

Connecting

Connecting to deepened wisdom and deepened relationship

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2023 Nov

Interdependence

Chalice Lighting

Words of Joanna Macy: “We are our world knowing itself. We can relinquish our separateness. We can come home again – and participate in our world in a richer, more responsible and poignantly beautiful way than before.”

Check In

How is it with you today? How has the last month been?

Interdependence in the Proposed U.U.A. Article II Bylaws

Section C-2.2 Values and Covenant

As Unitarian Universalists, we covenant, congregation-to-congregation and through our association, to support and assist one another in our ministries. We draw from our heritages of freedom, reason, hope, and courage, building on the foundation of love. Love is the power that holds us together and is at the center of our shared values. We are accountable to one another for doing the work of living our shared values through the spiritual discipline of Love. Inseparable from one another, these values are: . . .

Interdependence. We honor the interdependent web of all existence. We covenant to cherish Earth and all beings by creating and nurturing relationships of care and respect. With humility and reverence, we acknowledge our place in the great web of life, and we work to repair harm and damaged relationships.¹

¹The five other values named, with 2-3 sentences on each: pluralism, justice, transformation, generosity, and equity.

QUESTIONS

Interdependence is a **fact**. Whether we notice it or not, everything depends on its environs to sustain it, and, through interactions with the things and beings around it, a being or object is defined. Our interactions and interrelationship make us what we are.

Our particular focus this month, however, is on interdependence as a **value**. Valuing interdependence amounts to:

- valuing the cultivation of mindful awareness of connection, interrelationship, and mutual reliance;
- heightening and deepening our sense of our place in the great web of life;
- honoring the interdependent web of all existence;
- cherishing Earth and all beings; and
- working to repair harm and damaged relationships.

So we just have two questions this month:

1. What is the place of interdependence as a value in your life?
2. What can you do to value interdependence more?

FOR FAMILIES

This month, our children and youth will also consider what it means to be a community of interdependence. Check out these stories they will encounter in class in November, and questions you can explore together as a family.

- “And It Is Good”, in “A Lamp In Every Corner” by Janeen K. Grohsmeyer
 - *Our food is a great way for us to see how we are interconnected to the world. Where did your last meal come from?*
- “Have You Filled A Bucket Today?” by Carol McCloud
 - *How do you feel when your “bucket is empty”?*
 - *What about when it’s full?*
- “Honoring Life: A Story of Beatrix Potter” by Alice Anacheka-Nasemann and Lynn Ungar¹
 - *When do you feel closest to nature?*
- “One Smile” by Cynthia McKinley
 - *When did reaching out to someone make a difference for them?*
 - *How did it feel for you?*

READINGS

Read these pieces with a pencil in hand. Underline parts that seem worth remembering. Be ready to share in your group meeting what you underlined – and what those selected words mean to you.

SECTION 1: Interdependence as Interbeing

“Honor the interdependent web of all existence.”

“Emptiness”

Rev. Meredith Garmon

The word “emptiness” turns up a lot in Buddhist literature. Sometimes “emptiness” comes across as a very deep and mysterious concept – but it isn’t. Buddha himself – or the earliest of the texts attributed to him – was quite straightforward about emptiness. When we say something is “empty,” we must ask, “empty of what?” We’re not talking about empty *in general* (trying to imagine *emptiness-in-general* that is what makes emptiness seem mysterious) – we’re talking about empty of something particular. Empty of what, then? When Buddha said things were “empty,” he meant that they were empty of two attributes: permanence and independence. He was simply saying that nothing is permanent, and nothing is independent.

Similarly, the “no self” teaching is just that there is no permanent self, and no independent, separate self. Our brains, frequently and recurrently, generate a sense of self, and some sort of sense of self is necessary to function. The delusion is thinking that our Self is permanent rather than constantly shifting and changing – or is entirely distinct and separate and cut off from the rest of the world rather than constantly being changed by and through interactions with the rest of the world.



Interrelationship

Thich Nhat Hanh

You are me, and I am you.
Isn’t it obvious that we “inter-are”?
You cultivate the flower in yourself,
so that I will be beautiful.
I transform the garbage in myself,
so that you will not have to suffer.

