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306 Earth Ethics
Covenant of UU Pagans Lecture

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When I was a teenager, I enjoyed watching the television series *Wagon Train*. Each program was packed full of personal stories about settlers heading west to make a new life for themselves. The camera angles were often majestic, revealing to my eager eyes the vast length and breath of the Great Plains. Only after I grew up and read Ralph K. Andrist's book, *The Long Death: The Last Days of the Plains Indians*, did I realize that one camera angle was consistently missed when filming the life of the settlers.

If a camera had been placed on one of the bluffs overlooking the Great Plains of what would later be called Kansas, Nebraska and Wyoming, the television viewer would have seen an unbroken stream of garbage from one horizon to the other.

Day after day the settlers littered the trail with discarded tools, clothing, furniture, broken down wagons, food of all kinds, thrown out as equipment broke down. Baggage was discarded to compensate for the reduced pulling power of weakening animals. Animals gave out and died [and] the fresh smell of spring grass was blotted out by the corruption of rotting flesh [15-17]. Not surprisingly, the buffalo fled and as a result, the Pawnees, whose range was being crossed by these settlers, lost the major source of their food and they began to die without a shot being fired.

The camera captured none of these scenes on film because the production team lacked three things:

One. earth ethics,

Two. A desire to depict the ecological disasters and loss of life that occurs when earth ethics' rules for right living are ignored, and

Three. Courage.

I wish to focus our attention on this third element: the courage required to practice earth ethics.

Let's begin with three definitions of earth ethics.

The first is by Larry Rasmussen, the Reinhold Niebuhr Professor of Social Ethics at Union Theological Seminary in New York City. His definition of earth ethics is found in his award-winning book, *Earth Community Earth Ethics*.

Earth Ethics, writes Rasmussen, is fidelity to earth. It is the awareness that the "world around us is also within. We are an expression of it; it is an expression of us. We are made of it; we eat,

drink, and breathe it. And someday, when dying day comes, we will each return the favor and begin our role as a long, slow meal for a million [others].

Rasmussen elaborates. Earth is bone of our bone and flesh of our flesh. This is not 'environment' so much as the holy mystery of creation, made for and by all earth's creatures together' [xii]. In sum, earth ethics is human life lived according to the awareness that all that exists, coexists [324].

Our second definition is given to us by the Zen Buddhist master Thich Nhat Hanh in his book, *The Heart of Understanding*. Thich Nhat Hanh calls earth ethics "interbeing" and uses a sheet of paper from the book to explain what he means.

"If you are a poet," Thich Nhat Hanh begins, "you will see clearly that there is a cloud floating in this sheet of paper. Without a cloud, there will be no rain; without rain, the trees cannot grow; and without trees, we cannot make paper. The cloud is essential for the paper to exist. If the cloud is not here, the sheet of paper cannot be here either. So we can say that the cloud and the paper *inter-are*.... You cannot point out one thing that is not here [in this sheet of paper] - time, space, the earth, the rain, the minerals in the soil, the sunshine, the cloud, the river, the heat. Everything coexists with this sheet of paper.... This sheet of paper is, because everything else is." Thich Nhat Hanh can thus conclude that when we say something with our whole being, and not just with our mouth or our intellect, we can transform the world [3-4,50].

The third definition of earth ethics is my own and it emphasizes the most intimate aspect of earth that we know: our own bodies. Earth ethics is the awareness that our bodies are astir with creation. Faith in this creation means affirmation of our bodies as the place where the touch of another becomes a sweep of feeling, a flux of sentiment, a current of ideas, the matter of engagement first felt. Each body-based feeling is a new creation of the world and as such, is an expression of the primal fact of human life: it is impossible to be alone because our bodies are an engagement with life.

We can think of each of these definitions as a call to return to early childhood in order to "learn anew [--as Larry Rasmussen would say --] the categories we think *with* when we think *about* things. Each is an invitation to go back to the time when our Unitarian Universalist interdependent web of life of which we are a part -- was Charlotte's web, and we had a talking relationship with spiders, and a host of other non-human persons. In my own life, such a return would take me back to the time in which I refused to set on the cracks in the sidewalk because that's where the ant people lived.

