

Order of Service  
*Our Extended Body*  
Sunday, April 19, 2009



**Call to Worship and Chalice Lighting**

We come together in celebration of our community and our world.

Mindful of Earth Day this Wednesday,

We gather to recommit ourselves to the loving care of our earth,

Leaving a legacy of healthy place

For all those who will live here when we are gone.

**Readings**

“The Reading of the Will,” by Tolles

THE READING OF THE WILL: A CARTOON BY TOLES

Dear Kids:

We, the generation in power since World War II, seem to have used up pretty much everything ourselves. We kind of drained all the resources out of our manufacturing industries, so there's not much left there. The beautiful old buildings that were built to last for centuries, we tore down and replaced with characterless but inexpensive structures, and you can have them. Except everything we build had a lifespan about the same as ours, so like the interstate highway system we built, they're all falling apart now and you'll have to deal with that. We used up as much of our natural resources as we could, without providing for renewable ones, so you're probably only good until about a week from Thursday. We did build a generous Social Security and pension system, but that was just for us. In fact, the only really durable thing we built was toxic dumps. You can have those. So think of your inheritance as a challenge. The challenge of starting from scratch. You can begin as soon as - oh, one last thing - as soon as you pay off the multi trillion dollar debt we left you.

Sincerely,  
Your parents...

“For the Children,” by Gary Snyder

The rising hills, the slopes,  
of statistics  
lie before us  
the steep climb  
of everything, going up,  
up, as we all go down.

In the next century  
or the one beyond that,  
they say,  
are valleys, pastures,  
we can meet there in peace  
if we make it.

To climb these coming crests  
one word to you, to  
you and your children:

stay together  
learn the flowers  
-go light.

**Sermon** *Our Extended Body*

Rev. Bruce Davis (2379)

We begin and end many of our conversations about the plight of our environment with talk of our children. I don't mean just our biological offspring but those little people we know as friends or neighbors or grandchildren. Even those little people we don't know, but may imagine in their play in the woods and meadows and

playgrounds the world over. Even those little people who will walk in our same forests, play in our same streams a century or a millennium from now.

When we think about the degradation of natural habitats we become mindful of the harm we cause our brother and sister beasts and flowers. The Persian Tiger and the Caribbean Monk Seal have entered the ranks of those species who will never again grace this Earth. Do we not have some concern that these children we love so dearly face the same fate?

I reflect on my own relationship with my granddaughter. How many times I've held her, sleeping, wondering about what hardship lies before her, caused by the thoughtlessness of my own generation toward our environment. It is powerful motivation to take care of this broad nest, this Mother we call Earth, but am I doing all I can, all I should, to preserve this nurturing home? Tolles, in our reading, suggests that the most enduring environmental legacy of the last century for future generations of children ... are the toxic dumps we've created.

Which leads me to wonder: what motivation, if not these children of ours, will lead the human family to do something more than dig the mass grave that may be our species' final resting place?

Care for our environment can't come not from humanity as a whole but must arise from each of us individually and from small gatherings of committed souls like Evergreen. I can't tell you from where your motivation will spring in this Great Work, but I can share with you an answer that is forming in my own heart.

For me the answer is both simple and paradoxical, so bear with me. If we can begin to move toward the realization that this earth and its creatures *are none other than our own extended body*, we will begin to decrease the hurt that we are causing. Where I may harm the body of my enemy, I'm less likely to harm my own body.

Yes, you say, but it makes no sense. The very *notion* of this body and that body carries with it a separation. I am in my own body, and the tree is in its own body. How is it reasonable to even consider that I might know the tree's body as my own?

I'd like to explore this paradox with you. Because, for me, at the depth of that paradox is a growing realization that each part of the world in which I live is an extension of this body that I am.

Our first look at this paradox is biological, so it makes the scientist and the skeptic in me happy. The core question is this: is the seed the tree? I'm thinking of a favorite tree I know, a *friend-tree*, whom I've known for half a century, on the shore of Lake Quinault. It's the largest Sitka Spruce in the world. It would probably take three of our Covenant Circles, hand in hand, to circle it round. It's origin, of course, was a seed that popped out of a spruce cone hundreds of years ago, landing on that very spot next to the lake.

