Partners with the Earth
UU Fellowship of Santa Cruz County
April 19, 2026

Selected worship texts

Chalice Lighting

On this Earth Day Sunday, our chalice lighting words
come from the United Nations Environmental Sabbath program.

We join with the earth and with each other

To bring new life to the land
To restore the waters
To refresh the air

We join with the earth and with each other

To renew the forests
To care for the plants
To protect the creatures

We join with the earth and with each other

To celebrate the seas
To rejoice in the sunlight
To sing the song of the stars

We join with the earth and with each other

To recreate the human community
To promote justice and peace
To remember our children

We join with the earth and with each other

We join with as many and diverse expressions of one loving mystery:
for the healing of the earth
and the renewal of all life.[1]

And with these words, we light the chalice.

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Story for All Ages "Tree Bridges," adapted from "Living Tree Bridges in a Land of Clouds," by Prasenjeet Yadav[2]

Today I want to tell you about a place on earth
where people and trees cooperate to create living bridges.
This is a real place,
not something out of a fantasy novel.
It's in the Khasi Hills, in Eastern India,
which, by the way, is home to one of the largest communities of Unitarians in the world!
The Khasi Hills Unitarian tradition was founded about 150 years ago,
in 1887, by Hajjom Kissor Singh.
Today there are about 10,000 Unitarians in the Khasi region,
and about 40 congregations.
So the Khasi Hills is a place where we have cousins.

One thing to know about the Khasi region
is that it's mostly mountains and rivers.
It's hard to get from one place to another.
There aren't many roads, just paths.
And most of the paths from one village to another
have to cross over mountains and rivers.
It takes bridges.

[1] *Earth Prayers*, p. 94
[2] https://www.npr.org/sections/goatsandsoda/2020/08/01/892983791/photos-living-tree-bridges-in-a-land-of-clouds

But another thing to know about the Khasi region is that it rains, a *lot.*
It's the rainiest place in the world, with up to 45 *feet* of rain a year—
not 45 inches, but 45 *feet!*
All that rain could really mess up the kinds of bridges
we know how to build, with metal and concrete.
There are landslides and floods all the time.
Our bridges would probably just wash out.

So how do the people of Khasi build bridges?
With *trees.*
Take a look at this photo by Prasenjeet Yadav:



This is a bridge made of living tree roots.
People call this tree a rubber fig tree.
It sends out roots that are very stretchy,
and some of the roots grow not into the ground, but into the air!
The Khasi people partner with this stretchy tree,
sending its roots out into the air,
to make a living bridge across a river or a ravine.
It takes a long time!



Here's a picture of a little baby bridge—the people have taken one of the stretchy roots and tied it to a tree across the river.
That's the very first step in creating a living bridge.
Over time, the roots grow, and the people help them weave together.
Here's a closeup of what the roots look like when they get bigger:



And here's a mature living bridge:



This man is carrying a piece of bamboo
to help shore up and strengthen the bridge.
The people also use bamboo for railings, so it's safer for people.

Here's one without any railings—looks a little scary to me!



How long do you think it takes for one of these living bridges to grow?
Any guesses?

It takes 10 to 15 years for a new tree
to even start sending out those aerial roots.

Then it takes years for the roots to grow long and strong enough
for people to walk on.
And then they need constant tending.
The people pack the roots with leaves like fertilizer,
to give them the energy they need to live and grow.
Some of the bridges are hundreds of years old.

One more picture, just because:



These bridges are still alive, still growing,
in partnership with the people and with the earth.
Living bridges.

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New Member Ceremony

Rev. Laura: There's something else that is alive and growing,
in need of constant tending: this beloved congregation.
And today we tend it with an especially joyful task:
welcoming our newest members.

Will the new members who have been through orientation
and agreed to join please come forward and face the congregation
as I speak your names:

Names

Today, we welcome into our community these newest members, who have chosen to make a commitment to this congregation by signing our Membership Book.

We are so glad to have you here with us, and that you've chosen this community of fellow seekers to travel with you on your life journey.

Joining a religious community is a declaration of commitment—by both the congregation and by the individual member. In making these commitments, you have expectations of the congregation, and the congregation has expectations of you.

