

The Actions of One Affects the Many:

The Interdependent Web of Existence

(Seven Principles series)

(Version 1a)

A Sunday service led by the
Reverend Michael Walker, Interim Minister

Presented on May 21, 2017, at the
Unitarian Church of Harrisburg, Pennsylvania

WELCOME

Dear friends, some who are new, some who are not, you are welcome here – one and all. We are a welcoming community which honors the inherent worth of all people, regardless of age, ethnicity, gender, orientation, socio-economic class, or other attributes that only serve to divide our society. Here, we welcome you as you are, and are glad you came to be with us today. You may have been coming here for years, even decades; or you may have been coming here for just a few weeks; or, this might even be your first time here, ever. Regardless of how long you have been here, we have one thing to say to you all: **Welcome Home!** Please take a few moments now to greet your neighbors.

CALL TO WORSHIP

We come together today seeking a reality beyond our narrow selves that binds us in compassion, love, and understanding to other human beings, and to the interdependent web of all living things.

May our hearts and minds be opened to the power and the insight that weave together the scattered threads of our experience and help us remember the Wholeness of which we are a part. - Rev. Wayne Arnason

It is in recognition of our deep connectedness as a community that we light our flaming chalice on this and every Sunday morning.

May it ever be so and blessed be you all!

JOYS AND SORROWS (Market Street)

During our time of Silent Joys and Sorrows, we acknowledge those things we hold in hearts, whether they be joyful or sad. If you wish to mark some joy or sorrow in your personal life, you're invited to come and choose a disc from the heart-basket; hold it, admire it, imagine your joy or sorrow coming to reside in this symbol.

Of course, these can mean whatever you want them to, but we picked out the colors based on the sky. Joys might be blue for clear skies or yellow for sunny skies, while the dark stones can symbolize your sorrows, as an overcast or stormy sky. If you have a joy or sorrow you wish to acknowledge, please come forward.

MEDITATION

Being a caring community, we *celebrate* the joys and *share* the sorrows, whether we have told others about them or hold onto them in silence. We do so, so that our friends do not carry these alone. You are now invited into a moment of silence and meditation, as we hold these joys and these sorrows in our hearts and minds. We will bring our meditation to a conclusion by joining in singing a Musical Meditation, Hymn # _____, _____ (name) in the (grey/teal) hymnal.

[Silence]

Thank you. Blessed be.

OFFERING

This congregation offers a liberal spiritual home to seekers from all walks of life. We are proud of the work we do in the community, the classes we offer for children and adults, for the care and concern provided by this community and its staff, and for these two beautiful campuses that have each become a spiritual home for so many.

If you are here for the first time, we invite you to let the offering basket pass you by, because you are our honored guest. And if you have made this your spiritual home, we thank you for your continuing generosity.

Every month, we also collect donations during the Offering to support a worthy cause. This month, our Share-the-Plate Recipient is _____.

If you are writing a check, please specify on the Memo line whether this is for your Pledge, an offering to UCH, or for the Share-the-Plate recipient.

Thank you, all, for your generosity. This morning's offering will now be received.

CHILD DEDICATION (Clover Lane only)

OPENING WORDS – Minister

Friends, this is one of the happiest occasions in the life of a congregation. Today, we dedicate a child and pledge our collective commitment to safeguarding her -- one of our youngest members, **Jack Kratos Lybarger**. **Jessica** and **Grant Lybarger**, will you please come forward with **Jack**? Also, god-parents, **Rachel Dietz** and **David Tringali**. Thank you.

The poet Kahlil Gibran wrote:

“Your children are not your children. They are the sons and daughters of Life’s longing for itself. They come through you but not from you, and though they are with you yet they belong not to you. You may give them your

love but not your thoughts, for they have their own thoughts. You may house their bodies but not their souls, for their souls dwell in the house of tomorrow, which you cannot visit, not even in your dreams. You may strive to be like them, but seek not to make them like you. For life goes not backward nor tarries with yesterday.”

ADDRESS TO CONGREGATION AND FAMILY

DRE: The ceremony in which we now share is both ancient and timeless. In all parts of the earth, and from the earliest days of recorded history, parents have brought their children at an early age to a place of worship, sharing their joy and dedication with those of the wider community.

Traditionally, the element of water has played a symbolic part in this ceremony, for all life has arisen from the waters, and it is through water that life is sustained as it flows forward like a river.

Minister:

Traditionally, at our service of dedication, we welcome those at the beginning of their time with us into our church community by giving them roses – tightly closed buds, on stems from which the thorns have been removed. The buds are symbols of life just beginning, whose unfolding they will experience, petal by petal. The thornless stems are vivid images of our deep desire to protect the children of our church family from all that

could be hurtful – to make their paths smooth as their lives unfold.

