

Everybody's Gotta Eat Somebody

A Sermon on the Miracle of Life and Our Place in It

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Readings: Four poems by Mary Oliver interwoven into the sermon
“Some Questions You Might Ask” – “Mysteries” – “Praying” – “The Fish”

Those of you who knew Barbara Yardley, know that she was an avid environmentalist, vegetarian, and animal lover. She once told me she stopped watching the Nature Channel because it was all animals killing other animals. My reply was, “Barbara, everybody’s gotta eat somebody,” and the title of this sermon was born. Amy Rands who teaches in our church school said to me, “Whenever I have to teach seventh graders about the concept of irony, I ask them one question: ‘You have to kill to live. Irony or necessity or coincidence?’”

So I invite you to consider this proposition: Every living thing—human, animal, plant, microbe—has to eat some other living thing in order to survive. The question is not “whether” we take other life in order to survive, but what our priorities are in doing it and the values from which those priorities are created. I don’t have answers to give you; I don’t think we all have to have the same answer. As Francis David, European Unitarian leader in the sixteenth century said, “We don’t have to think alike to love alike.” But our Unitarian Universalist faith offers some principles and perspectives to help you develop your answers.

Albert Schweitzer achieved international recognition as a theologian, philosopher, biblical scholar, musician, and physician. His primary religious affiliation was Lutheran, but in 1961 he became a member of the Unitarian Universalist Church of the Larger Fellowship. Writing of his principle of “reverence for life,” Schweitzer said: “Whenever I injure life of any kind I must be quite clear as to whether this is necessary or not. I ought never to pass the limits of the unavoidable, even in apparently insignificant cases. The countryman who has mowed down a thousand blossoms in his meadow as fodder for his cows should take care that on the way home, he does not, in wanton pastime, switch off the head of a single flower, for in so doing he injures life without being forced to do so by necessity.”

That could be the text for this sermon, and it requires us to look at life in a way that is very different from the traditional biblical one in which “Man,” is told to “...have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over every living thing that moveth upon the earth.” That’s from the first chapter of Genesis—a similar theme is found in the eighth Psalm.

That egocentric male-centered view of the universe is reflected in a comment by nineteenth century anthropologist Alfred Wallace—a contemporary of Charles Darwin and Mark Twain—that the whole universe was made for man, that the human race was the culmination of all creation, and that everything was created for man’s benefit.

Mark Twain responded: “Mr. Wallace has proved that the universe was made for this world, and that this world was made for man. There being 22 billion microbes in each man, and feeding upon him, we now perceive who the whole outfit was made for.”

Contrast that egocentric male image of Genesis and the Psalms with our UUA Seventh Principle: “We, the member congregations of the Unitarian Universalist Association, covenant to affirm and promote ... Respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part.” Note that the one implies male ownership and domination of the environment while the other perspective is one of humans being a part of it—not independent but “interdependent.”

Isn’t this the philosophy behind all of our acts and concerns as we live our social principles? I cannot think of a single Unitarian Universalist social concern that is not grounded in this principle of reverence for life and respect for living things. War and peace, genocide, poverty and economic justice, hunger, animal rights, social justice, gender and racial issues, child abuse, spousal abuse, war crimes, environmental concerns, etc.—every one of these as well as our historic Unitarian and Universalist positions on issues such as slavery and women’s suffrage grow from our perspective on the miracle of life and our place in that miracle.

Last Tuesday was the 199th anniversary of the birth of Charles Darwin and today is “Evolution Sunday,” created by a number of ministers and churches to affirm the harmony between religion and science, particularly evolution, an appropriate time to consider how we fit into this miracle of life.