Surely there is *continuity* between the seed and the now towering spruce, but *is the tree the seed?* Obviously, by its appearance, the tree is not the seed. Rather, the clusters of cells in the seed, guided by tiny strands of DNA, structured themselves to gather water, sunlight, and nutrients from this Earth in order for seed to become a sapling and finally a massive tree. What the cells in the seed actually did was, over time, to restructure bits and pieces of *the Earth* into a form that has become the tree. Nor is this process done until the tree dies, and then it becomes the raw material for other creatures to emerge and grow.

What is the tree other than a temporary and beautiful shaping of Earth elements? If the tree could be conscious of its tree-ness it would know that the boundaries of its body extend far and wide. It would say, "The sun is this body, and the lake is this body, and the bedrock that holds my enormous weight is this body."

What we are talking about here has been wonderfully described by the Buddhist monk, Thich Nhat Hanh, as "interbeing." This is not a mystical or transcendental concept. It just says that any *one* thing on this earth has interrelationships with other things on this earth. This hymnal's body, in a *physical* sense, is not limited to the pages within the cover. Think of the tree whose cellulose is in these pages. Think of the nutrients who fed that tree. Think of the ferns and bugs that, composting, formed those nutrients.

The idea of interbeing goes on and on, until we realize that every body we are aware of is physically interconnected to every other body in significant and physical ways. We begin to realize that what we call *separate* bodies are not so separate after all.

Consider an anthill or a beehive. Social Biology challenges us to identify where the “body” unit actually is. Is it the individual ant? Or is it the interdependence of specialized functions, so that the actual body is the whole of the hill or hive? And why stop there, because that hill or hive is likewise interdependent with all other bodies in its environment.

When I was in India, I spent most of my time on the holy Ganges River. The river is called Mother Ganga because it sustains life in Northern India. Without it the complex web of living interdependence would simply not exist. I spent time sitting by the Ganges each day, reflecting on how this water and all the world’s interconnected water is part of my extended body. And yet, the trash that comes floating down that river every day is awful. I spent a couple of half-days with others I knew there at the Ashram picking up litter in the shallows and along the shore of the river. I just needed to do it. It felt like nurturing an important part of myself, like healing a wound in my own side.

So we are part and parcel of *Earth’s* biology. Earth and her creatures, animate and inanimate, are part of our extended physiology. Elements flow into us and out from us as part of this wider physical being. How can we not care for these extensions of our own selves?

Yet there is another level to this interconnected web. So far we’ve been talking about our interdependence with the Earth as a physical, biological symbiosis. The field of Quantum Physics invites us to understand this interbeing at a much deeper level. Again, this is the realm of the scientist, though it begins to include our mystical and spiritual colleagues as well.

All of existence, according to the quantum models, is present on three levels simultaneously. What we call “reality” depends on which of these levels we are considering at any moment.

The grossest and most manifest level of existence is *stuff*, extending everywhere. This is the physical plane of existence that we have been talking about, most proximately, of course, as our Earth. It is a world that can be localized in categories of space and time. It is a world that can be known and predicted empirically. It is a world that follows certain natural laws that have been described by scientists like Isaac Newton. It’s a world that follows certain mathematical principles

like those offered by Euclid. It's the world we know and trust, and for the most part it is the basis of the lives we live each day.

But the field of Quantum Physics indicates that a stranger and more profound reality exists beneath the surface of all this stuff. Within what we call a solid table-top are vast areas of space and miniscule packages of power that combine particle and wave characteristics, called *quanta*. In this world, space and time are intimately connected. A particle or event cannot at this level be localized to only one place and time, and is therefore called a non-local field of existence. Instead of being a world of *manifestation*, it is a field of *potential*. Infinite wave/particles stretch in interconnection and interdependence in a complex web of interbeing much more intimate that we find in the manifest world.

