

**11.0: Sermons & Sermon Excerpts**

**11.2:** *How Wisdom Comes* by Rev. Jay E. Abernathy, Jr.(excerpt, full text no longer online) (901 words)

I recently attended a conference that turned out to be more like a retreat. But not a silent or solitary retreat. There were over a hundred and twenty of us present—mostly ministers and religious educators. And we were gathered to spend four days learning about Native American spirituality.

…Socrates drew students even though he said he had nothing to teach—that he was only a midwife for wisdom, and the most ignorant man in the city of Athens. Our leaders at the conference I attended were equally unpretentious.

One was a woman from the Tewa People of Tesuque Pueblo, in New Mexico, a pre-school teacher. The other was a chief of the Winnebago of Wisconsin, where our retreat took place. Dislodged long ago, and moved more than once, they are now confined to a small reservation near Omaha, Nebraska.

They were sent to us by an inter-tribal group—the Traditional Council of Elders and Youth. We had to be judged receptive. As one of the Council’s leaders, Chief Oren Lyons, Faithkeeper of the turtle Clan of the Onondaga Nation and spokesman for the Six Nations Iroquois Confederacy puts it, “You think we send our Wisdomkeepers to just anyone? We guard them like pure spring water. If what you seek from us is secrets, mysteries...I can tell you right now, there are no secrets. There’s no mystery. There’s only common sense.”

Or perhaps better put, the uncommon sense to sense the uncommon in the common, the holy in the ordinary. And isn’t it this sense which we too often have lost? Lost not only to the detriment of our individual souls, but to the detriment of the planet—our Mother, the Earth.

… “Think not forever of yourselves, O Chiefs, nor of your own generation. Think of continuing generations of our families, think of our grandchildren and of those yet unborn, whose faces are coming from beneath the ground.” This wisdom, spoken a thousand years ago, came from the traditional founder of the Iroquois Confederacy, called ‘the Peacemaker.’

But for the last half of the intervening millennium, we who dominate this continent have scorned its original inhabitants. We have seen ourselves as ‘civilized’, them as ‘savage.’ Ourselves as knowledgeable, them as ignorant. Ourselves as successful, them as defeated. And dominant illusions can even keep nightmares seeming true.

I am no sentimentalist about these matters. Neither are the Wisdomkeepers of the indigenous people. They are familiar with irony, and forthright about their motives. “We have been subjected to physical and cultural genocide,” said Reuben Snake. “The Grandfathers and Grandmothers are dying out. Some of us have to go out to them, record their words, take their photographs, learn their songs and their stories, then pass them onto those of you in the dominant culture who may have ears to hear and hearts to understand.”

… “These days people seek knowledge,” said the Tewa woman who was one of our leaders, “not wisdom. Knowledge is of the past; wisdom is of the future.” She was no grandmother; she was younger than I. And at first that bothered me. But it also served to remind me that wisdom is not necessarily a function of years. There are plenty of old fools who miss the knowledge or experience, power or prestige, and racing past wisdom.

Not Delores. She spoke slowly, sometimes referring to what she was telling us about her people as “information.” At first the pace tried my patience. Then I began to see how what I seek, I too often want instantly and easily—insight without responsibility, spirituality with duties—while this woman knew better. She would laugh and say she identified with her elan animal, the Turtle, as she goes about her work—tending to future generations at the Pueblo, helping preserve the language and stories, but also carrying them out, to people like us.

“Beware of instant medicine men,” said Reuben. “Those who exploit, who have no real power. Real power comes from the Creator. It comes in the form of wisdom. Its strength is not power-over, but power-with. It works with people and with the Creation. It refuses to exploit either people or the Earth. For these are our times and our responsibilities. Every human being has a sacred duty to give thanks, and to protect the welfare of our Mother Earth, from whom all life comes. In order to do this, we must recognize the enemy. Not in others. The one within us. We must begin with ourselves...”

“Let us live in peace and harmony to keep the land and all life in balance,” added Delores. “Only prayer and meditation can do that. The native peoples of this land have suffered much. Have suffered nothing less than a great crucifixion.” So has the land. But as I came away from prayer and meditation with them, I knew more deeply than ever that the Great Spirit within both abides, and can yet give wisdom.