We smile easily when we recall our nonhuman friendships and the long childhood conversations we had with them. This was the time when we still knew that our bodies were a part of the world and as such could communicate with other bodies without having to use human words or concepts. Our world was known through the sentient language of touch, sound, and sentiment. All of us lived in this world as a child. At least for a while. But as we grew older, more and more experiences with the adult world taught us to forget this world of sentient, mysterious delight. Fortunately, not all of us forget the language of this world of feeling.

Listen to the way in which developmental psychologist Daniel N. Stern, in his book *The Interpersonal World of the Child, A view from Psychoanalysis and Developmental Psychology*, explains how he, as an adult remained, to use his word, bilingual:

"When I was seven or so, I remember watching an adult try to deal with an infant of one or two years. At that moment it seemed to me so obvious what the infant was all about, but the adult seemed not to understand it at all. It occurred to me that I was at a pivotal age. I knew the infant's "language" but also knew the adult's. I was still "bilingual" and wondered if that facility had to be lost as I grew older. This early incident has a history of its own. As an infant, I spent considerable time in the hospital, and in order to know what was going on, I became a watcher, a reader of the nonverbal. I never did grow out of it (ix)."

Earth ethics calls us to return to this nonverbal realm of human experience and retrieve our bilingual skills, our ability to know and affirm the world of which we are a part with our bodies as well as with our minds. But to do this takes great courage because we have to reaffirm what Stern calls our sense of a core self. According to Stern, by the age of two or three months, each of us developed a sense of ourselves as a separate, physical, coherent being with our own feelings and physical history. Stern calls this sense of self our "physical self" and the "existential bedrock of interpersonal relations. This sense of self has also been called the "ecological self" to emphasize its relational quality. It is this "ecological self" that makes us part of the natural world. Strictly speaking, we should not even call this sense of a core self an it because the content of this self is a moment of relating, an act of life itself. Psychoanalytic theorist George Butterworth emphasizes the noncognizability of this activity notes that "this core self -- this ecological self--] is neither a cognitive construct, nor a concept of the self, nor linguistic or even self knowledge. It is the foundation, in perception, action, and emotion, for the more elaborated aspects of self that are yet to be developed. In short, the ecological self is the bedrock of our life because it is our life as the ongoing experience of being in relationship. This is the self that knows that to be is to relate, to coexist, to inter-be, to be astir of creation. Earth ethics begins here, with the experience of being part of the world we know.

As adults, we take this core activity of relating for granted. It is out of sight and out of mind. But it is more difficult to ignore this basic fact of life when we are in the presence of an infant - because we notice that if we smile, the infant smiles back. And if we respond with an even broader smile, so, too, will the infant, and these moments of body-based, affect responses and actions will crescendo into laughter.

Through numerous experiences like this, the infant learns that other core selves can regulate its own moods, but it never forgets that its experiences are its own. And so its sense of being a discrete entity does not collapse as a result of such interactions. Why? The basic answer is: *difference*. The infant's core sense of self is not ruptured because of the difference between its expectation of what its caretaker will do and what the caretaker actually does.

We now have to pay particular attention to this experience of difference because it is here that we can begin to understand why it takes courage to practice earth ethics . The simplest way to understand the human experience of difference is to recall your own experience when you picked up a package that you assumed was heavier that it actually was. As you picked up the package

you were mildly startled by the difference between the actual weight, and your expectation of what it would weight and so you made a series of muscular and mental adjustments in order to handle the actual weight.

Every day, we repeatedly make such muscular and mental adjustments to engage a world that exceeds our conceptual grasp until we engage it with our senses. We then adjust our grasp symbolically and sentimentally in an interplay of encounters between our selves and the world in which we are both astir and stirred. Our grasp of the world, quite literally, takes place in this realm of difference between ourselves and that which is beyond our subjective experiences, thoughts, expectations and estimations.

Stern's concept of a sense of a core self highlights the difference between the infant's sense of a core self and that of its caretaker. To make the point, Stern gives us a thought experiment:

Suppose that an infant experienced joyful cycles of anticipation and resolution only with [its] mother, and that [its] mother always regulated these cycles in the exact same way (virtually impossible). That infant would be in a tricky spot. In this particular, unchanging activity, mother would be sensed as a core other because her behavior would obey most of the laws (agency, coherence, continuity) that specify others as against selves. However, the infant could not be sure to what extent his or her feeling state was an invariant property of self or of mother's behavior since both would invariably accompany this feeling.

