

June 6, 2021

The Selfhood of Seeds, the Personhood of Plants, and Listening to our Kin

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Welcome and Invocation

Almost 3000 years ago, the psalmist wrote:

(Psalm 8: 1, 3-9)

¹O Lord, our Sovereign, how majestic is your name in all the earth! ³When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars that you have established; ⁴what are human beings that you are mindful of them, mortals that you care for them? ⁵Yet you have made them a little lower than God, and crowned them with glory and honor. ⁶You have given them dominion over the works of your hands; you have put all things under their feet, ⁷all sheep and oxen, and also the beasts of the field, ⁸the birds of the air, and the fish of the sea, whatever passes along the paths of the seas. ⁹O Lord, our Sovereign, how majestic is your name in all the earth!

Like that unknown psalmist so long ago, we, too, have foreknowledge of our own mortality, and place that awareness just beside our awe for the majestic Grandeur Being manifest all around us, which we too sometimes, even now, honor with the name of God. And we too share with the psalmist that uneasy wonder: *What are human beings that you are mindful of us, oh Lord, mortals that you care for us?*

*What are human beings -- as mortal as all the other works of God's hands and yet God-like in our dominion over them? The psalmist ends this 8th psalm as he began, by reasserting the majesty of the Lord, the name **he** gives to honor the Being that is made manifest -- in all the earth...he says.*

*And so, shall we too, today begin and end in such praise, as we ask again the ancient psalmist's question: **What are human beings that you are mindful of them, o Lord?**, and as we sing our first hymn: **How Great Thou Art, 8.***

Readings

Isaiah 40: 3-8 ³A voice cries out: "In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God. ⁴Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low; the uneven ground shall become level, and the rough places a plain. ⁵Then the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all people shall see it together, for the mouth of the Lord has spoken." ⁶A voice says, "Cry out!" And I said, "What shall I cry?" All people are grass, their constancy is like the flower of the field. ⁷The grass withers, the flower fades, when the breath of the Lord blows upon it; surely the people are grass.

Two quotations from Thomas Berry. Thomas Berry died 12 years ago in June and was an ordained priest, a cultural historian, scholar of world religions, author, and student of Earth history and evolution. He called himself a "geologist."

"The universe, the solar system, and planet Earth in themselves and in their evolutionary emergence constitute for the human community the primary revelation of that ultimate mystery whence all things emerge into being."^[4]
...The Universe is to be seen as a Communion of Subjects, rather than a collection of objects."

Matthew 17:20 truly I tell you, if you have faith the size of a mustard seed, you will say to this mountain, 'Move from here to there,' and it will move; and nothing will be impossible for you."

From an article in the May 2021 edition of Sojourners Magazine: 'White Supremacy and the Fate of the Earth,' by Randy Woodley, the author of *Shalom and the Community of Creation: An Indigenous Vision*. "Jesus taught his disciples to not rule over one another...but instead that each should become the servant of one another. This humility applies to creation as well. Our future depends on treating the whole community of creation as our relatives. The question remains: How can we become good relatives?"

Second Hymn: Earth Was Given As a Garden, 307

Pastoral Prayer

Holy One...Great Being. What are human beings that you are mindful of us? We like so many of our kind before us, hear a voice that cries out in the wilderness....teach how to listen, remind us when we forget, that the more than human Beings with us also speak of the majesty of your name, the greatness of Being. Open our eyes and ears, Holy One, for your glory all around us is revealed. Give us the faith of a mustard seed, that the impossible may be possible. That we may know how to be good relatives, that we may stand in the awesomeness of the question we, our ancestors and all our relations ask: What are human beings? Oh Lord? What is this Being-ness we share with all beings? Help us, Oh Holy, Great Being to hear the mouth of the Lord speaking and the majesty of that Name in all the voices that cry out. We pray together today for ears to hear. Amen.

Message

When our apple tree next to our front deck was in full bloom last month, my ten year old son Cazimer and I sat one afternoon under its blossoms, listening to the busy bees doing the passionate work of pollination above our heads. He gazed up into the buzzing, fragrant flowers, and he said lazily, wonderingly, 'Oh, yeah, I forgot how the whole world starts to buzz and talk to us in the summertime!'