I support you;
you support me.
I am in this world to offer you peace;
you are in this world to bring me joy.

The Insight of Interbeing

Thich Nhat Hanh

About thirty years ago I was looking for an English word to describe our deep interconnection with everything else. I liked the word “togetherness,” but I finally came up with the word “interbeing.” The verb “to be” can be misleading, because we cannot be by ourselves, alone. “To be” is always to “inter-be.” If we combine the prefix “inter” with the verb “to be,” we have a new verb, “inter-be.” To inter-be and the action of interbeing reflects reality more accurately. We inter-are with one another and with all life.

There is a biologist named Lewis Thomas, whose work I appreciate very much. He describes how our human bodies are “shared, rented, and occupied” by countless other tiny organisms, without whom we couldn’t “move a muscle, drum a finger, or think a thought.” Our body is a community, and the trillions of non-human cells in our body are even more numerous than the human cells. Without them, we could not be here in this moment. Without them, we wouldn’t be able to think, to feel, or to speak. There are, he says, no solitary beings. The whole planet is one giant, living, breathing cell, with all its working parts linked in symbiosis.

We can observe emptiness and interbeing everywhere in our daily life. If we look at a child, it’s easy to see the child’s mother and father, grandmother and grandfather, in her. The way she looks, the way she acts, the things she says. Even her skills and talents are the same as her parents’. If at times we cannot understand why the child is acting a certain way, it is helpful to remember that she is not a separate self-entity. She is a continuation. Her parents and ancestors are inside her. When she walks and talks, they walk and talk as well. Looking into the child, we can be in touch with her parents and ancestors, but equally, looking into the parent, we can see the child. We do not exist independently. We inter-are.

Everything relies on everything else in the cosmos in order to manifest—whether a star, a cloud, a flower, a tree, or you and me.

I remember one time when I was in London, doing walking meditation along the street, and I saw a book displayed in a bookshop window with the title *My Mother, Myself*. I didn’t buy the book because I felt I already knew what was inside. It’s true that each one of us is a continuation of our mother; we are our mother. And so whenever we are angry at our mother or father, we are also being angry at ourselves. Whatever we do, our parents are doing it with us.

We are the continuation of all our ancestors. Thanks to impermanence, we have a chance to transform our inheritance in a beautiful direction.

When I hold a calligraphy brush, I know I cannot remove my father from my hand. I know I cannot remove my mother or my ancestors from me. They are present in all my cells, in my gestures, in my capacity to draw a beautiful circle. Nor can I remove my spiritual teachers from my hand. They are there in the peace, concentration, and mindfulness I enjoy as I make

the circle. We are all drawing the circle together. There is no separate self doing it. While practicing calligraphy, I touch the profound insight of no self. It becomes a deep practice of meditation.

We can see our ancestors' and teachers' hands in our hands as we prepare a meal or wash the dishes. Through the conscious recognition of interbeing, We can experience profound connection and free ourselves from the idea that we are a separate self.



SECTION 2: Interdependence as Eco-Spirituality

“Cherish Earth and all beings.”

What Is Eco-Spirituality?

Universe Spirit Website²

Understanding and practicing Eco-Spirituality is more crucial than ever today because many of our current global crises have deep ecological and spiritual causes. Eco-Spirituality is based on a fundamental belief in the sacredness of nature, Earth, and the universe. It is also based on the fact that we as humans are not separate from or above nature; we are a part of it. The belief that humanity is somehow separate or above nature has created many of today's problems.

Eco-spirituality in the most simple of terms holds that:

- a. Humanity is born from nature, is a part of nature, and does not own nature exclusively for its own ends and purposes.
- b. Humanity must stop using the natural world and our atmosphere as a toilet for its pollutants.
- c. Humanity cannot treat and use the natural world as an "infinite" extraction resource and treasure chest. It must stop all over-exploitation of the natural world, which harms current and future generations, or other biological life forms.
- d. Humanity has not been given dominion over nature to use at its pleases. Humanity must assume the role of stewardship for nature.

