

WHAT TOUCHES ONE AFFECTS US ALL

**A sermon by Rev. Elizabeth L. Greene
Boise Unitarian Universalist Fellowship**

March 28, 2004

Reading

*“From too much love of living,
Hope and desire set free,
Even the weariest river
Winds somewhere to the sea—“*

But we have only begun
To love the earth.

We have only begun
To imagine the fullness of life.

How could we tire of hope?
—so much is in bud.

How can desire fail?
—we have only begun

to imagine justice and mercy,
only begun to envision

how it might be
to live as siblings with
beast and flower,
not as oppressors.

Surely our river cannot already be hastening
into the sea of non being?

Surely it cannot
drag, in the silt,
all that is innocent?

Not yet, not yet—
there is too much broken
that must be mended,

too much hurt we have done
to each other
that cannot yet be forgiven.

We have only begun to know
the power that is in us if we
would join our solitudes in the
communion of struggle.

So much is unfolding that must
complete its gesture,

so much is in the bud.

Sermon

“What touches one affects us all.” “We affirm and promote the interdependent web of all existence.”

What does that mean, anyhow? We are Americans—American Unitarian Universalists at that—autonomous and individual. We are smart and strong, and seldom think of how little we can truly do alone. Our default worldview usually does not include a heart-and-gut level understanding of how much everyone and everything depends on everyone and everything else. And yet, when we explore the interdependencies of even a small and insignificant object, it can be boggling.

Take this T-shirt for example, advertising my candidacy for the Pacific Northwest District (PNWD) trusteeship on the Unitarian Universalist Association (UUA) Board.

There is cotton in it. Let us meditate on that for a moment. Somebody, a real person, as human as you or I, drives the machine that sows the seeds that are planted in the soil of this earth. We T-shirt owners depend on that person (and the earth), just as the person ultimately depends on us, buyers of garments made from the fruit of the worker’s labor.

Tracing our interdependence back through time, my shirt has a direct connection with one of our country’s gravest sins, the buying and selling of human beings. The cotton industry as we know it in the US flourished on the backs of African-American slaves. We may well be reminded also that slavery still thrives in parts of the modern world.

After the planting, other real persons work at jobs we do not do, but which must be done. They water, weed, apply pesticides, harvest, and transport the bolls to the cotton gin. In centuries past, animals would have been involved, now machines. People we do not know, but upon whom we depend, run the machinery that removes the seeds. We would not have our T-shirt without them, and they would not have work without T-shirt wearers such as we. The same is true between us and those who operate the machines that spin and weave and cut and sew.

Notice how intimately we are interconnected with a lot of machines and their history. This connection traces us back to the Industrial Revolution and the development of technology. Since this T-shirt is part of the garment industry, notorious both past and present for exploiting workers (very often children) in sweatshops, our interdependence

here can be uncomfortable. Here, we have ties to both the exploiter and the exploited, the powerful and the powerless—we look seriously at our connections to each and both.

(The technology connection also leads us to reflect on the saving of lives, to the easing of laborers' burdens, and to leisure time.)

So far, one small aspect of this T-shirt—one of its fabric constituents—reveals much interdependence. It reveals connections with nature, with the responsible and the irresponsible ways we humans treat the basic soil of our earth. It reveals ties to farmers and workers in countries where we have never set foot. It reveals connections with thousands of human beings, people with lives, feelings, joys and sorrows like ours: people who rejoice, just as we do, at love and growth and laughter; whose hearts grieve, just as ours do, at death and other partings; people like us who greet their days with enthusiasm or resignation, who go to bed fulfilled or depleted.

The T-shirt connects with a plethora of moral issues. We who buy these garments depend on exploited workers and/or those who receive a day's wage for a day's work. We depend on bosses, grasping and shortsighted or generous and visionary. They depend on us. Wherein lie our responsibilities?

All that interdependence stretches its web filaments out from only one physical component of the shirt. If we started meditating on its purpose—to get Rev. Elizabeth Greene of the Boise (ID) Unitarian Universalist Fellowship elected as Pacific Northwest District trustee to the Unitarian Universalist Association Board of Trustees—a whole raft of interconnections arise. My passionate commitment to the growth and maintenance of our faith tradition depends on the passion and dedication and hard work of Unitarians and Universalists all over the world—those who have gone before me and those who currently carry the torch of the flaming chalice. The souls who have preceded me—16th-century martyr Michael Servetus, 19th-century nursing pioneer Clara Barton, 18th-century statesman Thomas Jefferson, 19th-century human rights activist Lucy Stone—persevered in the faith that they could depend on future generations.

My campaign also connects with those who have, over the centuries, loved to laugh, even when the issues are serious. The back of my shirt reads: "PNWD: Naturally Greene."

Let us take a moment now, to bring the far-flung idea of interdependence closer to home, with a little personal meditation. Let us close our eyes, if it helps us reflect. Let us take a couple of breaths, feeling our selves here on these chairs in this room on this morning, sensing the people around us. In our own lives—in this room, this town, this valley—with whom do we share mutual dependence and mutual responsibility? Physically? Emotionally? Ethically?

Unless I take the time, consciously, to explore the complex webs that connect my specific life and the lives of millions of others—near and dear, far-flung and unknown—interdependence seems like an abstract concept, not particularly relevant to who I am.

