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SERMON: "Charlotte's Web"

In E. B. White's story "Charlotte's Web" when Wilbur, the pig, is scheduled to be killed by the farmer, Charlotte, the spider, weaves a web above his head which spells out the words "Some Pig," "Terrific," then "Radiant." The farmer and his family are impressed. Because they don't think a spider could do such an intelligent thing they believe these words are messages from the supernatural world so they don't make Wilbur into bacon instead they take him to exhibit at the county fair. Wilbur doesn't win first prize because he isn't the biggest pig there. But Charlotte, who went along with him, weaves the word "Humble" above his head and for this he is awarded a special prize, treated with respect, and allowed to live happily ever after.

We should respect all of nature because we are all connected as our seventh UU principle states, "in an interdependent web," in "Charlotte's Web." The Unitarian, Emerson, said, "Within each one is the soul of the whole: the wise silence; the universal beauty, to which every part and particle is equally related, the eternal one. When it breaks through our intellect, it is genius; when it breathes through our will, it is virtue; when it flows through our affections, it is love."

Charlotte the spider had all three: genius, virtue, and love; and though we claim to be a higher species, we need to do a lot more evolving of all three in order to live responsibly on our planet. We hardly treat our fellow humans humanely, and we have been ripping up the web, paving "paradise and put[ting] up a parking lot." Though we claim to care for nature, we have become the biggest threat to life on the planet.

I have always loved trees. As a child I spent hours sitting in them. I liked looking out from them and seeing the wider view. I felt at-one-ment with the world then. I felt the embrace of the trees arms as I hugged it, the leaves shimmering, sheltered me. I love trees, and yet I did not flinch while working in my youth as a lumber-jack. I chopped down healthy growing green trees, and peeled off their bark to prepare them for processing into pulp for paper.

While growing up I worked on relative's farms. I can't say I ever developed a close, personal relationship with a cow, pig, or chicken, but I felt a kinship for them, and I would never hurt one. And yet I eat chicken and sometimes beef though I know that the chickens today are cruelly caged, cows are being slaughtered in some *Jungle*, and that oxygen producing rain forests are being destroyed to gain pasture land to raise more cattle for our consumption.

As a young boy Jerry Wisneiwsky and I shot a rabbit with our BB guns. We did not realize what that might be like for the rabbit, and when we saw it suffering, we cried as we tried to put it out of its misery. I used to go hunting with my father for whom such sports were one of the joys of life. We tramped the woods together, father and son for three seasons until I finally shot something, a bird. I wounded it, but could not wring its neck to finish it off as instructed. My father did. I never went hunting with him or anyone again.

I do, however, still go fishing. I remember trout fishing in a "catch and release" section of a river. To be honest, I wanted to eat my dinner, if I caught any. I didn't. So, I bought a frozen fish from the grocery store, which is what most of us do distancing ourselves from reality. Though many of us have pets, the human relationship with other life forms on the planet could hardly be described as caring or collaborative. It seems as an old Hindu sage once said that life is a story of the eaters and the eaten, and if you wait long

enough the eaters are eaten.

And yet, Charlotte the spider saved Wilbur the pig's life. They were friends. My relationship with nature and the rest of life on this planet is more ambiguous than that. Along with the major religions of the world, I affirm that all life is one, that we are connected. However, there are all kinds of connections, and being related doesn't necessarily mean we will act with respect instead of exploitation.

Alice Walker wrote: "I knew if I cut a tree, my arm would bleed." This is one of my favorite quotations. I believe it, and yet, I have cut trees and I did not bleed; I made money. I still believe in what Alice Walker says, but not literally. We are not identical, me and the tree, but we are related. We are part of an interdependent web. We need the tree; we need the fish, the poultry, the protein. There is a sense in which we are one with them, but that doesn't mean our relationship is necessarily friendly let alone reverent; being one doesn't mean when we cut a tree we will bleed—right away!

But, if we chop down too many trees we will choke to death unable to breathe. If, trying to make more money we continue to pollute the environment, we will die of cancer. If we continue to deny justice, to ignore the clamor, we will continue to live in fear. If we pretend to be powerless, someday we will be. It is necessary to use some of the earth's resources, but sparingly for there is a line we have crossed between using and abusing nature.

The Unitarian author, Herman Melville, wrote, "We cannot live only for ourselves. A thousand fibers connect us....And among those fibers, as sympathetic threads, our actions run as causes, and they come back to us as effects. On a daily basis, we affect the web of all existence, just as we are affected by it."

