

Aldo Leopold and Our View of the World

Delivered to the First Unitarian Church of Wilmington Delaware

September 28, 2014

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This week we wrap up our exploration of the theme of unity. We have been thinking about unity in ever expanding circles. At Ingathering we talked about unity in the context of our church community coming together to further our mission. Then we looked at different ways to understand what it means to be human; particularly through the lens of the Old Testament and the Jewish tradition. Today we are widening that out even further. What if we went beyond the realm of human beings and considered our unity with the entire natural world?

Of course we are hardly the first Unitarian Universalists to think in this way. In the mid-1980s a seventh principle was added to the bylaws of the Unitarian Universalist Association. Whereas the previous six principles had come out of a multi-year study and a series of conversations throughout our Unitarian Universalist congregations, on the day of the final vote, someone from the floor of the General Assembly proposed adding a seventh principle that read, "Respect for the interdependent web of all

existence of which we are a part.” Unitarian Universalism had been the home of humanism for nearly a century by that point. But this seventh principle pointed to something beyond the human realm strictly speaking. It encouraged us to think of the entire web of existence of which we are all a part.

How did we arrive at that point? How did the Unitarian Universalists get from the Humanist Manifesto in 1933 to the Seventh Principle in 1986? Well it just so happens that I have the minutes from every General Assembly meeting that occurred in those intervening years, and I will now read them to you in their entirety...No just kidding! I don't want to initiate a mad dash for the door. Instead I thought I would talk about a man who both lived and wrote extensively about that interdependent web that is mentioned in our Seventh Principle. He was not a Unitarian Universalist himself, but he inspired many of us. His name was Aldo Leopold.

Leopold was really the first person to apply the philosophy of ethics to the environmental world. Ethics up until then had focused on how humans treated other humans. Leopold used some of what philosophers of ethics were talking about and applied it to the earth, to animals, to land, to water, and nature. You see Aldo Leopold was a hunter and a naturalist. He understood that we human beings are part and parcel of the

world; not separate from it in some specialized category in the hierarchy of beings.

One of the ways we are intimately connected to the world is through food. What we eat comes from the earth; or at least it has for most of human history until recently. When we eat things that are natural, this tends to be healthy for us. When we eat overly processed food, it tends to be less healthy. I am speaking in general here because the line between food that comes from the earth and food that is processed is a fuzzy one, but generally speaking you have experienced this. Twinkies don't grow on trees; apples do. What we put into our bodies affects us literally at the molecular level. Our food becomes who we are and what we do. When we eat that apple, we give it new life, it is transformed into our bodies, our skin, our muscles that help us to move and act and love, the apple is transformed into the neurological chemicals that become our thoughts and feelings.

Similarly, someone pointed out to me, we are not the end of this process. We like to think we are the top of the food chain, the rulers of the world according to Genesis, but we are but another strand in that interdependent web. Mosquitoes bite us, and use our blood. Innumerable micro-organisms live on our skin, on our eyelashes, in our digestive systems. I won't go into details, since most of us expect to eat lunch after worship today, but Google it

sometime. But be warned, after you read about all the little creepy crawly things that make their home on our bodies and the bodies of our loved ones, you may find yourself showering for days on end.

Aldo Leopold had that interdependent understanding of the world. It was reflected in our meditation this morning too, about the two trees that grow into each other, for purposes known only to them. Instead of seeing the world as a collection of isolated individuals, this is a systems understanding of our world. What happens to one species affects another. Leopold was a hunter, and did a good deal of hunting in Wisconsin, where he spent most of his life. I too grew up in the upper Midwest with a strong hunting culture. Christmas and birthdays are easy for me when it comes to my extended family. A few gift cards to Bass Pro Shop and Cabela's and they are literally happy campers. My brother is probably the most avid hunter of the lot, until recently he hunted deer, pheasant and wild turkey with a bow. I, on the other hand, am not particularly adept at hunting.

I went hunting for the first time when I was 16 years old. Now I should preface this by saying that this is a story I do not tell often, and almost never when I am back in Michigan. But you know this is my church, I love you guys, so I feel I can share this. I was in High School of course, I had taken a safety course on

hunting – a prerequisite to get a license actually, and my uncle was going to take me up to his family’s cabin in Northern Michigan. This, by the way, meant missing nearly a week of school and “going hunting” was considered an acceptable reason.

I am not sure how much hunting any of you have done, but it is either very relaxing or very boring depending on your point of view. You get up before dawn, sit in a blind, a small hideout in the woods, and wait for a deer to come by. And you wait, and wait, and wait and wait. Most of the time, you don’t see anything. On the few occasions you spot an animal that is legal to shoot, and you put your gun up to your shoulder, your adrenaline kicks in. Your body goes from 0 to 60 in ten seconds. This is known as “buck fever.” It manifests in various ways, some people forget to breathe to the point where they nearly black out. Some people can’t keep a steady hand. One year my brother came home with an impressive buck, but also a black eye. I teased him that finally the deer fought back. A fair fight for once! Actually it was buck fever; he pressed his eye up against the scope so hard that the recoil from his shot gave him the black eye.

