

This Is What Makes Us Worlds
Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Columbia
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A few months ago, I led a Queer Spirituality class in my teaching congregation. We used the poem by Rev. Soto as a text to provoke our thinking on what it means to queer spirituality – what it is to have a queer theology. We spent nearly half an hour just on that first line – “To be free, you must embrace/the breadth of your own existence/without apology, even if they try to take/it from you.”

We kept coming back to it – a Zoom room full of queer adults of all ages, dreaming, struggling, scheming, trying to envision what it would be like to embrace the breadth of our existence without apology. How do we live and work and love and engage a theology that is *that* big?

What I know is that when I engage theology from **my** queer lens, I can access the Universes inside myself – the ones Rev. Soto says are “milky blue, magenta and gold” and expanding. I can see myself and my queer and trans family in a light that lets us thrive in our fullness. There is power and healing in the ways the world can reflect our selves back to us so we can be known.

In a poem called, “This Is What Makes Us Worlds,” Joshua Jennifer Espinoza writes about her experience and identity, about her image of freedom. She writes, “We turn a corner and make the hills disappear...Planets are smashed into oblivion, stripped of their power to name things...Our love fills the air.”

“This is what makes us worlds.”

I’m struck by the way these queer authors use nature analogies of the biggest things – planets and universes and worlds– to describe what it’s like to be free. Planets and universes and worlds – those images evoke what it’s like to experience liberation.

(pause)

I have a postcard on my refrigerator that reads: “things you can do to eradicate gender or multiply it exponentially.” There is a list that follows with ideas that range from “spend a day in drag” to “hang out with children and teach them how to cross dress Barbie and G.I. Joe.” I really love this idea of either eradicating gender or exponentially multiplying it.

It's not that there's anything wrong with gender: I love being a woman...when I get to define what being a woman means. I like to think about gender not as a binary, and not even really as a spectrum – gender is not a line with male on one side and female on the other with various discrete points in between. I saw a meme that suggested gender is more like a galaxy – a 3-dimensional space of mystery and magic that is always expanding and shifting, and we get to choose the intersection of identity and expression and pronouns and role that fits who we are at any given moment. Imagine the freedom in that. I want to live *that* kind of free.

But it's hard to fully explore those universes and galaxies when we live in such an intensely gendered world. Yes, I'm talking about the toy aisle at Target. And yes, I'm talking about gender reveal parties, and the pressure to conform to prescribed gender roles and stereotyped expectations that pervade every aspect of our existence.

But I'm also talking about the way many of us don't give it too much thought, but even the language we use is often gendered. English doesn't use a grammatical gender for nouns the way Spanish or French does. Instead, English uses a grammatical “natural gender” where nouns become “it” unless they have a biological sex or a gender we intentionally ascribe. There are, apparently, genderless languages, like Finnish and Chinese, where even the gender specific pronouns we use in English don't exist. What we do, in the absence of that grammatical gender, is we apply a *metaphorical* gender - boats, tools, machines, countries, hurricanes, and the earth all have a metaphorical gender most of us know, use, and understand.[2]

I'm particularly interested in the ways we ascribe gender to nature, and the ways this informs not only our relationship with nature and the earth, but also our theologies around our care of the natural world and our understandings of gender and ourselves.

Nature and the earth are pretty universally understood to be female. Images of Mother Earth or Mother Nature are likely familiar to all of us. It's unclear where this feminized understanding of nature originated; it is pervasive across cultures and languages. Several sources suggested this understanding of earth as female may have formalized during the Enlightenment, as a way of separating God and nature in ways they may have previously been synonymous.[3],[4]

Many of the sources I found discussing this topic describe nature as female because "nature has many of the same qualities as women." [5] One source wrote, "Women were seen as being domestic, pious, moral, pure, gentle, kind, graceful, simple, and beautiful...men were seen as hard-working, industrial, rational, assertive, independent and proud, none of which is easily connected with nature." [6]

I actually find this funny, once I look past the ridiculous stereotypes. Did you know that ants can carry things 5,000 times their body weight? [7] Did you know monarch butterflies can fly 50-100 miles a day [8], and Arctic Terns can fly more than 49,700 miles a year? [9] Nature is, undoubtedly, hardworking. And, while we often describe nature as random, the deeper we delve, the more we learn that nature is highly rational – down to things like the ways the seeds in a sunflower follow the Fibonacci sequence [10].

And assertive? Well, we all know not to get between a bear and her cub. We know not to touch stinging or biting animals. Even plants – stinging nettles, or poison ivy say "do not touch me" – and if we touch – there are consequences. In fact, in that list of adjectives, I find the "male" descriptors as being so much more easily attributable to nature. I can't think of any examples that would describe nature as "domestic" or "pious."

And yet, nature, broadly, continues to be gendered in our language as female. What's interesting is that studies have shown that people living in countries that use gendered languages demonstrate more gender stereotypes – specifically with a pro-male bias. [11] While this research is the topic of debate, some researchers conclude that the regular use of gendered words unconsciously reinforces implicit attitudes towards men and women (and I would add, reinforces ignoring the existence of other genders).

