

The Compass in Compassion

David R. Weiss – October 19, 2025

Merging Waters Unitarian Universalist Congregation

NOTE: Because I intentionally echo some of the images in the service readings in my message, I'm including slightly abridged versions of those readings here:

Opening Words: "Charge from the Earth," by Irene Glasse and Rev. Dr. Rebekah Savage

There is a song beneath the soil. Ten million, million voices raise their call in no human language. Life flows through the tangle of roots, mycelium, microbiota, and crawling burrowing tunneling life.

The song flows upward through trunks and stems and blades of tender grasses and races out into the air. It is picked up and carried on no human tongues. It is in the footfall of paw and hoof, it hums in the buzz of wings and the fluttering of feathers, it shines on scales and fins and slithering skins.

And if we are quiet and pay attention, sometimes we remember that we are part of this song as well and we have notes to sing. But what happens when we humans forget that the life around us is part of us? That these lives have no less inherent worth and dignity? How many more singers of the earthsong will go silent forever?

Today, we are charged to remember. To know that as we live together in community, we are also in community with the silently singing lives in the vast congregation of the earth as well. The interdependent web of existence is no allegory. It is as real as the heart beating within our chests. We are so charged in the name of the sacred song, the tapestry of life of which we are a part: let us remember, and then act.

Reading: from Chris Jerrey's commentary on *Hospicing Modernity* by Vanessa Machado de Oliviera

Modernity, Oliviera claims, is not about being contemporary or cutting edge, nor is it about technology or science. It is the state humans adopt when they believe they are separate from nature and not reliant on each other. It is when we view the planet as a storehouse of resources, rather than an organism. It is about viewing non-human animals as livestock, rather than brothers and sisters. It is thinking that polluting a river is okay because the human concept of profit is more important than the life of a waterway. It is about regarding a forest as timber rather than a complex web of life. It is the Slave Triangle, it is using Agent Orange in Vietnam, and it is the lies of the oil companies to defer action on climate change. It is the story of separation, of how humans have

cut themselves off from the rest of life on planet Earth by believing that we can do precisely as we wish without repercussions.

We were wrong. Yet generations of modernity as the driving force of the Western world mean that it is everywhere. It is the story we hear whilst growing up and finding our place in the world. It shapes our education and what we do with the things we learn. It reaches deep inside us, filtering our view of the world, deciding what is possible and what is not, severing links with ancient wisdom and the diversity of human experience. It is a restrictive template for how we experience our own lives.

Story for All Ages: "Necessary Equipment" by Karen G. Johnston, based on a true story that happened in Iceland in December 2024.

[The story recounted an incident in which social media posts reported that a young swan was stuck, frozen to the ice on a pond, and seemed to be dying. The post sparked many responses, but one person posted, "I am on my way. With the necessary equipment." That equipment turned out to be a thermos of hot water, a surfboard (in case the ice failed), and a friend.]

Song: "By Breath" by Sara Thomsen

[Through four nature-filled verses, this song unfolds its refrain: "By breath, by blood, by body, by spirit, we are all one."]

MY MESSAGE: THE COMPASS IN COMPASSION

CARE FOR THE EARTH—IN A TIME OF COLLAPSE?

Today's twin themes are Cultivating Compassion and Care for the Earth. But that leaves a stark truth unsaid. Our real task is to care for the earth—in a time of collapse. Anything short of this is a task for another time.

I could spend the next twenty minutes supporting this claim. But I have more to say than that. So, I'll just reference one recent headline.

For fifty years now we've known—beyond doubt—that rising CO₂ levels could eventually imperil us. And we've determined that 350 parts per millions of CO₂ in Earth's atmosphere is the "safe upper limit" for a climate hospitable to human civilization. Above

that, a host of reactions begin that threaten the stability of ocean currents, growing seasons, ice caps, and much more.

In 1987 (the year my son was born), CO₂ hit 350 parts per million. In the years since, it has soared past that safe upper limit, rising year after year without interruption. Just last week (10/15/2025) *The Guardian* reported that last year CO₂ reached (another) record level of 424 parts per million. Worse, last year's increase was the largest single year increase in CO₂ since 1957 when modern record-keeping began. We're far past 350, and we're accelerating.

The truth is we aren't asking about how to care for the earth in a vacuum—as though by learning some green practices, we can keep the planet pristine. Earth as we know it is *dying*. We may tend some of her wounds, but the juggernaut of extractive industrial consumptive capitalism is such that even the wounds we tend, will be torn open again before long.

