

# Nature's Scripture: We Are Earth

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Good morning. Thank you for inviting me to speak with you today. Sorry I'm not there in person with you this morning. As a friend said, "Just because I'm over this pandemic doesn't mean it's over *with*." Clearly it's not finished with me.

The pandemic lockdowns gave me some time to think, and to wake up from my zombie-like consumer lifestyle. I took a hard look around at the world, and I got more clear about the multiple existential crises we face. Most of them can't be solved at the local or even national level, because they are inherently global in nature.

That really got me thinking about my role. You've probably heard all the arguments back and forth. Anything individuals do to minimize their environmental footprint is totally dwarfed by larger systemic and corporate actions. On the other hand, those larger systems are driven and sustained by demand from individual consumers and voters.

It's hard to know what to do. I think underlying all this is a culture of disconnect, a worldview of separation. Our American culture emphasizes separateness, individualism, competition, either-or thinking, one-right-way, pull yourself up by your own bootstraps, domination, consumption. That culture, *my* culture, burst out of western Europe 500 years ago and took over the whole world.

Everywhere it went it encountered indigenous people already living there. And the indigenous response to our arrival was pretty much the same everywhere: "These people are crazy!" They don't seem to understand simple things every child should know, like not to defecate near a water source, and not to pull up ALL of the tasty plants.

To indigenous peoples, my European ancestors seemed completely ignorant of their own kinship and connection with the land, acted out in ways natives regarded as a form of suicide or self-harm. The Hopi language has a term for this, *Koyaanisqatsi*, which has been translated as "life out of balance," "life of moral corruption and turmoil," "a state of life that calls for another way of living." You may have seen the 1982 film titled *Koyaanisqatsi*. If you haven't, I recommend it.

Margaret Atwood's poem "The Moment" says it well:

The moment when, after many years  
of hard work and a long voyage,  
you stand in the centre of your room,

house, half-acre, square mile, island, country,  
knowing at last how you got there,  
and say, I own this,

Is the same moment the trees unloose  
their soft arms from around you,  
the birds take back their language,  
the cliffs fissure and collapse,  
the air moves back from you like a wave  
and you can't breathe.  
No, they whisper. You own nothing.  
You were a visitor, time after time  
Climbing the hill, planting the flag, proclaiming.  
We never belonged to you.  
You never found us.  
It was always the other way round.

That same culture is now destroying us, and taking the planet with it. If we're to survive, we have to change our culture. Our worldview. Literally meaning we have to change how we view the world & our place in it.

Religion can't help us much with this, because it's not shared. There are too many different scriptures, all subject to a diversity of interpretations. We *believe* this or that; we don't **KNOW** it, so it's not shared among all of humanity, and these emergencies require global cooperation, global unity of purpose.

What **IS** shared is natural reality. The United Church of Christ has a tagline: "God is still speaking." You don't have to believe in God, *any* god, to recognize there are **ARE** things we know, about the world and our place in it. And that knowledge grows as science reveals it to us.

So however you view ultimate reality, it's still speaking, through *our* explorations of natural reality. What we know about the world **IS** a kind of common scripture, shared among all humanity, because the scientific endeavor includes people from every religion and culture on the planet.

This is the first in a series of sermons about *what we know*, and how it offers a worldview that just might save us, if we're courageous enough to listen and grow accordingly. In honor of Earth Day, I ask: what *do* we know about Earth?

We know that one person wearing a mask in Seattle or Beijing can save hundreds of lives in Texas, or South Africa. Or not.

We know that when the U.S. Government tested atomic bombs in NV, it damaged thousands of rolls of Kodak film in Rochester, NY. That was 70 years ago. We don't know exactly what the radiation did to the people living in between there, but we do know southern Utah still has higher cancer rates generations later.

We know that every movement, every flap of a butterfly's wings, every square inch of blacktop laid, or diesel fuel burned, affects someone's weather, somewhere, over time.

