

# All in All: Spiritual and Life Skills Necessary to Thrive in Our Interconnected World



**Sermon by Reverend Rebecca M. Bryan**

*September 24, 2023*

This is the year for us to journey through the reality and truths of interconnectedness and interdependence. It is exciting, hopeful, and sometimes overwhelming. And it is time to learn about FRS wasps and all kinds of other things.

This is the first sermon this year where I can offer my thoughts about what it takes for us to do the spiritual, theological, and moral work around interconnectedness. I pray the year will be transformative for us all. The world and our fellow creatures—humans, plants, animals—are crying for us to pay attention, learn, and grow.

Albert Einstein once said that we cannot solve our problems with the same thinking we used to create them. That is an essential truth to remember as we enter this work together. We must be open, willing to learn and see things differently.

It's a gift to realize we don't know everything and to learn new things. It is a gift to be given the opportunity to repair, try again, and learn together.

Wasps aren't the only thing that Lance brought to my attention. One day, he emailed me to share the discomfort he was feeling with the language used in our traditional Affirmation of Faith. The phrase "humankind" was unsettling to him. Are we only serving humankind?

As soon as I read his words, I knew he was right. It was a wakeup call. I needed to see the words we say and think about their meaning.

How has the exclusive focus on humans worked so far?

Author, scholar, and member of the Citizen Potawatomi Nation, Robin Wall Kimmerer, calls this anthropomorphic world view, the "Myth of Human Exceptionalism." This way of thinking views the world as a pyramid, based on power over and control of resources, with humans at the top of that pyramid. Implicit in this way of seeing the world is a belief that humans are different, higher up, and better than other animals. It relegates nature to something separate and distinct from us and negates the belief that all of

creation has inherent beingness and associated rights. It also substantiates economies and lifestyles built on consumerism, "me first," and overconsumption.

Lance has created a beautiful brochure explaining the Myth of Human Exceptionalism using the words and work of Robin Wall Kimmerer. Included in that brochure is an image of this pyramid with humans at the top. Alongside that is another image, one of an interconnected circle in which humans are one among many of the interconnected web or circle of life. This image is also on the cover of your Order of Service.

Lance and the Green Team have generously made these pamphlets available to our church. They will be in holders around the church and will be displayed in the Tannery, the Audubon Center, Joppa Flats, and Heron Pond Farm. We are thrilled that the community is helping to get the word out about the need for different and earth-based ways of understanding. I'm sure the Green Team would appreciate your help with this initiative and any others.

Beliefs of human superiority can be linked to ancient Greeks and to Christianity. Presbyterian minister Craig Barnes writes this about the story of Adam and Eve eating the forbidden fruit: "The old doctrine of the church refers not just to our primal disobedience to God's command. It also means that by seeking the fruit of the garden for its own sake, we have pulled the spiritual out of it and made the world material. It's not only our original sin; it's our continued addiction."<sup>1</sup>

Robin Wall Kimmerer offers a different way of understanding and relating to the world based on indigenous beliefs. Her work, along with that of many others, is essential to our spiritual, religious, and moral exploration of interconnectedness this year.

Kimmerer presents critical concepts essential to

1 M. Craig Barnes, *The Pastor as Minor Poet: Texts and Subtexts in the Ministerial Life* (Calvin Institute of Christian Worship Liturgical Studies), (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2008), 34.

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responding in helpful ways to what scientists call the 6th Extinction, wherein high percentages of distinct species of bacteria, plants, reptiles, fish, invertebrates, and more are dying out. World Wildlife Federation reminds us that “The planet has experienced five previous mass extinction events, the last one occurring 65.5 million years ago which wiped out the dinosaurs from existence.”<sup>2</sup>

The difference between the first five extinctions and the one we are currently experiencing is that the earlier ones were caused by natural phenomena. The 6th extinction is caused by human activity, “primarily the unsustainable use of land, water and energy use, and climate change.”<sup>3</sup>

The purpose of my sermon today and our exploration of interconnectedness this year is to offer hope and to focus on spiritual and moral solutions in keeping with our UU principles. We want to support one another in learning how to respond helpfully to all that is happening, rather than react, shut down, or panic. After all, religion, particularly Christianity from which we come, is partially accountable for many of the false and faulty beliefs that have helped bring us here.

It is also religion’s responsibility to help us find our way back to what Indigenous peoples, nature, and our plant and animal kin have known for thousands of years: the importance of sustainable living.

In one sermon, I can’t go into depth about all of what is required to make these massive changes; however, I can offer key concepts, which we will return to throughout the year ahead.

