

**SERMON  
THIRD UNITARIAN CHURCH OF CHICAGO  
NOVEMBER 26, 2006**

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PRESENTER**

**(EXCERPTS)**

**OPENING WORDS**

Our opening words are from well-known kayaker Chris Duff:

*The sea, like any expanse of nature, is a great teacher of humility. It strips away the nonessentials: the ego, the place in society we fill, and the clutter of busy lives.*

*Wind, waves, cold water and the exposure of miles of endless cliff can bare the soul as any desert experience might. All the insecurities of society—the stress of success or fear of failure—suddenly seem inconsequential. What is left is the stripped-down reality of purposeful, passionate living in an environment that tolerates nothing less. It is a great and continual cleansing, at first shockingly cold; but like the initial plunge into a mountain stream, it refreshes and wakes the body and mind to new life.*

**RESPONSIVE READING**

*This we know. The earth does not belong to us, we belong to the earth*

*This we know. All things are connected like the blood which unites one family*

*All things are connected*

*Whatever befalls the earth befalls the sons and daughters of the earth*

*We did not weave the web of life;  
We are merely a strand in it*

*Whatever we do to the web,  
We do to ourselves*

## **SPOKEN AND SILENT MEDITATION**

Please take out your pebbles, which I brought back from Lake Superior to share with you. Roll the pebble around in your hands. Feel its shape and imperfections. Gaze at its colors and patterns.

The rock you hold may be a billion years old. Its been in mountains, been pressed under the weight of seas, been pushed around by glaciers, and felt the feet of our ancestors. I found it as it lay on a beach where it was washed by the freshwater sea.

Now settle in and imagine yourself standing on that beach. Watch the water wash on the shore, an endless advance and retreat.

Establish a steady rhythm of breathing in and out as we join together in a time of silent meditation. Close your eyes if you wish. Feel the gift of earth in your hand.

## **SERMON**

As any of you who grew up in a traditional religious household certainly know, there is a strong link between shame and religious feeling.

So it is not surprising that this service stems from a shameful moment three summers ago. The new minister at my beloved Second Unitarian Church had just revealed her mission to remake 2U into a Protestant church. I had spent my youth escaping the cold, clammy embrace of Protestantism and I had no desire to return.

This was also the summer that I threw myself into a new love, sea kayaking. So I voted with my feet, getting up at the crack of dawn on Sunday mornings, paddling on Lake Michigan in the glowing light of the morning, and then racing back to 2U to retrieve my son T.J. from his religious education class.

One morning Susanna Lang intercepted me outside of church. Susanna fixed me with that dreaded schoolteacher's look of hers and asked rather sarcastically "so you care more about kayaking than the church do you." I felt a wash of shame. Shame that I put mere recreation over religion. Shame that I put paddling solo over the pleasures and responsibilities of community. Shame that my sneaky ways set a poor example for my son.

But shame or not, I kept kayaking. And over time I came to realize that for me the problem was not kayaking. The problem was religion. This is my story.

Let me start with the kayak. The arctic people built spare, beautiful kayaks using sealskin stretched over a driftwood frame.

A kayak is about 18 feet long and about 22 inches wide at its widest point. Imagine sitting in a boat as long and as skinny as the pew you are sitting on: on an ocean; two miles offshore; in waves taller than you.

The paddler sits in the kayak, plants a paddle blade in the water and then uses all sorts of core muscles to propel the kayak forward. Repeat again and again and again, literally thousands of times in a single day. Overhead is the dome of the sky. Birds and other wildlife go about their daily business and the changing shoreline constantly attracts the eye.

Like many kayakers, I've developed a special affinity with water as I paddle. Wendy Killoran, a school teacher who paddled 1700 miles around Newfoundland this summer, says:

*Sometimes I feel as though my kayak is flying over the water. It feels effortless. At that moment, I feel connected in some small way to the universal picture surrounding me. I am but a mere speck on this vast lake affected by the wind, sun, water, air, shoreline and the creatures and plants who share this place. But I maintain my cadence instinctively. I am in tune with the lake and myself. Distractions don't exist when I'm absorbed in the inherent moment. Everything simply is as it is, and I am here, part of this world, in my own space as myself, my true self.*

Water, of course, has a long association with religion. In many creation stories the earth and its creatures emerge from a primeval watery world. Water is used worldwide to symbolically cleanse, bless and baptize. There is sacred water

of all sorts and if the stories are to be believed, gods and goddesses seem to cluster around water. Water is even equated with justice. As Lao Tzu said: “the highest good is like water. □ water gives life to the ten thousand things, and does not strive. □ it flows in places men reject, and so is like the tao.”

We also must reckon with water’s deadly power. While paddling this past spring I discovered floating human bodies on two separate occasions, giving me a certain dubious notoriety in the local paddling community. This was not warm and welcoming water, but cold and deadly water. The associations between death and water are as deep as water’s life-giving properties.

In light of these profoundly varied qualities of water, I find these words by Nathaniel Altman to be apt: “*by acknowledging the essential role water plays in our evolution and survival, by expressing respect and gratitude, we transform it from a useful object into a sacred object.*” If there is one thing I want you to take away from this talk it is this: we prosper as individuals and as a species the more that we are able to transform what is useful, what is common, what is everyday into something sacred and beautiful.