So, I am saying the hard part out loud and up front. *Our care for the earth is going to look a lot more like hospice than healing.* I don't say that lightly. I say it because we need to know. UU's have been at the forefront of many social justice causes because our principles and values have helped us to discern truth and act with resolute conviction, even when it has been challenging and uncomfortable. This is one such time. I beg of us, that we hold tightly to our values and lean into the tumult, to be of service as best we can.

COMING HOME . . .

TO A PLACE WE'VE NEVER BEFORE

To do that, *we must come home*.

Now, "home" was a topic of *major discussion* a few days ago when I discussed my thoughts for today with my Second Tuesday conversation group. I got more pushback for this choice of image, than anything else. Let me explain why I'm holding onto it, including how I mean it—and how I don't.

It's true, for some people "home" is not a happy memory; maybe not even a happy present. I lived for three years in a violent marriage that left me regularly bruised on the outside and broken on the inside. I know "home" can hold ambiguous meanings or worse.

It's true, there are people who live far closer to the land than most of us do. But even farmers, naturalists, ecologists, even off-gridders—while they may

understand the land, its creatures, and its systems better than most of us, *they were still formed by a civilization built on a lie*. Most of them are not "home" in the sense I mean. Unless you're talking about the Bushmen of the Kalahari (or some other indigenous people largely untouched by the West) there are very few people "at home" in the way I mean it.

It's true, "home" can wrongly suggest I'm inviting us back to some pristine earlier time some generations ago. No. *Home*, as I mean it, is nowhere behind us. It is *only up ahead*. And *only* if we chose to go there. In this sense, even the few tribes that still know many of the old ways, are no longer "home"; because their wisdom—which is *real*—will be shaken by a world made unknown to them because it is dying on account of forces beyond anything they can fathom.

In fact, that future will be marked decisively—for all us—by *displacement*, by *homelessness* to one degree or another. So why then speak of coming "home"?! Because I believe "home" still *means* something profoundly good, even if for some, that meaning is intuited in painful contradiction of our own experience.

By "home" I mean being in a dynamic relationship with our surroundings that is honest, trustworthy, and life-giving. In *that sense*, I'm asking us to *come home to Earth*. If we wish to care for the web of life in all its diversity, to be of service to the plants and animals, to the waters, skies and land, *we must come home*.

And right now, we are far away.

THE STORY THAT TOOK US FAR FROM HOME

Vanessa Oliviera was born into the overlap and conflict between indigenous heritage and the West. Today she works at the crossroads of indigenous wisdom and the Western worldview. In *Hospicing Modernity*, she argues that Modernity is governed by a Story of Separation that tells us we are separate from nature. That animals can become livestock, because they're not our siblings; that the soil and water and air can be the endless recipients of our pollution and waste because they're not living webs of relationship—at least not with us.

The first whispers of Separation began much earlier, with patriarchy, agriculture, domesticated animals, and anthropocentric cosmologies. What we've called "civilization"—urban settlements with science, leisure,

and the arts, but also class structure, extractive and exploitative economies, and accumulative wealth—fed on the Story of Separation for several millennia before Modernity emerged.

But in the culmination of the scientific and industrial revolutions, powered by seemingly unlimited access to fossil fuels, and amplified by the globalization of economics and information, Modernity became a threat to life on Earth.

This notion that we were somehow separate from the natural world, was foolhardy from the first, but Modernity embedded it in every facet of our lives. It's now the DNA of the systems we've built. Capitalism foremost. But our economic and banking systems; our transportation and manufacturing systems; our education and social systems; even our cultural and belief systems have all been shaped by a story that sets apartness rather than relationship at the heart of reality.

Vanessa says we were *taught*, generation after generation . . . to be *separate*—until today when our neurophysiology so limits our ability to sense and perceive nature that *our separateness seems real*.

Human beings once *knew* Earth was alive. That we were singers within a chorus that began in the soil beneath our feet and echoed in the trees and animals alongside us. Our distant ancestors *knew* Earth as *home*. We might even have entertained that distant memory in our own childhood imaginations . . . before the Story of Separation had its way with us.

It is demonstrably (and devastatingly!) “true” that the stories telling us we were “more” than Earthlings—somehow apart from Earth itself and all its limits—those stories led us to new heights, which we called “civilizations,” each one grander than the one before it. “Progress” was a rush to our egos and seemed such proof of our genius. Never mind that we achieved this by utter lack of civility toward our fellows, human and otherwise.