Traditional eco-spirituality is as old as humanity and has been practiced by indigenous peoples for millennia.

From the eco-spiritual perspective, Ultimate Reality (The Great Mystery, God, Spirit, Buddha, and/or the Divine,) is not just the source of creation it is very much also an ongoing part of creation; a part with which we can interact on a daily basis through our senses and from such experiences gain greater insight into the wonder of physical reality and our natural world.

² Adapted and abridged from https://universespirit-factnet.nationbuilder.com/what_is_eco_spirituality

On a personal level, this inherent sacredness of nature and our complete immersion within it generally leads to a spiritually motivated engagement in the current global warming and other major crises of our planet and a dedication to justice and a long view of a sustainable prosperity for all.

Furthermore, eco-spirituality understands the position of human beings to be inextricably related to all other life forms within an interrelated, interconnected web that is part of the Divine's dance of life. Eco-spiritual perspectives can be found in all the world's religious traditions. No matter how they are articulated, however, these perspectives all provide for recognition of the importance and relevance of the immanent Divine, the power of understanding our human relationship to the planet, and our direct experiences of the natural world.

The eco-spirituality movement provides both a critical re-vitalization of our relationship to nature's unique sacredness and a powerful Ultimate Reality-leveraged spiritual imperative and support for the current sustainability movement's programs and goals.



The Eco-Spiritual Path

adapted excerpts from Rebecca James Hecking, *The Sustainable Soul: Eco-Spiritual Reflections*

In his masterwork, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, renowned mythologist Joseph Campbell describes the hero's journey as a process of leaving the normal world behind, journeying into a symbolic wilderness or underworld, confronting the demons or monsters that reside there, and then returning victorious with wisdom to share with others.

Facing the reality of the state of the natural world is daunting. Leaving behind the mindless consumerism that passes for genuine culture in our day and age, you may feel as though you are quite alone in the wilderness without ever leaving home. You will be transformed and changed in ways you might not be able to imagine here at the beginning.

You will also find joy in unexpected places, and discover that you are a member of Earth's family in ways you might never have realized. You will find that you are a part of a larger community of heroes who dare to imagine and create a different sort of world. You will claim your birthright as a being who embodies the consciousness of the planet, and embrace your part in healing the Earth.

The Ecospiritual path roughly parallels Campbell's concept of a hero's journey:

(1) We separate ourselves from the paradigms of the everyday world, and confront the hidden realities of business as usual. (2) We shed the dysfunctional mindsets that keep us trapped. Like the ancient Babylonian goddess Inanna, who shed the trappings of her power

and status as she journeyed to the underworld, we too will let go of the illusory ideas that keep us bound to an unsustainable cultural paradigm. We move to the depths, and in so doing we break free. (3) We face a turning point. We have confronted the demons and lived to tell the tale. We find ourselves on the cusp of transformation, ripe for rebirth, and begin to ground ourselves in the deep wisdom of the Earth. (4) Finally, we emerge with a new vision, ready to recreate our culture from the inside out.

Change is upon us. Old ways are dissolving. Those who embark on the path of creation are the imaginal cells of this global process. We must envision the new, and midwife it into being through our dreams and our hard work. There is no other way.

The joyful part comes into play when we see just how much we love this exquisite, blue-green jewel that is our home. We are creatures of this place. We are the consciousness of Gaia, now able to realize this fact, truly understand it, and act upon it in ways that previous generations could not. We are the beloved children, the prodigal sons and daughters of our planet, who now understand the need to come. We are the beloved children now growing up, who realize that excess is unsustainable, greed is unacceptable, responsibility is a necessity, and our adulthood as a species is upon us. As mature beings now, we have fallen in love: utterly, madly, and gloriously in love with this place, this Earth and all who live upon it, human and nonhuman. We are head over heels for this sublime and unimaginable state of being. We are in love with Life, not our own small lives, but Life with a capital L. The Universe and All That Is. Life.



