

Rev. Kim K. Crawford Harvie
 Arlington Street Church
 17 April, 2011

Dear Earth

“Earth's the right place for love.” A boy is up in a birch tree at the close of American poet Robert Frost's *Birches*:

... He learned all there was
 To learn about not launching out too soon
 And so not carrying the tree away
 Clear to the ground. He always kept his poise
 To the top branches, climbing carefully
 With the same pains you use to fill a cup
 To the brim, and even above the brim.
 Then he flung outward, feet first, with a swish,
 Kicking his way down through the air to the ground.
 So was I once myself a swinger of birches.
 And so I dream of going back to be.
 It's when I'm weary of considerations,
 And life is too much like a pathless wood
 Where your face burns and tickles with the cobwebs
 Broken across it, and one eye is weeping
 From a twig's having lashed across it open.
 I'd like to get away from earth awhile
 And then come back to it and begin over.
 May no fate willfully misunderstand me
 And half grant what I wish and snatch me away
 Not to return. Earth's the right place for love;
 I don't know where it's likely to go better.
 I'd like to go by climbing a birch tree,
 And climb black branches up a snow-white trunk
Toward heaven, till the tree could bear no more,
 But dipped its top and set me down again.

That would be good both going and coming back.
One could do worse than be a swinger of birches.

“Earth's the right place for love; I don't know where it's likely to go better.”

Earth Day comes again this Friday, Good Friday, reminding us of the perils and blessings of living here on earth, that arc between weariness in the pathless wood and love that saves. Alice Walker promises, *Anything We Love Can Be Saved*.

Let's move together along that arc for another moment, feeling its bi-polar gravitational pull.

Wendell Berry's poem, *The Peace of Wild Things*:

When despair for the world grows in me
and I wake in the night at the least sound
in fear of what my life and my children's lives may be,
I go and lie down where the wood drake
rests in his beauty on the water, and the great heron feeds.
I come into the peace of wild things
who do not tax their lives with forethought
of grief. I come into the presence of still water.
And I feel above me the day-blind stars
waiting with their light. For a time
I rest in the grace of the world, and am free.

Held in the beauty of the earth, all that we bear can become bearable.

Many years ago, I sat for long hours at the bedside of my young parishioner, Patrick Grace, stoic and broken-hearted in his pitched but losing battle with AIDS, as he navigated between too much pain and too much morphine. Words discerned in prayer by thirteenth century mystic Mechtilde of Magdeburg came to me:

You have the wings of longing.
You know the pull of hope.
You feel the flow of desire.
So why not soar to the blissful heights
where I await your love?¹

1 Mechtilde of Magdeburg was a member of the Beguines, a 13th and 14th century lay Catholic religious community.

Together, Patrick and I took leave of his little room on Commercial Street in Provincetown and flew in our imaginations to his beloved American Southwest, where I had never been. He walked me deep into the canyons and up into the blue, blue sky of Utah and Arizona, happy and free. He was a wonderful guide, exuberant and patient, and when evening came, we shook the red dust from our boots, spread our tarp on the desert floor, unrolled our sleeping bags next to each other, and gazed up into the indigo bowl of stars.

For weeks after Patrick died, my breath came in short, shallow gulps, my chest aching with grief. I flew to Albuquerque, and drove away in search of him ... or not him, exactly, but of the gift he had left me ... the peace of wild things. Patrick Grace's legacy is in the spectacular beauty of the remote, desert wilderness Kem and I love so much. Red AIDS ribbons flutter from my backpack, my hiking poles, and my boots ... to remember, and to rejoice. Earth's the right place for love. Anything we love can be saved.

Unitarian Universalist minister Max Kapp writes,

Often I have felt that I must praise my world
 For what my eyes have seen these many years
 And what my heart has loved.
 And often I have tried to start my lines:
Dear Earth, I say, and then I pause
 To look once more.
 Soon I am bemused
 And far away in wonder.
 So I never get beyond *Dear Earth*.

I never get beyond *Dear Earth*.

