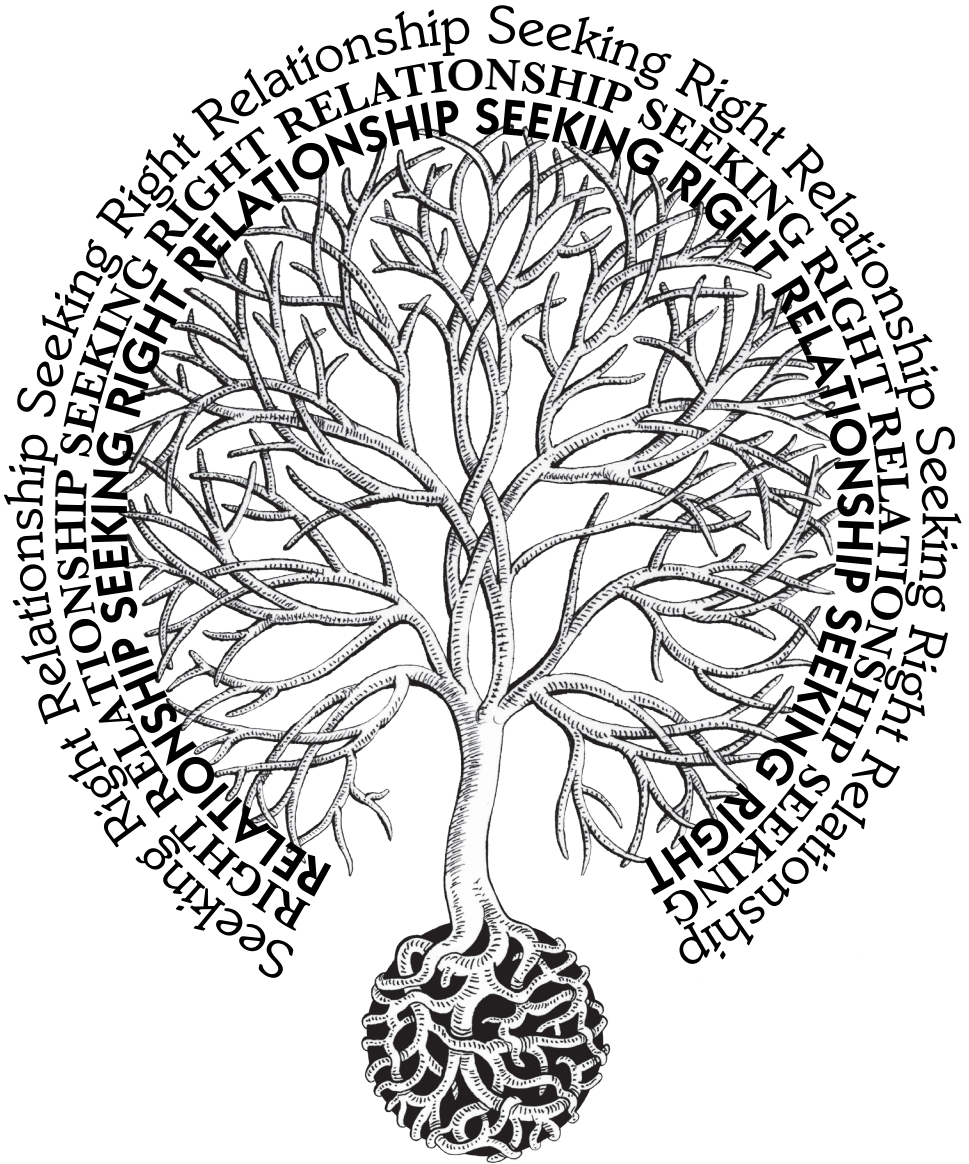


# The Faithful Cosmos

*Faith as a Healing Aspect of Interdependence*



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READING,

*Little Summer Poem Touching The Subject Of Faith*

Mary Oliver

Every summer  
I listen and look  
under the sun's brass and even  
into the moonlight, but I can't hear  
anything, I can't see anything --  
not the pale roots digging down, nor the green  
stalks muscling up,  
nor the leaves  
deepening their damp pleats,  
nor the tassels making,  
nor the shucks, nor the cobs.  
And still,  
every day,  
the leafy fields  
grow taller and thicker --  
green gowns lofting up in the night,  
showered with silk.  
And so, every summer,  
I fail as a witness, seeing nothing --  
I am deaf too  
to the tick of the leaves,  
the tapping of downwardness from the banyan feet --  
all of it  
happening  
beyond any seeable proof, or hearable hum.  
And, therefore, let the immeasurable come.  
Let the unknowable touch the buckle of my spine.  
Let the wind turn in the trees,  
and the mystery hidden in the dirt  
swing through the air.  
How could I look at anything in this world  
and tremble, and grip my hands over my heart?

What should I fear?

One morning  
in the leafy green ocean  
the honeycomb of the corn's beautiful body  
is sure to be there.

## THE FAITHFUL COSMOS I

Covenant, this month's theme. It's nice sounding word, sounds serious, important, has a slightly religious mouth feel. That's what we say binds us together here at Beacon, a covenant. It lays the foundation for everything else we strive to do, a solemn promise to come together in loving, supportive community. Easy to say until the first whiff of serious disagreement. Conflicting opinions, hurt feelings, can drive us apart so easily, even in family, and especially in voluntary communities like this.

When we are tried, what holds us together? I think it's something we already have, something we're born with but have to learn to use with increasing discernment and sensitivity. If I had to distill it down to a single word I'd call it faith.

Now, if I were sitting where you are, at this point every cell in my body would begin to resist. I became a Unitarian Universalist in part, to avoid words like that, coming from a pulpit on a Sunday morning. But you see, I'm more than a Unitarian Universalist, much more. I'm also an English major. And that means that besides having made a serious career miscalculation, I love the archaeology of words, I love digging down to their original meanings, because often, underneath abuse and overuse, words like faith still have the power to describe what really matters.