Joanna Macy on Four Outlooks on the World

Meredith Garmon

1. The World as Battlefield. Per this view, good and evil are pitted against each other, and the forces of light battle the forces of darkness. The Zoroastrians and the Manicheans developed that story line. People for whom this story is the context for making meaning of their lives, will be oriented toward “courage, summoning up the blood, using the fiery energies of anger, aversion, and militancy” (Macy). This worldview is good for building confidence – it’s a story that reassures you that you are on the right side, and your side will eventually win.

A variation is the model of the world as a proving ground, a kind of moral gymnasium for showing your strength and virtue at the snares and temptations of the world. You are only here so that the mettle of your immortal soul may be tested prior to admittance to some other realm.

2. The World as Trap. In this worldview, our spiritual objective “is not to engage in struggle and vanquish a foe, but to disentangle ourselves and escape from this messy world . . . to extricate ourselves and ascend to a higher, supra-phenomenal plane.”

Not in some future life, but in this life, the objective is to escape the trap, to live with contempt for the material plane, prizing only the rarefied life of mind and spirit, aloof from the world of strife and desire. This view engenders a love-hate relationship with matter – for aversion inflames craving, and the craving inflames aversion. Wherever we see people vigorously denouncing something and then being caught at doing that very thing – whether it’s extramarital relationships, or eating fatty foods – we are seeing the playing out of a love-hate relationship that comes from seeing the world as a trap.

For people who see the world as a trap, social justice may still be a concern, but their approach is to get themselves detached and then help others detach – escape the trap of the material world.

3. The World as Lover. This view beholds the world as an intimate and gratifying partner. With training, one can bring to every phenomenon the beauty and sweetness of primal erotic play. Since lovers are impelled toward union and oneness, this view can then segue into:

4. The World as Self. In the Western tradition there is more talk of merging self with God rather than with the world, but the import is about the same. When Hildegard of Bingen experienced unity with the divine, she gave the experience these words: “I am the breeze that nurtures all things green....I am the rain coming from the dew that causes the grasses to laugh with the joy of life.”

In riding a bicycle or driving a car we can quickly come to feel the vehicle as an extension of our own bodies. In the same way, the whole world is an extension of your own body. Yes, sometimes it does things you don’t want it to and can’t control, but the same is true of your joints and organs (increasingly so as the years go by). Truly, everything in the world is your joints and organs, sinews and bones, glands, skin, and hair. And brain and mind.

If you see the world in the first view – as a battle-ground, or a proving ground – then your moral thinking will emphasize individual courage, strength, taking responsibility. Those are good things. But a moral code that sees self-improvement as solitary and nonrelational won’t work. It doesn’t stick. Our growth and change require the nurture we get in relationships and loving attachments.

We don’t get to resilience by ourselves. And when we are held in a network of relationships – providing both support and accountability – then we become able to adopt the third view: we can see the world itself as lover. And from there we might even see the world as our very self, the fourth view.

From this place of joy and gratitude, then we are ready to care for the Earth: reduce consumption of her resources; reduce pollution of air, water, and soil; reduce deforestation,

habitat destruction, species extinction; reduce our carbon footprints. If the work of saving our planet isn't fun, if it isn't joyful, we won't do it. A joyless call to self-sacrifice and duty is not what any of us need to hear.



from World as Lover, World as Self

Joanna Macy

Throughout, at each step, it is evident that action on behalf of life transforms. Because the relationship between self and the world is reciprocal, it is not a question of first getting enlightened or saved and then acting. As we work to heal the Earth, the Earth heals us. No need to wait. As we care enough to take risks, we loosen the grip of ego and begin to come home to our true nature. For, in the co-arising nature of things, the world itself, if we are bold to love it, acts through us.

The way we define and delimit the self is arbitrary. We can place it between our ears and have it looking out from our eyes, or we can widen it to include the air we breathe, or at other moments, we can cast its boundaries farther to include the oxygen-giving trees and plankton, our external lungs, and beyond them the web of life in which they are sustained.

I used to think that I ended with my skin, that everything within the skin was me and everything outside the skin was not. But now you've read these words, and the concepts they represent are reaching your cortex, so "the process" that is me now extends as far as you.