Sister of Saint Joseph and artist Mary Southard writes, “I had always sensed a real presence and kinship, but [then] I began to experience myself for the first time as Earth – not separate from Earth. What would it be like if we could really trust that we have the wisdom of 13.7 billion years of evolution within us? That we have these dynamics we can rely on – the creative energy, the fire that's been within us since the fireball.”

“I continue to awaken to this glorious Universe,” she says, “saturated with Divinity, and see ever more clearly that we are essentially creative beings, engaged with the Creator in the Great Work of OUR time.”² [Now we are called “to do what humans do best: Be amazed! Be filled with reverence! Contemplate! Fall in Love! Be entranced by the wonder of the Universe, the beauty of creation, its new revelation each day, and the Divine Presence within all!”

Sister Mary Southard concludes that “we have to fall in love ... with the Earth, because we'll protect what we love.”³

This past Tuesday evening, as the Arlington Street Zen Center gathered for meditation, our own astronomer Doc Kinne reminded us that exactly fifty years earlier, on April 12, 1961, Soviet cosmonaut Yuri Gagarin was making history as the first human being to journey into outer space; that night, for the first time, a human being saw Earth from space.

Scientist James Lovelock, wrote, “The apologists for space science always seem over-impressed by engineering trivia, and make far too much of non-stick frying pans and perfect ball-bearings. [But] ... the outstanding spin-off from space research is not new technology. The real bonus has been that, for the first time in human history, we have had a chance to look at the Earth from space, ... our azure-green planet in all its ... beauty [giving] rise to a whole new set of questions and answers.”⁴

In 1968, the Apollo 8 astronauts sent a holiday gift from their orbit around the moon, two hundred and thirty thousand miles away. On Christmas day, on the front page of the *New York Times*, poet Archibald MacLeish reflected on those first images of Earthrise: “To see the Earth as it truly is: small and blue and beautiful, in that eternal silence where it floats, is to see ourselves as riders on the earth together...”⁵

Astronauts understand this at a cellular level. Edgar Mitchell, sixth person to walk on the moon, said, “Suddenly, from behind the rim of the moon, in long, slow-motion

2 The close of this statement is, “We are all part of a radical shift taking place in human consciousness.”

3 Sister Mary Southard at evolutionarychristianity.com/blog/general/mary-southard/

4 James Lovelock, *Gaia: A New Look at Life on Earth*. James Lovelock created the Gaia Hypothesis, “which postulates that the biosphere is a self-regulating entity with the capacity to keep our planet healthy by controlling the chemical and physical environment.” Please see wikipedia.org

5 Archibald Macleish, “Riders on the Earth Together, Brothers in Eternal Cold,” *The New York Times*, Christmas Day, 1968

moments of immense majesty, there emerges a sparkling blue and white jewel, a light, delicate, sky-blue sphere laced with slowly swirling veils of white, rising gradually like a small pearl in a thick sea of black mystery. It takes more than a moment to fully realize [that] this is Earth ... home.” And Alan Shepard, first American in space and fifth person to walk on the moon, said, “If somebody'd said before the flight, 'Are you going to get carried away looking at the earth from the moon?' I would have said, 'No, no way.' But ... standing on the moon ... when I first looked back at the earth ... I cried.”⁶

I close with a fragment from Denise Levertov's poem *Beginners*.

But we have only begun
To love the earth.

We have only begun
To imagine the fullness of life.

How could we tire of hope?
– so much is in bud.

How can desire fail?
– we have only begun

to imagine justice and mercy,
only begun to envision

how it might be
to live as siblings with beast and flower,
not as oppressors.

*

We have only begun to know
the power that is in us if we would join
our solitudes in the communion of struggle.

So much is unfolding that must
complete its gesture,

6 My favorite piece is by Rusty Schweikart. There are also some great quotations at spacequotations.com/earth.html

so much is in bud.⁷

Beloved spiritual companions,

Earth's the right place for love.
Anything we love can be saved.
May we come into the peace of wild things.
May we never get beyond *Dear Earth ...*
Not separate.
Amazed.
In tears.
In love.
Unfolding.

Amen.

⁷ Denise Levertov, "Beginners," dedicated to the memory of Karen Silkwood and Eliot Gralla, from *Candles in Babylon*. Asterisk (*) denotes several lines of the poem, omitted.