Traditionally, this is also the time to recognize our children by name, for it is by name that each of us is acknowledged as a unique and separate person. The flower we present is also symbolic of the individuality we wish to affirm.

ADDRESS TO PARENTS AND GOD-PARENTS

DRE: Grant and Jessica, to you as parents let me say this: In presenting your child at this service, you invite all of us to share some of the joy and responsibility that is yours as parents. You seek our support in your dedication to the task of fostering, with love and

guidance, the fullest unfolding of the personality of your child.

Do you now promise that, to the best of your human abilities, you will help this child to an appreciation of truth and beauty, uprightness of character, and love? If so, say, “We do.”

Rachel and David: Have you agreed to serve as god-parents to this beautiful child? Do you pledge to help **him** and parents in times of need? Do you pledge your support for **Jack** as **he** grows up? If so, say, “We do.”

DEDICATION – Minister

Jessica and Grant, by what name is this child to be known?

Jack Kratos Lybarger, in the manner of our ancestors, I touch your brow with water from nature’s infinite sky, water that flows around the world and nourishes all life on Earth. In so doing, we dedicate your life to the good of all and to your own growing into the self you will become.

We also give you this flower, unique in all its natural beauty, separate and distinct from all other flowers found in creation, to express symbolically our hope that all your life long you will unfold and blossom just as you must, in all of your own unique and natural beauty.

PARENT’S AFFIRMATION –

Led by Minister, with parents

I love you. I am your parent; you are my child.

There is no more sacred bond.

In all the days and years to come,

I promise you my loving care,

Providing you both roots and wings,

That you may feel safe, that you may one day fly.

I am glad you have entered my life. I love you.

- Lindsay Bates

CONGREGATIONAL RESPONSE – Led by DRE,

with congregation

May you grow to love only that which is good;

May you seek and attain that good.

May you learn to be gentle and respect all persons;

May you be filled with courage to challenge evil;

May you endow those who know you with faith

and hope;

May you come to know that which is eternal;

May love abide with you always.

BLESSING OF THE CHILD – Minister

May we be grateful for the gift of children in our lives.

Though we cannot save them from trials or sorrow, we can show how much we love them.

Though we cannot make them into people of our choosing, we can be generous with positive recognition and celebrate their triumphs and support what is unique and special.

As they learn from their time with us, so shall we learn from them as we anticipate the day when they shall stand with us, challenging us and offering us new companionship. - Cheryl Jack

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(Seven Principles series)
Reverend Michael Walker

You can breathe easy, because this is the **final** installment in my sermon series about the Seven Principles of Unitarian Universalism. Our Seventh Principle states that we *affirm and promote ... respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part*. This principle is often described in terms of ecology and environmentalism, but I have always felt that that is a reductive view of the whole world and our place in it, in which our actions make such a difference

on all the rest. A broader theological view of the principle implies more than just caring for, or about, the Earth. It implies relationality and mutuality.

The metaphor of an interdependent web teaches us that we are part of a greater family of all life. It is interpersonal, relational, and even a bit mystical, in that we are part of an interdependent web of life that transcends mind, heart, soul, or even body.

When we take the time to realize that all life is interdependent, and this certainly includes all people, then we learn at a very basic level that we are all connected, so that which affects one of us affects us all. My colleague, Rev. David Bumbaugh, put it this way:¹

¹ Bumbaugh, David, quoted in *Theology Ablaze*, Tom Owen-Towle. (San Diego: Flaming Chalice Press, 2011.) p. 104.

We believe that in this interconnected existence the well-being of one cannot be separated from the well-being of the whole, that ultimately we all spring from the same source and all journey to the same ultimate destiny.

Building on that: we are all born and we all die; this is the common experience of life shared by all. It is what we do with the intervening time that really matters, and we do well to recognize that *all that we do* affects the others in our lives. We first become aware of this in our families, I think.

Perhaps the first relationship each of us has is with a parent or parents, when we are just starting out in life. *[By way of example, it was just last week that we celebrated Mother's Day, and this morning, a Child*

Dedication.] Of course, our relationships during infancy are ones of dependence. Interdependence is something that we grow into as we mature, and in my mind, these are equally important and entwined with each other: interdependence and maturity. We take care of others as much as we take of ourselves, and vice versa. I think this is true of family relationships and friendships that we develop over the courses of our lives.

It is also true about our relationships with our surrounding society and nation. In previous sermons of this series, we lifted up efforts of working for peace, world community and democratic process. We recognize these as core values held by most UUs. We are a religious movement that is not shy about speaking our

political views, although we do not usually discuss partisan views during worship. What I'd like to point out, however, is the interdependent nature of our political system here. Of course, there are interdependent political systems in other countries, as well, but I limit this to what we are currently experiencing here and now, in America.

