

Forever the Earth Beneath My Feet
April 24th, 2022
Rev. Dr. Leon Dunkley
North Universalist Chapel Society

Have you ever tried to hug the ocean? Have you ever sworn to swim a kiss? Oh, good day, forever the sacred earth beneath my feet. Forever the sky above and forever the river and hills and grasses. Forever the sun and moon and stars. Seal these in our heart and help us to remember always. Remember the ways I love thee. Forever the earth beneath my feet. What does it mean “to forever” something?

Good morning. Today is Sunday, April 24th. This is a time of remembrance for me. I’ve been rummaging through old pictures and hard copies of sermons that I delivered years ago. I was looking for an old program in the boxes that I have at home. As I was looking through them, I came across this old newspaper from my teaching days. It’s a student paper and it’s almost 19 years old. It’s from October of 2003. I’ve kept it all of these years because I was featured on the front page—below the fold but the front page is still the front page. Ministry is a second career for me. Before seminary, I was a professor of ethnomusicology. I taught at Brooklyn College and at Duke University over a span of seven years. When I was at Duke, I directed the Mary Lou Williams Center for Black Culture. Students, staff and faculty gathered there all the time. We had fun.

In 2003, we celebrated a double anniversary. Forty years earlier, in 1963, Duke finally desegregated. *Brown v. Board* was decided in 1954 but Duke resisted desegregation for another nine years. By 1963, they were an outlier and behind the curve. So, they changed their policy.

Twenty years later, they founded the Mary Lou Williams Center for Black Culture at Duke University (affectionately referred to as the Mary Lou). Mary Lou Williams was a jazz pianist (which is why I was drawn to Duke). I interviewed in ’98 and started working there in ’99. In my fourth year, in 2003, we celebrated both of these anniversaries university-wide—desegregation in ’63 and the founding of the Center in ’83. It was a double anniversary and we called it ‘20/40’. It was catchy and so, we made the front page of the student newspaper.

We didn’t get top billing. Another story beat us out. We were outshone by none other than Dr. Nan Keohane, herself, the president of Duke University. She’s wonderful and d’early loved. The article reflected that sentiment. It was titled *Onward Upward: Keohane celebrates the pursuit of the scholar’s passion.* It’s a good memory.

I found a lot of things as I was rummaging through boxes. I found the old program that I was looking for and it reminded me that I have a happy announcement. Ten years and three days ago, on April 21st of 2012, I was ordained by the congregation of Unity Church—Unitarian in St. Paul, MN.

It was as beautiful day. Unforgettable. It was a true and meaningful marker in time. I’m still grateful to have been a part of it. I was then and am now moved almost to tears by what happened that day. I’m moved to laughter, too, upon reflection. Oliver and Noah, Kevin and Sherry’s two sons, they lit the chalice that

afternoon. Brothers of different colors... They were about ten and twelve years old at the time. The ordination meant something a different to them than it did for me. In fact, Kevin just reminded me that...

What Oliver and Noah remember [most was that it was] "the longest church service ever". [Kevin said] When I remind them of their role [as the chalice lighters at the very beginning of the service], I believe it was Oliver who noted, "Yeah, You're lucky we didn't set anything on fire."

Kids! I know that it was ten years ago and that he's in his early twenties old now but I still wish I could squash the little monster! But then, Noah would protect his brother, of course, and rush to Oliver's defense. And there's no way I could take the two of them, even if they wanted me to...so, I guess I have to just live with it. ☺ This, too, was a good memory.

It was a beautiful day, despite the rebellious attitudes of some impatient, young men. It was a powerful day. April 21st of 2012. It was two months after Trayvon Martin had been killed in Sanford, Florida. Unarmed... 17 years old... He was visiting his father. It was family time. He was just walking home from the local Seven-Eleven with coins jingling in his pocket.

In seminary, we anchored our ministries in the context of real life. Ordinations were not only celebratory. They were daring. They were fierce. Rebecca Parker gave the sermon and her opening words were these"

There were no mirrors in my Nana's house...
And the beauty in everything was in her eyes
Like the rising of the sun

Then, she said,

I begin with these song words from Ysaye Barnwell of Sweet Honey in the Rock. She sings of a grandmother whose love enabled a black girl child to know the beauty of the world and the beauty of herself even while growing up in material poverty in a world the denied and defiled that child's beauty, in a world where then as now, black children with Skittles in one hand and iced tea in the other are hunted down by those who cannot see them.

Dr. Parker said,

This afternoon, we joyfully ordain Leon Dunkley to the Unitarian Universalist ministry. As we do, I invite us to remember the realities of suffering and injustice in our world and to contemplate the spiritual importance of beauty and the ministerial power of the artist.

Dr. Parker is pretty and kind but spiritually speaking, she's pretty brutal...and so is faith...and so is hope...and so is love...and by these, I pray, we are all imprisoned. Rituals like ordinations, installations and child dedications bring meaning to the cage in which we live. Rituals like Red Flannel Hash, the church auction and Clean-up Day... These bring meaning to life...and bring meaning to laughter... They are like the earth beneath our feet. They are like the wings of spiritual freedom.

