

Reflections by Rev. Dr. Jan Carlsson-Bull
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“Braided”

Koyaanasqatsi. It's a Hopi word that means life out of balance. This past week feels in so many ways like *Koyaanasqatsi*, from the personal to the interpersonal, from violations of individual dignity to violations of the highest aspirations of a society and abuses of power that impact us all, from the loss of one among us that shakes us to the core to the loss of a joyous cluster of young and old dancing in the sun on a faraway beach. Yet every morning as I walk our four-legged alarm clock, I pray. Above all I say Thank you to God, to Love, to the Universe impartial as it is, for life—for your life, our life, my life, for mobility, for health as far as I know, for the gift of giving and receiving in what is so much more than a job, for the scents of the seasons, the hues that signal summer's segue into autumn, and for hope against hope that we—you and I together and through our faith and belief in the transforming power of love—can do our fair share and more in realizing justice and compassion and joy in the life that is ours to live.

May our first breath of the morning be Thank You—whatever came down the night before, whatever losses we have known and grieve, whatever injustices we witness or to which we contribute, whatever reason we have—and there are many—for asking Why this? Why that? may our first breath be Thank You.

I take heart from the practice of pledging allegiance to gratitude, as told by Robin Wall Kimmerer in *Braiding Sweetgrass*. Envision the children of the Onondaga Nation heading off to school, “with bright backpacks too big for their little shoulders”, running circles “through sun shafts, over clan symbols etched on the slate floor.” Heed their allegiance to gratitude, “directed straight to the ones who share their gifts with the world.” Listen closely to their young-voiced gratitude for the gift of “duty to lie in balance and harmony with each other and all living beings”—a far cry from the throes of *Koyaanasqatsi*. Listen even more closely to their invitation to one another to “bring our minds together as one as we give greetings and thanks to each other as People,” and to the refrain that concludes each round of specifics: “Now our minds are one.”

However we lose balance, however we become ungrounded, however we precariously and even enthusiastically join the forces that throw life out of balance, our earthling status is a gift of grace, which in spite of ourselves binds us to the reality that we are spiritually embodied in this earth's life and in the lives of each other.

“Mother I feel you under my feet...Father I see you when the eagle flies.” we sang, affirming in song authored by one named Windsong, that we are of this earth, of this sky, that we are one with nature. I am, but we are. I am a strand; we are a braid, a sacred braid in affirming our oneness with all that is. As we draw from the wisdom of the indigenous peoples of this land, may we take joy in weaving together separate strands as did our children just moments ago, as did many of the rest of us along with them, and as we gave them away—in generosity that flows from gratitude. Let us stretch our souls on the braid of Mother Earth, our most Ancient of Mothers, and say thank you, thank you, thank you.

“Intertwined”

Three seeds, three sisters, three colors, three textures, three shapes rising from “the same square foot of soil”. What more nourishing image might we have for earth in balance than the witness born by the seeds of corn, beans and squash planted as a close-knit family. One of the many lessons learned from the indigenous peoples by the European newcomers was this. How ridiculous, thought my ancestors; such seeds must be planted in same-seed rows only. The ancestors of this land knew better. As one seed becomes a stalk of corn, another spirals upward as the bean vine, and the third stretches into the broad shapes of squash leaves girding her sisters and drawing through the spaces between stalk and vine only the light she needs. Intertwined, the sisters embody harmony and reciprocity.

A close-knit family they are. If rain falls upon one, it falls upon all. If a dry spell parches one, it parches all. If the wind moves one to dance, all join in. If the sun sheds warmth on one, the others are positioned to receive only what they need—not too much, not too little.

As our children and many of the rest of us braided our ribbons earlier this morning, so we crafted a symbol of how the three sisters grow and nurture one another, how they provide nurturance through their twining, and how they are gifts given and received.

As sisters, as brothers, in the families of which we are a part and in this family of faith, we thrive when the gifts of thriving are given and received in community. We grow when we respect one another’s space, while embracing one another in support. We nurture our larger community by the health of our own mutuality.

“Giving, receiving as love shows us how”, we sing together. So too might we heed the wisdom of our Mother Earth and sing out: “thriving, surviving as She shows us how.

Intertwined? Yes. Braided? Yes. Sisters and brothers in the interdependent web of all existence? Yes. And thank you, Mother, thank you!

Amen.

Sources:

Robin Wall Kimmerer, *Braiding Sweetgrass*, milkweed editions, 2013.

“Mother I Feel You”, Words and music: Windsong Dianne Martin, in *Singing the Journey: A Supplement to Singing the Living Tradition*, Unitarian Universalist Association, Boston, 205. 1070.

The Qatsi Trilogy, <http://www.koyaanisqatsi.com/>.

“Wake, Now, My Senses”, Words: Thomas J.S. Mikelson; Music: Traditional Irish melody, in *Singing the Living Tradition*, Beacon Press, Boston, The Unitarian Universalist Association, 298.