Religion has long taught the oneness, the connection of all creation; science has too. Maria Mitchell, an astronomer, and a Unitarian, studied the stars and saw us. She wrote: "and yet, small as is our whole system compared with the infinitude of creation, brief as is our life compared with the cycles of time, we are so tethered to all by the beautiful dependencies of law, that not only the sparrow's fall is felt to the outermost bound, but the vibrations set in motion by the words that we utter reach though all space and the tremor is felt through all time."

As astronomy has looked out at the heavens modern physics has studied the infinitesimal constituents of matter and they find no separate entities but enigmatic energy incorporating the all. We are made of the same stuff. We are all connected: the air, the fish, the fowl, pigs, cows, people, and planet. You can see that when you widen your view, when you look at the earth from space, for example. It is clear that the human species has a crucial part to play in preserving or ruining the environment. Our extravagant use of natural resources and pollution obviously are problems; most of our interactions with nature have deleterious effects, but we can change that.

For example, all of the wolves in Yellowstone were exterminated by hunters by 1926. In 1995 they were re-introduced to the park, and have flourished. Humans put them on the endangered species list; their return indicates the interplay between parts of the web of nature. The Yellowstone ecosystem is reviving. Without wolves the elk were eating the cottonwood, willows and aspen trees along the river banks. Returning the wolves has lowered the elk population and keeps them away from the exposed river. The trees have rejuvenated, prospered; their shading keeps the water cool which has caused the fish to increase as have birds, beavers, otters, and other small animals.

John Muir, another Unitarian, said, "In wilderness is the preservation of the world." We could preserve and recover the balance of nature, if we but had the will. Unfortunately, it seems we have little. I recycle and have switched to compact florescent bulbs, but I use chemical fertilizer and weed killer, though runoff causes pollution in streams, and I seldom use public transportation. My occasional email or call to a legislator is not enough to balance the pressure put on them by the corporate interests. There is so much more we could do if we had the will.

We are part of the problem. As we live very well, children in third world countries and even here do not have enough to eat. As we air-condition our homes, cars, and churches, the glaciers melt and raise ocean levels. As Herman Melville said, "We affect the web of all existence just as we are affected by it." This means we are a part of the problem; it also means that we are, we can be, part of the solution, if we but had the will.

When Charlotte saved Wilbur he asked her: "Why did you do all this for me? I don't deserve it. I've never done anything for you." Charlotte replied: "You have been my friend.... That in itself is a tremendous thing. I wove my webs for you because I liked you. After all what's a life, anyway? We're born, we live a little while, we die. A spider's life can't help being something of a mess, with all this trapping and eating flies. By helping you, perhaps I was trying to lift up my life a trifle. Heaven knows anyone's life can stand a little of that."

Such is certainly the case with our lives what with consuming and polluting and living high on the hog, so to speak. We need our lives to be lifted up a trifle. And, we need to lift up other lives too. Charlotte, the lower species spider sets us an example. We are connected by Charlotte's web; she has been weaving words to remind us that we are something more: we are terrific, we are radiant; but, we should also be humble because right now we wouldn't win a prize for being the best caretakers of life on earth. We may all be connected, but we are also self-centered, shortsighted, and endangering "the web of all existence."

Oren Lyons, Faithkeeper of the Onondaga Nation said to an assembly at the United Nations: "I do not see a delegation for the four-footed. I see no seat for the eagles. We forget and we consider ourselves superior, but we are after all a mere part of the Creation. And we must continue to understand where we are. And we stand between the mountains and the ant, somewhere and there only, as part and parcel of the Creation. It is our responsibility, since we have been given the minds to take care of these things."

Indeed, Charlotte's web is delicate; our way of living and capitalizing on its resources is tearing it. Nature has its ways of reminding us of its power and the importance of balance. We have been given the minds and we are supposed to contribute "to the well-being of the whole system." We are an important part of the interdependent web; but we are only one part, not the only part, and not necessarily the best part. Though we may not deserve it, we have been singled out for a special award. So it is we live so well, but to continue to live on this planet, we need to develop a more sustainable, a more reverent relationship with nature.

The American Indians would never kill a buffalo or deer unless they absolutely needed the sustenance. And before doing so they would pray to it. Let us do the same before we touch any part of the web, remembering the words of Chief Seattle: "This we know: the earth does not belong to us, we belong to the earth. This we know: all things are connected like the blood which unites one family. ...Whatever befalls the

earth befalls the sons and daughters of the earth. We did not weave the web of life. We are merely a strand in it. Whatever we do to the web, we do to ourselves."

So let us pray to that "soul of the whole...the eternal one..." as Emerson called it. Spirit of Life well up within us as you are in this spring time and grant us if not genius and virtue, then love; help us find the will to be more responsible stewards of the web, which connects us all. Amen.