

## Relationship at the Heart of All That Is

John 1:1-4

*Ute Molitor, First Congregational Church, UCC, Camden, April 14, 2024 (Early Earth Day)*

FROM THE MYSTICS                      Hildegard of Bingen                      12th Century

*The earth is at the same time mother. She is mother of all that is natural, mother of all that is human. She is mother of all, for contained in her are the seeds of all. The earth of humankind contains all moistness, all verdancy, all germinating power. It is in so many ways fruitful. All creation comes from it, yet it forms not only the basic raw material for humankind but also the substance of the incarnation of Christ.*

GOSPEL John 1:1-4

*In the beginning was Logos, and Logos was with God, and Logos was God. Logos was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through Logos, and without Logos not one thing came into being. What has come into being in Logos was life, and the life was the light of all people.*

The solar eclipse certainly caused quite a buzz of excitement this past week! How many of you had a chance to see and/or feel the various changes that were happening during the eclipse? I know some of you traveled a few hours to get the best view and said the effort was well worth it. Mark and I hiked up Bald Rock Mountain with our dog and could notice the shifts in light, heightened by the reflection of the remaining snow, as we approached the top. Like many of you who stayed closer to home, we were stunned by how much light remained when there was only a sliver of the sun visible. That, in itself, was a testament to the power of the sun which helps to sustain all life. There was also an odd shimmer in the air and animals went quiet. The awesome silence and calm were particularly potent for me.

Humans and other creatures of this earth have been witnessing such eclipses of the sun or moon for millennia. Some cultures have seen bad omens in these moments. Others celebrate an eclipse as a union between sun and moon which signals death and rebirth, ushering in fertility and creative energy for the earth. In the Christian tradition, some believed it would signal the return of Christ. I am fascinated by the question of what draws so many of us to experience such natural phenomena and imbue them with meaning. What can it also teach us in the context of Earth Day which we are celebrating a bit early this month?

In pondering these questions, I was struck by how many of you who witnessed the eclipses alongside others, often complete strangers, named a sense of connection among those gathered. People were connecting beyond political, social, or religious divisions in a shared sense of awe and wonder. Moments like these remind us of how much we are part of and shaped by much larger forces than we can control. We can be frightened by this realization or gratefully embrace the ways we are sustained through the interrelationship and interdependencies of countless phenomena.

Interestingly, studies have indeed shown that people experiencing solar eclipses felt “less self-focused and more prosocial, affiliative, humble” and used “more prosocial, affiliative, humble, and collective language”<sup>1</sup> afterwards than those who did not witness the eclipse. We are changed when we can tap into a deep inner knowing and longing for interconnection. This knowing and desire exists in all of us. What if we could connect with this knowing more often and awaken to the ways we are mysteriously sustained and interconnected at all times, not only every few decades a solar eclipse comes our way?<sup>2</sup>

I am particularly struck by how people used different language in the wake of the experience - “more prosocial, affiliative, humble, and collective” expressions. We use more language like “we” and “oneness” and together when we experience awe together. We become more prone to looking for possibility and connection. This is a reminder that how we speak changes how we perceive and shape the world and our relationships and vice versa.

In her book “Church of the Wild,” Victoria Loorz highlights the need to reengage with such relational languaging at the heart of our Christian tradition.<sup>3</sup> We just heard parts of the *Prologue* from the Gospel of John in which Christ is referred to as *Logos*. *Logos* is a Greek word

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<sup>1</sup> <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/35942889/> “The Social Effects of an Awesome Solar Eclipse” by Sean P/ Goldy, Nicolas M Jones, Paul K Piff. Cites in <https://www.psychiatrictimes.com/view/the-many-meanings-of-solar-eclipses> by H. Steven Moffic, “The Many Meanings of Solar Eclipses.”

<sup>2</sup> For example, every breath is a miracle and a reminder of the complete interdependence of life-forms.

<sup>3</sup> Victoria Loorz, *Church of the Wild: How Nature Invites Us Into the Sacred*, Chapter Six.

which describes the “intelligent life force embedded in and interconnecting all things.” Until the fourth century, this dynamic quality was honored in the languaging of our Western Christian lineage. Latin translations used the word *Sermo* for *Logos* which means “conversation” or “weaving/joining, living, conversing together.” Both *Logos* and *Sermo* signify a relational force at the heart of living and dying, binding matter and spirit together. John identified the crucified and risen Jesus Christ as the manifestation of this life-giving relational principle in time. Christ comes alive – or “returns” - every moment we live within this inter-relational dynamic. The Holy Spirit empowers us to live in celebration of this divine presencing in all that exists, within and among us.

