

5th June 2022 – ‘Healing Earth

Led by Rev Kate Whyman

GATHERING MUSIC ‘Mystery’, Paul Winter from Missa Gaia (Earth Mass)

<https://youtu.be/0mKwDpF7ziQ>

WELCOME

Welcome to our service this morning. To you all, whether you are here in person or online. I hope you have been enjoying the Jubilee celebrations.

Maureen Killoran

Welcome, you who come in need of healing,
you who are confused, or have been betrayed.
Welcome, with your problems and your pain.
Welcome, too, your joys and your wonderings,
welcome your need to hope, your longing for assurance.
Instead of answers, here may you find safety for your questions.
Instead of promises, may you find community for your struggles,
people with hands and hearts to join you
in engaging the challenges and changes of our day.

Our theme for June is Healing, and this month’s services will all touch on aspects of that hugely important subject, which is a bedrock of a spiritual life. And as today is World Environment Day I have chosen to focus on ‘Healing Earth’, which is both a description – the Earth is always healing us – as well as an action – we can also take part in healing the Earth. It’s a potentially beautiful, creative relationship, one that at its best is mutually nourishing and sustaining...if we let it be.

CHALICE LIGHTING

Let’s begin by lighting our chalice candle, as is our custom, as a symbol of our free religious faith. And if you’re at home, you might like to light a candle with me.

We are children of the earth, born here, made of the mud and the air, the water and the fire.
To the earth we will return. For the flourishing of this essential and eternal relationship, of
nurture and nourishment, we light this flame now.

1st HYMN 43 (P) Gather the spirit

Gather the spirit, harvest the power.
Our sep'rate fires will kindle one flame.
Witness the mystery of this hour.
Our trials in this light appear all the same.

Gather in peace, gather in thanks.
Gather in sympathy now and then.
Gather in hope, compassion and strength.
Gather to celebrate once again.

Gather the spirit of heart and mind.
Seeds for the sowing are laid in store.
Nurtured in love and conscience refined,
with body and spirit united once more.

Gather in peace, gather in thanks.
Gather in sympathy now and then.
Gather in hope, compassion and strength.
Gather to celebrate once again.

Gather the spirit growing in all,
drawn by the moon and fed by the sun.
Winter to spring, and summer to fall,
the chorus of life resounding as one.

Gather in peace, gather in thanks.
Gather in sympathy now and then.
Gather in hope, compassion and strength.
Gather to celebrate once again.

PRAYER by John Saxon

Source of All, All Life, All Love, All Hope, known by many names

We don't know who or what you are or even whether you can be called a who or a what. Our words fail us. Our minds fail us when we ponder the enormity, diversity, complexity, wonder, and beauty of the universe and this world. And yet we sense, more than know, that our lives are part of a larger Life, that we are indeed connected with everyone and everything, and that there is something, both immanent and transcendent, that nurtures and sustains our lives and Life itself: something that calls us and all life to greater wholeness and harmony.

We give thanks today for all of the gifts and blessings of life: for this day, for the beauty and wonder and mystery of life, for family and friends, for health and work, for opportunities to learn and love and grow, for the love and support of others in times of illness or despair. But we remember, too, that others, here in this room, in this city, and around the world, live in poverty, hunger, fear, illness, isolation, violence, and economic insecurity.

In the silence of this space and in the silence of our hearts, may we hear the call to a wider perspective and a deeper resolve.

May we live with greater compassion and care for ourselves, others, and creation. May we touch each other more deeply, hear each other more clearly, and see each other's joys and sorrows as our own. May we strive to be and become more than we are: more loving, more forgiving, more kind, more honest, more open, more connected, more whole.

May we heal and be healed. May we face the uncertainties and tragedies of life with hope, faith, and courage, knowing that Life is good and that we are not alone.

And in these moments of silence, may our hearts speak silently all the prayers of our lives—our souls' greatest joys and deepest sorrows, our triumphs and failures, our regrets and fears, our disappointments and losses, our hopes and dreams.

[Silent Meditation]

May it be so. Amen.

STORY: 'The starfish story', adapted from *The Star Thrower*, by Loren Eiseley

Once upon a time, there was an old man who used to go to the ocean to do his writing. He had a habit of walking on the beach every morning before he began his work. Early one morning, he was walking along the shore after a big storm had passed and found the vast beach littered with starfish as far as the eye could see, stretching in both directions.

Off in the distance, the old man noticed a small boy approaching. As the boy walked, he paused every so often and as he grew closer, the man could see that he was occasionally bending down to pick up an object and throw it into the sea. The boy came closer still and the man called out, "Good morning! May I ask what it is that you are doing?"

The young boy paused, looked up, and replied "Throwing starfish into the ocean. The tide has washed them up onto the beach and they can't return to the sea by themselves. When the sun gets high, they will die, unless I throw them back into the water."

