

**The Web of Which We Are a Part**  
**UU Church of Vancouver**  
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**The Web of Which We Are a Part** © Danielle Garrett

As the weather turns nicer, I'm eager to get outside and enjoy my last few months living in the Pacific Northwest. It's stunningly beautiful here and in the two years I've lived here, I've tried to spend as much free time as I can exploring the many trails and parks that make up this area. And I have caught on quickly to that other favorite spring past time...complaining about all of the other people who are exploring the stunningly beautiful trails and parks in our area. They don't have good trail etiquette, their dogs are poorly behaved, there's nowhere to park and frankly, there are too many of them. I may say I value interdependence, but when Saturday rolls around, suddenly I think I have some kind of right to an untouched forest that doesn't extend to other people.

And I know I'm not alone in, sometimes, regrettably, viewing the "natural world" as my own private retreat and other people as interlopers. Travel sites list the top 10 places to escape to nature, with one headline from Travel and Leisure magazine reading, "When you need to get away from it all, there's nothing like total immersion in nature." As though trees and lake views aren't a part of "it all." And as though we aren't a part of nature. Over the past few years, there have been several high profile news stories about how our National Parks are being "overrun with tourists," complete with pictures of selfie-taking families in tennis shoes and flip flops and overflowing trash cans. When I see these stories, I feel disgust and worry about the ecological impacts but it hasn't stopped me from stocking up on new gear at REI and visiting those parks myself. If I'm not stopping, who is it exactly that I think should? But they aren't serious nature lovers, I think as I look at the photos accompanying these stories, you can tell by their flip flops and selfie sticks! As though having the right pair of hiking boots entitles me to those beautiful vistas.

And I'm not dismissing the joy and wonder of finding yourself in the woods alone, the mental and spiritual benefits of escaping light and noise pollution, or of finding time for contemplation and solitude. Those are indeed good things. But when I view other people as an impediment to my outdoor experience, I'm only further perpetuating a false dichotomy that sees humans as separate from the natural world. And when this attitude spills over into my concern for the climate and the environment, it's very easy to begin seeing each other as the enemy, as *only* threats to our natural world and not a part of this great, beautiful web of creation I profess to respect and desire to protect. And this line of thinking often has sinister consequences

For example, how many of you saw some of the "nature is healing" and "humans are the real virus" social media posts during the height of the pandemic? They were often accompanied by images of animals who were returning to city centers as humans were forced inside by COVID. Some of them were real, but many, like the widely circulated image of dolphins in the Venice canals, were fake. They may seem like a harmless way to bring people's attention to the fact that our daily activities have a real impact on our environment. Carbon emissions after all, did go down during the pandemic. But at what cost? We were scared, isolated from each other, hoarding toilet paper and fighting over hand sanitizer. Watching black, brown, poor, and unhoused folks get sick and die at disproportionate rates. Willing to sacrifice the lives of "essential workers" to the virus, while still paying them less than a living wage. What does it mean to say "nature is healing," while so many humans are dying?

The language about humans being the real virus might feel specific to the pandemic, but the idea behind it is not new. In fact it is tied to a long history of racism, sexism, classism, and ableism within some strands of the modern environmental movement. Indeed, many early conservationists were also supporters of the eugenics movement. The preservation of the supposedly "untouched wilderness" in the early 1900s ultimately resulted in the displacement and death of thousands of indigenous Americans. 20th century conservationists spoke in barely coded language about preserving wilderness as an escape from the so-called blight of modernity and urbanization, meaning cities

with increasingly black and immigrant populations. And books in the 1960s and 1970s popularized the false idea that overpopulation in the global south was a main driver of climate change. The real truth of the matter is that the richest 1% of the world's population are responsible for more than twice as much carbon dioxide emissions as the poorest 50%. And the harmful effects of climate change, from hazardous waste exposure to asthma diagnosis and economic losses after natural disasters, disproportionately impact people of color and low income populations.

At its most extreme form, this ideology is known as eco-fascism and it is especially violent and insidious. In fact, it was this idea that prompted an 18 year old to kill 10 people at a Buffalo New York grocery store in a predominantly black neighborhood in 2022. And it was this idea that led to the murder of 23 people in an El Paso Walmart in 2019. In his manifesto, the shooter claimed he was trying to stop the "Hispanic invasion of Texas." He wrote "If we can get rid of enough people, then our way of life can be more sustainable." He was echoing sentiments of the Christ Church New Zealand shooter who took the lives of 51 people, claiming he was trying to end overpopulation and "save the environment."

Now there is a great deal of distance between being annoyed at the overcrowding in our national parks and embracing a violent ecofascism. But both have undercurrents of racism, ableism, and classism that dictate who is worthy of consuming resources, enjoying beauty, and taking up space on this planet. Both create a sharp and false dichotomy between nature and humans, seeing us as only the weavers of the web and not part of it, dependent on every other part, including each other. And both lead to an environmentalism that fails to see one another as part of the planet we profess to protect. And that's not a movement I want any part of. Both because it isn't true to my deepest values and because it's bound to be ineffective. As James Baldwin reminds us in our reading, "The moment we cease to hold each other, the moment we break faith with one another, the sea engulfs us and the light goes out."