Maybe you know, for instance, that originally, faith had nothing to do with belief or religion. And teasing them apart again, may

help us. In the Online Etymological Dictionary, Douglas Harper writes “Belief used to mean ‘trust in God,’ while faith meant ‘loyalty to a person based on a promise or duty’...which contain[s] no notion of divinity.” So when you hear the government pledging its “full faith and credit,” it isn’t promoting a belief in democracy, or the Constitution, it’s just promising to pay its bills – at least until recent Congresses it was.

Translated into personal terms then, good faith means only that people can depend on you to do and mean what you say. Something is tugging at you, and you feel responsibility. That’s just how Interdependence feels. So, we’re going to forget beliefs, take them right out of the picture. Beliefs tangle us in doctrine, opinion. They go in and out of fashion. Where beliefs tempt us to enforce, faith inclines us to protect. By this definition, faith comes before belief, it’s more fundamental than belief and does not require it. It glues people together in families, in churches, in communities, in business. It’s what we fight for under fire – not the causes and slogans that put us in the trenches, but for each other.

Now, we need ways to show good faith, behaviors that signal trustworthiness. In Nature, they abound, all creatures have them. Take the male bower bird. To convince females to trust him, he builds the elaborate bower that gives the species its name. He collects all manner of trinkets, and debris and brings them to the bower, particularly favoring anything blue. Then he has to cap the whole thing off with a dance. Dogs are more informal. On meeting, they do their end to end version of the handshake, more or less saying “I’ll trust you with my nethers if you’ll trust me with yours.” They know you have to risk something if you want to make and keep friends. And at the end of harvest, just when as everything appears to be dying, plants spill out their seeds anyway. These are all ways of demonstrating trust and trustworthiness, good faith.

When I discussed this with my trusted partner, Chris, he wondered whether I wasn't really talking about survival instinct. And of course he was right. Because you see, to me, they are the same thing. It's just that calling others animals' display of trustworthiness survival instinct, makes it sound like nothing special; whereas calling our display of trustworthiness faith, makes it sound exceptional. The truth is, we have no idea where these behaviors come from in us or them. Meanwhile, we have built immense cultures around denying that it's the same. If the similarities weren't so striking, do you think we would have to try so hard?

