

All Is Connected (Help Thou My Unbelief)

A Sermon by Reverend Lynn Strauss

All is connected...words of wisdom revealed in every faith tradition – reassurance of connection is offered through prayer and science and hope...they-some preachers, new age gurus, science fiction writers, social networkers, would have us believe that we are not alone.

And yet, what is the human condition, but a living out of the felt contradiction of this wise assurance. What is the journey of our lives but movement between the poles of loneliness and connection. What is the trajectory of a day, but a series of attempts to connect. To connect to a loved one. To connect to a friend, to a stranger, to an animal or a landscape, or an idea or a story.

Buddhist wisdom teaches that separation is an illusion. I'm not here...you're not there...this reality that we see is not what it seems. Honestly, I find illusion hard to understand.

And science too, teaches that the movement of a butterfly wings on the other side of the world will reach us here, and bring some change...because we are fundamentally part of a whole...because we are one life form.

All is connected...I find it hard to believe. I am skeptical.

How can I preach the truth that "all is connected" while I struggle in the rough waters of individual survival. It's been one of those weeks when I have felt myself quite alone in the world.

What about you, do you also swim in the sea of private personal torment. Are you alone with your fears, your regrets, your confusion. Why are experiences of true intimate connection so rare, so illusive...it seems to me that the "all is connected" statement is the illusion...and the separateness of my waking and working and loving is the reality.

Admitting to loneliness is risky, maybe especially for a spiritual leader, maybe especially for a married person, maybe especially for a mother and a grandmother...especially for a person of my privileges. How profound a struggle is loneliness set against hunger, homelessness, living in a war zone?

Rest assured I have plenty of people in my life, plenty of people who love me, and most weeks...precious little time to myself. I'm sharing something deeper and hard to put into words. I just know that somehow, I can't fully embrace the wisdom of my own sermon title...what does "all is connected" mean...and what are the ramifications of feeling oneself so frequently on the outside of the All.

Those of you who heard Reverend John Tolley's sermon at Stephen's Ordination service last Sunday might remember how he drew us all into a circle he called "exiles". His reading from John Fortunato spoke to the experience of gay people as exiles in our culture...but Reverend Tolley understood that most of us have reason to feel on the outside...whether because of race or class or gender or disability or illness, or religion or politics...most of us have known the pain of exile...

His good news was to suggest that if most of us are on the outside of the power and the influence of our society – then we can work together from the edges to push the middle into prophetic change. I was grateful for Rev. Tolley’s hopeful message.

But I believe and I fear that how we live today pushes us all into more and more experiences of isolation and separation-greater exile.

We live, so many of us, far from family members. My mother and my sister are both recent widows...and I am too far away to bring them soup, or take them to a movie.

Two of my own adult children bought homes this year, in two different cities...most of us live in our own houses, most of us drive our own car, most of us control our own remote to our own television, most of us have computers and cell phones.

It is easy to hide from one another. It is easy to withdraw. Even with social networking options like Facebook and twitter...we’re still sitting alone at home or at Starbucks, or on the metro or we’re sitting together in the living room checking our e-mail.

What does “all is connected” mean in this hyper-connected, world of separate dwellings?

This move toward hyper-connected isolation has global implications...ramifications far more serious than our own existential angst. Far more serious than our own personal lonely moments or our families rules about answering phones during dinner.

How can we be so connected and yet so dis-connected even on a global scale.

You may have seen the article in this week's New Yorker magazine or heard the author interviewed on NPR. I'm referring to the article titled The Predator War...the CIA's drone program written by journalist Jane Mayer.

It is a shocking account of both extremes of which I am speaking this morning...the extreme reality of how we are all connected...and the extreme experience of disconnection.

Mayer writes of the covert drone program of the Central Intelligence Agency of our government. As you know, drones are unmanned planes that hover high above potential targets in Pakistan and other critical zones in the war against Al Qaida.

Drones send amazing real time video of their targets and they can deliver deadly missiles at the push of a button on a console at a location far away around the world.

The world is so connected that video feeds show the details of the family of a high ranking Taliban leader in Pakistan relaxing on a rooftop in South Waziristan. And the world is so disconnected that a remote operator can push a button and drop a missile from the drone and wipe out the Taliban leader and his entire family while watching it all on video.

Mayer writes, "it is easy to understand the appeal of a "push-button" approach to fighting Al Qaeda, but the embrace of the Predator program has occurred with remarkably little public discussion, given that it represents a radically new and geographically unbounded use of state-sanctioned lethal force. And because of the C.I.A. program's secrecy, there is no visible system of accountability."

Describing how the drone attacks work she writes, “with the C.I.A., control of the unmanned vehicles is split among several teams. One set of pilots and operators works abroad, near hidden airfields in Afghanistan and Pakistan, handling takeoffs and landings. Once the drones are aloft, the controls are switched over to operators in Langley Virginia. These operators don’t need conventional flight training, they sit next to intelligence officers and watch on large flat-screen monitors, live video feed from the drone’s camera, they can turn the plane, zoom in on the landscape below and decide whether to lock onto a target.”

