

## ***Moon Over Earth***

Unitarian Universalist Church of Vancouver

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***Moon Over Earth*** © by Rev. Jennifer Springsteen

Do you remember that children's rhyme, "I see the moon and the moon sees me; God loves the moon and God loves me" ? Oh that moon: invoking imagination, mystery, illumination, feelings of love and expansion. It has been with us every day of our lives. Isn't that funny to think? The moon, sun and planets, including our own beloved earth, are our longest relationships. No wonder our wonder when the astronauts of Artemis ii sent back photos of our beloved earth—letting us gaze at it like an old familiar marble kept in a jacket pocket. It gives us a chance to see ourselves—land masses and water—as pristine, undamaged, hopeful. We forget—just for a moment perhaps—all we can't see. How vulnerable and beautiful we are. And I mean how vulnerable and beautiful all of us are in the universalist sense: as we gaze upon that bright blue and green ball, the whole of it feels worthy of our love.

The astronauts of Apollo 8 read from the bible, Genesis, verses 1-10. "A wind from God swept over the waters, Then God said, "Let there be light..." This combination of religion and science is where we UU's shine. It has always been beautifully interjoined in our faith tradition. In April, aboard Artemis ii, before they passed into the dark side of the moon, astronaut Victor Glover said, "...As we prepare to go out of radio communication, we're still able to feel your love from Earth and to all of you down there on Earth, and around the Earth, we love you from the moon."

Love. The most powerful abstraction there is. Love to the moon and back, into the cosmos, down the milky way, in and out of black holes and then, also into the darkest depths of the ocean where a lantern fish lights and into inky black eye of a crow on a fencepost. Love holds it all.

It holds you, right now, it holds the person next to you and the one in front of you whose neck and shoulders you have been looking at, and the people behind you, looking at yours. How intimate it is for us to be here like this, thinking of all the ways we are glad and hopeful and also of our deepest bruises, knowing those around us feel this too in their own ways. This is the closeness we return to each week. And dare I say, it is this feeling of longing and belonging that fills us with mysterious ache when we look up at the moon at night or back at the earth as seen from the heavens. Connection, love.

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We talk about love and connection as religious people. We want our congregations to thrive, and we hope our values spread into the wider community and draw people into our pews. I want more to find us, I want to build our religious exploration back better than pre-Covid times. I know this church has been successful at that, and yet, we need to continually be diligent about that, mindful of our welcome.

Last week at the church where I am the affiliate minister in Virginia, the Reverend Alice King spoke of flourishing as a congregation in our values and our purposes. During her sermon, well, before the sermon during the Joys and Sorrows and the reading, too, the eighteen-month-old behind me, who hadn't joined the religious exploration crew, babbled constantly. I figured a tickle on the knee was the

best response to chair kicking, but there were a few folks who turned to scowl at the mother. Now the church is a very small one. It was built in 1890's by the freed slaves of the Oatlands Plantation, what they hoped would be the beginning of a new South. Aside from its beauty, and its coziness, you can't whisper to your neighbor without the folks on the pulpit hearing you. So Reverend Alice was quite aware of the baby, and I wondered if it distracted her. I felt distracted, I'll admit. But when she asked the rhetorical question, "how do we flourish?" She paused, closed her eyes, and unawares, the child continued on and Rev Alice let us be with it, a long moment of babble-guided meditation, and with a hitch in her throat, she said, "this is how we flourish, by welcoming all of us in."

The Divine couldn't have offered up a better example of what it means to live into who we say we want to be as people of faith, for people who ask, how can we welcome new families? For how can we best be the people who want to both widen the circle and nourish those sitting inside it.

How will you flourish, friends? If we zoom closer into that big blue marble and wind our way down the lovely path, with the garden to the right, past the large evergreens, into this bright sanctuary with all of you and those joining online... how will you flourish in the months ahead? I'm speaking to the obvious now: of Reverend Kathryn's retirement. I've heard you have a fantastic interim minister arriving in Rev Doug Wadkins. That is certainly news to celebrate.

And still, changes can bring on anxiety and anxiety gets passed around like the flu. Like the flu, anxiety can infect us before we even recognize we are symptomatic. Me? I'm not anxious. In this time of flux, you might be drawn to your beloveds whom you have known forever, who know you, who have been through several iterations of change within the church. Hold one another close. But careful that drawing close to those you know best doesn't lead to clickishness which can make it difficult for new folks to find a seat at the table, to use that familiar metaphor, or to be fed once they have sat.

Notice also during this time of change if you feel the tendency to cling to how things exactly as they are now, or how they have always been, even if a different way could open up new possibilities. Are you clinging because the old way works best? Best for whom?

It's normal for some folks to have the desire to withdraw because it's difficult to navigate a new pattern of doing things, new ministers and new people. Please notice who isn't coming around—send them a text, write them a note: "I miss you. Please come and sit by me next Sunday" or, "Stay and have a coffee with me after service."

Love, the greatest of abstractions, is best understood in metaphors. As the poet, Pádraig Ó Tuama wrote, love offered itself after the storm in small but simple ways. Love not lost after all, rather, love asking to be noticed.

One of the things I love about being a chaplain is talking theology with my volunteers. I have representation from so many faiths: Muslim, Jewish, Catholic, Anglican, Baptist and Mormon. In one conversation we had, my LDS friend spoke of how she continued to notice the intersection of the personal and the collective in faith. She told me of a friend who, when feeling estranged from God, planned a trip and event to swim the English Channel in the hopes of being able to "feel" God once more. The friend returned from her trip disappointed, brokenhearted. I said, "What a lot pressure to put on yourself." My friend said, "What a lot of pressure to put on God." Indeed.

Another volunteer returned from her first Hajj just last week and brought with her gifts for me. She was simply aglow—when I hugged her, I felt the Divine tingling in her skin. She told of how on the third night of Hajj, it is important for every pilgrim to lay on the ground under the stars—no tents—with the idea that all can see the heavens equally, and all are equal under God. It is quite moving. When she returned, she spoke of how wonderful that was, to be with all those faithful Muslims.

The day before I flew here, I spent an hour with my mentor contemplating Howard Thurman's Meditations. Thurman wrote, "whoever is aware of the Spirit of God in himself enters the doors that lead into the life of his fellows." It is a mediative exploration that suggests it is not enough to have your own siloed connection with God, the connection must spill out into, through, between each other. This exploration of the Spirit lets us notice the connections around us: wild hogs exploding from bushes, a frog on a rock, the bright smile of your friend.

Look at you here. How wonderful it is, all of you faithful UUs gathered each Sunday in one place. Your worship team, ushers and greeters, your choirs, your board, your committees. Think off all you do to keep one another supported, to keep these lights on, so that all can experience the transformation of what our religion offers. All of you equal under the stars. All of you precious holy beings a gift to each other. Love one another to the moon and back. Back here each Sunday, to build the beloved community. May that be so. Amen.