

# Spiritual Beings in the Interdependent Web

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I do what must seem to many rather mundane work. I – with my daughter – offer management services to condominium homeowner associations. We collect money every month from about 1,000 homeowners. We answer their questions, take care of maintenance problems at their properties and, not infrequently, are called upon to settle issues concerning noise, pets, parking, landscaping, decorating, imagined affronts and just about anything else. It would be easy to see these matters as petty, but I *know* that each issue brought to us is important to the other person. In their mind, it affects their finances, their home, their life, their environment. How I respond affects them and these things. I have incredible power to affect a number of people, their homes and their lives. The good will generated by my quick and kind response just might get passed on to the other's family, co-workers or neighbors. Likewise, my less than kindly response might also be passed on to others. Several such responses just might set the tone for the environment of their condominium community. I try to be ever aware that I am but a piece of a much bigger picture.

Nature has more exciting examples of these inter-relationships. I very recently learned that giraffes in sub-Saharan Africa are especially fond of eating the leaves of the Massasa tree. As long as not too many of the leaves on a particular tree are consumed, the tree and the giraffe cohabit quite harmoniously. But – when a hungry giraffe consumes so many of the leaves that the tree's well-being is threatened, the tree raises the acidic content in its leaves. The giraffes no longer find them tasteful and stop eating them. Not only that - if there is a wind, other trees downwind of the Massasa tree raise the levels of acid in *their* leaves, thus sending the giraffes on to another grove of trees to graze. All of these relationships are complex. Every species of plant, animal and human has a part to play in the health of the whole.

This is the interdependent web of life. It is a fact of our existence - an interconnection of every facet of existence. Family systems affect the outlook and behavior of individuals. Wars in the Middle East affect our local economies. History has been shaped by not only events and prominent leaders but by cultural and other forces as well. It was the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King who said, "We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied to a single garment of destiny. Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere."

This is the interdependent web of life. This is not a mere poetic metaphor. It is an essential way of understanding the world. Shortly before the Unitarian

Universalists adopted the image of the interdependent web in the 7th Principle, a striking account of that same web, and how it affects us and we affect it, appeared in a science fiction novel by Brian Bates called *The Way of Wyrd*. A sorcerer explains it thus:

All things are connected as in the finest web of a spider. The slightest movement on any thread can be discerned from all points in the web. The flight of ravens trembles the threads that connect indivisibly with the affairs of men...The balance and eternal cycles of night and day, fire and frost, winter and summer, woman and man, weak and strong, moon and sun, death and life [are] forces that form the end points of a gigantic web of fibers which covers all worlds [and] passes through everything. Start at any point on the web and find that you are at the center. All our lives are locked together in the shimmering web in which all things are enmeshed, and connected to one another. Everything vibrates the web, whether it is an act of the gods or the movement of the tiniest insect.” (pp. 83, 127)

Everything is connected.

We, as Unitarians, covenant to affirm and promote respect for this interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part. This is our seventh principle.

It is a religious statement and this statement necessitates, according to Rev. Barbara Merritt, certain fundamental spiritual truths and disciplines – namely humility, compassion, respect and an acknowledgment of the consequences of our actions.

The first of these is **humility**. If we are part of something larger than ourselves, then the arrogance that we are self-made and self-sufficient must end. Rev. Merritt says we must give up our delusion that we have control, our imaginative belief that we are safer when we are alone, and our congenital preference for self-centered assessments. We need to open our eyes to our interdependence. In humility, can we invite help, grace, and mercy? Can we confess that we do not wish to live stubbornly alone, lost in selfishness? Together we can seek to be strong in ways that open our hearts and our eyes. We can discover the friends, companions, and assistance that accompany us on each step of our path.

Another spiritual discipline inherent in the seventh principle is a vastly increased **compassion** - the cognizance and recognition of all existence. When we open our eyes to the interdependent web of existence, we get a serious dose of reality. We become aware not only of sunsets, singing birds and towering trees. In this web, we find the retroviruses that cripple and kill, and Alzheimer's, and the ultimate death of everyone we love, and hurricanes, and stock market crashes, and relatives we aren't fond of, and wars. This

interdependent web is not just a romantic tapestry of nature at its most beautiful and inspiring.

The web of existence in which we breathe, move, and have our being includes the often violent struggles for domination and survival, as well as breathtaking sunsets and the smile of a newborn baby.

This web of existence is good and evil, comforting and terrible, a web of life, and a web of death. The seventh principle asks us to have a clear and affirming relationship with what is real. We must learn the spiritual discipline of living with **respect**; respectfully entering into relationship with the many conditions and challenges of this world.