But now the repercussions of our “progress” are here. Rising CO₂, warming temperatures, vanishing insects, weakening ocean currents, increasingly fraught weather, and collapsing carbon sinks to name just a few. The fractures are everywhere.

How do we care for THIS world? *We must go home.*

HUNGRY FOR HOME

And yet here we are, FAR from home, lost in a world now increasingly and inexorably *un-worlding* itself all around us. We have wandered so far and for so long in this Story of Separation, how will we ever find our way home from here?

I suggest the compass that can lead us home can be found in a stuffed bear named Winnie-the-Pooh. Hear me out. Because we need wisdom anchored in images that stay with us.

There is a tale in which Pooh and his friends are out adventuring and get lost. Tigger is unfazed, but also frenetically unhelpful. Rabbit denies they're lost—and stalwartly leads them in circles until panic sets in and he goes off on his own. As Pooh and Piglet take a rest in the small clearing they've now come to for the umpteenth time, Piglet names out loud his fear that they're lost and wonders how they will ever find their way home.

Suddenly, Piglet is startled by a noise, but Pooh explains, “My tummy rumbled. Now then, let's go home.” Piglet is confused and asks Pooh if he really knows the way. Pooh responds, “No, Piglet, but I've got twelve pots of honey in my cupboard, and they've been calling to my tummy. I couldn't hear them before because Tigger and Rabbit were talking so much. I think I know where they're calling from now, so come on. We'll just follow my tummy.”

And sure enough, Pooh's rumbling tummy guides them home.

It's interesting; there's a Greek word used frequently in the New Testament Gospels: *splagchnizomai*. It actually means tummies rumbling. Okay, literally, it means “to be moved deep in your bowels”—pretty much the same thing. When the Gospels describe Jesus as having a rumbling tummy, it's translated as COMPASSION. Beyond pity, sympathy, or even empathy, *splagchnizomai* names that restlessness so deep in your gut that it drives you to act.

I offer Pooh's rumbling tummy to remind us to trust compassion to lead us home.

ALLOWING OUR GUTS TO WRENCH

However, we will encounter challenges as we use compassion as our compass to go home.

Even for Pooh, the challenge was to *hear* the rumbling itself. Both the frenzy of Tigger and the

adamant denials of Rabbit make it impossible for Pooh to hear his own tummy until he sat in silence. Vanessa would say the Story of Separation contains both Tiggers and Rabbits determined to keep us from hearing the rumbling in our own tummies.

Just ask yourself, which of your personal habits (your thinking, eating, entertainment, news, purchasing) and which institutional forces around you (where you work, live, and shop; your credit cards, debts, government) *reinforce the Story of Separation* and *keep you from being moved so deeply in your gut by the suffering in the natural world that you cannot fail to act.* I'm betting this isn't a short list for any of us.

So, the first challenge is to become aware of how loud the Lie of Separation is in our lives, and then to call its bluff. Joanna Macy, a contemporary saint of ecological renewal, was a Buddhist practitioner and a scholar of systems thinking. She just died in July at 96. Her life's work was to overcome the Story of Separation. In fact, the trainings she developed are known as "The Work that Reconnects." Joanna was convinced our connectedness to the web of life ran *so deep*, far deeper than any of the noise generated by the Lie of Separation, that if we just genuinely pause and listen, we will hear the music of that song inviting us to learn its tune once again.

The second challenge is harder. Because while that song—the music of all the beings in the interdependent web—is just waiting for us. And while that music can indeed evoke reverence and wonder. In a dying world, as we choose to listen beyond the Separation that has framed our lives, we will hear cascades of grief upon grief upon grief.

The creatures, the plants and forests, the soil are all suffering on account of the damage done to this living Earth by a story that set one being—humans—outside the web. And while we may be happy to savor the reverence and wonder that nature can still evoke, the rumbling in our tummies, the compassion that is our compass, that will be felt *as grief*.

Compassion means, literally, *to suffer with*, and our journey home will lead us *into* the felt suffering of the world that we had learned we were separate from. And there, we will discover that we were *never* apart from all other living things. That intimate connection remains, like the still embers of a fire, deep in our bones.