We know that some of the carbon atoms you ate for breakfast this morning were in YOUR car's gas tank a few years ago.

We know that when wolves were reintroduced to Yellowstone, the water in streams & rivers ran much more clear, and their courses straightened themselves, among uncountable other seemingly-unrelated effects, from the return of beavers and otters to increased fish populations.

We know that living systems like your body construct themselves from non-living ingredients: water, air, sunlight, and minerals.

We know that forests are neighborhoods, and diverse ones. When we look at a tree, we're seeing only half of it. The other half is below ground, talking over the back fence with their fungal neighbors, trading a cup of sugar for a bottle of water & some fixed nitrogen. Beetles and bacteria are the recyclers, squirrels are the farmers, flowering plants trade sexual favors with pollinators, who make nests in tree cavities, and on and on. Take away any one species, and the whole neighborhood misses them.

We hike in there like we own the place, and they all whisper, "well, there goes the neighborhood!" Too often, they are exactly right.

We know that fungal empires in the soil are the internet of the forest, carrying news of invaders and abundances across acres and miles.

We know it's not just forests: every ecosystem on the planet is a completely interconnected web of mutuality between a vast diversity of living organisms. Dr. MLK Jr. wrote from the Birmingham jail, "We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly." King wasn't just reflecting a biblical prophesy about human interactions. Whether he knew it or not, he was also speaking about *how this planet works*.

We know that even whole ecosystems are caught up with other ecosystems in that

network: you can't even draw a boundary between marine ecosystems and terrestrial ones, because the intertidal ecosystem straddles both, with seagulls as the poster child for this intermingling overlap.

We know that even if ecosystems *could* be separated, the atmosphere, lithosphere, and hydrosphere flow through all of them, linking them inseparably together. Rocks dissolve in water, become ocean, get incorporated into seashells, then bird-bones or rocks again. River becomes ocean, then cloud, then apple, then human, then air, all at once, up, down, across and around, with interconnections and shortcuts everywhere.

We know that we participate in cycles, all the cycles you learned about in school, like the water cycle, the carbon cycle, the oxygen cycle, the nitrogen cycle. You know, we teach these cycles as though they were "out there" somewhere, but they're *in here*, too, flowing through us, Earthly materials taking our form for a moment or a month, then moving on to become something else. But always, always being Earth. Earth in motion, Earth come alive, in us.

We know that every glass of water we drink contains water molecules that came from every body of water on earth, just within the last few months. Emissaries from the entire planet in every sip. Those molecules are about to experience being alive, inside my body.

We know that a human body is not an independent organism, but an entire ecosystem, crawling with diverse creatures. The bacteria in and on us are not parasites but essential neighbors, participants in our wholeness, as are the microscopic mites, protists, fungi, and bacteria that protect and clean our skin. We know they outnumber our human cells nine to one. We are about as solitary as a single bee in a swarm of her sisters.

Ecosystems within ecosystems within ecosystems within Earth. Made of Earth, flowing Earth. Thinking, being Earth.

Our bodies exploring the world is how Earth learns about itself. What we know, Earth knows, and as far as we know now, we are the only way that happens. When we are mesmerized by a murmuration of starlings, we are Earth looking at ourself, and liking what we see. When we stand rapt in awe at Niagara Falls, or the Grand Canyon, Earth stands rapt, too, through us, appreciating our own grandeur.

We know that here on Earth, all boundaries and distinctions are either arbitrary or temporary. In nature, there is no such thing as "independent" or "self-reliant," on any scale you care to examine. In nature, as in our bodies, there is no separation to speak of. Cutting off your foot damages the entire body. We ARE Earth! My body is made from the water, air, and minerals of Earth. I am Earth; we are Earth.