My experience was not quite so impressive. By the second day I was bored to tears by sitting in this blind literally from dawn until dusk. So the next day I did the only logical thing: I brought a book to read. Every once and a while I would look up for

something to shoot, but I got a lot of good reading done. Being the safe hunter that I was, I put my gun in a safe position while reading. A few hours in, I looked up from my book and saw a deer; probably as close to me as the front pews are to the pulpit. Now you might think, no big deal. All you have to do is slowly put the book down. Carefully reach back for your gun, bring it up to firing position, and you have your first deer on your very first hunting trip! That is what I was thinking. I am going to be Mr. Outdoorsman here! But had you thought that, you would have fallen for the same mistake I did: not accounting for buck fever. My kidneys dumped a massive amount of adrenaline into my system the second I saw this deer. I dropped the book, snatch my gun, clicked off the safety, put it up to my shoulder, and by the time I was ready to shoot, that deer was probably half a mile away. I had scared him off. No great prize for me. That was the first mistake I made hunting. The second mistake I made was telling people this story! My hunting companions found this hilarious, when they heard it. To this day, certain cousins of mine demand to hear this story so that they can have a laugh at my expense. I rarely give them the satisfaction.

Of course this was years before I discovered Buddhism. Buddhism takes a dim view of hunting. Killing any living thing results in bad karma; in fact it is some of the worst kind of karma.

Actually in the West there is a similar school of thought that says that killing is wrong, painful, and cruel. What did that deer ever do to you? Didn't you see Bambi? The hunters were the bad guys. I don't know the history of this school of ethical thinking. I do know that it is vocally represented by my mother in a forlorn attempt to discourage hunting in our family. But it is worth noting that Aldo Leopold himself was both a naturalist and a hunter.

Actually at the time of my not-so-grand hunting expedition, deer were overpopulated in the state of Michigan. As is often the case when animal herds are overpopulated, diseases spread. One disease that was common at the time affected the enzymes in the deer's stomach. No matter how much they ate, they couldn't break down and digest their food. They were starving with full stomachs. If you ask me, that is the cruel and painful way to die. In addition, eating locally harvested meat and produce is all the rage in the restaurant world these days. That is because locally hunted meat significantly reduces our carbon footprint on the earth. There was a fish market in Omaha Nebraska that I would go to sometimes. They boasted about having fish and seafood flown in from both coasts and the Gulf. That is a big carbon footprint to leave just to have fresh fish in Omaha.

Interdependence as a worldview presents us with ethical dilemmas like that. Aldo Leopold was the first to truly understand

this. In his seminal essay The Land Ethic, Leopold shares his overriding ethical principle for the earth. He writes, “A thing is right when it tends to preserve the integrity, stability, and beauty of the biotic community. It is wrong when it tends otherwise.” Hunting an overpopulated deer population preserves the stability of the environment. Overhunting them down to near-extinction levels does not. Those three values: integrity, stability, and beauty lie at the core of Leopold’s Land Ethic. Integrity, stability, and beauty are what most folks focus on when they either critique or evangelize this ethic. But you know, in my most recent reading through our lens of unity that we are winding up this month, another piece of it struck me. The last part of the Land Ethic: the biotic community. The community of all living things; not just people.

From a philosophical point of view, Land Ethic is a form of utilitarianism. Utilitarianism is a philosophy that says that something is ethical if it brings about the most amount of good for the highest number of people. The Land Ethic is similar in that it thinks in terms of consequences, but it has different assumptions. Rather than just people, Leopold is concerned with all of life, all of nature, benefiting from a particular action. He knows that to just focus on humans is to misunderstand our interdependent world. His is an enlightened self-interest. If we as human beings want

the most amount of happiness for as many people as possible then we need to look at the earth as a whole. We are all a unity.

Aldo Leopold is the beginning of the environmental movement. His Land Ethic was the first assertion of something we now know all too well: that human beings are a part of nature too and therefore our actions affect the rest of nature. Sadly those actions have not been in keeping with integrity, stability, and beauty very well. We face an encyclopedic number of environmental problems, any one of which could prove cataclysmic. The actions of human beings on the environment have lead us down this road to a large extent. But there is good news. If we can act to make things worse, then it stands to reason that we can also act to make things better.

Often when faced with the number and severity of the numerous environmental problems before us, people ask, "What is the first step?" I find myself asking that question more often than I like. What is the first step? I think the first thing we can do to live according to the land ethic is arguably the most important step: don't give up hope. It is easy to give up hope given the pessimistic tone of some writers and activists. But pessimism leads to despair, and despair leads to inaction. Remember Aldo Leopold teaches us that human beings can affect their

environment. Give up hope, and we can guarantee that no one will do anything, and everything will get worse.

Along with don't give up hope, the second step is to get inspired. I found it to be very inspirational when last week hundreds of thousands of people flooded into New York City for the People's Climate March; including 20 or so from this congregation. What a powerful example of unity. True, all those people in New York didn't, in that moment, fix the hole in the ozone layer or anything like that. But the real value of the march for them, and even for those of us looking on, is that it buoyed hope. Through a tangible experience of being together, an experience of unity, all those people showed that there is hope so long as we are together in our minds, bodies, and attitudes. By itself that is not enough of course, but it is the crucial first step vitally necessary for further action. Get a bunch of hopeful people together, inspired by each other to take action, and there is little they can't accomplish from there.

And you know, the sad and hopeful thing about all these environmental problems is that they are everywhere. There is no shortage of issues we need to address. Which means there are things we can do right in our backyard. Opportunities for action abound. Just a couple examples: following the Delmarva worship celebration on October 12 participants will be heading out to do

an environmental cleanup action. And in our own congregation, the Green Sanctuary Team and I are thinking of new possibilities for that team as they envision themselves no longer as a building committee but as a group of environmental activists leading the way for the rest of us. Green Sanctuary will be providing hope and inspiration to us through new programs in the coming year and beyond. Keep an eye for them, and join in the work.

May we be ever in tune with our unity not just with each other but with all living things. May we have a similar rush and excitement of “buck fever” as we work for a world made whole. Amen Blessed Be.