Our Beacon Press has published several volumes of poetry by Mary Oliver, almost all of them about how, as one form of life, we view other living things with whom

we share this earth. I read five volumes of them aloud to Helen last summer, out-of-doors, at our family cabin in the Tahoe Sierras. In her poem, “Some Questions You Might Ask,” Mary Oliver raises some of the questions you might wish to consider. Here is what she wrote:

Is the soul solid, like iron?
Or is it tender and breakable, like
the wings of a moth in the beak of the owl?
Who has it, and who doesn't?
I keep looking around me.
The face of the moose is as sad
as the face of Jesus.
The swan opens her white wings slowly.
In the fall, the black bear carries leaves into the darkness.
One question leads to another.
Does it have a shape? Like an iceberg?
Like the eye of a hummingbird?
Does it have one lung, like the snake and the scallop?
Why should I have it and not the anteater
who loves her children?
Why should I have it and not the camel?
Come to think of it, what about the maple trees?
What about the blue iris?
What about all the little stones, sitting alone in the moonlight?
What about roses, and lemons, and their shining leaves?
What about the grass?

What does it mean to be alive? How do our lives relate to other lives? Is the whole earth—perhaps even the whole universe—one large organism of which each plant, each animal, each person, each microbe is a tiny part? Sophia Fahs, an early twentieth century pioneer in Unitarian and Universalist religious education puts it this way:

We pause in reverence before the wonder of life—
the wonder of this moment—
the mystery of birth—
the crocus, the germ, the puppy, the human babe—
each with a will to live—
each resisting irritation—
each wanting to feel pleased.

Plants are alive, animals are alive, worms are alive, germs are alive, molds are alive; we are alive, but our life forms are very different. What pet owner has not wondered what his/her pet is thinking, wondered what it would be like to be inside their pet's mind? When our dog curls up on her bed at the foot of ours every night wearing the same hair coat she has worn all day does she wonder why her idiotic humans take off their clothes and put on different ones before going to bed?

The late Paul Tillich tells a wonderful story about sitting under a tree with an eminent botanist who remarked, "I wish I knew this tree." Tillich expressed his surprise, noting that the botanist probably knew as much about the tree as anyone in the world. "No, that's not what I mean," said the botanist, "I am alive and this tree is alive, but we are very different. I wish I could know what this tree's life means to the tree." Mary Oliver makes the same point in her poem, "Mysteries," when she writes:

How does the seed-grain feel
when it is just beginning to be wheat?
And how does the catbird feel
when the blue eggs break and become little catbirds, ...
And how does the turtle feel as she covers her eggs
with the sweep of her feet,
then leaves them for the world to take care of?
Does she know her accomplishment?

There is a huge Western White Pine growing within inches of the deck of our cabin in the Tahoe Sierras and towering above the cabin. Thinking about that tree and the forest fire that missed us by about 400 feet, I said to Helen, "I wonder if it was scared." No, a plant doesn't have the kind of brain and neurological system that we have, but in its own way it is aware of and interacts with its environment. When it is dry the plant's roots go deeper in search of water. When I look out our bedroom window on a winter morning I can tell how cold it is by how tightly the leaves of the rhododendron are curled up. Stop watering or over-water a potted plant and you will soon see that it "knows" and responds. A plant may not have a brain like ours, but it is alive and has the capacity to interact with and relate to its surroundings.

Plants are as much alive as animals, just in a different way. Vegetarianism is a fine choice—that nice green salad may be better for your health than that rare filet mignon—but the lettuce plant was just as much a living thing as was the Black

Angus steer. Everybody's gotta eat somebody, so how do we prioritize whom we will kill in order to live?

Jonathan Swift famous for *Gulliver's Travels* (If you want to see a parallel to our gladiatorial Presidential primaries, reread how the Lilliputians chose their leaders!) wrote a satirical essay on the poverty and starvation in Ireland. The essay was titled: "A Modest Proposal For Preventing The Children of Poor People in Ireland From Being Aburden to Their Parents or Country, and For Making Them Beneficial to The Public." His "modest proposal"? Cook and eat the children; considering the misery in which they were living he thought they were better off dead, there would be fewer mouths to feed, and they would provide an additional source of food. "I have been assured by a very knowing American of my acquaintance in London," he wrote, "that a young healthy child well nursed is at a year old a most delicious, nourishing, and wholesome food, whether stewed, roasted, baked, or boiled."

Of course Swift's satirical "Modest Proposal" is not much worse than what the human race in our time is actually doing to its children with wars, poverty, hunger, and disease—but that's another sermon for another time.