So now I ask you:

Will you accept our gifts of fellowship, discovery, and service?
Will you offer us your unique presence and gifts?
Will you add your name to the long history of Unitarian Universalists who spread hope with our living faith?
Will you engage with us as we seek to create a community and a world dedicated to love and justice?

If you agree, please respond, "I will."

New Members: I will.

Rev. Laura: And now, I ask the congregation,
Will you welcome these new members
with the warmth and comfort of your fellowship?
Will you seek to add your strengths and talents
to the new gifts they bring to us?
Will you share our triumphs and our struggles
as our community grows and changes?

If you all agree, please respond, "We Will."

Congregation: We will.

Rev. Laura: Since we have now entered into covenant and shared our expectations with each other, our new members will now sign the Membership Book. As you sign the book, our Membership Team member will give you a gift.

Wendy and Ginny:

- Ushers each person to the table to sign the book
- Say name of each member as they step toward the book to sign it.
- Then usher the person to back away from the table, but remain facing the congregation.

Rev. Laura: If any of the new members would like to share briefly about what brought you here, or what you hope to find here, you are welcome to come on up to the microphone now.
And then we can't wait to hear more during our social time afterwards.

New members speak, then Wendy & Ginny present gifts

Rev. Laura:
We are different now because of these new members.
We are better and stronger together.
And who knows what amazing things we will do together,
for each other, for our community, and for the world?

So now let's welcome these new members! *Applause*

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Reading from *Braiding Sweetgrass*, by Robin Wall Kimmerer

Robin Wall Kimmerer is an environmental biologist, a member of the Citizen Potawatomi Nation, and a renowned writer. Today's reading comes from her book *Braiding Sweetgrass:*

On Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays at 9:35 a.m., I am usually in a lecture hall at the university, expounding about botany and ecology…. One otherwise unremarkable morning I gave the students in my General Education class a survey. Among other things, they were asked to rate their understanding of the negative interactions between humans and the environment. Nearly every one of the two hundred students said

confidently that humans and nature are a bad mix…. They were well schooled in the mechanics of climate change, toxins in the land and water, and the crisis of habitat loss. Later in the survey, they were asked to rate their knowledge of positive interactions between people and land. The median response was "none."

I was stunned. How is it possible that in 20 years of education they cannot think of any beneficial relationships between people and the environment? Perhaps the negative examples they see every day—brownfields, factory farms, suburban sprawl—truncated their ability to see some good between humans and the earth. As the land becomes impoverished, so too does the scope of their vision…. How can we begin to move toward ecological and cultural sustainability if we cannot even imagine what the path feels like?[3]

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Sermon Partners with the Earth

How can we begin to move toward ecological and cultural sustainability if we cannot even imagine what the path feels like?
—Robin Wall Kimmerer

This is why I wanted you to see the tree bridges.
I think they're wondrous, and incredibly hopeful.
People working *with* the trees, a mutually beneficial partnership
that can last for hundreds of years with even one single tree.
This is possible.

Human beings can partner with the plants,
with the land,
with the earth,
to bring about well-being and goodness for all.
This is possible.

[3] Robin Wall Kimmerer, *Braiding Sweetgrass*, p. 6.

And I know, in this moment there are so many reasons to feel discouraged about our relationship to the earth.
I'm not going to try and convince you everything is fine.
We know it isn't fine.
We know that right now our country is going in a backwards direction that is unsustainable for our planet.

But today, that's not where *I* want to focus.
Just for the next few minutes, I invite you to focus
not on the ways we humans are harming the earth,
but on our power as human beings to cooperate *with* the earth.
Focusing not on what's wrong, but on what's *possible.*
Because we need to prepare for what *will* be possible
on a national and global scale
when the political scene changes, as it will.
And in the meantime, we can imagine what's possible right here, right now.

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So, a story. Maybe you know it:
in her book *Braiding Sweetgrass*,
Robin Wall Kimmerer writes about the sweetgrass plant,
traditionally harvested by indigenous people where she lives,
in what we call upstate New York.
The people tend the sweetgrass and harvest it
and braid it into baskets.
Kimmerer tells the story of an experiment she ran
at the request of an indigenous woman named Lena, who came to her concerned that there was less sweetgrass growing than there used to be.
Lena's hypothesis was that some people harvesting the sweetgrass were pulling the grass up by the roots,
instead of leaving the roots intact, as she had been taught to do.