Breaking faith with one another, viewing each other as the enemy, isn't going to solve the climate crisis. In fact, it might even exacerbate it. Hatred, paranoia, fear, and distrust tend to have negative impacts on our planet. In just the first 60 days of the ongoing conflict in Gaza, Israel's military response was equivalent to burning 150,000 tons of coal. At the beginning of the January ceasefire, over 80% of trees in the region had been damaged and damaged infrastructure means raw sewage is pouring into the Mediterranean.

Rather than seeing each other as the enemy, we have to view one another as shared partners in our work towards a solution. We can't keep waiting for one lone genius to invent some kind of magic technology that can reverse all of the pollution and resource depletion and carbon emissions. If we're going to solve the climate crisis, our solutions need to be multi-layered and involve everyone. We're not going to reduce overconsumption by operating from a place of fear and scarcity, hoarding and competing for resources. We're going to do it through living more cooperatively, through mutual aid and shared support. We're going to have to tap into wisdom we've spent too long ignoring, wisdom from indigenous communities about how to live in right relationship with the land, or wisdom from queer and black and brown communities who have experience caring for each other and surviving and thriving in the face of immense challenges. And we're going to have to really listen to those who disagree with us and understand the circumstances and beliefs that keep people from seeing the reality of the climate crisis and getting engaged in this work. If we're going to have any hope at all of stopping or reversing the damage we're doing to our planet, we have to stay in deep, accountable, and loving relationships with one another.

And that means finding a way to recognize the human impacts on the environment, without resorting to narratives of fear, distrust, and scarcity. It means doing the spiritual work we need to do to ensure our commitments to environmental and climate justice come not from a place of fear and mistrust but from a place of deep love, for one another and for the planet.

I think it starts by grounding our work in a radical theology of interdependence, that views not only the earth as sacred, and not only the individuals who inhabit it as sacred, but also the very web connecting us as sacred. A theology that sees care for one another and care for the planet as not just related but deeply entangled to the point of being indistinguishable. Because almost without exception, the practices that corrupt our environment also harm people. From colonization and deforestation that drove indigenous people from their homelands to the production cheap consumer goods that rely on exploitive labor and pollute the environment. We are not separate from the web of creation, we can not harm one without harming the other. Theologian Sally McFague uses the metaphor of the earth as God's body to make this point. I love this image because it helps me see the very fact of our interdependence as divine.

But we can also look to our own Unitarian Universalists values. I don't think it is an accident that we hold "The inherent worth and dignity of every person" as a value alongside "Respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part." In the new formulation of our values, the idea that "We covenant to cherish Earth and all beings by creating and nurturing relationships of care and respect." is intertwined with a declaration "that every person has the right to flourish with inherent dignity and worthiness." And love sits at the center holding those statements together. Both formulations make it clear that racism, violence, and eco-fascist ideology have no part to play in our work for building a loving and sustainable future. And both formulations resist the false dichotomy that says we have to choose one- people or planet. They see us as part of this web of creation, with a responsibility for protecting it but also worthy of protection ourselves.

And secondly, we need to do things that help us see the daily, lived reality of that theology. We need to find those spaces where we can lean into joy and delight in the natural world and each other and remember what it is we're fighting for in the first place. Maybe it's gardening and playing in the dirt with a little kid, or working with an organization focused on improving safe access to the outdoors for LGBTQ+ people or people of color. Find out more about the people who grow your food. Clean up a stream

with some friends. Talk to someone else you meet out on a hike and find out what they love about that place. I'm not claiming any of these actions are going to reverse climate change, but they will help orient us towards an ethic of communal care that rejects fear, greed, and individualism.

There are people much more knowledgeable than myself who can tell us what actions we need to take that might actually help us slow down the impacts of climate change, what letters we need to write and to which legislators we should write them. But my expertise is not in environmental policy, but in theology. And I believe those actions are going to be more effective and easier to stick with for the long haul if they are come from a place of joy rather than fear. If they are rooted in a deeply held theology of interdependence and love, that respects the web of life and sees and honors our place in it.

In a recent interview, Joanna Macy commented on her deep commitments to people and planet in spite of the pessimistic forecast for our species and the earth we inhabit. Even if it's too late to save us, she says, "It's embarrassing to go out as a species when we're treating each other and the world so poorly." This struck me as such a beautifully simple reframing of our work while we're here. One that doesn't require any scientific knowledge or carbon emissions measurement. It made me want to stay committed amidst all the doubt and complexities. It reminded me I don't have to be certain that it's going to *fix anything* before I choose to treat others and the planet better.

Because the honest truth is, I don't know what we're going to be able to save. I hope all of it. It's all so extraordinary, isn't it? "My god what a world, " writes Annie Dillard, "there's no accounting for one second of it. " But I'm not always optimistic. So much has already been lost and so much seems beyond saving. But either way, I want to go out loving extravagantly, with abandon. Even if we're too late to save any of it, I don't think we'll regret having loved more until the very end. And if we're not too late, and I hope to God we aren't, well then I think that kind of fierce love is our best and only shot. So Love the planet, love one another, wholly and completely and without reservation.

Hold each other.

Keep faith with another.

That's how we'll keep the sea from engulfing us.

That's how we'll keep the light from going out.

May it be so. May we make it so, through our living, Amen.