To have respect for all life does not mean that we understand all that goes on in this creation. It certainly does not mean that we approve of all behavior. Surely the interdependent web will break our hearts as well as restore our souls. To have respect for life itself, for *all* of existence is to recognize a relationship, a covenant, a connection. To attempt to be respectful is fundamentally a faith stance. The word “respect” comes from the root “to look back” – to regard. In this faithful commitment, we promise to pay attention. We offer our acknowledgment of reality. Oftentimes, what begins as simply a respectful regard for what is true and real can expand into gratitude and reverence for what is true and real.

The spiritual discipline of offering our respectful attention to the interdependent web of life will automatically lead those who wish to advance the seventh principle into the most fundamental of religious practices; **acknowledging the consequences of our actions and choices**. Jose Ortega y Gasset stated the connection clearly in *The Viking book of Aphorism*: Tell me to what you pay attention, and I will tell you who you are. What we choose to pay attention to determines to a large extent what we become. We are not only a part of the grand design of natural selection and evolution; by the decisions we make, by the way we take care of, ignore, or increase the brokenness of our world, we ourselves are profoundly changed.

Seemingly inconsequential human actions, like throwing a candy wrapper on the grass, can alter the beauty and well-being of a landscape. But such small, thoughtless acts also damage the perpetrators. In the Hebrew scripture, the proverb is simply stated: “Whoever digs a pit will fall into it, and a stone will come back on the one who starts it rolling.” We can look at the holy scriptures of any of the world religions and find this principle. Call it cause and effect, or karma, or compensation. We cannot harm the earth without harming ourselves. We cannot do violence without that violence eventually having its effect on us. Our own Ralph Waldo Emerson said: “The thief steals from himself. The swindler swindles himself.”

If we put poisons into the natural environment, we will eventually find that our own water and air is contaminated. On the other hand, if we plant trees and flowers, and protect open green spaces, the resulting beauty will bless those who do the gardening as well as the rest of the world. When we are a part of healing the earth, we will find ourselves being healed. When we damage the environment, we and our children will bear the consequences.

As Unitarian Universalists, we have clearly stated our commitment to do what we can to repair, restore, and promote the web of life. This commitment necessitates the development of our humility, compassion, respect, and a heightened awareness of the consequences of our actions. Yet all of these fine principles are ultimately meaningless if they do not show up in our daily life, if they are not incarnate in our ordinary actions. The cost of affirming our relationship with all of existence is high and demanding. We must sacrifice our self-centeredness if we want to give our attention to a creation that is much larger than our own individuality. This immense sacred relationship in which we find ourselves requires at least a lifetime of labor. Learning to live in harmony with all living beings requires our hands-on involvement. Ideally, one should be able to tell simply by watching a Unitarian Universalist's daily behavior, whether or not this seventh principle has any relevance or meaning.

\_How do we greet the stranger in our midst? If every soul is a part of the human family, then surely we will welcome each with respect and dignity.

\_Are we kind and compassionate to other living creatures? A reverence for life, a commitment to live as non-violently as possible, leads us into life-giving relationships.

\_Do we attempt to promote and affirm the well-being of others, especially those who have fewer resources than we do? Those who are prosperous and strong have a moral obligation to work on behalf of life that is at greater risk – whether that life is an endangered species, or a neighbor in need.

\_Are we aware and careful of our own impact on the natural environment? We are told that when we throw something away, it always shows up somewhere on earth. There is no place that we can call “away”.

\_Do we actively seek new ways to reestablish our connections with those people we might have previously dismissed, belittled, or disparaged? Even our enemy occupies a place in the interdependent web.

\_Do we work not just the soil in our gardens, but also the ground of our hearts – paying attention to those circumstances which break us open, that call us to go deeper, that challenge us to be more responsive to our fellow men and fellow women? Living in “right-relationship”, acknowledging our common humanity, will make us more compassionate, more empathetic, and more fully

committed to protecting the interests of all generations; especially those yet to come.

The Unitarian novelist Herman Melville wrote, "We cannot live only for ourselves. A thousand fibers connect us....And among those fibers, as sympathetic threads, our actions run as causes, and they come back to us as effects. On a daily basis, we affect the web of all existence, just as we are affected by it."

To acknowledge the interdependent web of all existence is to admit that we live in the midst of mystery. We are supported and sustained by life forces we do not fully understand. We are acting upon others. We are affecting the quality of other lives in everything we do. Every one of us is a part of a much larger story than we can comprehend from our own limited perspective.

Rumi, the 13<sup>th</sup>-century Persian poet, wrote that the reality and the truth we seek are not far away. They are not found after death. They are not locked away in the secret incantations and rituals of priests and temples. They are not a gift reserved for the very wise or for the very good. The reality and truth we seek are close by. We are surrounded by a miraculous energy. We are a part of it.