In the fourth century, a dramatic shift occurred when *Sermo* was changed to *verbum* or “word” after Christianity became the religion of the Empire under Constantine. God became more of a static noun than a living, dynamic power manifesting in and as relationship. Looorz argues that this change in language was intended to shift the focus away from an organic relationality at the heart of all life to a definable and enforceable order and dogma. Of course, the Christian tradition also suffered from the systematic suppression of feminine aspects of divinity, and the honoring of the earth as the fertile ground of all incarnations of matter and spirit- to reference Hildegard of Bingen.

How can we reclaim this sense of relational dynamism and power not held by an institution but alive and inherent in all of creation, masculine and feminine and non-binary expressions- between, human and other species? I raise these questions in the context of Earth Day (slightly ahead of time) as we face the challenges of mass extinctions and climate change. It is important that we know the extent and accelerated speed of the effects of climate change on all species on our planet (more of that will be shared in the future). However, today I would like to keep our focus on this originally relational and dynamic nature of God and reality at the heart of our faith. The more we trust this divine indwelling and aliveness, the more our hearts can reconnect with our sense of awe and interconnection for the good of all.

We can cultivate this aliveness in many small and big ways. Much has to do with our quality of being present to and with particular beings, whether human or of another species. As Thomas Berry and others have said, we become willing to protect that which we love. We do not love in abstraction but through relationship and reciprocity with particular others.<sup>4</sup> This is a two-way street. I would like to tell you two personal stories which speak to this.

I still remember spending time digging up an overgrown vegetable garden at my friends' new home in Wisconsin. They always provided me sanctuary when I needed it. I was going through a difficult time of loss, minor depression, and confusion. Every day, I would grab garden tools and tend to the overgrown garden that had come with the house garden. I would turn over the still fertile soil, weeding out crabgrass, stones, and debris. This became my daily spiritual practice. It did not take long for a small thin Robin to come close while I was working. We spent a lot of time just looking at each other. One of her wings seemed damaged ever so slightly. As I kept digging and weeding, I unearthed many juicy grubs much to the delight of my newfound friend. Honoring the reality of life feeding on life (sorry grubs!), the sacred reciprocity of giving and receiving (Robin Wall Kimmerer), living and dying, the little bird was fed. She would come every day as soon as I showed up with my shovel. This very much felt like sacred conversation and relationship to me. She gifted me with joy, a sense of connection and deepening purpose in return.

I also cherish memories of spending three months in the Northwoods of Wisconsin in a cabin by a lake. Having grown up in the city this was a new experience for me. Each day I would wander through the woods and gaze at trees, other plants, and animals. I would listen to the booming cracking of winter ice on the lake. After I returned to my tiny university dorm in Heidelberg, Germany, I had this dream. A deer had come and was snuggled up with me in my small bed. I remember being so full of joy at sensing this wild being next to me. The deer told me she had

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<sup>4</sup> Someone recently shared an article with me about two young men who live in a slum area of New Delhi and have dedicated their lives to nursing injured black kites, birds which often literally fall out of the sky due to the immense pollution of the air and land.

been sent by the animal community to keep me company. She said they were all concerned for how I would stay alive and thrive back in the city. As the dream unfolded, it became clear that being in the city was hard on the deer who was out of her element. As we walked about in my dream, the cars, noise and lights continued to startle my friend and I became increasingly worried about her. Eventually, I couldn't stand it and said I so appreciated her love but that it was ok to return to where she would be safer. I also said I would do my best to would remember them and their gift of presence."

I woke up with feelings I cannot describe fully but they included deep joy, sadness, gratitude, and a sense of belonging that had been given to me as a most precious gift. There was a depth of love and interconnection across species that has stayed with me. It probably has a lot to do with moving here with all the natural beauty around us on the Midcoast. I know that our dreams have many dimensions and speak to our internal psyche and process. My time in such close proximity with the wild had a deep and lasting impact on my psyche. This dream will always be a reminder of the deeper truth of divine presence at the heart of our relationships.

The *Sermo/Logos* is alive in all of us as this relational generative force calling us into relationship within and beyond our particular species. Let us all pay attention to the ways we are invited into wonder and relationship in our daily and nightly encounters. May the aliveness so many of us sensed in relationship to the solar eclipse continue to engage and shape our consciousness. May we come to know how loved we are and honor God by loving the earth and our fellow beings by changing our impact on our shared environment, our sacred home in which God continues to become incarnate. All thanks and praise be to God.