And what is that, precisely? What is this thing called spiritual freedom? It's a good question. What does spiritual freedom mean to a theologian like Rebecca Parker? What did it mean to an evolutionary scientist like Charles Darwin?

Dr. Parker has written a lot about spiritual freedom...in books like Proverbs of Ashes, Blessing the World and Saving Paradise. Dr. Darwin wrote about same thing in a different way. I just learn from the Darwin Crash Course that, In the...1800s, England was...moving away from the traditional way of thinking about life which was then called Natural Theology. ...there were four aspects of creation

One, there was a Divine Creator... Two, there were species that never change [and never evolved any further. Three, there] was a short Creation...the world was only about 6,000 years old [and four, there was] a perfect design for each species.¹

Darwin's theories went against the assumptions of Natural Theology. What's so cool about Darwin is that he was a 19th-century scientist. He was a scientist at a time in which 'science' was not so distinct from 'theology', not like today.

In 1859, Darwin wrote his most famous work, The Origin of the Species. Natural Theology was still the prevailing wisdom. When I think about the Fourth Principle of Unitarian Universalism, the free and responsible search for truth and meaning, I think of bold thinkers who broke new ground. I think of people like Charles Darwin, whose family was Unitarian.

Charles Darwin was born in September of 1809, 213 years ago. His mother was the churchgoer in the family but she died when Charles was only eight or nine. Things changed for him after she passed. So, it's a little hard to 'claim' him as our own. I'm skeptical of the concept anyway but I do think it's noteworthy. Charles Darwin's parents and grandparents were Unitarians.

Darwin is a great example of thinking freely and for oneself. He broke free of the prevailing mental cages of time—the mind cages, the soul cages—that can imprison us spiritually. He was free. Freedom is so important because in freedom, we may find clarity and purpose...we may find meaning. In our hymnal are many songs about spiritual freedom. The words of one of them are as follows:

Circle round for freedom
Circle round for peace
For all of us imprisoned
Circle for release

Circle for the planet
Circle for each soul
For the children of our children
Keep the circle whole

It's funny. Circle was the name of the meeting group that gathered in St. Paul, at Unity Church on Monday evenings at 7:00 for food and fellowship. Circle was put

¹ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dfsUz202jww>

together by an organization called AMICUS. AMICUS is a local 501-C3, a non-profit based in Minneapolis. The founder and president, Louise Wolfgramm, was a member of Unity so it made a lot of sense for Circle to meet there.

The mission of AMICUS is to get us out of prison, those of us who are chained up on the inside and those of us who are chained up on the outside. We all sing,

Circle round for freedom
Circle round for peace
For all of us imprisoned
Circle for release

I worked with AMICUS for all of the years that I spent in Minnesota. Monday was my day off but I went anyway. It was always beautiful, always brave. It was also almost always black and brown, to look at the faces.

AMICUS helped formerly incarcerated folks reintegrate into society. Youth and young adults with minor infractions with the law were encouraged to escape recidivism. We didn't want them going back. They were good kids. No different than you and me. We sat around and ate food together and we talked. These were the days of Minnesota-nice, the days when the unbearable politeness of life in the Twin Cities was the prevailing ideology. It was before the killings Duante Wright and Philandro Castille, Amir Locke and George Floyd. Back then, it was much harder to convince the general public that racial strife was really that extreme. Most of the good people at Unity believed that we had evolved beyond that point.

I moved to St. Paul in 2008. By 2012, my own eyes had been opened to the realities of racial life in Minnesota...not that Minnesota is unique. It's not. It's just where I was. Our eyes open where we are, wherever our feet can touch the earth and remember. When I was younger, I floated above the earth until I found my grounding. Duke helped me to do that. Starr King helped me to do that. Circle helped me...and ,y teachers helped—Rebecca Parker, Rob and Janne Eller-Isaacs and members of Circle, the group that gathered at church on Monday nights, who gathered to deepen meaning of human freedom.

For the past ten years, I have been passionately devoted to the power of human freedom. I have resisted, I have rebuked and I have rejected that which has limited human freedom. I have worked hard, I have been deeply committed to the cause of defining, revealing and making visible that which has or threatens to imprison us without our noticing. I have been passionately dedicated to, committed to and given to the things that make us free. Crosby, Stills, Nash and Young sing of freedom. They sing,

Find the cost of freedom buried in the ground
Mother Earth will swallow you, lay your body down

...and I take what they say and sing very seriously. Many times, I have been broken and shattered by this commitment that I've made. It was dangerous but my life is made more meaningful by the journey. In the strangest of ways, I am grateful for the pain.

Darwin's notions were dangerous...because they didn't justify they way we live. They didn't comfort us. They were provocative. They made us question if we

were heading in the right direction. Darwin's notions made us live more deliberately.

Charles Darwin was the childhood hero of an evolutionary biologist named Stephen Jay Gould. I think that Stephen was so smart, so brave, so grounded and so unflappable, especially when it came to the idea of human progress. In an interview that he gave in 1996, he talked about this issue. He talked about the meaning of Darwin's phrase—"the survival of the fittest." And he explained that Darwin's idea of "fitness" had no moral implications and that Darwin's "fitness" had nothing to do with human progress. Gould explained that...