The lesson of recent months, I believe, is just how interdependent we all are, and how that is a double-edged sword. We celebrate our interdependence when life is going well for us all; and we hold each other in times of fear, anger or sorrow, when our interdependent relationships bring us low. I have often struggled to describe the abstract concept of interdependence to those who approach life with rigid, concrete-thinking. The current political situation provides us with a very

concrete example, though. The unaddressed suffering of some resulted in a movement that elected leaders, and they appointed more leaders, that has created a situation of chaos that is spilling over into our every-day lives, the stock market and housing, access to medical care, and care for the environment, the last of which I will return to shortly.

Another of my colleagues, Rev. Ken Collier, wrote in his book of reflections about the Seven Principles:²

If we treat some people critically and disdainfully, it becomes easier to treat others badly. Before long, what goes around comes around. Wagons begin to circle. Sides are

² Collier, Kenneth W. *Our Seven Principles in Story and Verse*. (Boston: Skinner House, 1997.) p. 105.

chosen. Despair and anguish is heard, even among ourselves. And the fighting begins.

I don't know about you, but as I listen to that passage, I begin to think about many things happening in our country, leading up to and since the national election. I've noted a lack of maturity in political discourse of recent months.

I wish our political leaders could take a step back and look at the whole system, and not just their platforms. When any among us are not treated equitably, we have done a disservice to us all. The poorest among us are just as deserving as the rest of us, of respect, care and access to all they need to survive. What some may call a *boot-strap mentality* is a result of individualism – people are concerned for themselves, individually, and

not for others. In my view, individualism is a form of disease and self-delusion in a system of interdependence. I posit that all life, and all society, is interdependent, no matter what some individual may say.

Another way in which illness in an interdependent system is making itself know to us is *climate change*. Some individuals do not recognize the cell-deep, down into our bones, relationship that all life on Earth has with the Earth, itself. Actions we take that cause damage to our surrounding environment not only affects life in the immediate area, but in fact has a cascading effect on life throughout a region, continent, and even the world. Have you heard of the Great Pacific Garbage Patch? Where did all that plastic and other pollutants come from?

When we think of our place in nature, it is often with a sense of awe at its enormity, and a sense of ourselves as insignificant. But, when we learn of things like the garbage islands, we realize that our impact is not insignificant at all. But what is our personal role in all this? Interdependency has its positive side as well, and perhaps we can find a way, as a people, to bring the environment back into balance.

I think many UUs would agree with these words from the great naturalist and poet, John Muir:³

Come to the woods, for here is rest.

There is no repose like that of the green deep woods.

Here grow the wallflower and the violet.

³ Muir, John, quoted in *Meditations of John Muir: Nature's Temple*. Chris Highland, ed. (Berkeley, Wilderness Press, 2001.) p. 129.

*The squirrel will come and sit upon your knee,
the logcock will wake you in the morning.
Sleep in forgetfulness of all ill.
Of all the upness accessible to mortals,
there is no upness comparable to the mountains.*

Some have said that humanity's place in the world consists of more than just experiencing a sense of awe when standing out in nature. Some speak of our deep relationship with our world, in fact, a direct relationship to our world. In the book, *A Chosen Faith*, UU minister John Buehrens wrote,

The words human and humane both come from the same Latin root, humus, the earth that bears us, to which we all return and on which we are asked to walk together in humility during the time that is

ours.

In the UU search for truth and meaning, we have sought wisdom in many spiritual traditions and scientific disciplines. Many old cultures around the world have stories about us as the *Children of the Earth*, as well as the story from the Hebrew Bible that tells us that Man was molded from the dust of the Earth, and then God breathed the Breath of Life into Man, and he lived. Throughout many cultures, there is a recurring metaphor of humanity being borne of the Earth on which we live, move and breathe – a relationship that indicates a greater family of ALL life. If we are in relationship with the Earth, then our actions that harm the environment will also harm ourselves, even if it takes a long time for it take effect.

Finally, let us consider the relationship a person has with whatever that person may recognize as something greater than themselves, some indefinable existence of the holy that one can contemplate, but not physically touch, see or hear. The Jewish philosopher, Martin Buber, proposed an *I-Thou* relationship. He wrote that the 'I' of Self (me, myself and I) exists in relationship to the 'It' of existence, but that that is a limited existence, a world limited to the depth of one's perception. That limited existence reinforces the illness of individualism. But, when the 'I' of Self enters into relationship with the 'Thou' that is all else, then the relationship becomes an unlimited existence, a world of relations that takes one *beyond* oneself... into something

greater than oneself.