The old man replied, "But there must be tens of thousands of starfish on this beach. I'm afraid you won't really be able to make much of a difference."

The boy bent down, picked up yet another starfish and threw it as far as he could into the ocean. Then he turned, smiled and said, "It made a difference to that one!"

Adapted from The Star Thrower, by Loren Eiseley (1907 – 1977)

READING: 'The healing moment', Elizabeth Tarbox

Each day I am newly reminded of my unworthiness—a dozen thoughts misspoken; another day when the good I do falls short of the good that I could do; myriad small interchanges; moments of sharing that strain to breaking point my desire to be generous, helpful, and kind; months of careful work lost by a moment's impatience, a careless word.

But when I am here at the edge of creation, breaking with the small tide over the sand, the need to do good rolls away; the question of what is right diminishes to insignificance and is easily borne away by the tiny waves. Here, where no words are spoken, none are misspoken.

I am with the broken stubble of the marsh grass that holds on through the wrecking wind and the burning flood. I am with the grains that mold themselves around everything, accepting even so unworthy a foot as mine, holding and shaping it until it feels that it belongs. I stand somewhere between truth and vision, and what I don't know ceases to embarrass me, because what I do know is that the water feels gentle like a lover's touch, and the sand welcomes it.

What I have done or failed to do has left no noticeable mark on creation. What I do or don't do is of no moment now. Now I am here and grateful to be touched, calmed, and healed by the immense pattern of the universe. And when I die, it will be an honor for my blood to return to the sea and my bones to become the sand. Reassured, I am called back to my life, to another day.

2nd HYMN 148 (P) Spirit of life (sung twice)

Spirit of Life, come unto me.

Sing in my heart all the stirrings of compassion.

Blow in the wind, rise in the sea;

move in the hand, giving life the shape of justice.

Roots hold me close; wings set me free;

Spirit of Life, come to me, come to me.

CANDLES OF JOY & CONCERN

INTERLUDE 'Earth Song', Frank Ticheli

https://youtu.be/-qZ4u_2ZAlc

ADDRESS

Our friend Karen Gazley, who for months co-hosted our services on Zoom, recently wrote an article for the National Unitarian Fellowship newsletter. In fact, the issue was mostly written by members of Plymouth, some of you here today!

Karen wrote an excellent piece called 'Loving the land' in which she described her campaign to protect a communal strip of land at the back of her house. She worked with a neighbour who was on a permaculture course, while Karen herself undertook a course in scything in order to keep the land tidy in a way that was less disruptive to the wildlife that lived there than mowing or strimming would be. She writes that as she scythed, 'I found I could see individual spiders and beetles moving through the grass and would pause in my swing to allow them to run out of range as I went along...What grew in me during those months was a loving connection for all the living beings in the field - voles, field mice, bats, birds, insects and toads.'

A loving connection.

Last Sunday I came home from 10 days spent on the Isle of Lewis and Harris in the Outer Hebrides. I felt as though I had been in a different world. Perhaps I had. I didn't see a huge amount of wildlife – eagles, otters and whales all eluded us, though a rib boat trip did take us out into choppy sea round rocky islands where seals, cormorants, shags, gannets, kittiwakes and fulmars were in abundance. Gazing into the wide open yellow mouth of a shag through my binoculars was a memorable moment. But what I really fell in love with was the light and the space, the skies and the quietness, the shallow turquoise waters and the golden sandy beaches. The feeling of wide, windy, watery openness.

This week it's been back to earth – as the saying goes – as I have reconnected with my allotment. There were some surprises in store, including a wasps nest established in my shed and – more welcome - some remarkably red and deliciously sweet strawberries. But mostly it was tremendously satisfying to finally shovel my own compost, made from raw food waste from my own kitchen, onto a newly uncovered bed and plant new green beans into it.

The natural world – especially when it's wild but even when it's cultivated - is life in the raw. It is life living itself. And it seems to call to us to join it. There is some place deep within each of us, a nearly forgotten place, where we too are simply life living itself. And in those precious moments of interaction with a spider, or a vole, or a bean plant there is a recognition. Deep calls unto deep. And healing takes place.

The 12th century mystic Hildegard of Bingen spoke of *veriditas*, or greenness. Author Casper ter Kuile writes that, 'She used it both to mean literally the greenness of plants, and their amazing ability to spontaneously put forth leaves, flowers, fruits and seeds. But she also saw the very same life force inside each of us. Our own innate capacity to grow, give birth, and heal...'

