

Sermon: "It's a Small World After All" c. Rev. Vail Weller  
Preached in Cabighuan, Ulay, the Philippines  
January 18, 2009

We live in places that are very different, you and I. My friends and I from San Mateo live in a very densely populated place, very crowded with people and cars and busy-ness. We live in a place where life moves at a very fast pace, and where much is taken for granted.

The psalm read earlier talks of abundant crops, families full of children, families with enough to eat, and full of happiness. But life is not always this way: crops sometimes fail, we lose loved ones, and at times, we despair.

In our congregation, we worry about our children's future, about having access to health care, and what will become of our beloved elders as they age. We wonder will have easy access to water in generations to come. We wonder if the environment will sustain us, if global climate change will lead the Pacific Ocean and the San Francisco Bay to rise, because if it rises even only a few feet, our congregation and the places where many of us live will be under water. We worry about education, and living lives of purpose and meaning, and we wonder if we are being the best people we can be.

And here, you rise before the sun to care for your families and your livestock. You till the soil, plant crops, harvest the crops, and take them to market. You make food for your families. You get your children off to school. You wash their clothes, clean the home in which you live, you labor long and hard. You also plant flowers for beauty, and sing songs. You laugh with friends when you can. You care for your neighbors, you take in family members when they are in trouble. You come to church on Sundays and you help your children to learn how to be good people.

And I am sure that here, too, you worry about your children's future, and worry about not having access to health care, and what will become of your loved ones when they become ill. You may wonder if you will have access to water in generations to come. You are most likely worrying about education and about the meaning of your lives, and wondering if you are being the best people you can be.

So for as different as we are, we are very similar, too.

I believe that what happens to you affects us where we live, and I believe that what happens to us where we live affects you here. I believe that we are interconnected, that all of life is interdependent.

When I was a girl, to get to school, I walked up my street to the bus stop, where the bus would pick me up and deliver me to school. The bus stop sat atop a very large hill, giving me a view of a valley on either side. The morning air was clean and fresh, and I saw the birds everywhere flitting around the trees that covered the valley.

Punctuating each morning, in that simple daily experience of looking at the world, really looking at the beauty which surrounded me, I had an experience of the benevolence of the universe. I rose each morning and made my way into the world, and had just a few moments of stunning, tremendous beauty. I felt caressed by this beauty, and soothed by its peace.

My personal theology was formed by experiences such as this. One facet of my belief is that there is this general benevolence, that “God”, is loving and not wrathful. Universalism naturally exists within me. I resonate with the Unitarian Universalism here in the Philippines which arose through Universalism, and I have enjoyed learning more about how this faith is expressed here. Let me tell you a bit about how it is expressed where I live.

*In 1791, the Universalist Benjamin Rush, a physician and signer of the Declaration of Independence, described Universalism as “a belief in God’s universal love to all His creatures.” He went on to say that God “will finally restore all of them who are miserable to happiness.” Taken by itself, this was a remarkable statement in an age when belief in eternal hellfire and damnation was common.*

John Murray is one of the fathers of American Universalism. After a string of tragedies in his personal life, including the death of his wife and young son and a time spent in debtor’s prison, John Murray traveled to America and started the spread of the Universalist message here. He formed the first Universalist church in America in Gloucester, Massachusetts in 1779.

Our new country of America was solidly Calvinist in perspective. Murray inspired listeners with a vision not of a judging, wrathful God, but one of love. The Calvinist notion was that only the few, the “elect”

(those who had accepted Jesus as their personal savior) would be “saved” (accepted into heaven). Universalists believed that a loving God would never damn people to eternal hell. (In time, Universalist churches became known as the “no-hell” churches.)

Another significant distinguishing feature of Universalism is the refusal to believe in the notion of original sin. Rather than understanding humanity as deeply flawed by the actions of Adam and Eve in the garden of Eden, we accept that our lives are spread out before us full of possibility and promise, not smeared with the stain of sin.

The words of John Murray that are the most familiar to Unitarian Universalists are these: “Go out into the highways and byways of America, your new country. Give the people, blanketed with a decaying and crumbling Calvinism, something of your new vision. You may possess only a small light but uncover it, let it shine, use it in order to bring more light and understanding to the hearts and minds of men and women. *Give them, not Hell, but hope and courage.* Do not push them deeper into their theological despair, but preach the kindness and everlasting love of God.”

“It’s a small world after all”, we sang earlier. Many of us in San Mateo, many of my friends and neighbors are in danger of living in a very small world, indeed. Many of us can go a whole day without spending any time at all outdoors. We might find our world shrinking so that all we do, and all we think about, is work. Or money. Or what’s wrong with our lives. What we don’t have.

Additionally, I fear that we may take our religious freedom for granted. We may not honor the faith that we have inherited by making it central to our lives. We may not attend religious services each week, rain or shine. From you, we can learn the lesson of discipline and commitment, as it takes some of you hours to get here, on foot, each and every Sunday. (I don’t ever want to hear a complaint in my congregation again, if the service runs over an hour exactly!)

We may be living in the small world which helps us to believe that our own comfort, our own accumulation of goods, is what life is all about. Deep down in our hearts, we know better...but our society makes it very easy for us to forget that we are alive in order to make the world a better place...not for personal gain or accumulation of things, or money.

So it is a small world, after all...in the sense that what happens to one of us affects the others; that “not only the sparrow’s fall is felt to the uttermost bound, but the vibrations set in motion by the words we utter reach through all space and the tremor is felt through all time,” as Maria Mitchell wrote.

But it is also a big, big, big, big world, an immense world, an awesome, beautiful, tragic world...filled with people who live diverse lives in communities quite different from this one. And yet underneath all of our diversities lie commonalities: we all care about our children, and education, and health, and our elders, and clean water and food, and making the world a better place.

It is traveling here to meet you in person which has helped us from the United States to feel more aware of what is truly important. It is through connecting with you that we remember that all of life is interwoven. It is through your hospitality that we are humbled, and it is through your stories that we are inspired!

I will close with the words of my colleague Wayne Arnason.

Take courage friends.

The way is often hard, the path is never clear,

And the stakes are very high.

Take courage.

For deep down, there is another truth:

You are not alone.

Amen!