

***“The Rhythm of Life”***  
**Shoreline Unitarian Universalist Church**  
**June 21, 2009**  
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Some years ago on Memorial Day weekend, while everyone was at “Folklife” or some other holiday activity, I was working. I went over to Seabeck retreat center with the folks from the University, East Shore and Rainier Valley churches at their annual retreat. I had been asked to be the presenter of the adult program there. My presentation was called “Spirits Rising,” and it dealt with a subject very central to my own theological and spiritual being: *How is it that our physical bodies, as well as our minds, participate in the way we live and grow as spiritual beings?*

As you know, we Unitarian Universalists tend to approach our religion intellectually, seeking to reason our way through the complexities and mysteries of human reality. Some say that we have gone overboard in this regard, (and we really do have a reputation for being very smart people.) I would also add that most of us were first attracted to UU-ism for this very reason. I know I was. When I first entered into a Unitarian Universalist environment, it was downright refreshing to be among people who honored our human ability to think!

But now I am ready to expand on this important characteristic of who we are as a religious people. It almost sounds like heresy, (and we are, after all, heretics,) but is there anything we might be missing in our approach? Could it be that our whole selves, which, of course, includes our physical bodies with all their amazing abilities, are also a part of the way humans strive toward understanding and appreciating our reality?

This question begins with the way Western culture has historically separated the mind and body, both philosophically and especially religiously. Our culture has held that the human spirit is one thing and the physical body is something quite different, and that these two important human components are not only separate, but actually in opposition to one another.

The result of this mind/body split has been well-documented. By separating our intellectual selves from the physical world, we have literally “lost *touch*” with corporeal reality. And the final blow came when we began assigning righteousness to our higher, spiritual selves and evil to our lower, fleshly selves.

Over the years I praised our liberal religion’s propensity toward intellectual pursuits. And then I suggested that we might expand and enrich ourselves by considering how the physical body can also play an important role. In essence, I praised the body and its wonders, and how it may, in fact, be our primary access to what we know of our human reality.

This is a theme I have spoken of many times here in this pulpit. We’ve talked about the physicality of spirituality often, but mostly we have *engaged* in it here. The way we sing, the way we clap our hands and even dance is all physical. We have chosen to be a spirited group and that is very good, I think, and over there at Seabeck, I was simply spreading the good news.

One aspect of all this I would like to bring forth today is about a primary characteristic of our physical selves and the whole physical world. It’s about *rhythm*.

As usual, I have a theory about this. I believe that there is an all-pervasive rhythm in the universe, a beat, a vibration—or more correctly, an incredibly complex series of vibrations—which are not only intimately and essentially related to all that is, but which actually make up all that is.

At the root of all power and motion, at the burning center of existence itself, there is music and rhythm, the play of patterned frequencies against the matrix of time.

This is important to understand, for if we could only tune into this amazing rhythm—hear it, feel it, get in harmony with it—we would know so much more about our relationship with the world around us. Also, I believe that being *out of tune* with it—or “out of sync,” as we say—has caused the worst of human error over the millennia.

Furthermore, I believe we can be intentional about hearing this rhythm and getting “in sync” with it. And it may be a matter of simply listening. And we can listen, not only through our mental

capabilities, but will our whole bodies. All of our senses feed us information, and these senses are physical, not intellectual. They provide us access to the world and it is through their service that we live and breathe and enjoy the world.

I think that our bodies are best able to connect us with the rhythm, the pulse of the universe. We can see the rhythms, we can hear them, we can taste and smell them, and most strikingly, we can feel them.

Let's look at that magnificent song the universe is constantly singing. There is rhythm in everything, from the tiniest particle—let's say the proton or the pattern of energy called a quark within the proton—to the entire galaxy or great clusters of galaxies. Truly, we are in the midst of dancing fields of rhythm and relationship.

The full range is awesome. Listen to this: our solar system takes 270 million years (or  $72^{15}$  seconds—that's the number 72 with 15 zeroes following) to make one circuit of the Milky Way galaxy. The waves at the heart of the atom whirl or vibrate  $10^{22}$  in one second. The whole atom, at room temperature, vibrates at around  $10^{14}$  times a second. All of this amazing vibration is happening all the time, within and around us.

Our senses act as rhythm transformers for us.

Take the case of vision. The waves of visible light pulse between 390 trillion and 780 trillion times a second. The human eye can respond to a single quantum of light (the smallest amount possible) and can discern more than 10 million colors.

For example, if you should glance for only a second at the yellow wing of a butterfly, the dye molecules in the retinas of your eyes will vibrate approximately 500 trillion times. Were the butterfly blue or purple, the number of waves would increase, since those colors vibrate faster. With X-rays instead of light, the rate of vibration would speed up a thousand times, with gamma rays, a million.

Consider our human ability to hear the rhythms of the cosmos. Of course, we immediately think of music, which is only known through its variation of vibrations of waves of air.

Music is a reflection in sound of the world's very structure, making explicit the rhythmic quality in all things.

Do you remember the Pythagorean *Myth of Er*, which Plato recounts in *The Republic*? He pictures the spheres of the heavens as wheels turning on an unyielding spindle, and on each of these, a siren is singing one tone. Together they form an amazing harmony, "the music of the spheres." Philosophers since Plato changed the sirens to Muses (and that's where we get the Greek word *music*.) Of course, the Christians changed the muses to angels, who, in hierarchical order from angels on the moon to Seraphs on the spheres nearest God, filled the heavens with song.