…Let us be wise enough to see how foolish we often are. Let us be open even to that Spirit which sometimes stops and shames us in our foolishness—listen to its promptings, taking time to hear its warnings, to be awakened by its reminder that even the soul that seems dead within us can yet be revived, simply by acknowledging the soul in others, and Soul of this world itself. Let us do so even now. …

**11.4:** *Breath of Life* byRev.Beth Chronister (Excerpt, full text no longer online) (1,112 words)

In the beginning... Darkness. In the beginning... Formlessness. In the beginning... Void. And then—hovering over this nothing-ness: *Ruach Elohim...* the breath of God moving across the face of the deep and sparking the first lights of...

* Transformation.
* Animation.
* Divine Imagination.
* Spirit illumination.
* And Life Proclamation.

This is the dramatic and poetic description of the dark before the dawn of creation as Described in the first book of the Hebrew Bible. It is one of two distinct creation stories in the first chapters of Genesis. They are stories that offer explanations about who we are and how we came to be in relationship to the earth, each other, and to God. You know both of the stories, though they may have become conflated into one creation myth along the Sunday school path

The first creation story is the one that has maintained the cadence of oral tradition. The plot is driven by a sequence of seven days and each day ends with the repeated rhythmic phrase— “And God saw that it was good.” The story opens in dark nothingness. A scene soon transformed by the breath of God moving over the faceless deep and the simple Divine utterance— “Let there be light.” This sets in motion a process that unfolds the night and the day, the sky and the sea, the plants and the animals. A creative catalyst moment that culminates in the creation of humankind. *Genesis 1:26*: Then God said, “Let *us* make humankind in *our* image, according to *our* likeliness.” At which point, God blesses creation by noting, it was very good.

The second creation myth in the Hebrew Bible is not remembered for its structural plot of seven days. Instead, this story is known more for its setting, the Garden of Eden and its characters, Adam, Eve, God, a serpent, and a fateful tree.

Biblical scholars believe that the first and second chapters of Genesis offer distinct accounts of creation because they are rooted in different areas, cultures, and histories of Israel. The story of the seven days is believed to have been developed during the Babylonian exile, after the destruction of the temple, in 6th century BCE. The story of Eden is traced to in the southern territory of Judah. This story is estimated to be even older. Its origins are dated to the 10th century BCE, 3,000 years ago. In the current setting of the 24-hour news cycle, the longevity of these two myths is pretty incredible.

It is very interesting that the people who compiled the Torah chose to include both accounts of creation. This canonical choice provides an important clue into the initial intentions of the creators for how the books were intended to be interacted with. To include both stories is an invitation to interpretation. These stories were never offered as historic fact, but instead, were passed on as a resource in the pursuit of meaning. The symbols, poetry, teachings are there to help guide communities in exploring their identity and discovering their place within the cosmos.

As our community enters into these creation myths to seek what we might learn there, we should not dismiss the powerful, yet subtle, presence of *Ruach Elohim* in Genesis 1:1. This is the original Hebrew name that describes the force which hovers over the face of the deep and disturbs the nothingness. *Elohim* is one of the various names for God in Hebrew. And *Ruach,* appears at different times in the Torah as wind, breath, or Spirit. Thus, the catalyst of creation in the first chapter of Genesis*, Ruach Elohim,* can be correctly translated as the mighty wind of God, the Spirit of God, or the Breath of God.

*Ruach*, wind, breath, spirit. Three possible translations. Each is alluring and each holds insight into the fuller meaning of *Ruach Elohim.* Wind, breath, Spirit—all are present in the world in ways that are both common, and yet deeply mysterious. Common, as each is imbued throughout creation. Mysterious, as *Ruach* trulyis a word that tries to grasp at what is ungraspable. For who among us can contain the wind? Who could adequately describe either the first or last breath? And who could possibly conceptualize the Spirit?

As a word, *Ruach* can only point to the unseen power and presence. That what moves softly and profoundly in our lives, like the inhalation and exhalation of breath through body, changing everything, animating life itself, yet remaining indescribable. *Ruach Elohim*, moving over the faceless depths, bringing life and transforming everything. As breath marks the moment of birth, the breath of Godenters into the beginning and creates the first sparks of life and light. All of creation is linked through this act of breathing. It is celebrated in the first inhalation of living things. It is present in the miraculous exchange of carbon dioxide and oxygen between plants and animals. And it is deeply felt in the translating of breath into loving speech, prayer, or meditation. *Ruach Elohim* moves in and out of our lives, reminding us to be aware that each time we breathe, we are a part of this glorious and Divine interdependent web of life.

