsius. Nearly half believe we’ll crest 3 degrees. Recall, the Paris Climate Accord identified a 1.5 C temperature rise as the *safest target*, with a 2 degree rise as the *outer edge of safety*, the range beyond which all bets are off. *That’s where we’re headed*. Likely in the next 76 years—during the lives of the youngest persons alive already today.

Using that same body temperature analogy, it will be as though the planet is brewing a 103 to 104 fever. All. Day. Long. We’d experience that as misery from our pulse to our pores. We cannot imagine what it will mean for the planet. Except that we are surely imperiled together.

But there are others capable of—or condemned to—perceiving the planet’s peril in real time. Animals, Henry Beston writes, are “gifted with the extension of the senses we have lost or never attained, [and live] living by voices we shall never hear.” They know, with an immediacy that is less cognitive alarm than collective unrest, that something is afoot. That the fabric in which all beings have been securely woven by forces more patient and holy than anything we can grasp, *that fabric* is now stretched, strained, and fraying—in some places, ripped apart.

Toward a Planetary Pluralism

The UU tradition’s historic commitment to pluralism has hardly proven easy. Indeed, pluralism *seems set* on being unsettling: it openly invites others to disturb what has seemed settled. Yet, the value of pluralism is interwoven with other core convictions of our tradition:

That human dignity is universal—an unconditional given—whether bestowed by God, extended by the Universe, or co-arising with our very being;

That humility is wisdom—because each of us is on a journey of growth, and there is always benefit in listening to those whose journeys have given them differing perspectives;

And that *love lends itself better to life lived in relational covenant rather than life bounded by religious creed*.

Last week, Kathy Burek quoted (past UUA president) Bill Sinkford’s one-sentence summation of UU theology: “One God, no one left behind.” Not everyone in the room would say “God,” but *we’d all agree*—standing as we do, on the side of love—with the vision of “no one left behind.”

To affirm *planetary pluralism*, then, is to say that what meaning we make of the perils before us, requires that we learn to include these fellow beings in our reflections. That we embrace a covenantal relationship with the planet and all its beings. That we choose, as best we can, to align our listening and our lives with their well-being alongside our own. That we seek for our intuitions and actions, our alliances and loves, to be shaped by a planetary pluralism. *Because anything less leaves someone behind*.

Let me suggest that the shared values of our community—mindful interdependence, authentic curiosity, and courageous love—can guide us toward a planetary pluralism.

Mindful Interdependence

Togetherness is Truth: *that's* Interdependence—and it's been a core UU principle since 1985, reflecting our growing ecological awareness. But the mindful part: how do we *attend to* our togetherness?

There's a line in the 1984 film *Mass Appeal* that's stayed with me for forty years. In a homily, a young seminarian describes his beloved tank of tropical fish. One night the heater went haywire, and all the fish boiled in the darkness. He recalls, "I woke up the next morning and went to feed them, but I found them all floating at the top. Most of them split in two, others with their eyes hanging out. It looked like violence, like so much suffering, but it had been such a quiet night. *And I remember wishing I had the kind of ears that could hear fish scream.*" The image is a metaphor for the silent suffering often present in church pews on Sunday mornings. That's the suffering he wants to hear.

I mean it literally. Currently, global ocean surface temperatures have set a new record for each day of the year in recorded history ... for **432** days now (since March 14, 2023). **432** days—without reprieve—and counting. That's not how temperature records work. Unless the ocean's heater has gone haywire. That heater ... is us. Which is why I can't help but feel as though right now we NEED "*the kind of ears that can hear fish scream.*"

Mindful interdependence across the community of life. *That's* planetary pluralism.

True, bird songs can be an enchanting delight. As, too, the contented purr of a cat or the happy bark of a dog. But we are imperiled together not because of the hubris of dinosaurs or the omnipresence of feathery ferns but because *we humans* have chosen to "flourish" at the expense of our planetary companions, almost without exception. Except—when Togetherness is Truth, there is *no such thing* as a world that flourishes only for us.

There is, however, a word to describe that situation, when it transpires in an ecological system. It's called "overshoot." And, without exception in Earth's history—*likely without exception in the cosmos itself*—overshoot has one singular outcome. *Collapse.*

When Togetherness is Truth, any life form—whether algae, locust, rabbit ... or humanity—that multiplies itself in ignorance or (in our case) *in open defiance* of that truth, is ultimately held accountable. Not by a punishing God, but by a universe whose warp and weft are, in fact, less given to competition than cooperation. Reciprocity, says Robin Wall Kimmerer, is the ecological-moral code of life. And just as surely as it eventually calls every plague of locusts to account, it will call us to account as well.

On a global scale, we've been in "active overshoot"—each year consuming more from the Earth than it can replenish and dumping more waste than it can absorb—for 54 years now. Easy access to fossil fuels has allowed us to delay collapse, but only by deepening the debt that our children and grandchildren—and all our fellow companion creatures—will bear as it comes due. *In a universe regulated by reciprocity, overshoot means collapse.*

Surely mindful interdependence will *bless us* with wonder and awe. And we will need those blessings. But the suffering that is already well underway the world over among Beston's "other nations," that suffering begs us make unending acquaintance with grief. Not so much our own—although there will be plenty of that—but for the flora and fauna who *will ask us* to feel their pain. That's planetary pluralism.

We may even find that, as we hold the pain of our companion creatures, the tears we weep beside one another become one expression of the merging waters that name our congregation.