In this impossible situation, the mother's action would be indistinguishable from the infant's expectation. And so the infant would have no unexpected feelings that alerted the infant to the presence of another person who could not be reduced to its own expectations. Stated technically, we could say that, in this case, the other could not be taken into account "as a thing in itself" - someone with an independent center of self-generating activity. Someone, in short, with her or his own discrete way of relating to others. Instead, the infant might feel as if it were relating only to itself.

We must now imagine an opposite scenario: the adult in the world of the infant cannot make distinctions between itself and its own child's feelings. Psychoanalytic theorist Alice Miller describes this scenario in her book *Prisoners of Childhood: The Drama of the Gifted Child and the Search for the True Self*, when noting that the child needs to be loved unconditionally. But such love is virtually impossible for a great adults to give, because they did not experience this kind of unconditional affirmation during their own childhood, and thus cannot provide such an affirmation for their own children. Instead, such parents seek an object for the gratification of their own unmet need for affirmation and turn to their own children for this affirmation.

Newborn babies are ideal for fulfilling this parental need because neonates are, as Miller notes, "completely dependent on [parents], and since [parental] caring is essential to [their] existence," they do all they can to avoid losing them.

Thus, from the very first day onward, infants will muster all their resources to this end, like a small plant that turns toward the sun in order to survive. Adapting its needs and its sense of itself entirely to its caretaker's, the child does not develop its own independent sense of a core self.

Instead, the child learns to suppress its sense of feeling different and denies its own personal sense of history that does not conform to its parent's expectations, thus impairing its core ability to relate to others while keeping its own personal integrity intact. The emotions, affections, sensations, tones, moods, attitudes, and so much more that fill every moment with an irreplaceable presence called "me" as an unrepeatable instant called "now"-- are lost. Differences between parental expectation and the child's expressions are compromised and begin to disappear.

The child thus becomes a figment of the parent's imagination, a false self. In short, it becomes the perfect child. Someone who conforms uncomplainingly to what others think is best for it. The cost of this conformity is that everything that is uniquely different about the child's sense of its own core self is threatened. To protect itself, the child thus begins to deadened, hide, deny, split off from consciousness, or in some way neglect its feelings that differ from its parents and caretakers . Otherwise, so the child has learned, it will be punished. It thus denies its own feelings in order to protect itself, and as a result, loses touch with the magic, mystery, and beauty of the world it used to know when its body was astir with creation and the child knew it.

Now we can begin to understand why it takes courage to practice earth ethics: We have to retrieve our earliest feelings of delight and pleasure in feeling the presence of others as a part of our own core sense of self. And to retrieve these feelings, we first have to recall how we lost them. We lost them as our bodies were being gendered, raced, and classed by our own caretakers. This is my point. In order to practice earth ethics, we need courage to free our own bodies from the cultural restrictions that forced us to flee from our true feelings as sentient beings who are part of an interdependent web of life of the entire world.

I will use a story from my new book, *Learning to be White: Money, Race, and God in America*, to demonstrate what kind of courage is needed in order to practice earth ethics.

The story is about a woman whom I call Dorothy. I met Dorothy, a middle-aged EuroAmerican woman, at a dinner party in an Upper West Side Manhattan apartment. We had been introduced by our host: she was a "poet," whose most recent volume of poetry was prominently displayed on the coffee table in front of the couch on which we were seated. I was a "writer" working on white identity issues. After our host departed, Dorothy wanted to know what a "white identity" was. She did not have one, she assured me. She was simply an American. I could help her find hers, I responded, if she wanted to know what it looked like. Her interest piqued, she accepted the offer. And so, I asked her to recollect her earliest memory of knowing what it means to be white. After a little excavation, she finally found the memory:

When Dorothy was five, she and her family lived in Mexico for a year. Although her family's housekeeper brought her daughter, who was also five, to work, Dorothy's parents forbade her to play with the little girl. Dorothy, in fact, was never allowed to play with any Mexican children, and she and her two brothers were forbidden to venture beyond the gates of their backyard. Dorothy remembered her feelings of sadness and regret. The Mexican children and their parents seemed so much more at ease with themselves and each other. They seemed warm and tactile, unlike her own family, whose manners and expressions were cold and constrained.