UU theologians often discuss Buber's *I-Thou* relationship as a backdrop for that which we usually call our *Interdependent Web of All Existence*. The Quaker teacher, Parker Palmer, brought that *I-Thou* relationship into his classroom. Palmer recognized that teaching was more than him, simply talking – if that was all it was, one could talk to a wall for the same effect. He also realized that this was more than the *I-It* relationship that focuses merely on what one individual thinks and feels. Rather, Palmer realized that the teacher-student relationship, like the *I-Thou* relationship, was about something greater than themselves. You have probably heard me speak of this before, and may have even come to realize that my entire theology is based on this.

Let's turn now to an example from our own Unitarian history, and the Transcendentalist thought and philosophy that so influenced early Unitarianism in America. The Father of Transcendentalism, Ralph Waldo Emerson, wrote in his book, Nature:⁴

The aspect of Nature is devout. Like the figure of Jesus, she stands with bended head, and hands folded upon the breast. The happiest man is he who learns from nature the lesson of worship.

Of that ineffable essence which we call Spirit, he that thinks most, will say least. We can foresee God in the coarse, ... distant phenomena of matter; but when we try to define and describe

himself, both language and thought desert us, and we are as helpless as fools and savages. That essence refuses to be recorded in propositions, but when man has worshiped him intellectually, the noblest ministry of nature is to stand as the apparition of God. It is the organ through which the universal spirit speaks to the individual, and strives to lead back the individual to it.

Bring the individual back into relationship with something greater than oneself. Emerson expounded upon two aspects of reality, as he understood them. Those two aspects were: *Nature* and *Soul*. He further believed that nature and soul were connected, through this *entity*, this *spirit*, perhaps we should call it a *mechanism*, that he called the ***Over-Soul***. He said that it

⁴ Emerson, R. W., "Nature," in *The Portable Emerson*, Carl Bode and Malcolm Cowley, eds. (NY: Penguin, 1987, reprint.) p. 41.

was the Over-Soul that connected all life to all other life. This was, very literally, the precursor of what UUs now call *the interdependent web of all existence*. Having said that, I want to go back to something else Emerson said. He used the “G” word, *God*. We should be clear that Emerson was using a word that loomed large in the vocabulary of his time. He lived in an age and place when everyone went to church, almost without exception. But the brilliance of the Transcendentalist movement was that they redefined the very concept of God, which laid the groundwork for what evolved into the modern UU movement. The Transcendentalists had a very expansive view of the holy. By defining the holy as the *Over-Soul*, Emerson took human experience of the holy out of Christian Scripture and put it smack dab in the middle of

mother nature. This was the revolution — this was a great crisis of faith that the new Unitarian denomination experienced in the mid-1800s. Emerson was so criticized by some of the more conservative Unitarian ministers, and by the fact that his own congregation did not want to accept his reasoning for no longer offering communion, that he chose to leave the ministry and began what was to be the career he was really famous for: being a great orator and essayist. Today, we might have recognized him as a cutting-edge theologian. He was one of those people who gave up dogmas and scriptures, and instead believed that all of the Scripture he ever needed to read was written on the leaves of trees, and in the stars of the sky, and could be heard in the breeze or the babbling of a brook. So, yes, Emerson did use the word, *God*. But you

must understand, the God he is speaking of is not Yahweh or Yeshua, not Jehovah or Jesus. The *God* Emerson speaks of, we might call mother nature, or the interdependent web, or *All-That-Is*.

Interdependence in the spiritual sense is there to be discovered in one's relationship to something greater, but it is perhaps more easily witnessed when looking at this from our seats in this sanctuary. I say this because interdependence is also found in groups that have some sort of covenantal purpose, such as churches and synagogues, mosques, ashrams and sanghas, and all the other congregational communities. A religious community is greater than the sum of its parts, and has more importance to the world than just membership numbers. We are in mutual relationship with each other,

and we support each other in our relationships to something greater than ourselves, something holy in life.

To conclude, we have considered the rather abstract idea that seems to be a critical underpinning of Unitarian Universalism, *the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part*. To better relate to this, we learn that interdependency runs through our personal lives, our relationships with family and friends and church, in our society and in politics, and throughout living systems on the Earth. We are so interdependent with each other that when one does something bad, we all suffer; when one does something good, we all benefit.

May it ever be so and blessed be you all!

BENEDICTION (by Rev. Michael Walker)

May we be ever mindful of relationships we hold sacred,
 And relationships we may not even be aware of,
That we do well and not ill by our every action and deed.

May we be aware of words that we speak and are heard,
 And of words that remain unspoken and unheard,
That we do well and not ill in every communication.

May we walk lightly on the Earth and treat it well,
 And leave our world better than we found it,
That we do well and not ill for all the future generations.

May we be aware of the myriad and ever-changing ways
 That connect us to all others and all things,
That we do well and not ill in all our endeavors.

May it ever be so and blessed be you all!