What if we admitted we are inescapably attached, not just to other life, – but even to the dependable cycles that govern galaxies and quarks. What if we admitted that what drives them drives us, too? And we could do it by just reducing all of it survival instinct, and bring everything down to nothing special. But what if instead, we had the deeper humility, the imagination, to credit even the dependable cycles that govern galaxies and quarks with faith? Then, suddenly, we would see where we get it from. We would see that Nature built faith into us atomically and anatomically to equip us for challenges that would otherwise drive us apart. Faith would diffuse through sub atoms and expand to undergird the whole of Nature, and we would rejoin a faithful cosmos, one we can depend on, one worthy of our loyalty, one in covenant with us. How, wonderful, how empowering, how healing is that?

## MUSIC

### THE FAITHFUL COSMOS II

When we left off we had just rejoined a faithful cosmos, one worthy of our loyalty. one in covenant with us. Is it? Is it really? If only it were that simple! Loyalty works both ways. What exactly does the cosmos promise us for ours? Somehow, an inchoate promise, a feeling of a promise accompanies us

into this world. Without seeing any covenant, any terms, we are born into families expecting them to nurture and defend us. And with any luck at all, that convenient – if unfounded – expectation carries us through life.

You know what it reminds me of? It reminds me of the bewildering contracts we accept when we install new software, where we routinely agree to binding terms without looking at them – except that at birth, circumstance has chosen our primary loyalties, the first objects of our faith – whether worthy or unworthy. And to the degree they fail us, it offends our sense of justice, We feel betrayed. No one has to teach us this.

And if indeed, some kind of promise, some kind of covenant, underlies our faith, it follows that a broken promise a broken covenant, underlies every betrayal. And given enough broken promises, we may come to see the world as riddled with betrayals In Nature, they abound.

I used to take a lot of outdoor pictures, and sometimes things move so fast, all you can do is point and shoot – like the time, I was trying to capture sulfur butterflies. Only when I downloaded did I see that someone else was trying to capture them too. Immediately behind the butterflies, disguised as leaves and stem, I saw a preying mantis. What clause in the covenant with the cosmos allows the mantis to wear that innocuous costume? And if that deceit were not enough, here's the clincher, As soon as she has mated, the female mantis is apt to decapitate and consume the male's head as the readiest food source for the next generation.

The butterflies act in good faith, so too, the male mantis, and for that, the cosmos rewards them with sudden death. How do we square that with good faith? This promise that we cleave to from birth, does it exist at all? In the fifth and last teleplay of his cycle called *The Glittering Prizes*, Frederick Raphael gives this

answer. "Man is more moral than God." "Man is more moral than God." I love that! To me, that expresses our indignation at an existence that promises us nothing, guarantees us nothing. We never see the covenant because there is no covenant. And confronting suffering, how can we disagree? At the same time, the seasons turn. Flowers, seeds and fruit pour out anyway, despite. There must be a basis for such behavior in the face of everything that contradicts it. But how are we supposed to make sense of that?

I think Voltaire gives us a clue when he says "God is a circle whose center is everywhere and circumference nowhere." That tells me that the very faith in life's promise that we are born with leads us to mistake ourselves for its primary center. Meanwhile Nature, with breathtaking promiscuity, seems to have made the same promise to everything. And now everything is prone to mistake itself for the primary center. These competing claims conflict. The covenant, if there is one, and even if drafted in good faith, the covenant is flawed. However hard it tries, the cosmos cannot live up to all those conflicting loyalties. The sun will not always rise. We can depend upon it nonetheless – or, as Lao-tzu put it in the Tao Te Ching, [The Master]...trusts people who are trustworthy. She also trusts people who are untrustworthy. This is true trust.