It doesn't accumulate over time into such patterns as increasing complexification or betterment. [He explained that] A fish in a pond—which may be a hydrodynamic marvel of perfection that may have been there for ten million years, knocking out species after species by virtue of perfection of its design—is still going to die if the pond dries up. [Gould explained that the accumulation of adaptive changes] over time doesn't build into sensible patterns [and that the slow arc of time engenders the opposite] engenders the lack of pattern, the randomness, the contingencies, the unpredictability.

Evolutionary science doesn't do anything for the ego. It doesn't make us feel special or important. Quite the opposite. But it has the excellent quality of being true. We are the ones who get to make meaning in life. Not our bodies.

I really like Stephen Jay Gould. I like his groundedness and his dispassion. He doesn't get caught up in things that don't matter. He says his peace and he moves on. I persevere and I persist. I revel in my righteousness. I wallow in ways that really don't do me any good...but I keep doing it. He keeps his eye fixed on the goals that he sets out for himself. I admire him. He was much cooler than I am.

We are the ones who make meaning in life. Not our bones and bodies. Biological determinism is intoxicating. It feels really good when it works for us. When it does not work for us, we resist. We break the French Bastille. We raid the gun house in West Virginia. We storm the beaches at Normandy. We fight and we find release...or we lose and we fall out of history. When we are intoxicated, when we are drunk with the illusions of society, we feel meaningfully chosen and not just lucky in whimsy of life. These illusions make what is ordinary, commonplace and average about the way we are suddenly seem exclusively spectacular...and this decreases the burden of public responsibility. ...which is a relief. On the other hand, when we are sober, the opposite seems to happen. Our sobriety makes what is extraordinary and spectacular about the way we are seems suddenly random, accidental and mundane...even mistaken. When we are not careful, sometimes we lose our sense of meaning. It starts when we are young. A poet writes,

They taught us kids in school between the recess breaks
That the universe just sorta fell together like a big mistake
It started with a bang that sent the pieces flying
Then it cooled and twirled into dinosaurs and dandelions

They said it was a big mistake but our souls know better than they do.

Back in science class, through the looking glass
We were magnifying little ancestors of our ancient past
Break a couple chromosomes and wait a zillion years or so
And you get an ostrich, a jellyfish, a kangaroo and a Romeo

They said that it was a “big mistake” to have eyes that see
To have love like this inside of me
To have lips that smile as I swim your kiss
To have minds that will forever every part of this

Thank you David Wilcox... “To have minds that will forever every part of this...”

What does it mean “to forever” something? It’s not in the dictionary but it just sounds sacred to me. Now, I don’t need a drunken belief system to make me feel good about myself. And I don’t a certain kind of body in order to be smart...or to be beautiful...or to be valid...or to be counted...or not to be purchased...or to matter.

Just because science doesn’t flatter the ego, just because it doesn’t privilege anyone...that doesn’t mean that the sacred goes away. It means that the sacred does not belong to us...and that it never did. That which is holy is not our inheritance. It has never been our right by king and country. The sacred is not given and it can’t be taken away. It can’t be stolen or embezzled or exclusively possessed. The sacred simply does not belong to us. It’s actually the other way around. We belong to the sacred. How could it be otherwise? We make sacred meaning...with blood and bones and breath embodied. They do not create that meaning for us. Each time they try, they fail...and create war and vile repressions. They create the prison-cages into which the body falls...when the soul forgets it has the key.

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Circle for release

Circle for the planet
Circle for each soul
For the children of our children
Keep the circle whole

Ten years and three days ago, Noah and Oliver were bored out of their minds...at an ordination service that seemed to go on forever. And in the middle of it, Katherine Allen walked quietly down the center aisle of the sanctuary holding a basket of rose petals that fell behind her as she walked. When she got to the front of the sanctuary, she spread the petals all around her. The picture on the covers of your Orders of Service shows just this, with Ruth Palmer leading the congregation in song,

Circle round for freedom
Circle round for peace
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Katherine was “forevering” something sacred. By way of ritual, she helped us to remember. We remembered with our bodies the sacred ground beneath our feet.

Then, those who went to Circle, the group that gathered at church on Monday nights, gathered again within that circle of flower petals in a moment of silent prayer. We forevered something special on that day... with soul eyes that see more than light, with hearts that know more than love.

with lips that smile as we swim life’s kiss
and with minds that will forever every part of this
The moonlight shrouded in the clouds above
The autumn leaves and the falling love
The still reflection in the moonlit lake

Even if they say it was a big mistake, this life is ours to live and ours to love and ours to honor. May this be our heart’s prayer. May we remember who we are. May we remember whose we are. On this Earth Day weekend, may we remember and may we forever every part of this. May we forever this sacred ground beneath our feet—rose-petaled or mud-entrenched...still in all ways beautiful.

May it be so. Blessed be and amen.