

Being Part of Nature

A sermon preached at Niles Discovery Church, Fremont, California,
on Sunday, September 12, 2021, by the Rev. Jeffrey Spencer.

Scripture: [Genesis 1:26-31](#)

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I don't remember my early childhood well enough to be certain, but I suspect I've never been a morning person. Even before I started adolescence, my mother would need to call me several times to wake me and get me out of bed on school days. Getting up in time for high school was always a wrestling match between me and the snooze button. Not much has changed.

20 years ago, I was living in Washington State. I had a phone in the kitchen and a phone in my home office. I did not have a phone in my bedroom. I wanted to have to get up and walk into another room if the phone rang while I was still asleep. That movement gave me a moment to wake up. 20 years ago yesterday, I was still asleep when the phone rang and I stumbled into the kitchen to answer. A member of the church where I was serving at the time was calling, saying I needed to turn on the news.

I don't remember how long I watched the news before I decided I'd better eat some breakfast, get showered and dressed, and get to the church I was serving. I realized that I needed to be there, in the church, with the doors open so that people could wander in and find a safe place to pray, to breathe, to grieve.

I don't remember much more about that specific day. The rest of my memories of 20 years ago are more about feelings—feelings evoked by the stories, especially the stories of sacrifice, of selflessness, of compassion. Those stories often brought me to tears and sometimes brought me to awe. Some of them still do. An image that sticks with me—and I don't know if I saw it or if I created it in my mind from the stories I heard—is of people lined up around the block in various places around New York City (and perhaps elsewhere), waiting to donate blood.

In the weeks and months following the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001, it seemed to me that everyone in America had one identity: "American." All those other identities we use to separate ourselves—religious identities and political identities and social identities and racial identities—suddenly ceased to matter.

I wasn't the only one who felt this. In an reflection that aired yesterday on *Weekend Edition Saturday*, Scott Simon remembered walking with his wife along Canal Street in lower Manhattan during the days that followed the attacks. "The city had cordoned off blocks of Lower Manhattan, and the crowd in the streets around us seemed to number in the thousands," he remembered.¹

¹ Scott Simon, "Opinion: United We Stood As 9/11 Responders Toiled and Families Searched," *Weekend Edition Saturday*, <https://www.npr.org/2021/09/11/1036057143/opinion-united-we-stood> (posted and accessed 11 September 2021).

“... Trucks would pull up to the barricades, carrying workers in dark, heavy emergency gear, and in the blue helmets of police, black helmets of firefighters, the yellow, white and silver helmets of street, sanitation, and construction crews.

“We had probably walked right past workers like those in our daily lives. Those nights along Canal Street, we saw them. The crowds cheered and clapped as they rolled into ground zero to search for those few who might still be alive and to dig out, with reverent and respectful hands, those many more who were now among the wreckage that smoldered there.

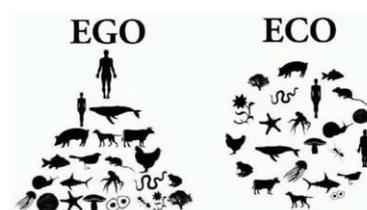
“... what we saw on those nights along Canal Street was a dazzling diversity of humanity—a living artwork of New York, of America, brought together in pain, pride and often prayer, on a street near where the city had an aching, smoking wound.”

I’ve been reflecting on this theme of unity for several weeks now, and not just unity among people. Our scripture reading today can be read as God separating human beings from the rest of creation, but I believe this is a misreading of the text. I think it is a text about the unity of creation.

There are two God-given directives in the text. First God tells the human beings to “be fruitful and multiply.” I think it is worth acknowledging that there are ways to be fruitful that do not include procreating, and every math major can tell you that multiplying is not limited to procreation either. However, if this first directive is only about procreation, I think we can agree that we have fulfilled it. We really don’t have any more work to do on it.

The second directive is (as translated in the *New Revised Standard Version*) to have “dominion over ... every living thing” on the earth. Rabbi Rachel Nussbaum doesn’t like this translation of the Hebrew (which I won’t bother mangling with my poor Hebrew pronunciation). She says a better translation would be something like “be guardians of every living thing.”²

Referring to Jewish interpretations from the 6th and 7th centuries, she says, “One famous commentary on this passage reads: ‘When God created Adam, God led him around the Garden of Eden and said to him: “Behold My works. See how wonderful and beautiful they are. All that I have created, for your sake did I create it. Now, see to it that you do not spoil and destroy my world, for if you do, there will be no one to repair it after you.”’ (Midrash Kohelet Rabbah 7:13). This is a warning we desperately need to hear and heed today.”³



² Rabbi Rachel Nussbaum, “Guardians of the Earth (*Shomrei Adamah*), *Earth Letter*, [winter 2020-21 edition](#), page 8.

³ *Ibid.*

At some point in your life, you've probably seen a chart that looks something like this pyramid. It is hierarchical and (if you look closely) patriarchal. It is the world view of someone who understands humanity's place in creation to be one of dominance, a world view that is perpetuated by the poor translation of the Hebrew in today's scripture reading.