And that is who we are – untrustworthy and yet worthy of trust. We, too, are riddled with conflicted loyalties – honestly conflicted loyalties. We are not more moral than the cosmos. We must trust each other anyway. From time to time, others hurt, anger and disappoint us – even those we depend upon most – just as we hurt, anger and disappoint them. Nevertheless, usually we try to hang together. We may grumble and protest, but still, we trust and depend. It can take an awful lot, it should take an awful lot to overwhelm that reflex, that innate response, – Interdependence at work in the viscera, –

the irreducible sense of attachment that we are not prepared to live without, the animal thing at the center of the gut that connects us to the rest of creation.

You know, I grew up in a bakery/deli. Like any small business, its success depended on regular customers – which is a mark of trust, and trust invites confidences. You get to know people’s problems. Like my mother, many of our customers were Jewish. They often shared their anguish when their children wanted to marry non-Jews. To fully appreciate their suffering, we have to remember how much closer we were to the Holocaust, which still shadows us today. You have to add that real menace to the long history of injury bred into Jewish bones.

From their perspective, their children’s marriages felt like betrayals, maybe even life or death threats. If they accepted them, or worse, approved, they would be breaking faith with a line of accusing ancestors beginning with their parents and receding into prehistory. On the other hand, what could be a more monumental breach of faith than rejecting your own child?

My mother met and married my Protestant father during WWII. They came from two different countries, two different cultures, spoke two different languages. Without the war, their orbits would never have intersected. She would have married a nice Jewish man the family approved of and led the life mapped out for her. She certainly knew that in ordinary times, as a first reaction to marrying a Protestant, her parents might have rejected her – if only they had had the chance. But they died in the Holocaust.

If facing their rejection could have brought them back, I think she would have paid the price. She knew what it meant when connections sever completely with no hope of healing. She appreciated how much was at stake, what really mattered. “Don’t deprive yourself,” she would say to her customers. “Go to



the wedding and be glad for your child.” And when they didn’t, the issue would fester – sometimes for years.

But then, usually, a miracle would happen. They would hear that they had a grandchild. “Go see your your grandchild,” she would say. And that’s all they needed. The irreducible sense of attachment that we are not prepared to live without, the animal thing at the center of the gut that connects us to the rest of creation, would take over, faith, would take over, and the healing would begin. That’s what it means to be in covenant. Before opinions, before beliefs, we owe each other a heart-felt and discerning loyalty. We are and must be a people of faith.

**READING, Emily Dickenson**

To mend each tattered Faith  
There is a needle fair  
Though no appearance indicate --  
‘Tis threaded in the Air --  
  
And though it do not wear  
As if it never Tore  
‘Tis very comfortable indeed  
And spacious as before --

*Green Vespers began in 2007, offering monthly services centered on the Interdependent Web of all existence of which we are a part. This reading gives a sample of the kind of content attendees might expect. You can learn about the purposes of these service on the next page.*

**W**elcome to Green Vespers, monthly services at Beacon UUUCS, dedicated to seeking right relationship with Earth. Green Vespers centers on respect for the Interdependent Web of all existence of which we are a part—which is no more than the golden rule extended to the whole of Nature. We start from that premise—the intuition that because something connects everything to everything, human beings have a stake in living justly, whether in community with each other or the rest of life.

This means we cannot truly expect to redress unnecessary suffering piecemeal, issue by issue, while holding the Natural World, the source of our being and sustenance, in contempt. And by implication, this means that we can trace every social wrong, every injustice, whether sexism, animal cruelty, race hatred—you name it—back to some indifference toward life’s interwoven fabric.

If we truly believe in Interdependence, an inescapable network of connections and responsibilities, we have to acknowledge and change whatever we are doing that harms Earth and its delicate and enduring systems. Despite understanding how imperative such change is, we feel how hard it is to live against the grain of the prevailing culture (the only way of living that we know).

Therefore, in Green Vespers, we come together to craft whole, or healing beliefs that worship Earth – worship in the original sense, meaning “value.” We must value it, and going forward, we must judge and measure everything we do by its impact on Earth. Gradually and consistently, in ways small and large, and in community, we hope to play a part in establishing a culture in right relationship with our sacred planet.