Physicists describe this level of reality as a “quantum soup.” It's undifferentiated, non-localized existence, forming interconnection across the universe.

What does this quantum field rest in? Silence and stillness. Vacuum. Emptiness. The “virtual” that is not yet the “actual.” According to quantum theory, the foundation of vacuum begins to vibrate as quanta in preparation for physical manifestation. The process of creation is thus not only historical but a process that is going on at all times.

If you are not fully understanding this, you are in good company. A friend of mine recently said, “This is not only stranger than you think. It is stranger than you *can* think.” Another friend told me, many years ago, that you can't really begin to get the idea of quantum soup unless you can do the math. Those without the math, like me, have to be satisfied using words as rough pointers toward the truth.

There is an increasingly interesting conversation taking place between physics and spirituality nowadays. Where we may understand these three levels, the physical, the quantum, and the purely virtual, as they relate to the universe, we may also understand them in terms of our own personal existence. My most obvious level of existence is physical, like soft tissues, fluids, and bones. My second level is a subtle aspect of myself, including the thoughts and feelings that are my identity. Yet I also have that third level of *silence and stillness* that I experience within as pure consciousness.

This is that awareness that I am. This is the Being that I am. Some would say, this is the soul that I am. Direct experience of this level within myself is sometimes talked about as mystical or transcendental.

Creative thinkers from both sides of this conversation, both physicists and those practicing spiritual disciplines, see a direct relationship between the three levels in the cosmos and the three levels within each of us. Buddhists, for example, will say that the experience of *emptiness* or *no-mind* is none other than direct realization of that universal vacuum state present throughout the universe. The great Vedic saint of twentieth century India, Ramana Maharshi, experienced that silence and stillness within as his very self. “It is the *I am* that I am.” Thus, for him, the word “I am that” refers to every particle, everywhere.

If the body of the cosmos is grounded in that universal presence, and my own human body is grounded in that same presence as it exists within me, then the body of a tree or a comet or a galaxy can be none other than my own body. Great sages like Buddha and Ramana Maharshi experience exactly this. Their “body” does not end with their hand. If you sit before them, you are no less their body than their hand. The body of the rose they hold is their own extended body.

I want to invite you one final step here. So far we’ve been pretty conceptual. I find it helpful, but ultimately it doesn’t get at the core of my commitment to improve how we take care of our Earth.

Many of us have experiences from time to time, especially in Nature, when we feel a quality of union. Maybe a favorite tree, like my Sitka Spruce at Quinault, suddenly shifts in our awareness, and we feel deep affection for it. Maybe we are sitting, watching the sunset, and a flock of brown pelicans drift by on the evening breeze, and we for a moment we feel oneness them.

Our pathways of perception, when combined with the power of love in our heart, create lines of connection between us and our world. Sometimes those lines of connection feel so intimate that, for a moment, we realize this other to be ourself.

I was sitting at night, high on a rocky mountain slope, in Eastern Washinton, when suddenly the boulder next to me became as much myself as my own hand. In that moment I realized that the boulder was an extension of my body. The rock didn’t do it. It was a shift to a deeper level of perception, of relationship, that happened spontaneously *within me*. I was standing on a sand dune at the Washington

coast, when a small hawk hovered on the breeze, and our eyes connected for a long moment. I felt I was that hawk. One night, late, as the campfire was burning down, I saw the red-hot coals shining, and I felt myself to be shining with them.

These are not rare occurrences. In fact, I think that as human beings we're wired for them. I think we just have to learn to slow down, quiet down, and open up to the possibility of their presence in our lives.

The writer and spiritual teacher Eckhart Tolle has written the book, *A New Earth*. Tolle is optimistic. He suggests that more and more people are growing in consciousness and deepening in perception, leading to a more intimate relationship with our world. If we can make this shift as a human family soon enough, there is a very real possibility that Earth and her environments can be saved.

Maybe we'll do this for our children and their children. But if finally that's not motivation enough, let's remember this: Earth is our body, and Earth's health is our own health. When we feel *that close* to our environment how could we continue acting in ways that destroy our very selves?