Have you ever noticed that our seventh UU principle is the only one that isn't a religious or moral value? It's the only one that's non-negotiable. We can argue all day about inherent worth, justice, acceptance, truth and meaning, democracy, world community—all good stuff!—but the interdependent web of existence is a *fact*; there's nothing to argue about. It's like gravity - it's not the kind of law you can break. When you jump off a cliff, are you flying or falling? You can convince yourself you're flying, for a while, but gravity is still in effect. The consequences are automatic. Same with the 7th principle: it's always in effect; our denial of it does not mitigate the consequences! We cannot extricate ourselves from the web of existence. The more we act like we can, the more damage we do, and the more we suffer.

As we anxiously wonder if Ukraine is the lit fuse of World War 3; as nationalistic authoritarian regimes capture more and more fear-hardened hearts; as unimaginable wildfires, cyclones, droughts, and floods devastate vast regions of the planet; as our children ponder a future bleaker than any generation in 1,000 years; as our leaders do little or nothing to address these crises—the consequences of a global culture of separation and competition loom larger and larger.

So what do we do? I'm convinced that the way out of our predicament requires a fast and vast change in our cultural values and expectations. We must acknowledge our embeddedness in Earth's cycles, and humbly accept that our colonial cultural values and expectations are inherently a denial of reality. We're not flying. We're falling.

Changing culture is hard. Culture is the water we swim in. Ask a fish, "How's the water?" and the fish might say, "What the hell is water?" It's really hard to see when you've been swimming in it your whole life. I'm convinced that to repair the world, we have to change our culture. Cultures do evolve; this is possible! As always, it starts with awareness.

These are the cultural shifts—from ego and separation to humility and appreciation—that might just save us.

So. We start with awareness. When we drink, we can think, about how this cup of coffee or juice or whatever contains molecular emissaries from everywhere. Holy water, symbol of a sacred Earth.

As we walk in the woods, we can see neighbors rather than resources. We can wear a mask when our breath might be contagious. We can consider the ramifications of our actions, maybe not every time or with every little daily decision, but with an ever-growing awareness that there *are* ramifications, that our actions matter.

Jane Goodall said, "You cannot get through a single day without having an impact on

the world around you. What you do makes a difference, and you have to decide what kind of difference you want to make.' Once aware, we can accept that everything we do affects everything else, no exceptions. We can sit with that for a while, letting both the power and the grief of it settle in our hearts and minds. As long as I'm alive, all the interconnected threads run through me, too. I matter. I can't NOT matter! It's a massive responsibility! What do I do now?!?

For starters, I won't just complain about gas prices; I'll tug on that thread; see what's connected to it. The submergence of island nations. The wars in Yemen and Ukraine. Livelihoods for oil workers. The extinction of polar bears. Global supply chains. And so on.

Can I get by with fewer trips? How much would I save if I carpooled, or took the bus, or switched to electric? What might I *gain* in making some changes? That questioning is where the difference is made, questioning my own assumptions and norms.

"How will future generations know that you loved them?" This is a question asked by my friend Victor Lopez-Carmen of Yaqui heritage, and it has become central in my own thinking.

When we do these things—drinking and walking and traveling and shopping—with mindful awareness of the infinite threads woven into, as Dr. King described it, the "inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny," When we stay mindful of that, there is a side benefit. Our day-to-day moments become imbued with a sense of the sacred. How will future generations know that you loved them?

Those threads of connection are threads of sustenance, of relation, of kinship. Of love. They are a sacrament that interweaves all of reality. This is just obvious to indigenous cultures.

The way we are living now, in separation and exploitation is *Koyaanisqatsi*. It's insane. It's self-harm. It calls for another way of living, and that means another way of thinking and being.

We. are. Earth. If we want life to thrive on this planet, we have to change our culture, starting with ourselves. It will take courage, courage to stop living in denial of reality. Courage to live into a gut-level awareness of being the eyes and ears of a living planet. A generous planet whose cycles and sustenance are love made manifest.

This we know: *We. Are. Earth.* May it be so.

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