

# *Earth Crammed with Heaven*

Rev. Peggy Clarke

*Earth's crammed with heaven,  
And every common bush afire  
with God; But only he who sees,  
takes off his shoes - The rest sit  
round it and pluck blackberries.*

Earth crammed with Heaven. Consider a box crammed with ribbon, satin pastels reaching out from under the top. Consider the Boston waterways 400 years ago, crammed with enough salmon, women could walk along their backs across the water. Consider a summer crumble crammed with so many blueberries, they've escaped the baking dish and have fallen to the oven floor. Consider a bush, so crammed with the power of the universe it sets itself afire.

Many years ago during one of the service auctions in my home congregation, I purchased three peonies and planted them in front of my house where the sun is strongest. In April, there's nothing there, generally having been either cut back completely or entirely neglected from the winter before, leaving behind scraggly silver arms lying unconscious. In May, life springs from the warm, wet ground and by June those peonies have grown five feet across and the very tight pink and white bulbs that have been fighting to develop, unfold in a grand display of triumph and splendor. Peonies send out their sweet aroma as a call to the garden and ants make pilgrimage there, climbing the stems to submerge themselves in the soft cradle of the flowers, surrounded by summer's fragrance.

Earth crammed with Heaven.

I have no intention this morning of invoking our powers of reason and logic to prove poetry. I will spend no time detailing the evidence to make my case. My theology, possibly like yours, begins with my experience which I often understand as metaphor. I live and we live in a world offering truth and beauty around every corner. The task of being alive is to experience it. The task is to know every common bush afire with God.

Annie Dillard has a great story about a bird she happened upon while he was having himself some fun. She writes:

"The mockingbird took a single step into the air and dropped. His wings were still folded against his sides as though he were singing from a limb and not falling, accelerating thirty-two feet per second, through empty air. Just a breath before he would have been dashed to the ground, he unfurled his wings with exact, deliberate care, revealing the broad bars of white, spread his elegant, white-banded tail and so floated onto the grass. I had just rounded a corner when his step caught my eye; there was no-one else in sight. The fact of his free fall was like the old philosophical conundrum about the tree that falls in the forest. The answer must be, I think, that beauty and grace are performed whether or not we will or sense them. The least we can do is try to be there."

The mockingbird jumping. Earth Crammed with Heaven.

When we are there, when we are awake, we see the universe spark and flame. We begin with experience and as Unitarian Universalists, we extend the personal to the inter-personal. We live our lives in intentional relationship as evidenced by the covenant which grounds us.

It is that covenant that binds us, each to the other, but it is also that covenant that binds us each to Earth and all her many parts. Our 7<sup>th</sup> Principle speaks directly to relationship. It could say that we are concerned about Earth or committed to being responsible stewards, but instead the language is that we "affirm and promote the interdependent web of which we are a part". As a denomination, we locate our environmentalism in the context of relationship. Relationship with all that is alive, with the mockingbird and peonies and the ants and the salmon and the waterways and blueberry bushes.

The challenge of living the 7<sup>th</sup> Principle is the ease with which we can and do separate ourselves from Earth, from the living context of being alive. It's an amazing feat, actually, since all that we are and see and have and know is a result of the abundance of this planet. Nonetheless, we live in ignorance of our profound attachment. There's an image in the Hindu tradition that has always worked for me. In explaining the connection between each person and the Source of Being, Hindus will often use the image of a wave. The ocean is vast and it moves and lives and from time to time, a wave splashes onto a rock, spraying countless drops of water into the air. For a moment, those drops exist as if they are separate from the ocean, but they will quickly fall back into the Source of their Being. The separation is temporary, and some would say illusionary. We are not actually separate; we are of the same substance, moving in the same direction, ultimately one absorbed into the other. Earth Crammed with Heaven.

We are One, each sourced from this one Earth, yet we live, not only convinced of our own independence from each other, but from Earth. Our way of life rests on the illusion that we can bypass the rhythms of life, that we can build an environment that will keep us entirely separate. Our built environment allows for the illusion that we are not part of the ecosystem and not responsible or accountable in any way. We live as if we've been liberated from the "forces of nature" or from the base existence of our ancestors. What we fail to recognize is that rather than being set free, we have been torn from our roots, from the very ground of our being.

"Nature" is not one aspect of life, but the platform for living. It is the air I am breathing as I speak, the water sitting here for me and the glass holding it. It's the field in which the cotton for my shirt was grown as well as the dye that gives it color. It's the tree that was taken down to make this pulpit and the metals mined and smelt that create the chairs on which you sit and the great fossil fuels that keep this building lit, keep our food cold and our coffee hot. It is from Earth that the materials were extracted to build my car and the parking lot and this building and our skyscrapers and malls and highways. This is what Sally McFague calls "second nature". It's the nature we exploit for our comfort, from which we detach long enough that we forget the source.

I'm troubled by our absent mindedness, our ability to get into our cars thoughtlessly and buy new clothes and mow our lawns and clean our homes and make our dinners without consideration of the destruction that results from our actions. Our laws protect humans, but not the planet that serves as the ground of our being. Sometimes I think we have failed even to wince at our collective destruction.

Jaime Miller took some time this week to be mindful. Recognizing that the food we eat too often stresses our planet much more than necessary, Jaime has created a coffee hour made of local and organic food. Our Green Sanctuary Committee, under Carter Smith's leadership, is starting a free-cycle program here at First Unitarian. Look for information in the newsletter for a creative way for us to live gently and mindfully, together.