And where, for that matter, did this process begin? I certainly can trace it to my teachers, some of whom I never met, and to my husband and children, who give me courage and support to do the work I do, and to the plant and animal beings who sustain my body.

What I am, as systems theorists have helped me see, is a "flow-through." I am a flow-through of matter, energy, and information, which is transformed in turn by my own experiences and intentions.

To experience the world as an extended self and its story as our own extended story involves no surrender or eclipse of our individuality. The liver, leg, and lung that are "mine" are highly distinct from each other, thank goodness, and each has a distinctive role to play. The larger selfness we discover today is not an undifferentiated unity.

Nowadays, yearning to reclaim a sense of wholeness, some of us tend to disparage that movement of separation from nature, but it brought great gains for which we can be grateful. The distanced and observing eye brought us tools of science, and a priceless view of the vast, orderly intricacy of our world. The recognition of our individuality brought us trial by jury and the Bill of Rights.

Now, harvesting these gains, we are ready to return. Having gained distance and sophistication of perception, we can turn and recognize who we have been all along. Now it can dawn on us: we are our world knowing itself. We can relinquish our separateness. We can come home again – and participate in our world in a richer, more responsible and poignantly beautiful way than before.



SECTION 3: Interdependence in Human Relationships

“Work to repair harm and damaged relationships.”

How to Build a Relationship Based on Interdependence

Jodi Clark³

We are wired for connection. The success of long-term relationships depends heavily on the quality of the emotional connection. A key element in building a relationship that gives you the freedom to be yourself, that supports your growth and allows flexibility, is understanding the difference between interdependence and codependence.

What Is Interdependence? Interdependence suggests that partners recognize and value the importance of the emotional bond they share while maintaining a solid sense of self within the relationship dynamic.

An interdependent person recognizes the value of vulnerability and is able to turn to their partner in meaningful ways to create emotional intimacy. They also value a sense of self that allows them and their partner to be themselves without any need to compromise who they are or their values system.

Being dependent on another person can sound scary or even unhealthy. Growing up, we are often taught an over-inflated value of independence, to be somewhat self-contained, with a high value placed on not needing others for emotional support. As valuable as having a sense of independence is, this can get in the way of connecting emotionally with others in a meaningful way.

Interdependence Is Not Codependence. A codependent person tends to rely heavily on others for their sense of self and well-being. There is no ability for that person to distinguish where they end and their partner begins, there is an enmeshed sense of responsibility to another person to meet their needs. Traits of a codependent relationship include: poor/no boundaries; people-pleasing behaviors; reactivity; unhealthy, ineffective communication; manipulation; difficulty with emotional intimacy; controlling behaviors; blaming each other;

³Abridged from <https://www.verywellmind.com/how-to-build-a-relationship-based-on-interdependence-4161249>

low self-esteem of one or both partners; no personal interests or goals outside the relationship. Codependency involves a loss of a core sense of self.

Why Interdependence Is Healthy for a Relationship. Interdependence involves a balance of self and others within the relationship, recognizing that both partners are working to be present and meet each other's physical and emotional needs in appropriate and meaningful ways. Partners are not demanding of one another and they do not look to their partner for feelings of worthiness. Interdependency gives each partner space to maintain a sense of self, room to move toward each other in times of need and the freedom to make these decisions without fear of what will happen in the relationship. A healthy, interdependent relationship features: healthy boundaries; active listening; time for personal interests; clear communication; taking personal responsibility for behaviors; creating safety for each other to be vulnerable; engaging and responding to each other; healthy self-esteem; being open and approachable with each other.



Check Out

From everything we've shared during this time together, what overall message stands out for you?



Chalice Extinguishing

Words from Thomas Merton: “The whole idea of compassion is based on a keen awareness of the interdependence of all these living beings, which are all part of one another, and all involved in one another.”

Connecting is produced by the First Unitarian Church of Des Moines for use in small groups. Each month (ten months a year) explores a different theological or spiritual theme.
Next issue: 2023 Dec: Transformation