So Kimmerer asked her grad student Laurie

to run a carefully controlled experiment in the local sweetgrass fields.
Laurie set up a square grid
and left half the plot squares alone as a control group.
In one quarter of the squares,
she harvested the grass by pulling it up by the roots.
In the remaining quarter, she harvested it as Lena taught her,
carefully leaving the roots intact.

The results astonished her.

It turned out that there was almost no difference
in how well the harvested plots flourished.
Whether the roots were pulled up or not barely mattered.
The grass in all the harvested plots flourished.
Healthy grass grew back even more lushly
than it had when they'd begun the experiment.
That was a surprise.

But the even bigger surprise was that the grass in the control plots,
which wasn't touched at all,
was the grass that failed to thrive.
It grew so thickly that it choked itself.
A tangle of dead stems choked out most of the new living stems.
There was no room for them to grow.

Laurie's professors and colleagues had all told her
that everyone knew harvesting a plant would damage the plant population.
Now, with her experiment,
Laurie had shown that the conventional wisdom in her field was wrong.
The sweetgrass *needed* to be harvested to thrive and grow.
It *needed* to be in partnership with people in order to live.[4]

When I heard that story for the first time,

[4] Robin Wall Kimmerer, *Braiding Sweetgrass,* pp. 157–165.

a wound in my heart healed that I hadn't even known was there.
Like Kimmerer's students,
I could name for you so many ways that humans have damaged the earth.
You probably could too.
In the last few years,
like you, I have worked so hard to become conscious and aware
of the ways we human beings are devastating our planet.
I've grieved over climate change and species extinction.
I've felt a fear grow inside me that maybe things will never get better,
that our planet will never heal,
at least on any time scale that I can imagine.

But what if there are possibilities I can't imagine yet?
What if humans can be part of the solution,
not just part of the problem?
What if our hands can heal, not just harm?

A while back, I saw a story in the paper that astonished me.
It was about a problem that's pretty common
in coastal Virginia, where I live:
what do you do when there's a storm,
and the power goes out for days at a time?
One solution is a backup generator.
But they're expensive,
and when you don't need them, which is almost all the time,
they're just sitting there.

However, did you know that *if* you have an electric car,
you can use it as a backup generator?
I didn't know that!
But it's true.
If you happen to have an electric car,
all you need is a power strip and an inverter gizmo
that costs about $150,
so you can plug your refrigerator and whatever else

into your car's battery,
and instead of powering your car, the battery powers your home,
for about 3 days!
Isn't that cool?

And OK, I know, right now the federal government is trying to undermine the electric car market.
And I know, many of us are not going to be buying Teslas any time soon.
But they're not the only game in town.
And here's what else we know.
High-capacity batteries are getting cheaper and better all the time.
The move to more renewable energy is unstoppable,
no matter how much the federal government tries to stop it.
And by the way, thank you, California, for your leadership on that!

Anyway, I'm telling you all this
not because I think electric cars will save the planet on their own,
but because I want to offer you *hope*.
The hope I experienced in the moment
when I heard about this wildly creative use for a known technology,
which is good for humans and good for the planet.
The hope I experienced when I learned
that sweetgrass *needs* human beings to care for it.
The hope I experienced when I saw those extraordinary living tree bridges in the Khasi Hills, the home of many of our Unitarian siblings in faith.

And the hope of our Unitarian ancestors
that the human spirit is not hopelessly evil and corrupt,
but resilient and creative
and capable of caring for life, caring for this planet
in ancient ways
and in new ways yet to be invented.

The planet is changing in ways that frighten us,
that is undeniable.

But we are nowhere near the end of our story.
How will we partner with our Earth
to ride the coming changes?
May it be with creativity.
With hope that burns through our despair.
And with love.

Blessings to you and to our planet.
Amen.

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Extinguishing the Chalice/Closing Blessing

Now, we extinguish the chalice.

And as we go forth on this Earth Day Sunday,
may hope rise in us,
and creativity, and strength!
May we let go of our despair
and dare to imagine a future for our planet
of humans and the plant beings and all the living beings
loving what is here,
respecting one another,
protecting all that is left
and all that is yet to be.

May it be so.
Go in peace.
Amen and blessed be.