

LOVING MOTHER EARTH

The title for this homily could mean two things. Both seem to work just fine for me.

First: Our Mother Earth is a loving mother
or Second: How can we love Mother Earth

I am going to focus mainly on the second meaning.

Let me begin with two quotes:

Henry David Thoreau

*Here is this vast, savage, howling mother of ours,
nature, lying all around, with such beauty, and such affection for her children, as
the leopard;
and yet we are so early weaned from her breast to society,
to that culture which is exclusively an interaction of man on man*

From: The Dream of the Earth

by Thomas Berry

We are talking only to ourselves. We are not talking to the rivers, we are not listening to the wind and stars. We have broken the great conversation. By breaking that conversation we have shattered the universe. All the disasters that are happening now are a consequence of that spiritual "autism".

I have come to the conclusion that the only way forward for the human species, faced with an overwhelming and catastrophic breakdown of the Earth's ability to support us, is to own and confront our "spiritual autism" and learn to love the Earth. This is no small undertaking. We have got accustomed to having dominion over the Earth, got used to just taking and not giving back, and we have lost the ability to really feel connected to the living system that is the source of our life and well-being. We enjoy the products of the Earth and admire her beauty but do we truly love Mother Earth as much as we love our self and our family? Do we really see ourselves as just one aspect of the interdependent web of life on this planet? Only now, at this time in history, have we begun to be aware of human impact on the Earth's ecological systems and begun to understand that we cannot go on plundering her resources solely for our own benefit. We have to discover a new way of being conscious humans where we are talking to the rivers and listening to the wind and stars - where we are loving Mother Earth. We have to learn to see the Earth as our "source" instead of just a "resource".

So what is love? And how can we, as individuals and as a culture, learn to love the Earth? What does it mean for our relationship with the Earth when UU's say that they are "standing on the side of love"?

The word love is used a thousand times every day but we rarely look at what it means. Here are a few attempts at a definition:

Anaïs Nin, in *A Literate Passion: Letters of Anaïs Nin & Henry Miller, 1932-1953*:

What is love but acceptance of the other, whatever he is.

Shakespeare in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*:

Love looks not with the eyes, but with the mind.

Ambrose Bierce, his definition in The Devil's Dictionary:

Love, n. A temporary insanity curable by marriage.

Katharine Hepburn in Me : Stories of My Life:

Love has nothing to do with what you are expecting to get — only with what you are expecting to give — which is everything.

Fyodor Dostoyevsky puts it even more forcefully in *The Brothers Karamazov*:

What is hell? I maintain that it is the suffering of being unable to love.

Honoré de Balzac, in Physiologie Du Mariage:

The more one judges, the less one loves.

And we could go on and on. Everybody creates their own meaning around the word "love" and often we give prime importance to the notion of romantic, sexual, passionate love neglecting a broader universal, more consistent love that was called "agape" by the Ancient Greeks and is termed "loving kindness" by Buddhists.

I find the teachings of a Buddhist monk named Thich Nhat Hanh very helpful when it comes to understanding the meaning of love and this homily is inspired by reading his two books: "True Love" and "Love Letter to the Earth"

Love, he says, is bringing happiness, compassion, joy, and freedom to another. And in order to do this we need to see love as taking certain deliberate actions:

Love is being there. The most precious thing that you can give to the one you love is your true presence. But what must we do to really be there?

Love is recognizing the presence of the other

Holding your loved one in your arms, bringing your awareness to your breath, and saying to yourself, "Dear one, I know that you are there and it makes me very happy". You can try this with your spouse, with a friend, with a tree, or with a caterpillar. It works in each case. (Maybe you would like to try it now?)

(It is best to read each of the following twice:)

Love is being there when someone is suffering

Love is being able to be vulnerable and ask for help

Love is listening deeply

Love is practicing loving speech

Love is being at peace with yourself

Love is letting go of judgments

Love is accepting somebody just as they are.

Love is letting go of anger

Love is facing fear

Love is being aware and understanding of another's needs and perspective

Love is caring as much about another as about oneself.

So love is a verb as well as a noun. Love is an action as well as a feeling. Love is what happens when we physically, mentally, emotionally, and spiritually connect with other people and the world around us. Love is feeling at one with something or someone, when we let go of ego, when we expand our personal boundaries to include this other being in our notion of self and in notions of the divine. The Hindu word Namaste captures this idea: The divine essence in me bows to the divine essence in you.

Our UUCM Mission states: "In the spirit of courageous love, we forge a community of radical welcome and deep connection that moves us together to heal the world". Courageous love is further defined by the following: "Sometimes it is not easy to love the stranger, the homeless person, or even the world. Often it takes courage to stand up for what is right. Courageous love moves us beyond our discomfort and fear".

So how can we overcome what Thomas Berry describes as our "spiritual autism" and turn the focus of the love, that I have just described, to our Mother Earth?

Most importantly, love is being there for the Earth. Love is getting outside and building an intimate relationship with all the plants and animals that comprise the web of life on this planet. Love is developing a daily practice of true presence to the Earth.

So what must we do to truly be there for Mother Earth?