The amazement continues as we consider how all of these vibration—all of this music—is interwoven. The music of the spheres is the grandest fugue that can be imagined and then is beyond that. The harmonies and complex chords and fascinating rhythms abound, endlessly. And they are all part of the same magnificent symphony.

And the patterns go on and on. More than 2,500 years ago, the philosopher Pythagoras told his followers that a stone is "frozen music." Modern science now postulates that every particle in the physical universe takes its characteristics from the pitch and pattern and overtones of its particular frequencies, its *singing*, if you will. And the same thing is true of all forms of radiation, all forces great and small, all information.

Listen to this: in 1665 the Dutch scientist Christian Huygens (*high-genz*) noticed that two pendulum clocks mounted side by side on a wall, would swing together in precise rhythm. They would hold their mutual beat, in fact, far beyond their capacity to be matched in mechanical accuracy. It was as if they "wanted" to keep the same time. Huygens discovered the universal phenomenon called "entrainment." It turns out that nature, as always, seeks the most efficient energy state, and it takes less energy to pulse in cooperation than in opposition. Imagine the social implications of that!

Modern physics, according to Fritjof Capra, in his pioneering work, *The Tao of Physics*, “has shown that the rhythm of creation and destruction is not only manifest in the turn of the seasons and in the birth and death of all living creatures, but is also the very essence of inorganic matter. According to quantum field theory, the dance of creation and destruction is the basis of the very existence of matter, that every subatomic particle not only performs an energy dance, but also *is* an energy dance, a pulsating process of creation and destruction. The patterns of this dance are an essential aspect of each particle's nature and determine many of its properties.

It is possible to conceive of each human individual as consisting of pure information expressed as rhythmic waves that start as the infinitesimal vibrations of subatomic particle and build outward as ever-widening resonant relationships of atoms, molecules, cells, organs, organisms, families, bands, tribes, nations, civilizations and beyond. At every step along the way, every entity is connected to the great web of information that is the universe. We are not *in* but *of* the web of relationship. As part of the web, each of us is an individual identity, and that identity can be most easily expressed as a wave function, a unique rhythmic pulse... We are completely, firmly, absolutely connected with all of existence, and the next evolutionary step will involve our realizing that connection.

Beneath the world we take as real there lies a deeper reality, another world in which our common notions of times and space and momentum are overthrown, in which are careless faith in the impossible begins to lose its age-old grip. A strange place is this world of the new physicists, a world of ultimate connectedness, where consciousness—or observership, as John Wheeler calls it—coexisted with the creation, and where it might be said that the vastness of space, the nuclear conflagration of stars, the explosions of galaxies are simply mechanisms for producing that first glimmer of awareness in your baby's eyes.

A world of connectedness, potential, and evolution turns us toward a vivid sense of community along with acceptance of personal responsibility; toward a de-emphasis on competing and winning along with a re-emphasis on participating and experiencing; from aggression toward gentleness and enjoyment; from dominance of nature to blending with nature; from exponential growth in production and consumption to a more moderate, more ecological standard of living along with a powerful intentionality, toward social justice throughout the world.

But there are shimmering moments on the mountaintop when the chaos dissolves in the sweetness of reflected sunlight, moments of perfect rhythm. There are interludes in the evening by the fire with music filling the room, music that joins the life of the body with the rhythms of the universe. Seeming contractions are reconciled in that vibrancy, not through the denial of death, violence, suffering and injustice, but through the vital, pulsing force that makes harmony of opposites. During those moments, all that is, *is* music, music heard and unheard, in which negation and self-deceptions are impossible.

Now on second thought I don't think this is such a weird story. In fact, I think that I am coming to the place where I believe that we *ought* to spend more time listening to the flora and fauna. I'm beginning to think that I can probably learn more about the true nature of reality, and certainly more about the relationship I have with the reality of the world, by listening to these ficus bushes, let's say, rather than the Bushes who used to live in the White House.

But you've probably experienced this yourself. Have you ever been out in nature, maybe up in the magnificent woods which are so accessible to us here in the Pacific Northwest? Have you ever just stopped and sat down and listened? We even use the phrase “communing with nature.” *Listen to the rhythm.*

And it's true, I think. We could learn much from really listening to the world around us, not only about the suffering of the world—and we are now beginning to learn more fully exactly how much the earth is suffering today—but also about other things, maybe even some kind of essential thing, maybe even the Word of God. Listen. *Listen to the rhythm!*

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What I am saying is that there is a unity of all things, a web, we might say. Every part of the world is related to every other part. What did the poet William Blake say,

*“To see the world in a grain of sand,  
And a Heaven in a wild flower,  
Hold Infinity in the palm of your hand  
And Eternity in an hour.”*

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#### TAGORE

I. The same stream of life that runs through my veins night and day rounds through the world and dances in rhythmic measures. It is the same life that shoots in joy through the dust of the earth in numberless blades of grass and breaks into tumultuous waves of leaves and flowers. It is the same life that is rocked in the ocean-cradle of birth and death, in ebb and in flow. I feel my limbs are made glorious by the touch of this world of life. And my pride is from the life-throb of ages dancing in my blood this moment.

II. Is it beyond thee to be glad with the gladness of this rhythm? To be tossed and lost and broken in the whirl of this fearful joy? All things rush on, they stop not, they look not behind, no power can hold them back, they rush on. Keeping step with that restless, rapid music, seasons come dancing and pass away—Colors, tunes, and perfumes pour in endless cascades in the abounding joy that scatters and gives up and dies every moment.