Remember these two words: Reciprocity and Rapture. Together they create a holding space for the concepts I’m calling the spiritual and life skills necessary for thriving in an interconnected world.

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2 <https://www.worldwildlife.org/stories/what-is-the-sixth-mass-extinction-and-what-can-we-do-about-it>

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## Reciprocity as Explained by Robin Wall Kimmerer

Indigenous people have always believed that we are interconnected members of existence and that when we are given a gift we are also responsible to give a gift in return. This does not have to be with the same person or being who gave the gift. But return the gift we must if the earth is to continue thriving. Robin Wall Kimmerer calls this restorative reciprocity.

She writes, “We must recognize ourselves as only one member of the great democracy of species and understand that we, like every other successful organism, must play by the rules that govern ecosystem function. The laws of thermodynamics have not been suspended on our behalf...we cannot relentlessly take without replenishment. We participate in economies that appear to love profits for a few members of one species more than a good green world for all. We have a choice to invest our love otherwise. We must align our economies with ecological principles and human integrity.”<sup>4</sup>

For Kimmerer this reciprocity begins with being in love with the world, as we pay attention to and care for what we love. Doing so asks us to lay down beliefs that separate us from the world around us and to get to know the land we inhabit, its plants, animals, and people.

We can start by getting to know the names of plants, bugs, and other parts of creation with which we share land. Kimmerer says she could not imagine not knowing the names of plants and trees...it would be so lonely. Scientists have a name for when we don’t know the names of the natural world. They call it our species loneliness. Perhaps the endemic of loneliness in our country has deeper roots than we recognize. Kimmerer says names are the way we humans build relationships not only with each other, but with

4 Robin Wall Kimmerer, “People can’t understand the world as a gift unless someone shows them how,” interview by James Yeh, The Guardian, May 23, 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2020/may/23/robin-wall-kimmerer-people-cant-understand-the-world-as-a-gift-unless-someone-shows-them-how>

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the living world. We can learn names of plants, trees, and bugs if we don't already know them.

Reciprocity is a core concept we will learn more about together. There are other core concepts as well, more than we can go into in detail in this sermon. I want to lay them out, however, and give you a sense of what they include. All of these will be interwoven into worship services over the year, and I'm happy to consider additional ways we can learn about them. Allow these words to wash over you. Do not try to write them down or even remember them. Feel them in your body and allow your mind and heart to be open. These words are contained in the acronym RAPTURE.

## **The RAPTURE of Interconnectedness**

Rapture is an acronym for seven key concepts and skills. Rapture is also a reclamation and redefinition of a word used by some evangelical religions since the 1830's to signify the coming together of believers with God in the afterlife. I love the idea of reclaiming its original meaning, which is to be filled with great joy here on Earth.

If we are to live knowing the interconnectedness and interdependence of which we are a part, may we learn to honor all beings including plants, animals, bugs, people, bodies of earth, water, and the sky.

As we receive and give in an endless circle of healing reciprocity, may we feel how this giving and receiving helps us to know ourselves and the rest of the natural world so much more deeply. May it bring us to new levels of bliss, joy, and rapture, in response to what life offers us.

As we see, feel, and accept the reality of what is before us, and learn of its conditions and causes, may we choose humbly and wisely and be open to know more.

May we live with appreciation, gratitude, and awe. May we honor the mysteries of life. As we learn the names of plants and creatures we share this earth with, may our biophilia, our innate love for living things expand, until we are overflowing and open to return the gifts it offers us. Help us to maintain perspective, expand our world view and ways of understanding, and reduce our sense of supremacy, dominance, and all knowing.

May we learn the essential art of self-awareness, spiritual maturity, and emotional regulation. As we titrate between trying hard and knowing we are enough just as we are. When we are overwhelmed, may we breathe. When sadness crowds in, may we connect with others and laugh. When it's time to work, let us do so with integrity and when it's time to rest, may we lay our work down. Help us accept that the work will not be completed in our lifetime. May we choose to do it for future generations. Unlock our minds from all we think we know and all we assume is certain. Unlock our hearts from weariness, pain, and cynicism. Allow hope to grow in our minds and hearts. Let us honor our relationships with all creatures by giving, receiving, and giving again until there is no end and there is no beginning, until we are one. Keep us ever mindful of the keen need for genuine and far-reaching empathy, balanced with right-sized view of ourselves as part of the world, not its entirety. May we choose to love the world.

May we remember some words of Helen Keller. Upon learning to "see" the world by her teacher putting sign language into the palm of her hand, she said: "Once I knew only darkness and stillness...my life was without past or future... but a little word from the fingers of another fell into my hand that clutched at emptiness, and my heart leaped to the rapture of living."

May it be so.

Amen.