As wind shapes landscapes over time, and blows through our social movements as the winds of change, the wind of God blows over, around, and against those places which cry out for transformation. Those formless voids and shadowing depths that exist in our individual and collective lives. Those places which resist change and refuse transformation. Places like hate, harm, disparity, destruction, and fear. They too can be moved and made new by those winds which bring illumination and inspiration on its gusts and gales. *Ruach Elohim* blows over, around, against and within, changing and moving landscapes and possibilities, birthing anew life potentials in this never-ending process of creation, bringing new light and new hope to the formless voids and shadowy depths. May we all learn to lean into the winds of changes as co-creators of our lives and our world.

And finally, *Ruach Elohim* as the Spirit of God. Much like breath and wind, Spirit and spirituality cannot to be contained by mere words, for words are simply inadequate in touching that which dances on the edge of mystery. Spirit and spirituality are entered through experience, felt at times like the soft breath of a sleeping baby, and at other times like the gusty wind on the plains. It can move our lives like it did in Genesis 1:1, unsettling our waters, bringing light to our shadowy depths, and acting as a force of creation, transformation, illumination, and expansion. *Ruach Elohim,* wind, breath, spirit. Moving in our lives and in all of creation. Blessed Be.

**11.5:** *This Holy Ground* by Rev. Kirk Loadman-Copeland (Touchstones) (1,460 words)

I’m not sure what his motivation was. Perhaps it was the belief that the world as it is was not perfect or the sense that if a world like this was going to be created, there had to be a set of blueprints in another realm to pattern the world after. Perhaps it was the concern that our senses were limited and limiting, so that we could not really know the world. None-the-less, Plato’s theory of forms postulated that the abstract forms or ideas of things possessed the highest and most fundamental kind of reality. The things of this world were mere shadows of those perfect forms. In Christianity, this was expressed in the dualisms of body and soul, the natural and the supernatural where soul and the supernatural were considered far superior to and more valuable than the world of matter. Unitarian Universalist singer-songwriter Peter Mayer captures the consequence of this view of reality when he refers to “a world half there, heaven’s second-rate hand me down.” The denigration of this world and this life in favor of an imagined future paradise has served neither humanity nor the world well. We would do well to emulate Thoreau’s attitude. It is said that as he lay on his deathbed someone asked, “Are you ready for the next world?” Thoreau responded, “One world at a time.”

If Plato provided us with an unfortunate misdirection, so did the Genesis account of creation. Genesis is a remarkable, imaginative account of how the world began and is as compelling, if not more so, than many of the other creation myths that have been told since the beginning of human time to make sense of how we came to be. Perhaps Genesis would have held less sway if people had understood that it was actually a Mesopotamian creation myth reworked to explain and defend the unique nature of the God of Israel. As allegory, Genesis is brilliant especially in trying to account for how human beings came to possess knowledge. In the interpretive frame of the story, we owe Eve our profound gratitude for having the courage to eat the fruit of the tree of knowledge. In that act, she did indeed give birth to humanity.

The problem occurred when people continued to take this myth literally, despite the revelations of science, and ascribed to it authority far beyond what was sensible or credible. This happened, ironically but understandably, in response to the emergence of a new Genesis account in which the storytellers were astronomers, physicians, anthropologists, archeologists, paleontologists, biologists, physicists, cosmologists, chemists, geologists, and other scientists. Their cosmological narrative is a story that began 13.7 billion years ago with the event called the Big Bang. The best available evidence suggests that the planet earth came into being 4.54 billion years ago, not in the year 4004 BCE as proposed by 17th century Church of Ireland Archbishop James Ussher.

God’s handiwork in Genesis, version 1.0 simply lacks the elegance, scale, diversity, complexity, experimentation, imagination, and mystery of Genesis, version 2.0. This new story, this story of the universe, should be a continuing source of utter amazement and awe. As cosmologist Brian Swimme said, “You take hydrogen gas, and you leave it alone, and it turns into rosebushes, giraffes, and humans.”

