

Talk for the Unitarians – Sunday 12 May 2019

Interconnectedness

Our theme today is interconnectedness and in this talk I'm going to discuss some of the essentials that support our lives and illustrate how none of them exist as separate entities in isolation from everything else.

Air

I'm going to start with the air.

Let's take a moment to be aware of our breathing, to just enjoy our breathing.

I'm going to invite this bell to sound and when it does we can become aware of our in-breath and say silently to ourselves "in" and become aware of our out-breath and say silently to ourselves "out".

In...Out

Breathing in, I know that I am alive. Breathing out, I smile to life.

Alive...Smiling.

It's thanks to the air that we can stay alive, and in particular the oxygen in the air. Without oxygen we pass out in a matter of minutes – hence the critical instruction that airlines give to "put on your own oxygen mask first". But where does the oxygen come from? Scientists tell us that atmospheric oxygen arose by the photosynthesis of blue-green algae in the primordial oceans and is now topped up to some extent by photosynthesis from living plants. So our lives wouldn't be possible without that contribution from plants. We inter-are with plants – both contemporary and from the mists of time.

Have you been able to enjoy fresh air recently? I remember walking on a beach in East Lothian and really savouring the fresh sea breeze. I've found that even just an early morning jog around Lochend Park puts me in touch with air that is fresher than that right next to a busy road.

Clean, fresh air is something to treasure and the efforts of organisations such as Client Earth <https://www.clientearth.org/> who use legal processes to try to get air quality regulations enforced deserve our support.

Air and Earth are interconnected since without the gravitational pull of the Earth, the atmosphere would drift off into space !

Water

Here is a little poem (or 'gatha') we recite before turning on a tap:

*"Water flows from high in the mountains.
Water runs deep in the Earth.
Miraculously, water comes to us,
and sustains all life."*

Have you had access to clean running water from a tap today? If so, you have benefited from those who constructed the reservoir and the pumping systems, laid the water mains pipes and plumbed the house or flat where you live. It is wonderful to live somewhere where it is safe to drink water from a tap and much better for the environment than using water from all those plastic bottles. Without water we can only live for a matter of days – exactly how many depends how hot it is.

Thay has frequently said "A cloud never dies" and one way the cloud continues is through us whenever we drink water. We inter-are with water. Water can take many forms: snowflakes, icicles, dewdrops, hail, tears and waves yet, whatever appearance it takes, water remains in essence H₂O.

I've experienced lack of water twice in Scotland. The first time was many years ago when I used to go to Kyleakin Youth Hostel with friends over New Year. One year the water pipes froze and it was amazing how quickly that became a problem. We had to fetch buckets of water from the sea to flush the toilets and we couldn't shower or wash our vegetables for cooking. The second time was when our meditation group had a retreat in a small cottage near Oban and again the water pipes froze.

The preciousness of water also came alive for me when I read an English translation of Antoine de Saint-Exupéry's moving account of when his plane crashed in the sahara desert in his book "Wind, Sand and Stars".

Many people across the world lack access to clean, fresh water. The Scottish singer-songwriter Karine Polwart wrote a beautiful song about this for a charity called "Wells for Zoe" which you might enjoy on You Tube:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AjSdEPeVzIc>.

Food

Plants also wouldn't be able to exist without the right amount of water, and whatever your diet, we inter-are with the plants and cannot exist separately from them. Some of the monastics at Plum Village have done controlled fasting for 10-14 days without ill effects but without food we can only live a matter of weeks. Mohandas Ghandi's three longest hunger strikes lasted 21 days each.

Food poverty in Scotland is a real, pressing and growing problem right now. In many cases this is a direct result of the long waiting period and harsh

conditionality and sanctions regime for those on Universal Credit.

Thich Nhat Hanh pays considerable attention to mindful eating – both savouring food and cultivating awareness of the conditions that have enabled it's manifestation. Here is the first of the 5 contemplations before eating:

'This food is the gift of the whole universe: the Earth, the sky, numerous living beings and much hard and loving work'

The term gift is important here. Our culture in general thinks of food as a commodity which one pays for, and at one level that is true. However, when eating a tomato did you pay the sunshine for shining, or the rain for raining or the soil for nurturing the tomato seedling?

Initially I had suspected that Thay's appreciation of food was partly due to the influence of French culture during the French occupation of Vietnam when he was growing up and his life at Plum Village in France. However, more recently I've learnt of the Vietnamese famine of 1945 in which it is estimated that somewhere between 1-2 million people (about 10%) of the population lost their lives through starvation. Since Thay was born in 1926 he will have experienced this when he was 19, three years into his monastic training. It seems likely that this experience may have contributed to his appreciation of food.

Soil

Not all plants are grown in soil these days. Something like 10% of the UK commercial production of tomatoes, peppers and cucumbers for supermarkets are grown hydroponically (that is, in water culture) at the huge 'Thanet Earth' complex in Kent. Some people advocate what's called 'Vertical Farming' in cities as a way to reduce transport miles and provide fresh food for urban consumers. However most food plants are still grown in soil, and they probably taste all the better for it! A healthy soil teems with life – all the way from microbes to moles! Whether you like pot plants or permaculture, there is no doubt that we inter-are with the soil. No soil, no plants; no plants, no us!

Thay often uses his experience of composting in an organic garden to illustrate the way how seemingly negative things can be transformed in a positive way. Dead roses become smelly compost, but in due course this supports the growth of fresh roses.

I've heard several stories from people whose own personal experience of suffering has motivated them to fundraise for organisations trying to help with whatever it was that led to their suffering. As Thay says, "no mud, no lotus".

Sunshine

And, of course, nothing much can grow without the light and warmth from the

sun. They once wrote a book called "The sun my heart" likening the sun to "an immense heart that gives all life on Earth the warmth necessary for existence". The sun is the ultimate source of all our power whether from fossil fuels or solar energy.

I remember an 80's song from 'Katrina and the Waves' with the lyrics "I'm walking on sunshine...and don't it feel good!". In fact there is a sense in which we are indeed walking **AS** sunshine since the plants we eat couldn't grow without it!

The sun is a star. Whenever I do something at work which meets someone's needs, I often hear back "Thanks. You're a star". Well, in fact we all are interconnected with the stars since the very elements of which we are made are understood by scientists to have their origin in stellar nucleosynthesis. So we all really are, in a sense, made from stardust.

Just as we need the right amount of water to live in a safe space between drought and flooding, we need also the right amount of sunshine to live in a safe space between freezing and over heating.

We live in very challenging times. Optimists supposedly see the glass as half full, while pessimists see it as half empty. However, from the perspective of interbeing we could say that the glass is completely empty (of a separate existence)...and that's why it's full of everything.

For those with children, or about to have children, it could be argued that only optimists create the future. However to look deeply, beyond either optimism or pessimism, and encounter reality directly it can help from time to time to sit quietly and come back to our breath.

Fresh air, clean water, wholesome food, fertile topsoil and the right amount of sunshine are wonderful treasures and not things that we can any longer take for granted.

They are not merely "natural resources" to be audited only for their economic contribution to human life but are natural wonders of intrinsic beauty and preciousness.

Contemplating interbeing and interconnectedness is one way for us to appreciate them and to cultivate a deep sense of gratitude for all the causes and conditions that support our lives.