Mary Oliver sets a tone for our attitude toward living things in her poem, "Praying"—really on how to pray. She writes:

It doesn't have to be
the blue iris; it could be
weeds in a vacant lot, or a few
small stones; just
pay attention, then patch
a few words together and don't try
to make them elaborate, this isn't
a contest but the doorway
into thanks, and a silence in which
another voice may speak.

In Eskimo tradition a prayer of thanks is made to the seal that is about to have its life taken. Schweitzer notes in the context of his "reverence for life" philosophy that as a medical missionary he has to destroy living things to protect the health of his patients. The Dali Lama, asked if he would swat a mosquito biting him, replied, "No, but I can do this" (flipping the mosquito off his hand). Schweitzer's litmus test of whether one "injures life without being forced to do so by necessity"

is the key point. If you follow that principle how does it affect your understanding of the miracle of life and your place in it?

Many years ago on my first trip to California I saw a cross-section from a 4,000-year-old redwood tree. Dates of historic events were marked on the tree's rings. Most startling to me was the birth of Christ halfway through that tree's life. I stood in awe in the presence of something that had been alive that long. And then I saw a photograph of five men who, in 1835, cut the largest redwood tree in the Calaveras Grove just for fun, for the challenge of it. That tree had been alive and growing for some 2,000 years and they destroyed it just to see if it could be done. I looked at that picture and wept, tears of both grief and anger.

Why? Why is it fun to kill something, to destroy a life? In my teens I hunted small game— rabbits, squirrels, pheasants—and yes, my mother cooked them and we ate them. But I have no illusions that I hunted for food; I hunted for fun. Now I'm a “reformed” hunter—and they are as obnoxious as reformed cigarette smokers!—but looking back I find it hard to understand why I thought killing anything was fun. Weeding your garden may be a necessity if you want the vegetables or flowers to thrive, but why do we rip them out with such relish and glee? R-r-r-r-r-rip! “Take that you weed!”

Yes, we can and must prioritize life—human beings outrank mosquitoes. But I wonder if killing life with relish at the lower forms doesn't condition us to think killing is fun and thus evolve into killing life with relish at the higher forms. How great a leap is it from killing an animal for fun and the speech that General George Patton made to his troops sixty-five years ago during World War II: “Battle is the most magnificent competition in which a human being can indulge. It brings out all that is best; it removes all that is base.” What in God's name have we come to when anyone could make such a statement about war?!

Everybody's gotta eat somebody—but how do we create priorities responsibly? No one can answer that question for you, but the principles we have considered this morning can help you find your answer. Here they are again: First, Schweitzer's philosophy of “reverence for life” the principle of taking life only when it is necessary. Second, the UUA Seventh Principle, “Respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part.” Third, seeing life as a whole, a miracle of which we are a part, and finding empathy with the other parts of that life and being nourished by the mystery of the whole that is too great a miracle for us to completely understand.

I close with another poem by Mary Oliver, “The Fish”:

The first fish
I ever caught
would not lie down
quiet in the pail
but flailed and sucked
at the burning
amazement of the air
and died
in the slow pouring off
of rainbows. Later
I opened his body and separated
the flesh from the bones
and ate him. Now the sea
is in me: I am the fish, the fish
glitters in me; we are
risen, tangled together, certain to fall
back to the sea. Out of pain,
and pain, and more pain
we feed this feverish plot, we are nourished
by the mystery.

Our closing hymn is number 207, “Earth Was Given as a Garden”

Closing Words: *Upstream* by Mary Oliver

One tree is like another tree, but not too much. One tulip is like the next tulip, but not altogether. More or less like people—a general outline, then the stunning individual strokes. Hello Tom, hello Andy. Hello Archibald Violet, and Clarissa Bluebell. Hello Lilian Willow, and Noah, the oak tree I have hugged and kissed every first day of spring for the last thirty years. And in reply its thousands of leaves tremble. What a life is ours! *Doesn't anybody in the world anymore want to get up in the middle of the night and sing?*