Mayer goes on...“people who have seen an air strike live on video describe it as both awe-inspiring and horrifying.”

The seeming unreality of the Predator enterprise is felt by the pilots, who return home to their families at the end of their shift. It has been described as a war without virtue, the remote operation carries no danger or sacrifice on our part, no courage or heroism. It is assassination. An extreme example of the paradox of connection and dis-connection in our time.

All Is Connected. The religious and spiritual wisdom of these words becomes meaningful only if there is embodied relationship to ground the connection.

How is a Facebook friend different from your best friend in sixth grade? How is a virtual hug, different from a hug you can feel with your whole body?

How is our connection to nature or to all of Life meaningful unless we work out right relationship with all that we touch, unless we feel the bark of the tree, and then protect that tree- unless we give of ourselves, give of ourselves so generously, so completely that others might live...might feel our love, might feel our protection.

There is a story from the Hindu tradition that tells of a different way of addressing big problems.

After Gandhi's death the Gandhian movement was in disarray. And so a nationwide meeting was called to see how best to continue his work.

They hoped to convince one elder, Vinoba Bhave, Gandhi's disciple to lead this conference, but he declined.

After much pleading, he finally agreed to lead their gathering, but only if the meeting were postponed six months, giving him enough time to walk on foot from where he lived to the meeting site halfway across India...and to give him time to listen to the people as he walked.

He walked from village to village. And in each he called a spiritual meeting. He would listen to their problems and at times advise the villagers. Many of the people spoke of their hardship and of their hunger and how little food they had to eat.

He asked why don't you grow your own food? But most of them were untouchables and they said, "we are not allowed to own land." Vinoba promised them that when he returned to Delhi, he would speak to Prime Minister Nehru and see if a law could be passed that would give land to the poor villagers across India.

But then he thought about how long it would take such a law to be passed...and how long it would take such a law to be implemented. He presented this sad, but honest predicament.

Then one rich villager stood up and said, "I have land. How much do these people need. There were sixteen families, each needing five acres apiece, so Vinoba said "eighty acres, and the man deeply inspired by the spirit of Gandhi offered eighty acres.

No we cannot accept it. You must first go home and speak with your wife and children who will inherit your land...and so the man went home and his wife and children agreed to give away the land to the poorest people in the village.

The next day Vinoba walked to another village and heard the plight of hunger and landlessness again and he recited the tale of the previous village and from his story another rich landowner was inspired. He offered 110 acres for the poor families of his village and his wife and children agreed – and the land was granted to those in need.

Village by village, Vinoba held meetings and continued this process until he reached the council several months later. In the course of his walk, he had collected over 22 hundred acres of land for the poorest families along the way.

He told this story to the council and many joined him to start the great Indian Land Reform.

For fourteen years that followed, Vinoba and thousand sof those inspired by him walked through every state, every province and most districts of India. Without any government complications or red tape, they collected over ten million acres of land for the hungriest and most impoverished villagers.

In this way there occurred one of the greatest peaceful transfers of land in modern history.

Being connected is not, I think, the intended goal of spiritual wisdom...the intention undergirding connection is the willingness to be changed...changed by the connection, changed by the relationship.

It's hard to imagine that any redemptive change would happen for anyone involved in the drone predator program...for there is no bodily engagement...no conversation, no shared cup of tea, no strategic compromise, no hand shake or bow...no relationship whatsoever. No openness to change in perspective or circumstance, no willing change in hate or in tolerance.

"All is connected" takes on spiritual meaning only when we trust enough to be changed by that connection...whether it's a connection to a loved one...or to nature, or to our church community or even to an enemy. We are only truly connected if we are open to being changed.

We hide because we fear being changed. Staying alone, choosing isolation is a protection against change...an attempt to remain in control. An attempt to survive by holding on for dear life.

Last Sunday in the ordination service, we witnessed and celebrated Stephen Sinclair's willingness to be changed. He came to us trusting that his connection with us would deepen into relationship. He trusted that the relationship we crafted during his internship would be transforming. In the act of ordination, Stephen got down on his knees, not because he was too tall for us to bless him with a laying on of hands, but because he knew

that the prayers and blessings would change him...he knew that he would rise to be reborn as Reverend Stephen Sinclair.

The connection he trusted with us, was embodied as he knelt. Stephen did not hide from the depth of that connection. He did not choose to stay alone. He chose to let go of control. He chose to survive by letting go.

And in that act, in that moment...when we all joined hand to shoulder, body to body around this sanctuary...when we joined to ordain and bless one who has chosen the vocation of Unitarian Universalist ministry...we participated in that moment in the truth...that All is Connected.

Let us hold that moment close to our hearts. Let us know the power that is in religious community. Let us know that we are meant to hold and to bless one another and to be changed by our loving, trusting relationship.

So I invite you to enter fully into relationship, to open your heart to all life...and to be changed.

So May it Be/Amen