Oh yeah. I forget too. But thank God, the whole world buzzes and talks to us, so there are a million opportunities to remember, and to listen to the messages and teachings in all that buzzing and talking. Robin Wall Kimmerer, a native American botanist and author who teaches at the College of Environmental Science and Forestry just up in Syracuse, and who founded the Center for Native Peoples and the Environment, has explained how the native language of her people is *composed primarily of verbs, ways to describe what she calls the vital beingness of the world. A blue jay is heard with a different verb than that with which you would hear an airplane, for example, distinguishing that*

which possesses the quality of life from that which is merely an object. She wrote: "Birds, bugs, and berries are spoken of with the same respectful grammar as humans are, as if we were all members of the same family. Because we are. There is no 'it' for nature. Living beings are referred to as subjects, never as objects, and personhood is extended to all who breathe and some who don't. I greet the silent boulder people with the same respect as I do the talkative chickadees." In an interview with CBC RAdio last fall, she said: *When I say that this aspen tree is a person, I mean it....yes, this is a sentient being, a conscious being, a being with its own intelligence...Western science tells us... "you must not anthropomorphize." I'm not anthropomorphizing, I'm botanizing. That aspen is its own kind of person. It's not like they're human people. They're aspen people.* She goes on to say that the word for recognizing the personhood of the other beings with whom we share this world is kinship. She speaks of listening to our kin, and of the importance of learning to be a good relative to all our relations.

The Quaker tradition is not indigenous to this particular land upon which our meetinghouse sits. The first Quakers in this area were some of the first European-descended settlers to live here. Likely, most of us worshipping together today wherever we are do not have in our personal lineage ancestors who were indigenous to the land in which we worship. Even if we do, wherever and whoever we are we inherit and worship within a long tradition of migration and colonization, informed by the sweep of Western thought and theology, with its spirit/matter dualisms and its various supremacies. Yet poets and prophets of this same tradition thousands of years ago wondered about the relationship between human Beings and other Beings, stumbled over the mortality we share with all Being-ness, and stood in awe of the Great Being whose name was clearly spoken by more than humans, whatever we are, that God would be mindful of us. Again within this tradition, priests like Thomas Aquinas, Pierre de Chardin, and Thomas Berry perceived our kinship with the world from which Being emerges as a Communion of Subjects. it is within this same tradition that our Quaker also forebears gave us language to describe their experience of the Divine, which resonates through the suffering, singing centuries with Robin Wall Kimmerer's 'vital beingness of the world.' In 1656, George Fox spoke of *That of God in Everyone*, a theological touchstone for me that seems 'akin' certainly to kinship. In 1660, Isaac Pennington

described the indwelling ‘That of God’ as *a Holy Seed* -- the ‘*Immortal Seed of Life*,’ he called it.

Here on Cayuga nation land, we are coming to the end of planting time. So once again, seeds are teaching us what faith and faithfulness look like, and our plant relatives are praising creation with their green bodies stretching toward the sun. With offerings of scent and song, with food and shelter and clothing and medicine, the beings who share this world with us are always -- but especially this time of year -- giving us messages, if we listen. At the peak of the lilacs’ flowering, a few weeks ago, their scent was so pronounced it was like an announcement: “Sweetness is Here. Come and drink and be filled. Get it before it’s gone. It’s going fast.” And it did. The sussurating sound of the leaves, unheard for the many months of leafless trees, is like a balm for frayed nerves after this pandemic year. It’s like water falling, rain on a roof, or grandparents murmuring. It’s the sound that light and air make when they are growing, the sound of the invisible becoming visible, the inanimate becoming alive, personhood appearing, the ungraspable becoming substance and sustenance: plants will be and are shelter and food and medicine for bodies that cannot (as the blade and leaf can), build their bodies from sunlight, water, and air. When I listen, I hear the plant people singing “Green,” saying, “Life is Here.” Giving texture to the air, sound to scent, and song to the meal that sunlight becomes, they are incredibly generous with their offering. Everywhere there is a honeyed buzzing in the blossoms: ‘Oh, yeah, I forgot how the whole world starts to buzz and talk to us in the summertime.’