Dorothy told me she had not thought of these feelings in years. She confessed that she now recalled how often, during that year, she wished to be brown. I suggested that the term *white* might not mean anything consciously to her *today* because it had too much negative meaning for her when she was five. She agreed and now expressed surprise that she had not written about these feelings, memories or experiences in her work. She said much of her life had been devoted to freeing herself from the emotional strictures imposed on her by her parents. Most of her poetry was about them and the way they had drained life out of her. She reiterated her astonishment that this set of memories had not surfaced in her work. As she blushed, the resurrected feelings of the child seemed to disappear.

"You know," Dorothy now said pointedly, "you are the first black I've ever felt comfortable with talking about racism." I said, "Why is it so easy for you to think of me as a 'black,' and yet until a few minutes ago you could not make sense of thinking about yourself as a 'white'? And Further -- were we really talking about racism? And if so, whose? Your parents'? Yours? That of the five-year-old girl who wanted to be brown?"

Dorothy was silent for a long moment.

"I now understand what I've just done, and I'm horrified," she confessed. Dorothy was horrified because she now realized that if I were a black, she, too, must have a race: the one that had enraged her as a child. Dorothy realized that she had indeed learned to think of others *and* herself in racial terms. Not surprisingly, Dorothy now confessed that she was afraid to say anything else -- not because I might condemn her, she said, but much more tellingly because, as she put it, "I might not like what I hear myself saying." Her insights had outstripped her racial vocabulary. To find the language for these insights, Dorothy would have to return to the world of feelings she had when she was five - before she had conformed to her parents' wishes and became white.

I do not have to tell you why such a return to this child takes courage because each of us knows what happens to bodies in this country that are not thought of as white.

When we practice earth ethics we have to return to our childhood experiences and remember what the race, gender, and class lessons made us forget - the marvelous way it felt to relate to differences. Differences define us, make us individual moments of creation. Unique, beautiful, whole. Most of us spend a life time trying to forget these feelings lest we be punished again.

This is why it takes courage to practice the earth ethics we preach. We have to retrieve what we lost: the feelings of kinship with the rest of the world. Only then will we discover the marvelous reality that allows us to show the world - as a Buddhist might say - with the face with which we were born - instead of littering it and destroying it and the rest of life as we deny the truth of our lives. As UU we are encouraged to practice what we preach by the 7th principle of our faith. Because this is a religious value, we are called upon to help each other to live it and celebrate so that we and the world can be one healthy family again.

Endnotes

1. Ibid., 26.

2. Ibid., 125.
3. George Butterworth, "At Ecological Perspective on the Origins of the Self," in *The Body and the Self* (London: A Bradford Book, The MIT Press, 1998), 10 1.
4. Martin Buber created the primary word "I-Thou" to refer to our awareness of ourselves as mutually engaged with another person or thing with a different core center of experience. Buber calls our attempt to think of ourselves as an isolated, discrete "I" an "I-It" attitude toward the world.
5. Stem, *The Interpersonal World of the Infant*, 10 1.
6. Ibid., 102-3.
7. Ibid., 104-111.
8. Thandeka, *The Embodied Self*, 70.
9. Ibid., 106.
10. D. W. Winnicott, "On The Use of an Object," in *Psychoanalytic Explorations*, eds. Clare Winnicott, Ray Shepherd, Madeleine Davis (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989), 22 1.
11. Ibid., 7-8, *passim*.
12. Ibid., 8. The infant, in short, can be emotionally and physically abandoned. Or as psychoanalytic theorist D, W. Winnicott notes: "When it is said that a baby is dependent, and at the beginning absolutely dependent, and this is really meant, then it follows that what the environment is like has significance because it is a part of the baby." See D. W. Winnicott, "The Mother-Infant Experience of Mutuality," in *Psychoanalytic Explorations*, ed. Clare Winnicott, Ray Shepherd, Madeleine Davis (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989), 253.
13. Ibid., 8. 5. Two important studies on race awareness in young children are particularly worth noting here. Anthropologist Mary Ellen Goodman's book, *Race Awareness in Young Children* (New York: Collier Books, 1962); and psychologist William E. Cross, Jr.'s, book *Shades of Black: Diversity in African American Identity* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1991).