

It's been suggested that maybe it's time that we called this COVID pandemic what it is: the revenge of the tiny. Here we are, we proud humans, brought low by the smallest and simplest of all organisms: a virus unable even to live on its own, a mere pocket of genetic machinery that has to hijack the cells of its host even to sustain and replicate itself, yet that has the capacity to disable us, to shut down multiple organ systems and threaten our lives.

But we've got spunk, right? We've got smarts. We can defeat this thing. We can shift our resources to a wartime footing and discover and exploit the virus's weak spots to give us super-duper medicines that will throw it to the mat.

But what if there's another narrative hidden in this crisis that tells a different story. What if we read this newly emerged virus as an example of the astonishing creativity of which life is capable, creativity which it is vital to us that we respect and understand. What if it's not an enemy, not an invader, but a wrinkle in the web of life that tells us things about ourselves and how we are connected to other beings, that is linked to us across millennia by genetic machinery that mirrors processes operating in ourselves. What if it offers clues as to how life works, that hint at a story of our very origin.

That would be a very different story, but it would not be foreign to us because it arises from our seventh principle. Of all our principles, the seventh is probably the most widely beloved: We covenant to affirm and promote respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part.

It is certainly in tune with our times, for it reflects a broad sensibility today that calls us to attend to our connections with the natural world. We were the first religious denomination to place respect for the natural world simply for its own sake as a central tenet of our faith.

But it hasn't always given us respect. Some joke that it means we regard recycling as a kind of prayer. Birds and trees and mountains and rivers are nice, we're told, but how are they religious?

At around the turn of the last century just as I was entering seminary my advisor at the time, the Rev. David Bumbaugh, wrote a sermon that took a stab at answering that question. He pointed out that in the previous century the sciences had taught us much that had inspired reverence and awe.

High-energy physics, he said, had unveiled a realm of unseen particles that were the very stuff of all things. "Ultimately," he reflected, "the more we understand of our universe at this level, the more we are driven to reverence before mystery of the invisible, ineffable reality in which our quotidian existence is rooted."

In the larger world, as we study the stars, we've come to discover that the universe, in his words, "is larger than we can encompass in our imaginations." All these discoveries, he said, "have served to tie us ever more tightly into the emerging story of the universe itself," that we are made of the stuff of the stars.

Zeroing in on the earth itself, it's become plain that "we do not live on Earth; we exist as elements in earth's living system," that we are related to "everything that creeps, crawls or flies . . . that is rooted in the earth and reaches for the sun. We are but one form life has taken, one expression of earth's living process."

All of this, he argued, is not simply a finding of science: "It is a religious story in that it calls us out of our little local universes and invites us to see ourselves in terms of the largest self we can imagine, a self that was present, in some sense, in the singularity that produced the emergent universe . . . and that contains within it the seeds of a future we cannot imagine in our wildest flights of fancy."

All of this, he said, widens our understanding of what moral living involves. On the one hand, we understand, in his words, "that at heart we are one with all things; separateness is an illusion." And yet, on the other hand, individuals matter: life emerges, flourishes, evolves in the specific, creature by creature, plant by plant.

And so, Bumbaugh wrote, "We are driven by our story to seek an ethic that respects the individual and the ground out of which the individual emerges." This story, he said, "is a religious story. It invites us to awe. It demands a vocabulary of reverence."

There was little response to Bumbaugh's essay until several years later when that last phrase, "vocabulary of reverence" caught the attention of our colleague, Rev. William Sinkford, who was also president of the UUA at the time. In a sermon, Sinkford said Bumbaugh's essay brought to his mind the struggle that many UUs often have to find language that expresses their faith. He didn't address Bumbaugh's appeal for language connecting humans more closely to the natural world but instead argued for UUs to return to using more freely more traditional "religious language," especially the word "God."

Sinkford's sermon prompted a fascinating conversation that still echoes in our movement. Responding to Sinkford, Bumbaugh agreed that we need words that give us the ability "to speak with power about what is deepest and dearest." But he said he had no interest in using terms of what he called "the classic forms and categories of monotheistic Jewish and Christian traditions" that, he felt, had been "challenged and outdated."

In the couple of decades since, while this conversation over language has been going on among us, science itself has been illustrating connections that are deeper and broader than we ever imagined. I'm particularly charmed by to what it's shown us about plants.

Long ago we were taught this great division in the natural world: plants and animals, two kingdoms, never the twain shall meet. Except, as our understanding has grown, those boundaries seem less and less clear.

For example, Peter Wohlleben in his recent book, "The Hidden Life of Trees," described how trees communicate with each other and the wider world in ways very much like human senses. Injured, they register pain in signals that move through leaves and roots give off warning gases that are received by other trees as scents. They can detect the saliva of invading insects and release pheromones that attract predators of those insects. And seedlings exposed to a certain frequency of sound, a crackling emitted by other roots, orient themselves to the sound.

So, smell, taste, hearing – there are three senses we share with them.

In his book, “The Overstory,” which you heard a portion of earlier Richard Powers imagines, as he puts it, “the air raining messages” from trees, and he weaves together the stories of nine people who he imagines hearing them. He’s not alone.

Forest ecologist Suzanne Simard argues that she can detect what she calls an “emotional response,” even something like intelligence in how trees act and respond. And it’s not just the trees. Peter Wohlleben says trees are only the most prominent members of what he calls a “wood wide web” of dense communication pervading our forests that link tree roots with forest fungi.

It’s not that far distant from the kind of vast web that the movie “Avatar” imagined connecting all life. It may not be quite so on planet Earth, but bit by bit we are learning that life is further along that path than we had ever imagined.

Part of what makes all this so hard for us to fathom is the heritage of Western religion that for so many years regarded the natural world as a depraved, sinful place, a veil of sorrows that we hope to leave at death for a home in heaven.

Our Seventh Principle makes a different bet: That the natural world is good in and of itself and that we are its children. All of us and everything is bound up together, in Mary Oliver’s words, “in one shining cup.”

In keeping with our theme this month of Thresholds, our Seventh Principle is a doorway to that understanding, a key to helping us understand that in the most visceral way we are in this story together. There is a common ground from which all life rose, and we humans were privileged to emerge from it, but we are not in charge.

Like so many species before us our continuation is not guaranteed. The irony is we could be the first to be eliminated by our own hand. Still, it need not be that way. The ingenuity and creativity of life offer us unbounded hope if we learn to listen, to watch.

Mary Oliver’s image is one that gives me hope: that one cup – the singular and the eternal – One in which everything, all life, is embodied, a place where despite our folly and hubris everything is redeemable: Even us, even our eyes, even our imagination.