It is so relevant, though, for at least a couple of reasons: I become a more generous and intentional participant in community, when I appreciate mutual dependence; and I understand better the Hebrew prophet's admonition to do justice and love mercy.

We human beings need our communities, and we need to be ever better members of them. In my personal reflection while preparing this sermon, I meditated for a bit on just my mutuality with this congregation. It is staggering. Least importantly but not incidentally, I depend on you all for my livelihood. Much more important is shared affection, commitment to hanging in together in honesty and compassion, willingness to be together in a certain mutual vulnerability. I am sustained and inspired by the honor of being invited into your lives at moments of deepest poignancy, when you are bereft, or overcome by joy or frightened or puzzled. I depend on that. You look to me to be fully present, to offer hope and perspective and assurance of our connection with something larger than we are. You depend on it.

As our amazed and humble hearts take in the complex miracle of our interdependencies, we resolve to be more generous, less critical, more loving.

And, just as we are led to joyful participation in our various communities, so too are we led toward making justice. Poet Denise Levertov says:

there is too much broken
that must be mended,

too much hurt we have done
to each other
that cannot yet be forgiven.

We have only begun to know
the power that is in us if we
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communion of struggle.

This morning, March 28, 2004, is Justice Sunday in many UU congregations across our land, celebrating the Unitarian Universalist Service Committee (UUSC) and its 50+ years of working for justice, equity and compassion. The UUSC is an institutional embodiment of the understanding that what touches one affects us all.

The Service Committee grew out of a 1933 resolution of the General Assembly of the American Unitarian Association (AUA) stating “we greatly deplore the persecution of the Jews in Germany as a violation of equity, tolerance and humanity.” The next year a resolution was passed regarding “the suffering of victims of religious and civil oppression.” In 1939, AUA representatives went to Europe to see what could be done. They worked tirelessly and often at their own peril to help refugees emigrate within and outside of the law. (It was during this time that the flaming chalice was designed to represent the UUSC, ultimately becoming our faith’s logo.)

Institutionalizing a structure to continue and support such work, the Unitarian Service Committee was formed in 1940 as a standing committee of the AUA, and it chose to be a non-neutral, proactive force for justice in the world. The Unitarian Service Committee and the Universalist Service Committee merged in 1963, just after the two denominations merged.

Today our Service Committee—fueled by the profound sense that our world is, indeed, one world—focuses its work in three areas: children’s rights, women’s rights, and

the rights of oppressed peoples. It chooses specific countries and regions on which to focus, based on the role that US policy played in today's human rights crises and the role that the United States can play to bring justice to the communities affected. It supports local human rights defenders, advocates with policy-makers for more just public policies, and educates and mobilizes UUs and others to work for justice.

For instance, the state of Burma in Southeast Asia has one of the harshest human rights records to date, with 40 years of military rule, the highest number of child soldiers of any country, and a record of abuse against minority groups and women. Over years of persistent advocacy, plus assistance to five Burmese human rights organizations, the UUSC has actually made a difference. Burma is only part of the Committee's wide-flung, "teach-them-to-fish" approach. (As opposed to just giving them fish.)

Thousands of individual UUs express their hunger and passion for justice through membership in the UUSC—hunger and passion born of feeling themselves part of the interconnected web of all existence. I invite you to visit our Social Action chair, Besse La Budde, in the back of the sanctuary after service, find out more about the Service Committee, learn more about the Burma project. Perhaps to join. (The Committee accepts no money from the UUA.)

I began this morning with a pretty complex model of interdependence, requiring us to take our minds and hearts to far-flung times and places to find those we depend upon, those who depend upon us. Sometimes it can be a little simpler, though. Consider this folktale from the beleaguered country of Burma.

It seems, once upon a time, that there was a giant bull elephant, who thought very highly of himself. He said, "I am the strongest in this forest. Therefore, I am the best."

In this forest was also a monkey, renowned for his agility and cleverness. He, too, thought highly of his abilities. "I am the cleverest and most agile. Therefore I am the best."

These two were friends of a sort, but their profound disagreement about who was superior got in their way, so they decided to take the issue to the wise old owl who also lived in their forest. They got to the owl's tree, and each animal outlined to the owl what was—each one said—only obvious. "I am the greatest." They asked the owl to be the judge.

The owl considered, then said to them, "See that huge banyan tree across our great river? Go get some fruit and bring it back to me"

The elephant and the monkey headed out to do the owl's bidding. They got to the edge of the river, looking over at the so-tall banyan tree. The monkey said, "I can't cross this huge river, I would get swept away." The elephant replied, "Don't worry about a thing, this is right up my alley. Jump on my back and we'll be over there in no time."

Sure enough, in no time, there they were on the other side. Now the elephant, looking waaay up into the tree said, "I can't reach the fruit, and I can't climb trees." The monkey replied, "Don't worry about a thing, this is right up my alley. I'll just dash up and get us a bunch of fruit."

So he did, holding their fruit as they returned across the river in the way they had come. They deposited the fruit on the ground at the foot of the owl and said excitedly, "Well, who is the greatest?" The owl looked at them. They looked back. The owl looked at them in wisely-annoyed expectation. They looked at each other.

"Oh," they said.