I may have started this sermon with poetry, but I don't want to pretend Earth is an easy place to live. It is a wild and difficult planet. The natural order is painful and often justice has no place. I learned this years ago in the tamest of ways. I was disturbed by the way one of my dogs treated the other one. My uncle is a vet and I asked him about it. He told me that I'm using the wrong categories. I'm trying to create a world where things are fair, where one dog gets what the other one gets, where everyone is loved and cared for equally. But, he explained, that's not the natural order. Nature, he said, isn't just. In this case, the natural order was about hierarchy. One was the alpha and the other was not. Once I allowed them to find the balance, they were fine. In fact, I think they were fine all along. I was the one who needed to accept that life isn't easy.

There have been more painful reminders of this for me and I'm sure for you. In the most detached way, from the safety of our living rooms, we can watch lions eating zebras and polar bears killing baby seals so their own babies can eat. Unlike famines supported by civil unrest, this basic reality of one animal eating another cannot be relegated to human responsibility. There is no one to blame. This is what's real. Earth is wild and it's no wonder we want out. Of course we utilize whatever resources we can attain to build a barrier between ourselves and a planet that can be vicious and heartless. But, the relationship is real and it's impossible to disconnect from it, for the moment we do, we die. We are utterly dependent and in full denial.

We have not institutionalized our responsibility to Earth or our bio-systems in the way we have

institutionalized our responsibilities to each other. We have not included in our national or global systems any recognition of the debt we are incurring, which may not be surprising since financial debt also seems distant and irrelevant.

As Unitarian Universalists, though, we are called to deeper awareness of our interconnectedness and our responsibility. Earth Crammed with Heaven. In fact, I believe we have tried or are starting to institutionalize this reality by highlighting the relationship that is at our core. We recognize that we are accountable to each other and Earth across both space and time, since we are conscious of how our behavior affects those in distant locations and of future generations.

Has anyone ever been to a GA Plenary during which the Youth Caucus speaks out? They have a very powerful voice in that room largely because we all understand that the implications of our choices will be their burden. We are setting their agenda for a GA in 20 or 40 years, and we want to be careful about what they will have to confront as a result of our decisions.

Nonetheless, there are plenty of arenas in which we are not holding each other accountable. I have a friend who recently told me she'd like to stand outside the A+P and tell each person walking out with plastic bags that their grandchildren will be drinking those bags. I have this John the Baptist image of her, screaming with the automatic doors opening and closing behind her. She won't do it because it's rude, which strikes me as a little funny. In many ways, we'd all rather contaminate our land and water supply than make people uncomfortable or draw too much attention to ourselves.

According to sustainability activist Alan Durning, we have burned more than half of the planet's fossil fuels and have produced more than half of the planet's destructive greenhouse gases in the last 25 years. Using another measure and an extended time period, over the course of 50 years, (1950-2000), the global consumer produced, transported and consumed as many goods and services as throughout the entire period of history prior to that date. He tells us there was about a 100% increase in the standard of living over the course of 4,000 years, ending in the middle of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, but since then the standard of living increases exponentially with each generation. Of course, how we define "standard of living" is in direct correlation to how divorced we are from the natural order. How large our houses are, how warm we are in the winter, how quickly we can get from point A to point B, these are the theoretical increases in our standard of living, albeit with no recognized correlation to the planetary aftermath.

Of course we want to separate. Earth might be crammed with Heaven, but it is also wild. Feral. Unsafe. Untamed. Uncivilized. Our ancestors fell victim over and over again to the turbulent forces of nature. Forget Heaven. Evidence of Hell seems more accessible. Disease and cold and drought and animals all served to encourage the conception of civilization and the effective creation of Second Nature.

But, we've lost something in that removal of ourselves from nature's forces and it isn't just the eventual destruction of Earth as the ultimate consequence of our estrangement. Henry David Thoreau, jealous of the raw, immediate life of the past, removed himself from "Second Nature" and lived in a more primary way. He sought to connect with the wildness and the freedom. In his essay "Walking" he says, "Give me a wildness whose glance no civilization can endure, as if we lived on the marrow of ~~koodoo~~ devoured raw." (Koodoo is an African Antelope.)

There is a god in the wildness. A god who is raw and primal and honest. Every tree and spider and sea lion is an expression of that god, is the divine embodiment of all that is wonderful and terrible. And this god is not tame. The god of Christian scripture, embodied by Jesus, is too civilized for me. I appreciate the model of patience and love and kindness and generosity, but it fits into the box too well. Remember, Earth is CRAMMED with Heaven. If Jesus is the way we know incarnation, the way we know all of Earth to be the embodiment of god, we have to be introduced to his wild side. We should talk about how he smelled and how dry his skin was and about his thick and tangled hair. We should tell often the story of Jesus driving the money changers out of the temple in a fit of rage. We should know that to be incarnate, is to be untamed, to be filled and stuffed with the magic and mystery of existence.

Earth crammed with Heaven. The natural way is sometimes violent but it's also gorgeous and lavish. Grace is bursting forth. Annie Dillard writes: "My God, I look at the creek... It never stops.... You don't run down the present, pursue it with baited hooks and nets. You wait for it, empty-handed, and you are filled. You'll have fish left over. The creek is the one great giver. It is, by definition, Christmas, the incarnation."

It is my hope is that we all learn to live in the genius of our location, that we become aware of the rhythms of the seasons, knowing when we enter blueberry season and when it's time to make jam for the winter; knowing where our water comes from and which animal habitats surround us; knowing fully the condition of our air, our sealife, our soil. It is my hope that we enter deep, intentional relationships with our neighbors, those also living in the genius of our location and that together we can agree to come out from behind the walls of separation we've created and into a more primal relationship with Earth and each other. And in that learning, my greatest hope is that we know every bush afire with god. For it is all and always holy. The creek, the mockingbird, the koodoo and the blackberry bush. Earth is alive with power, and every common bush and stream and cloud has been ignited. The least we can do is take off our shoes.