Growing up in Western Pennsylvania, I was influenced by remnants of Pennsylvania Dutch in phrases like “read up the house,” which meant to “make the house ready.” One phrase that I have long valued comes from the Pennsylvania Dutch phrase, “Das wundert mich,” meaning, “It wonders me.” This has been my lifelong response to the world: “It wonders me.” I was like the child of which Walt Whitman wrote: “There was a child went forth every day;/ And the first object he look’d upon, that object he became;/ And that object became part of him for the day, or a certain part of/ the day, or for many years, or stretching cycles of years./ The early lilacs became part of this child,/ And grass, and white and red morning-glories, and white and red clover….” In turn I became violets, fireflies, ladybugs, and more. I became sunflowers, a willow tree, and the crayfish in the creek that ran beside that tree. I became the osage orange, the buckeye, and the catalpa tree, which I knew by the name “Indian Toby.” I became the Allegheny River and the Monongahela River, and every river that I have ever crossed. In this regard I am like Langston Hughes who wrote, “I’ve known rivers:/ I’ve known rivers ancient as the world and older than the/ flow of human blood in human veins./ My soul has grown deep like the rivers.” How has the world caused your soul to grow deep? I mean the world of honking geese flying overhead, aspen groves shimmering in the autumn sunset, the towering Rocky Mountains, and the prairie that is like an inland ocean. It is so easy to take the world for granted. Better to take it with reverence and gratitude.

The problem, however, is that most human beings still have a flat world faith, one that regards human beings at the pinnacle of both creation and evolution. Shakespeare’s Prince Hamlet extolled humanity when he said, “What a piece of work is a man, how noble in reason, how infinite in faculties, in form and moving how express and admirable, in action how like an angel, in apprehension how like a god! the beauty of the world, the paragon of animals….” Do we think that we are more important or more elegant or more amazing than the humpback whale, the snow leopard, or the praying mantis? To be sure, we are collectively as a species more powerful, but with power comes profound obligation.

The poet Mary Oliver wrote, “Who made the world?/ Who made the swan, and the black bear?/ Who made the grasshopper?/ This grasshopper, I mean-/ the one who has flung herself out of the grass,/ the one who is eating sugar out of my hand,…” She continues, “I don’t know exactly what a prayer is./ I do know how to pay attention, how to fall down/ into the grass, how to kneel down in the grass,/ how to be idle and blessed, how to stroll through the fields,/ which is what I have been doing all day./ Tell me, what else should I have done?”

If you fall down into the grass, what do you see? Scientists believe that the greatest and most diverse amount of life, bio-mass as they call it, resides in the top 8 to 12 inches of soil that covers our planet’s landmass. Recalling the Genesis account, what does it mean that Adam was made from dust or that, in Hebrew the etymology of the word “adam” is related to “adamah,” which means soil? Likewise, the word human is derived from a proto-Indo-European word (*dhghem*) that means “earth.” This is not linguistic sleight of hand, but a reminder that the earth is our mother existentially and evolutionarily. And yet, the relationship of our species to the earth is characterized more by entitlement than gratitude. That will only change to the extent that we develop an attitude of reverence for the earth.

If we want to cultivate an attitude of reverence for creation, we would do well to pay attention to poets, including singer-songwriters like Peter Mayer, a Unitarian Universalist who lives in Stillwater, Minnesota. Seven of the eleven songs on his album *Earth Town Square*, convey his reverence for the earth. In the song, *The Play*, he writes “When I try to grasp the simple fact of this existence / And think of all the fantasies and fairytales and wishes / None strike me as more unlikely or magnificent than this is.” I suspect that somewhere along the road, Mayer had a religious conversion that brought him from the Catholicism of his youth to Unitarian Universalism, that brought him to a profound love for creation, where, as he says, “everything is holy now.”

Mayer’s attitude is one of gratitude for the earth. Like Thoreau he takes one world at a time. It is notable that Unitarian Universalist ministers Rebecca Parker and John Buehrens begin their book *A House for Hope*, which is subtitled *The Promise of Progressive Religion for the Twenty-first Century*, with the image of a garden. Parker writes, “This earth—and none other—is a garden of beauty, a place of life.” It is also that upon which we are utterly dependent for the air we breathe, the water we drink, the food we eat, and so much more. Take none of it for granted. Take all of it with the commitment to become a steward of the earth because “everything is holy now.”