In May, the bitter dandelion greens which formed a carpet over the bare soil of my garden, good for stimulating the liver after the stagnation of winter, said, “here, this is good medicine for you.” They said “I want to live. I want to make seeds. I want to continue.” ‘I want to continue’ is what all the volunteers in my garden say: the onions and parsnips that I forgot to harvest last fall, the lost and overlooked sprouting potatoes, the self seeding dill and calendula, the errant sunflowers dropped by the birds or undiscovered by the mice, the massive mullen plant in the middle of the garlic, five or six little oak saplings, and at least that many orphan ash, whose parents are dying. All of these

relations, these people -- every one, tells me, when I listen, that she, he -- my kin-- wants to continue, that the Great vital Beingness of Life within -- That of God, the holy seed, the majestic name in all the earth -- wants to continue.

Listening as a relative would, as one in the communion of subjects, I know I belong to the same family of Living Beings as the grass which grows so exuberantly in the field beyond our barn on these long days leading up to the summer solstice. I know that I share in the condition of impermanence which makes me kin to the purple and pink flox flowers who nod beside the barn.

⁷"The grass withers, the flower fades when the breath of the Lord blows upon it; surely people are grass. Robin Wall Kimmerer might add to the prophet's proclamations: Surely grass are people too. ³When I look upon and listen to the heavens, the moon and the stars, the work of God's fingers manifest all around me, there is always a part of me that asks the psalmist's ancient and plaintive question, ⁴But what are human beings that you are mindful of us, oh Lord, mortals that you care for us? You have set us below God and given us dominion. And so, A voice cries out. Are we hearing? Even now in the wilderness we are preparing the way of the Lord, with our pipelines and our shipping lanes across the melting Arctic. We have made straight in the desert many highways for our God. ⁴Every valley shall be lifted up, if we deem it necessary, and every mountain and hill shall be made low if we decide it shall be so. Indeed, mountains have fallen before us. We have moved mountains in ways that Jesus could never have dreamed of with our mustard seed faith. It does seem like all things are now under our feet--, the beasts of the field, ⁸the birds of the air, the fish of the sea, and whatever passes along the paths of the seas -- container ship, humpback whale, islands of plastic flotsam and jetsam. The dominion of which the psalmist ambivalently spoke almost 3 thousand years ago presents itself now as a project nearing completion. The one impossible task yet before us, if we could but harness the faith of Jesus' tiny immortal mustard seed of life, is to listen to our kin. Because still, even now, the wounded world wants to converse with us.

Being slightly below God, I transplanted some of the potato volunteers to this year's potato beds, and transported some of the saplings to the woods 20

yards to the north. I made one meal of a gigantic armload of dandelion greens that my boys gagged over. But mostly I pulled those relatives up by the roots, which is a lot of work -- leveling the uneven ground, making plain the rough places -- prepping the beds for the seedlings and seeds that I had decided, in my place of dominion, would go in that ground. But I didn't stop listening, as I yanked and uprooted; I heard the anguished, planty sighs, as the roots ripped and let go, and I understood that I'd taken something, that I would need to give something back. So, I did. I added manure. And I planted the seeds that I chose for that spot. And **they** told me, in their still small voices, that change is possible and very much the way The Great Being -- noun and verb -- works. They spoke of faith, those holy seeds. They said "I am waiting." They said "I am carrying my message. I do not know what is coming but I am ready. And I will know when my time has come. I will know when it is time to do the thing I must do." They said "I have a purpose. My time is coming. And I am not afraid."

⁵Then the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all people shall see it together, for the mouth of the Lord has spoken." ⁶A voice says, "Cry out!" And I said, "What shall I cry?" All people are grass, their constancy is like the flower of the field. ⁷The grass withers, the flower fades, when the breath of the Lord blows upon it; surely the people are grass. Surely the grass are people. May we try to be good relatives. May we listen to our kin.

Silent Waiting Worship

Final Hymn: This is My Father's World, Green 29

Benediction

*What are human beings that you are mindful of us, O Lord, O Great Being,
whose mouth speaks through all the beings of the World?*

When the world speaks to us, let us listen.

Let us listen to our kin.

Let us do the one impossible thing left in our dominion.

Let us, in our Being, become good relatives. Amen.