Given this, some authors argue that the gendering of earth as mother creates what I would call a “Giving Tree” effect. If you’re not familiar, the book by Shel Silverstein entitled “The Giving Tree” tells a story of a boy who relies on a tree who gives and gives and gives to him, ultimately sacrificing herself in the process. When we gender the earth as female, we understand her as a mother who will give and will continue giving, but does not require attention and care in return. We gender earth as female so we can continue to subjugate her – as one author wrote, “ the idea that women and nature are inherently linked is a tacit acceptance of their mutual exploitation.”[12]

Of course, nature is also feminized due to the connection made regarding fertility and reproduction. The earth is deemed female largely because of its fertility, and this is often explicitly named – or at least insinuated – through poetry, nature writings, and even just phrases in our common lexicon – “fertile land,” “virgin earth,” and “barren soil” are just a few that come to mind. Even excluding hymns with indigenous origins, which have a different cultural, linguistic, and religious context, the hymns in our hymnal overwhelmingly reinforce these stereotypes and refer consistently to a feminine Nature. For example, #1066 “Oh Brother Sun” sings about Brother Sun and Sister Earth with words attributed to St. Francis of Assisi. Hymn #1067 “Mother Earth, Beloved Garden” has words written in 1965, and #1005, “Praise in Springtime,” has words from the late 1800s evoking the “mother Earth” image without the use of pronouns with lines like, “Praise now for the snowy rest, falling soft on nature’s breast...”

What we know now that perhaps we did not know in the past, is that not every woman has a uterus. Not every woman is fertile. Not every woman is able to conceive a child or carry a child or birth a child. And – not every woman is interested in “mothering.” We know that some men have uteruses. Some men give birth. And in the galaxy of gender, not every person is a man or a woman. Trans and nonbinary beloveds mother and give birth and reproduce and exist in lives that are as natural as the natural world around us.

To be clear – we did not “know” this in times past because of oppression and transphobia and homophobia, not because trans and queer people did not exist. Trans and queer people have always existed because, in reality, nature is undoubtedly queer.

Of course, there’s nothing wrong with honoring, celebrating, worshipping, and creating a mother Earth or a divine feminine. There is nothing wrong with goddess worship, and nothing wrong with identification with a female goddess who is celebrated for her reproductive prowess. The problem also isn’t with the image of a male creator god. The problem is the absence of a theology that makes room for the galaxy of experience of all genders.

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(pause)

I recently came across the concept of “queer ecology,” and I am completely fascinated. On the “Ecofeminism and Queer Ecology” episode of “The Ecopolitics Podcast,” Dr. Catriona Sandilands of York University posits that our experiences of sexuality and gender identity shape our relationship to the natural world. She believes that nature has been influenced by heterosexism and homophobia, and queer ecology seeks to understand the ways those lenses have impacted how we understand nature.[13]

Our understanding of heterosexual behavior as “normative” has impacted the lens with which we view animal behavior. She cites a behavior in female bonobos, which was interpreted as a way of “cultivating cooperation” amongst the females so they could choose a (male) mate. Without the heterosexist lens, this behavior could also be (perhaps more accurately) understood as a “homosocial” behavior amongst the females, for the purpose of having fun - with nothing at all to do with choosing a male partner.

Even the ways we access nature has been influenced by heterosexuality and homophobia. She provides a specific example of the ways Central Park was designed especially for “appropriate rituals of heterosexual courtship to occur.” This then led

others - particularly gay men - to occupy other areas of the park, which led to entrapment and mass sweeps of the park by police, resulting in increased arrests and criminalization of gay men.[15][16]

And, importantly when talking about queer ecology, queerness *does* exist in nature. There is a frog that is asexual and reproduces independently. There are animals whose sex shifts. Male seahorses give birth. And this doesn't even touch the extremely lengthy list of animals, insects, fish, and plants that demonstrate "homosexual behavior" – which includes elements of sexual behavior, courtship, and parenting.[17],[18]

But in all of this, I am reminded of that poem we started with - the one in which Rev. Soto writes "being free is not a license, but a Promise,".

My Unitarian Universalist faith compels me to work towards that promise. The promise to develop and evoke and *live* a theology that makes us worlds. Worlds in which we – all of us - exist in our complexity and our wholeness. For me, nature is divine and houses so much that is sacred. To deny or subdue the queerness of nature is to erase divinity, and I am unwilling to knowingly erase any aspect of creation.

Indigenous author Dr. Robin Wall Kimmerer suggests using a new pronoun - *ki* and *kin* - for all natural things. Rather than gendering our world – or reducing everything to an inanimate "it," this pronoun enables us to queer nature and know kin as sacred family. Reimagining life with a new pronoun allows us to expand the ways in which we know the world and the ways in which we are known. It places us – all of us – in the world.

To be known in our fullness, and to see ourselves reflected in our theology and our natural world is a powerful force in moving towards freedom and liberation. When I know the queerness inherent in the divine...when it is reflected to me in the language and metaphor we use...when I know my own worth and dignity because I know it also in the sky and in each blade of grass, it is then that I know I have found my place. When I see the galaxy of identity reflected in all of what I know to be sacred, I know myself as a world that is *in* the world and *of* the world. I know my place, here, as being one that supports our liberation.

May it be so for all of us.