But that discovery has two distinct steps. As we open ourselves to the pain of the world, we will *feel* that suffering (not ours, *the world's*). And while that grief may seem overwhelming, it is ultimately our passport home. Because as we allow that grief to move through us, we will experience a rebirth of kinship deep in our souls. We will remember that we have *always* been kin to all that is on Earth. And that will be the first hint that we are nearly home.

THE NECESSARY EQUIPMENT

I end with three strong intuitions about coming home and some thoughts on "the necessary equipment" to care for a dying planet.

These days are fraught—and not just for the wider Earth community. Many members of our human community are also in peril. Immigrants and trans persons, the poor, persons of color, and women, all find their rights and wellbeing under attack as fascism asserts itself in this land. And across the globe there is no pause in human suffering. The Lie of Separation tells us humans matter most. But I say, far from distracting us from fascism here or suffering elsewhere, remembering our kinship with Earth will further deepen our care for our fellow humans. This is *not* either/or; it is emphatically both/and.

Second, it is *critical* that we include our youth and young adults as we come home. They are growing up smack on the fault line of the false promises of separation and consumption while both our natural world and social world are fracturing. They likely already feel the pain of the world. It's essential that we help them recognize that pain as a beacon home.

Third, our inward commitment to compassion will take expression in diverse ways. I will suggest a few this morning. But ultimately, the journey itself will be generative of the actions we'll need. Like you, I am a refugee from the Story of Separation. Our shared understanding of "home" will deepen and emerge as we go.

Now, the necessary equipment.

First is opening ourselves to compassion, both as the restless yearning in our gut and also as the ceaseless (and often senseless) suffering of our sibling creatures on the planet. Compassion is a muscle of sorts. As we use it, it will strengthen and be capable of more.

Alongside compassion, a host of personal and communal rituals and practices may help us. Think of them as “experiments in the Truth of Inseparability.” Some will work better than others. But we’ll only learn which ones work best by trying them out.

For starters, ask your five senses to help you know the world . . . intimately. Let compassion join your sight, sound, taste, smell, and touch. Pay attention to what evokes wonder and joy—and what evokes grief, perhaps even rage.

In light of the Truth of Inseparability, consider if the choices you make regarding pesticides, insecticides, and herbicides; or the food you eat; or the personal products you use. This isn’t about chasing ethical purity. All life takes life in order to live. It’s about becoming more intentional in choices that either reinforce the Lie of Separation or reclaim the Truth of Inseparability. Remember, too, *simplicity is green*. And, like compassion, simplicity is a muscle that can reach further the more we exercise it.

Read an introductory book on permaculture. This can get detailed and dense, but an introductory book can expand your imagination about what it might mean for agricultural, household, or even urban policies and practices to experiment with the Truth of Inseparability.

Create a meditative labyrinth (or really any simple trail) that features plants and animals that have gone extinct because of human activity in Modernity. Such a trail would ask us to really encounter, even briefly, the suffering wrought on our world by the Story of Separation. Not to make us feel guilty. Rather, to feel the world’s pain deeply so we remember our kinship with it. Imagine walking that trail with Sara Thomsen’s “By Breath” playing in the background.

Make green burial part of your own funeral plans. When we die, nothing pays final tribute to the Lie of Separation quite like taking extra steps to keep our dead body from re-entering the cycle of life. And it’s hard to overstate how shifting our death rituals away from Separation and toward Inseparability could harness the energy of these liminal moments for truth.

The last “necessary equipment,” just like in today’s story for all generation, is *company*. Everything I’ve mentioned above is more doable if we do it together. Additionally, because there will be waves of grief that wash over us as we go, it’s equally important that we

cultivate communal wonder and joy to steady us. Things like our monthly Coffee House will be needed *all the more* as we make our way home.

Okay, that was A LOT. But it is no small task: to consider cultivating compassion as we care for the earth in a time of collapse.

Still, I leave you with two concluding words of wisdom.

Vanessa Oliviera says it is helpful to remember we are both *insufficient* and *indispensable* for the work that awaits us. The song of Life is not a solo for any species. We can’t sing it by ourselves, but there are notes that only our voices can hit. The song needs all of us.

Lastly, I said earlier that the future will be marked decisively—for all us—by *displacement*, by *homelessness* to one degree or another.

So, let’s be clear: *home is not a place*. It is a dynamic living relationship with the web of Life, especially those strands of the web nearest to us. As we move our hearts and our lives in the direction of compassion, the journey itself becomes our home.

May it be so.

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