



NEIGHBORHOOD UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST CHURCH

Finding Balance

Rev. Lissa Anne Gundlach, Senior Minister

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301 N. Orange Grove Blvd. Pasadena, CA 91103 (626) 449-3470 information@neighborhooduu.org

In ancient Greek mythology, Gaia was the mother of the world, primeval creator goddess. From her descended the heavenly Gods, the sea gods, the giants and all earthly creatures. In Greek cosmology, Gaia supported the sea and mountains upon her breast. Her name was both the word for Earth and creator of Earth alike, worthy of praise and reverence. Gaia was depicted as a beautiful, abundant woman, half submerged in the Earth, defending her offspring, even the warrior giants who threatened her peaceful domain. Homeric Hymns to Gaia were written down in 500 BCE but most likely had much earlier origins from an oral tradition. Here are a few verses:

Gaia, mother of all,
The oldest one, the foundation,
I shall sing to Earth.
She feeds everyone in the world.

Whoever you are,
Whether you walk upon her sacred ground
Or move through the paths of the sea
You who fly,
It is she who nourishes you
From her treasure-store.

Queen of Earth,
Through you
Beautiful children,
Beautiful harvests come.
You give life and you take life away.

This morning, we dedicate ourselves to nurturing new young lives. We bless their parents and we pledge to join them in the responsibility of their sacred task. This image of Gaia as mother of all helps us to understand the vast dimensions of this sacred task of nurturing. Like Gaia, not only do we pledge ourselves to care for the individual life of the child in front of us, but to the larger task of nurturing the health and well-being of all dimensions of life into which this child is born.

Our seventh Unitarian Universalist principle affirms “respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part.” As we invite these children into community, we take up our part in the responsibility to make this congregation a welcoming and nurturing part of their life. It is a small microcosm of how we understand the web of existence. To make Neighborhood Church a healthy ecosystem, we must have diversity of life and generations, plenty of spiritual nourishment and ways to continue to grow in relationship with our larger world.

We also pledge to our children that we will help preserve a planet that supports their needs and the needs of all life: clean air and water, healthy food to eat, access to medical care, safe places to live and thrive. Earth's wellbeing is essential to the future flourishing of our children's world and ours as well.

We know that Earth's fragile health is in danger. Over the past fifty years, environmental consciousness has been raised significantly about the potential hazards threatening the future of the planet: extinction of species and global warming as a result of human exploitation of natural resources. James Lovelock sounded an early warning within the scientific community. Lovelock uses the image of an alarm clock—for over 40 years, he proclaims that an alarm clock has been sounding. We have, time after time, ignored its irritating sound, not wanting to disturb our dreams of a limitless earth. We have woven the alarm clock into our dreams and deluded ourselves into believing that the planet we love and cherish will be able to sustain itself for generations to come without serious intervention.

Lovelock's most well-known contribution to environmental justice is his "Gaia hypothesis," named for none other than the ancient Greek goddess, mother of all. "Gaia" is how Lovelock chooses to describe the intricate "web of existence." According to Lovelock's blend of science and poetic vision, as Gaia, Earth is a complex, self-regulating system of living organisms. With the exploitation of natural resources at an all-time high, Gaia is in trouble and out of balance.

Gaia's despair at her mistreatment causes her to lash out at humankind using any means she has to defend herself -- acts of violent destruction-- earthquakes, fires, tsunamis and tornados. Gaia is resilient, but angry, pushed past her limit. Lovelock believes that Gaia has her own powers to re-calibrate, if humans were to simply give her the right tools to do so. Our role is no longer simply to be nurtured by earth as our mother, but to help her care for herself, as we would an aging parent whose care for herself is no longer possible.

At 95, Lovelock remains one of the most controversial voices in the environmental justice movement. He writes in his 2009 book *The Vanishing Face of Gaia: a Final Warning*:

It is time to wake up and realize that Gaia is no cozy mother that nurtures humans and can be propitiated by gestures such as carbon trading or sustainable development. Until we all feel intuitively that the Earth is a living system, and know that we are a part of it, we will fail to react automatically for its and ultimately our own protection.

Lovelock, and the ecofeminists that followed his scholarship used the ancient image of the divine mother to illustrate the interconnectedness of earth and humankind's failure to return her care. In the Homeric myths, Gaia not only weeps for her own harm, but for the harm done to her children.