So when all these elements—boat, body, blade; sky, water, land--come together for me while kayaking the experience is as profound as anything that qualifies as a religious experience in my life. If I have learned anything from kayaking it is that the earth around us—water, land and atmosphere—is as worthy of religious attention as anything. There is a primal energy and a shared origin that runs through us all—living and non-living—that must be acknowledged.

Now, I don’t want to give the impression that all kayakers are monk-like religious nuts. Most would say we are just plain nuts! And I don’t want to sink my kayak under the ponderous weight of spiritual significance every time I venture out on Lake Michigan. Sometimes a paddle is just a paddle. And sometimes it is worse. It is real hard to summon positive feelings of any sort when there is scratchy sand in your wetsuit or nature starts calling when you are three miles off shore.

Over time, however, I became comfortable thinking of paddling as my religious practice. Indeed, the sight of me in a wetsuit no doubt has prompted many folks to prayers of deliverance!

But, more seriously, as I reflected on my continuing discomfort with religion, I learned that it would have been unremarkable 10,000 years ago anywhere in the world, and in some remnant cultures even today, to suggest that humans and the earth share a profound connection that must be nurtured and celebrated through religious practice.

But monotheism changed that. Divinity was abstracted and extracted from the world around us and reassembled in the form of the god in heaven. The earth and its creatures became mere resources for humans to exploit. Genesis is clear on the concept when the Old Testament god tells humans in words likely once thrilling but now quite chilling: “fill the earth and subdue it.”

Humanism, one of the great projects of 20<sup>th</sup> Century Unitarian Universalism and the pride and joy of this church, knocked the legs out from under the monotheistic god. But humanism left the job half done. The earth under humanism feels to me to be just as inert, just as utilitarian and just as devoid of religious significance as it is under classic monotheism.

That treatment of the earth is unacceptable to me. After having glided past 500 foot high cliffs, paddled by moonlight through a chain of islands, camped on silvery beaches under the stars with not a single human light in view, I just can't accept the moat our religious heritage has dug between humans and the rest of the world.

So where could I find a religious community that puts earth back at the center of religious life? Well, where else but in the good company of Unitarian Universalists! The summer after Susanna had outted me, I had the good fortune to go to the UU General Assembly. There, I connected with pagans, pantheists, religious naturalists, process theologians, UUs for the ethical treatment of animals, the UU Ministry for Earth and other groups under the Unitarian Universalist tent wrestling with the question of how to broaden the scope of our religious understanding and practice to encompass the earth and all its creatures.

Now what do I mean when I say an earth-centered religious practice? Here are three common features:

- Putting our treatment of the earth and non-human species on par with issues of distributional justice when it comes to our religion, our ethics and our political practice.

- Drawing from our rich human history of making natural processes such as the summer and winter solstices sources of religious reflection and celebration.
- Counterbalancing the high level of abstraction that characterizes monotheism and its humanist response with a focus on the simple, tangible stuff of life and community. Maybe in the end, for example, this church is as much about the bricks and mortar and artwork that frame this space like a seashell as is it about the words and deeds of us, its temporary occupants. Maybe picking up trash is as worthy as hammering out the latest 10-point political program.

Our religious tradition is rich with inspiration for a more earth-centered approach to religious practice. After all the seventh principle of the Unitarian Universalist association—they saved the best for last—enjoins us to show "respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part." The recognized sources of our shared religious tradition include the "direct experience of that transcending mystery and wonder" and the "spiritual teachings of earth-centered traditions."

Based on these denominational initiatives and resources I am hopeful that this congregation will extend a warm welcome those of us who like our humanism green, who identify with pagan traditions, or who bring to our community other earth-based traditions, practices and beliefs.

This past summer I was privileged to join two extraordinary paddlers on an 8-day journey along the eastern shore of Lake Superior. Mid-way through that trip one of my partners turned to me and said "how can we share this experience to the folks back home?" I don't think we can. All I can do is to encourage each of you to immerse yourselves directly and responsibly with the earth, be it through walking, gardening or concentrating on breathing via yoga, meditation or prayer.

But whatever method you use, bring earth to life in your imagination and in the way you live. Live lightly and fully on this earth. And may you find no sand in your wetsuit as you paddle your way through life.

## **CLOSING RESPONSIVE READING #551**

***Earth teach me stillness  
As the grasses are stilled with light***

*Earth teach me suffering  
As old stones suffer with  
Memory*

***Earth teach me caring  
As parents who secure their young***

*Earth teach me courage  
As the tree which stands all  
Alone*

***Earth teach me limitation  
As the ant which crawls on the ground***

*Earth teach me freedom  
As the eagle which soars in the  
Sky*

***Earth teach me resignation  
As the leaves which die in the fall.***

*Earth teach me regeneration  
As the seed which rises in the  
Spring*

***Earth teach me to forget myself  
As melted snow forgets its life.***

*Earth teach me to remember  
Kindness as dry fields weep  
With rain.*