Authentic Curiosity

In her darkly luminous eco-memoir, *Watershed*, Ranae Lenor Hanson, relates a scene from decades earlier. Her kindergarten son is pulling spruce twigs, one after another from young trees, tossing them into the nearby lake with innocent glee. She gently suggests, "Ask the tree. See if it wants so many

boughs broken.” “Trees don’t talk,” he counters. “Ask anyway.” So, he turns, poses the question silently to the tree, and assures her, “It said ‘okay.’” And he continues to plunder twigs. Moments later, however, he pauses to ask again, and his voice trembles, calling out, “Mom! It said, ‘No.’”

Such a simple searing lesson. From a child—and a tree.

My guess is most of us don’t plunder tree branches frivolously. But consider all the “necessary conveniences” that adorn our lives—and what might happen if we dared to ask any aspect of the living world, with something akin to authentic curiosity, whether it prefers to be plundered for our passing pleasure. We might well hear No upon No upon No.

I’m not suggesting we strive for ecological purity. Or consign ourselves to ecological shame. I’m asking us to recognize the real stakes of life ... in a finite world where Togetherness is Truth. *This homecoming is for everyone.* If we come with open hearts, then from the soil to the sea, animal to ecosystem, rock to tree, we will encounter a host of beings with lives rich beyond our knowing. Authentic curiosity toward the natural world will tutor us in wonder and awe.

Also, in limits ... and love. Because cultivating attitudes of genuine restraint and exploring acts of radical simplicity is the shape of love on a finite planet.

Octavia Butler writes in her *Parable of the Sower*, “There is no end / To what a living world / Will demand of you.” And, also, I must add: to what a *dying world* will demand.

Ultimately authentic curiosity will teach us that by now, tragically and inescapably, we humans are *deeply* entangled in overshoot. It drives the *ecological systemic injustice that forms the structures of lives.* Our politics is badly broken. Our corporations plunder the planet for profit with barely a thought for the planet itself. Our culture reels between chasing pleasure and feeding fear. The choices left to us, as individuals and as communities, are largely framed by forces beyond our control.

And overshoot—in which we are so deeply entangled—it *always and inevitably bodes collapse.* Thus, homecoming and heartbreaking in the same breath.

Courageous Love

Of all the possible future before us, none of them promises safety. Not one. But perhaps the greatest gift of planetary pluralism is the discovery that on a wondrous, awe-filled, finite planet, *safety has never been an option.* Only ever an illusion. Ask the otter or the redwood, the eagle or the whale. We are simply graced to know with full awareness what they intuit and exhibit from one generation to the next: *life is a matter of mutual vulnerability.*

That vulnerability and that mutuality encompass the entire planetary community. Which is the only place in which we are truly home.

We hold these shared values—Mindful Interdependence, Authentic Curiosity, and Courageous Love—as the ground from which we “work for a flourishing world.” But today—and really, for several centuries or longer if we are honest—that once-flourishing world is under assault, by forces that have ensnared our own energy. How, then, do we work for a flourishing world when that world is already now moving toward collapse?

This is the holy work that awaits us. It will unfold as we listen faithfully to the other planetary voices that carry wonder and awe, and especially anguish, here on our shared home. I can offer three small graces as we begin.

First, *we are in good company.* This will be holy but HARD work. But look around this room. You laugh with these people. You sing with these people. You hold hands and bless each other. You love these people. And so, now we will learn as Adrienne Rich writes, that “There must be those among whom we can sit down and weep ... and still be counted as warriors.” Because, my friends, regardless of the grief, regardless of the odds, as long as a new day dawns, we have work to do.

Second, *flourishing means* living in mutual vulnerability. Our goal is not to make a “safe” world. It is to be a creative, persisting presence of love in a vulnerable world. And that vulnerable world flourishes when we hold it in love.

Finally, I leave you with some words from Reverend Kim K. Crawford Harvie. Ordained in 1984, she ministered through the height of the AIDS crisis at the Universalist Meeting House in Provincetown. Serendipitously, I've learned that *today, May 19, 2024*, the Arlington Street Church, a UU congregation in Boston, is celebrating her retirement after 35 years as their senior minister.

These words come from a 1992 message, in which she is reflecting on her ministry in Provincetown. She remembers Paul, whom she describes as “a big, blond, boyish Midwesterner with the energy and exuberance of a Labrador Retriever.” Then sickened by AIDS, he still loved going out into Cape Cod Bay on his boat. She recalls a day in the last year of his life, that he took her with him.

This is what she writes, “Paul motored way, way out into the bay, until the leaning steeple of the church took its place in Provincetown’s silhouette on the horizon. He threw the anchor and we sat there, in silence. From a distance, the dying and death, the loss and grieving, all took their place.

Then Paul said to me, ‘Listen. *Even if it kills every single one of us, even if there is no one left to tell the stories, it matters that we care for each other in all this madness. It matters that, even in the face of death, we love each other well.*”

My friends, that is what courageous love in service of a planetary pluralism will look like for us. That we care for each other and for the planet in all this madness. And that even in the face of collapse, we love each other well.

Blessed be. And Amen.

* * *

I closed the service (right before we extinguished the chalice flame and sang our benediction/blessing to one another) with these words, from the poet-essayist Adrienne Rich:

“My heart is moved by all I cannot save: so much has been destroyed. I have to cast my lot with those who age after age, perversely, with no extraordinary power, reconstitute the world.”

David Weiss is a theologian, writer, poet and hymnist, “writing into the whirlwind” of contemporary challenges, joys, and sorrows around climate crisis, sexuality, justice, peace, and family. Reach him at drw59mn@gmail.com. Read more at www.davidweiss.com where he blogs under the theme, “Full Frontal Faith: Erring on the Edge of Honest.” *Support him in Writing into the Whirlwind* at www.patreon.com/fullfrontalfaith.