Looking at how women are mistreated globally, is it any mistake that our earth we call mother has been violated alongside her children? We are facing a time when the systematic exploitation and oppression of women and girls has reached an unprecedented high. My stomach turned when I saw the front page New York Times article about sex slavery and the Islamic State. I wonder if yours did too.

Gaia is weeping for her children. When education for girls around the globe continues to be controversial and cause for violence and even death, you know something is out of balance.

Gaia is weeping for her children. When sexual harassment and violence against women including transgender women is a domestic epidemic, you know something is terribly out of balance.

Gaia is weeping for her children, all of us, young and old, men, women, transgender and cisgender. The harm done to one is harm done to all.

To care for Gaia, we must ensure the care of all her children, ourselves, our relationships and our families. Engaged Buddhist activist Joanna Macy calls this imperative the “greening of the self.” In her 2013 book of the same title, she writes:

When you look at what is happening to our world—and it is hard to look at what’s happening to our water, our air, our trees, our fellow species—it becomes clear that unless you have some roots in a spiritual practice that holds life sacred and encourages joyful communion with all your fellow beings, facing the enormous challenges ahead becomes nearly impossible.

The turning of the year as recognized in the seasons can be a time when we feel most acutely connected to the earth. Today, we look to this day as an opportunity for this “greening of the self,” a time when we look within and connect to our spiritual community to help join us meaningfully to earth and its beings, great and small.

The Vernal Equinox, or equal night, marks the point in our year’s cycles and seasons when there are equal hours of light and dark. Throughout Western Christian church history, just as the liturgical season of Advent developed to coincide with the season of winter, the season of Lent adapted to coincide with the coming of spring. European Pagan customs observing the period of lack before the spring planting co-mingled with Christian practices honoring Jesus’ life and death. Pagan traditions celebrate the festival of “Ostara” with ritual and feasts, celebrating the German fertility Goddess of the same name, which many say is the origin of the Christian festival of “Easter.”

The word Lent originates from the Old English word *lenctene*, or length, referring to the lengthening of days. Our agriculturally-based ancestors approached this time of the year with reverence and asceticism with the practical fear that the spring would not return. It was important to use their resources sparingly until the harvest time again, which was spiritualized

through disciplines of fasting, ritual and prayer. The imposition of ashes was a tangible and humbling reminder of the cycle of life, death and rebirth of the earth in which all living beings participate—how earth gives life and takes life away.

Within the cycle of the year, the spring equinox was a special time for the healing and rebirth, where God's favor and life-giving energy returned to the world in abundance after the winter's dormancy. One of my favorite early Christian voices expressing the layering of Pagan and Christian traditions is the 12th century mystic Hildegard of Bingen. The generative process of life unfolding, present in all things yet so evident in the springtime's rebirth, she names "*veriditas*" or "greening."

Attributing this to God's life-giving power, Bingen writes, "*I am the breeze that nurtures all things green . . . I am the rain coming from the dew that causes the grasses to laugh with the joy of life.*"

The joy that spring brought to our ancestors is ours to revel in, the birth of the animals and the awakening of the earth still signals to us the possibility of an earth made new again. Can we also look to this time for our own "greening of the self," our own renewal. Pagan spiritual leader Starhawk reminds us, "All the elements within must be brought into new harmony."

At this time of balance between the elements of light and dark, where our planet turns to face the sun at its strongest once again, how can we re-balance our elements, within our own lives and in our world?

What balance do you seek in your life? Are you eating, sleeping and exercising, having healthy boundaries with work and creating space for family time and your spiritual life? Are you giving yourself time to develop a relationship with nature, to feel how you are connected to the earth and make choices to preserve the planet? Are you allowing yourself to take in the great suffering in the world, and to develop compassion instead of shutting it out? Are you honoring both the masculine and the feminine elements of our world, in your most intimate relationships and families and on a larger scale? Are you adequately contributing to Gaia's sacred task of nurturing generations beyond yourself?

The equinox gives us chance to pause and ask these questions, whose answers have real implications about how we live our lives each day. We are, just as our ancestors were, still creatures of the earth, still children of Gaia: promise making, promise breaking, renewed again. Ashes to ashes, dust to stardust, we are still compelled by wonder of her beauty and gripped by the fear of her wrath. Today on this Equinox we seek balance, drawing on the strength and resilience of our great mother Earth in her unending care for all creation, giving and forgiving. May the greening of our lives be fruitful, for us and all our relations. May it be so, **and Amen.**