Is that what we recognize? The very same life force in a wasp, a strawberry, a gannet, me, you? When we see it, when we *feel* it, something in us shifts. A primeval common bond is awakened within us and with the very source of all. The earth – this home we have been given – is our source of beauty, of water, of food, of medicine, of minerals and materials for making and building, it is the harnesser of the sun's energy and it is the great giver and also destroyer. The ultimate recycler.

And so what is our part here? What can we do to positively contribute to the healing of the earth and our fellow creatures in return?

If you think of the earth as being spirit-filled, as I do, or even if you don't, perhaps the most fundamental and the simplest gift we can give the earth is to love it. To notice it, to appreciate it, to be kind to it, to be grateful to it. Above all not to not cause it harm.

The earth can heal itself but like any living thing - like you and like me - it flourishes when it is cared for and recognised and treated with consideration. And can be harmed by neglect, carelessness, exploitation. The least we can do – and maybe the best we can do – is to love

it, in whatever way we can. Whether that's by throwing stranded starfish back into the sea, or tending an abandoned strip of land at the back of our house, or whatever is in your gift to give.

What the earth needs – and what we all need – in order to heal may simply be space, and time, with no demands made of us, no coercion or obligation. It may be that we need time for quiet, rest, opportunity to simply be. What we – and the earth – may need to heal is gentleness, consideration, listening, being. And what both we and the earth may benefit most from is care, compassion, love.

The way we will heal each other is through relationship, a sense of partnership, a willingness to be part of a creative collaboration that is respectful and mutually beneficial. Perhaps this is a dream. But it is a good dream.

Yesterday I found myself looking again at the Isle of Lewis and Harris, this time on Google Earth. It's amazing to be able to look down on somewhere you've been – I was able to spot the distinctive shape of the great standing stones at Callanish, I could hover over the sweeping white sands of Uig bay, and zoom in on the ancient church of St Clements in Rodel at the southeast tip of Harris, and I felt transported back to them all again. The island has got into my blood. A part of me hasn't left. I fell in love with it.

Karen's campaign to protect and nurture her strip of land had a sad ending – although it is not the end. She writes: 'Just as I was ready to stop scything and let the field rest through the winter, it transpired that the Residents Association had arranged maintenance of the field by a contractor. Although I tried to stop this, it was to no avail and was left with the shock of watching people with no connection to the land, much less love for its inhabitants, convert the entire field into the model of a municipal park using ride-on mowers and strimmers. Many of the insects and small mammals that I had loved would have been injured, killed by blades or left without habitat.'

She will continue to do what she can to change attitudes. And closes by suggesting that what will heal us and the natural world more than anything is a growth in our capacity to love.

Healing the earth and ourselves may be rooted in our recognition of the greenness – as Hildegard of Bingen would have said the ‘viriditas’, that same life force which is inside each of us. It is our innate capacity to grow, to give birth, and to heal.

May it be so.

3rd HYMN: 216 (P) Wide green world

Wide green world, we know and love you:
clear blue skies that arch above you,
moon-tugged oceans rising, falling,
Summer rain and cuckoo calling.
Some wild ancient ferment bore us:
us and all that went before us:
life in desert, forest, mountain,
life in stream and springing fountain.

We know how to mould and tame you,
we have power to mar and maim you.
Show us by your silent growing
that which we should all be knowing:
we are of you, not your master,
we who plan supreme disaster,
if with careless greed we use you
inch by extinct inch we lose you.

May our births and deaths remind us
others still will come behind us.
That they also may enjoy you
we with wisdom will employ you.
That our care may always bless you
teach us we do not possess you.
We are part and parcel of you.
Wide green world, we share and love you.

CLOSING WORDS: Rev Nancy Shaffer

How shall we mend you, sweet Soul?

What shall we use, and how is it
in the first place you've come to be torn?

Come sit. Come tell me.

We will find a way to mend you.

I would offer you so much, sweet Soul:

this banana, sliced in rounds of palest
yellow atop hot cereal, or these raisins
scattered through it, if you'd rather.

Would offer cellos in the background singing
melodies Vivaldi heard and wrote

for us to keep. Would hold out to you
everything colored blue or lavender
or light green. All of this I would offer you,
sweet Soul. All of it, or any piece of it,
might mend you.

I would offer you, sweet Soul,
this chair by the window, this sunlight
on the floor and the cat asleep in it.

I would offer you my silence,
my presence, all this love I have,
and my sorrow you've become torn.

How shall we mend you, sweet Soul?

With these, I think, gently
we can begin: we will mend you with a rocking
chair, some raisins,
a cat, a field of lavender beginning
now to bloom. We will mend you with songs
remembered entirely the first time
ever they are heard.

We will mend you with pieces of your own
sweet self, sweet Soul — with what you've taught
from the very beginning.

CLOSING MUSIC 'Blue Boat Home, Peter Mayer https://youtu.be/WhsXl1_rEwI