

Throw a Song in the Water
Unitarian Universalist Church of Vancouver
April 27, 2025

Reflection on the Theme – John Hennessy

Once, when I lived in Denver, Colorado, I had a sunny apartment that was a perfect place to raise orchids, which are some of the most stunning of all flowering plants! I met a man, who was then, the director of the Denver Botanic Gardens, and I learned much about these amazing flowers. I learned that orchids are to the plant world, as humans are to the animal world. They're very specialized to the point of being intelligent. Orchids have become one of the most successful plants on earth, thriving on every continent but Antarctica. And unlike other flowering plants that use a hit or miss method of spreading pollen, orchids use a more direct, interdependent technique. They lure insects to them using various deceptive signals, scents, shapes and colors to entice various insects to pollinate them. Interdependence in plants and animals is one of the more fascinating aspects of the natural world. And, the uniquely evolved partnerships between plants and insects was also particularly intriguing to a man named Charles Darwin, one of the world's greatest botanists, and the father of Evolution. To my mind, one of the most amazing examples of a truly interdependent or symbiotic relationship between an orchid and a special insect is the story of Darwin and the moth.

1862, a few years after he published the *Origin of Species*, Darwin was sent a collection of orchids from Madagascar by a friend he knew at a very special place in England known as the Kew Royal Botanic Gardens. One of these orchids was the beautiful 'Star-of-Bethlehem' orchid, and it had a very long tube hanging down in the back that contained the nectar. With his knowledge of the interdependence of some orchids and their pollinators, and his study of evolution, Darwin surmised that a type of African moth with a very long tongue must be the specifically chosen pollinator of this plant. But this insect was not known to exist! He was making an educated guess, but his prediction went untested for decades. Then, in 1992 over 130 years after he made the prediction, actual photos and videos of a rare African sphinx moth pollinating the star orchid surfaced! Because Darwin's prediction was based not only on his knowledge of the complex web of interdependent relationships, but on his own study of other co-evolution of plants and insects, he was correct!

Today scientists are aware of many such symbiotic relationships in nature. But unlike, for instance, parasites where only one party benefits from the union and the other is damaged, or even killed, symbiosis is mutually beneficial to both the host and the insect. Having co-evolved with the plant, this Hawkmoth, after eons of trying to feed from this orchid, finally evolved a proboscis that, just as Darwin had predicted, could easily reach down the 10-12" nectar tube of the 'Star-of-Bethlehem'. This then is a perfect symbiosis: An orchid that is custom suited to a giant African moth that has become its sole pollinator, and the interdependent partner of this rare and beautiful orchid. It is a fascinating example of true symbiosis.

Lyrics to *Throw a Song in the Water*© by Dave Irwin 11/24

Theres a river running
Right across the sand
The water is carrying
The story of the land
The river's been running
For centuries
The channel's being diverted
For all sorts of things
Now it seems it's running
All out of its banks
A flood might be coming
No matter what we think
There's foam in the water
It's pounding on the verge
Sweeping up flotsam
I get the urge
Throw a song in the water
Let it float down stream
Throw a song in the water
Let the people sing (2x)

I could throw in money
a little rolling green
I could write letters
To the editor, cause a scene
I could write to Congress
See where that goes
About as much chance as
eating grapes with my toes
But I can write a song
throw it in the flow
raise my voice
Then let it go
Want to make it to the ocean
I'll be there someday
Meanwhile I want keep the land safe
For my friends & family ... so I'll
Throw a song in the water

***Throw a Song in the Water*© by Rev. Kathryn A. Bert**

I think the point I want to make this morning, with the Dave's song, John's reflection and the reading selection, is that we never know the results of our labor, that our actions have consequences, and that we are not alone.

I'll begin with my last assertion – that we are not alone. I remember years ago when I was applying for theological school, I had an interview with a minister who told me to think of theology as that framework or set of ideas which keeps one going when all alone. I suppose her thinking was that a belief in God or Jesus might help one when otherwise alone –

*What a friend we have in Jesus
All our sins and griefs to bear
What a privilege to carry
Everything to God in prayer.*

The problem with the question, for me was that I didn't believe that it *is* possible to be all alone. In addition to the possibility of an omnipresent God, we are simply formed in community. Yes, one can *feel* alone, for sure, but we are not ever actually alone. The interrelated structure of reality, as Martin Luther King Jr., pointed out means that whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly. Our interdependence means that we are mutually affected by our individual actions. So much of our identity is formed through language and culture because we are social beings, connected to others, and

even when we find an authentic part of ourself that goes against the pressures of culture and social norms, the expression of this unique authentic self is only unique because of the backdrop of culture and society against which it develops.

I think of an old movie with Tom Hanks – *Castaway* in which most of the movie is his character, Chuck Noland, alone on an island – about as alone as any of us might conceivably be. And yet, he finds a Wilson volleyball which he names, predictably, *Wilson* and talks to him as if he were a friend, because he – Chuck Noland - was formed in community, he takes society with him even when he is the only human stranded on an island.

Which makes me think of the Galapagos Islands and Charles Darwin and the study he made of the natural world. I wonder if had any idea of the impact of his work on history? We talk a lot about mutual aid these days, but what is mutual aid but symbiosis – the mutually beneficial relationship between different people or groups? Between the African sphinx moth and the Star-of-Bethlehem orchid? I suppose the African sphinx moth can never be what it ought to be until the Star-of-Bethlehem orchid is what it ought to be....

There's a river running right across the sand, the water is carrying the story of the land, sings Dave Irwin. We can't really know the impact of our actions on the world, at least not in the longer arc of history, but we can do what we can do. And to figure out our unique role in the scheme of things – our unique talent and aptitude and to do that thing well, moves the world forward, in my opinion. Raising our voice and letting it go. What is it that needs to be said that you are uniquely positioned to say? And do you say it in a song, or a letter to the editor, an email to your representative, a garden, a sculpture, a meal? Whereas some may find it discouraging to not know the impact of our actions, it could also be empowering – perhaps this is the drop of water that fills the bucket, or the first drop of water that begins the filling.

It was member Donna Aase who remembered that reading about the drop in the water by Gordon B. McKeeman. Apparently, when I first started as your minister, back when Donna was your very part-time administrator, I shared that reading in a staff meeting. I have no memory of it, but Donna brought it to my attention recently because she felt we needed to be reminded that our little efforts, our little drops matter. The world can be so big, the problems so enormous, the changes so sweeping or flooding, that it can be hard to remember that our small efforts, too, have an impact. "Persistence depends on patience, on keeping at it when there is little to reassure us," McKeeman reminds us.

"The empty bucket litany is long and tedious:" he says, "racism, sexism, ableism, authoritarianism, oppression, injustice, violence, environmental degradation, overpopulation." But who said it was yours to solve alone? I love that image of throwing a song in the water. I can hear Sandra Hoyt's solo alto voice among the choir. We are both alone and connected, a part of the stream, and only a drop of water. Let's not carry the weight of the world in our muscles and bones, as another song says, but bathe in the awareness that there are many of us who share our values, many of us who are working for change, resisting oppression, and doing our part.