A more accurate diagram of humanity's place in the created order is more like this chart where we are one of many species.

Somewhere along the line, someone labeled these two charts: Ego and Eco. The pyramid is all about me. The circle is all about us—where "us" is very expansive.

Dr. Elizabeth Sawin wrote an interesting Twitter thread⁴ a few days ago. Listen to what she has to say:

Reality is our friend. And reality is that we are part of an indivisible network of relationship. An "inescapable network of mutuality" as Dr. King said. Not a metaphor. A literal truth that you [can] demonstrate right this minute. (Hold your breath if you don't believe me, hold your breath and think about where you end and "nature" begins). Take a breath, drink some water. What wasn't "you" is now "you."

Be changed by somebody's idea. Molecules change in your brain, because in someone else, brainwaves became sound waves, received by you, became meaning, became memory. But go ahead, tell me how we are separated.

By speaking, somebody else can change the wiring of my brain, never physically touching me. They can even do it from centuries ago, if the words were written down, or a continent away using a little computer that fits a pocket to capture video and transmit it around the world.

Current power structures pretend we are separate. Individuals, nations, sectors, silos, as though we are disconnected atoms bouncing off one another, with some atoms more worthy of safety and wellbeing. It's getting kind of ridiculous, the mismatch of that worldview from the actual world. It's so mismatched in some places you can't see because of wildfire smoke. It's so mismatched you might be sending your unvaccinated kid to a school without masks, or be evicted in a pandemic, or without shelter in a heat dome.

We'd never get into an airplane designed by someone skeptical of gravity, but everyday billions of us get into economies and governance systems designed by people who act as though they don't believe in interconnection. Maybe it's time to try something different.

20 years ago, our nation seemed to remember, at least for a little while, that we are connected, at least that we human beings are connected. And right now, there are people around the globe—some who never forgot and some who are remembering again—reminding us, shouting at us to remember with them that we are connected, and not only to

⁴ The Twitter thread begins with the tweet at <https://twitter.com/bethsawin/status/1435255384470609926>, posted 7 September 2021. (A few commas have been added for clarity.)

each other, that we are connected to all of creation, that we are part of creation, a part (our scripture lesson tells us) with a special job to do: to be guardians of the rest.

In 1854, Chief Seattle, a Suquamish and Duwamish chief (people who lived in the area I was living in 20 years ago), gave an important speech. What he said has been lost. Though several versions of the speech exist, none of them is a reliably accurate historical record. The sentiment of those versions, particularly of the most famous version, written in 1971 for a movie script,⁵ hold truth (despite their sexist language) and invite us to consider what it means to be part of creation.

“Every part of this earth is sacred to my people. Every shining pine needle, every sandy shore, every mist in the dark woods, every meadow, every humming insect is holy in the memory and experience of my people....

“We are part of the earth and it is part of us. The perfumed flowers are our sisters[;] the bear, the deer, the great eagle, these are our brothers. The rocky crests, the juices in the meadow, the body heat of the pony, and man—all belong to the same family....

“The shining water that moves in the streams and rivers is not just water, but the blood of our ancestors. If we sell our land, you must remember that it is sacred, and that each ghostly reflection in the clear waters of the lakes tells of events and memories in the life of my people. The water’s murmur is the voice of my father’s father.

“The rivers are our brothers. They quench our thirst. They carry our canoes and feed our children.... [So you must give to the] rivers the kindness you would give any brother....

“If we sell you our land, you must remember that the air is precious to us, that the air shares its spirit with all the life it supports. The wind that gave our grandfather his first breath also receives his last sigh. The wind must also give our children the spirit of life....

“Teach your children what we have taught our children, that the earth is our mother. Whatever befalls the earth, befalls the sons of the earth. If men spit upon the ground, they spit upon themselves.

“This we know. The earth does not belong to man; man belongs to the earth. This we know. All things are connected like the blood which unites one family. All things are connected.

“Whatever befalls the earth befalls the sons of the earth. Man did not weave the web of life; he is merely a strand in it. Whatever he does to the web, he does to himself.”⁶

Amen.

⁵ David Mikkelson, “Chief Seattle Speech,” *Snopes*, <https://www.snopes.com/fact-check/chief-seattle/> (posted 26 September 2007; accessed 11 September 2021).

⁶ Ted Perry, from the script for *Home* (produced by the Southern Baptist Radio and Television Commission, 1972), reprinted in Rudolf Kaiser, “Chief Seattle’s Speech(es): American Origins and European Reception,” in *Recovering the Word: Essays on Native American Literature*, ed. Brian Swann and Arnold Krupat (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987), 525-30; posted by the *Center for the Study of the Pacific Northwest*, <https://www.washington.edu/uwired/outreach/cspn/Website/Classroom%20Materials/Reading%20the%20Region/Texts%20by%20and%20about%20Natives/Texts/8.html> (accessed 11 September 2021).