It is not easy as an adult. It was much simpler when I was a child and was not constantly caught up in thinking, judging, worrying, problem solving, trying to control things. I had fewer pre-conceived notions and was much better at just being there, being open to new sights, sounds, experiences: playing in the dirt, splashing in the sea, throwing stones in the river, watching ants work, discovering and exploring a badger set, marveling at the weirdness, and vulnerability of baby birds in hedgerow nests. I had little desire to change anything, no need to give names and labels to things. I had fewer judgments about good and bad, weeds, vermin etc. I was able to accept and marvel at what the Earth offered.

As an adult it is much more difficult to be present. We get caught up in thinking and immediately we are transported somewhere else in the past or future. We can physically be in the most beautiful forest but, in our heads, be miles away worrying about yesterday or tomorrow. We can be walking the trails of Columbia, seeing all the invasive bush honeysuckle, and getting caught up in feeling hopeless about the destruction of our native woodlands - and then we are no longer present to appreciate those same woodlands. We can be sitting in our garden only seeing all the work that is needing to be done - and we miss the beauty of what has been created there.

I would suggest that if we wish to overcome our "autism" and begin to feel that we are in an intimate, passionate relationship with all the living things around us we have to develop a daily practice of being present. A practice that can help us turn off, or at least turn down, our obsessive thinking for a while and allow us to just be there as things unfold from moment to moment - to feel again the wonder we felt as a child. We have to let go of doing and practice being. We have to develop some sort of meditation or mindfulness practice.

Meditation practice is simply a strategy to tone down our thinking and become aware of our other senses: bodily feeling, touch, sight, smell, and sound. Thinking comes and goes but is almost always a distraction in our efforts to be present. We all have some sense of what it is to be truly present: a beautiful sunset, an emotional event that brought tears to our eyes, something that was really scary. We all have had experiences of such significance that we automatically stopped thinking and were just present with wonder, amazement, love, and connection:

This is captured in a poem by Jon Kabat-Zinn

Have you ever had the experience of stopping so completely,
Of being in your body so completely,
Of being in your life so completely,
That what you knew and what you didn't know
That what had been and what was yet to come,
And the way things are right now,
No longer held even the slightest hint of anxiety or discord?
It would be a moment of complete presence, beyond striving, beyond mere
acceptance,
Beyond desire to fix anything or plunge ahead,
A moment of pure being, no longer in time,
A moment of pure seeing, pure feeling,
A moment in which life simply is,
And that "isness" grabs you by all your senses,
All your memories, by your very genes, by your loves,
And welcomes you home.

This is what we are aiming at with a mindfulness practice. If we can really achieve presence we will not need a sunset or a view of the Grand Canyon to stop us in our tracks. We can find wonder, amazement, love, and connection in observing an insect on a dandelion flower.

If we can successfully achieve this presence then love will flow and all the other aspects of love will naturally follow:

We will notice the presence of other living things

We will be able to be there for the suffering of the Earth and all her offspring: the tiger, the raccoon, the frog, the elm tree.

We will be able to allow ourselves to be vulnerable and dependent on the Earth

We will listen deeply and be sensitive to the needs of the Earth, the trees, the rivers, the wind, the stars

We will be at peace with ourselves

We will let go of judgments and the need to control

We will accept the Earth just as she is

We will care as much about the Earth as we do about ourselves.

We will be able to say Namaste to the Earth: the divine essence in me bows to the divine essence in you.

Courageous love will be able to move us beyond our discomfort and fear and help us to stand up for what is right with regard to our treatment of the Earth.

So seems pretty straightforward, right?

Not quite so fast. What is this magical meditation or mindfulness practice that is going to bring love, enlightenment and healing to our world?

It is very simple but not easy because our thinking mind gets in the way. Our squirly "monkey" mind throws all sorts of distractions at us to derail us from our desire to be present. The mind has to be put in its place and not be allowed to take us over; not be allowed to pull us into trying to analyze and understand. We have to surrender our need for control and just accept whatever arises without judgment.

Let's try it together now:

Sit comfortably and close your eyes.

(Pause)

Focus on your breath and say to yourself: Breathing in, I know that I am breathing in. Breathing out, I know that I am breathing out.

(Pause)

With the awareness of breath in the background, now pay attention to sensations that arise and pass away in the body: the feeling of your feet on the ground, of your butt on your seat, of the wind blowing against your skin.

(Pause)

With the awareness of breath and body in the background, now give your attention to sounds that are arising and passing away. No need to judge good or bad sounds just accept the nature and quality of the sounds that arise.

(Pause)

And finally, with the awareness of breath, body, and sound in the background, watch your thoughts as they arise and pass away. If you find yourself caught up in thinking just come back to the breath. If you are in touch with your breath you are in touch with what is really happening here and now.

(Sit for 5 mins in silence, Ring a bell)

I hope that in this brief exercise, you have got a taste of what being truly present might feel like. It is something that is available to all of us. Every morning, when we wake up, we have 24 brand new hours to live. We each have the capacity to live in a way that these 24 hours will bring love, peace, joy, and happiness to ourselves and others. We just have to practice being present for whatever arises. We can bring this presence and love to our relationships with Mother Earth and all her thousands of species of offspring.

We can then rewrite the Thomas Berry quote that started this homily to read:

We are learning to talk to the rivers, we are listening to the wind and stars. We are once again engaged in the great conversation. By being present to the Earth and to the Universe in all its majesty, we are overcoming our disconnections and learning to love again. Now healing can begin.

Thank you. I hope this has been useful to you.