

“The Interdependent Web”

Rev. Mary Gear

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Reading: An excerpt from the Chaos chapter of *Sparks of Wonder*. The chapter was written by Erika A. Hewitt and Becky Brooks.

Although the German word Giftschränk sounds like a quirky holiday tradition, the term is really a combination of the words poison and cabinet. The term once referred to literal pharmaceutical cabinets in which chemicals were locked safely away, evolving to describe any container in which dangerous items are sealed to protect the common good.

As any parent knows, our homes (and even our workplaces) contain informal "poison cabinets:" places where we stow medicine, liquor, knives, or other things that could be life-threatening to a child who doesn't understand the items' power. How do we, as citizens, respond to similar threats at the social level?

[Over time] Giftschränk has come to refer to the conceptual containers—often special rooms or vaults—used by libraries, museums, and government agencies as repositories for material that's considered harmful or sensitive.

A Giftschränk is intended to contain... to control access for the sake of the common good. The stashing away of questionable writing or art isn't an attempt at secrecy, nor is it the same thing as censorship. There are still ways to access the metaphorical poison in the cabinet.

Both in the United States and in our Unitarian Universalist congregations, we're primed to speak of "freedom," and to reflexively protect our right to exercise free speech. We're enamored of freedom as concept and practice, and chafe at its narrowing—even in

principle. When we study history, however, we learn that freedom is rarely freedom for all, and is more often freedom for some at the expense of others.

If our congregations value interdependence, we must also acknowledge the ripple effects that can wreak unintended consequences on the innocent. At times, we're called to surrender some of our freedom in order to serve The Whole. How might members of our communities be harmed if we give freedom a greater value than responsibility?

Sermon/Homily: "The Interdependent Web"

The image was of a protest; people gathered in front of a government building somewhere, arms raised, holding signs, a speaker with a megaphone in front of the crowd. At the center of the image was a person holding a sign that said: My Body, My Choice. Next to them was a person holding a sign that said: No vaccines.

At that moment when I saw this image on my laptop screen, I was flooded with emotions. Fear, anger, determination.

I was instantly transported back to my days of working at a Planned Parenthood clinic, when I would cross a protest line to get to work every Friday. We were picketed by an anti-abortion, anti-family planning group that offered prayers for our sinful souls. Our clinic director thanked them for the prayers every week, saying that we needed all the help we could get, because we did.

As I gathered my wits about me and returned to that image on my screen, I was challenged to intentionally turn to curiosity. While I was still furious that this slogan for reproductive rights was co-opted by people who likely didn't support reproductive justice, I wondered: Is it the same? Does my long-held belief in a person's right to make decisions about their body and reproductive health, does that extend to someone's right to not get vaccinated in a pandemic, even though they can be?

Over the years, I have counseled quite a number of people facing an unintended pregnancy. I have never experienced anyone who made the decision about what to do easily. There are so many considerations, so many relationships to consider. Not only the impact on individual lives, but the impact on the wider family and community. What about the potential of the child that could be? What if parenthood delayed schooling? What if it was dangerous for a young mother? What if this were the first grandchild? What if it meant disconnection from family? What if it meant living in poverty? These hard decisions are rarely made without consideration for the interconnection, weighing personal freedom with some sense of the impact on and responsibility to others.

For many of us who are eligible, the decision about getting the COVID vaccine was the same kind of consideration. We might have considered: What does science say? What are the risks? How will it affect my health? My family? My community? We used our values, our moral compass, to decide for ourselves in relationship to how we perceive the common good.

Sometimes making a moral or ethical decision is easy and straightforward. Knowing our beliefs and values, having a moral compass, is most important when decisions are hard. And, we have a lot of hard decisions to make, not only for ourselves but for our nation and our world. We are in the middle of three big emergencies: an emergency of climate change, an emergency of the global pandemic, and an emergency of challenges to democracy. Any one of these emergencies is big; all three together are overwhelming and the experience of them is traumatic. There are hard decisions to make even when we are in the midst of trauma.

Let's take a moment to take a breath together here.

Our spiritual theme for this month is the interdependent web. This phrase is part of the new OUUC mission statement which we developed last Spring. This year we'll use words from the new vision and mission as our spiritual themes each month so we can deepen our understanding of the words we chose.

The new OUUC vision is for a loving, just, and healthy world.

The new OUUC mission says:

Our spiritual principles affirm the worth and dignity of every person, and that we are part of the infinite, interdependent WEB of life.

We:

Welcome and **W**onder

Embrace and **E**mpower

Bridge and **B**ecome

The OUUC mission references the Unitarian Universalist Association seven principles, and specifically the 1st and 7th which say that we affirm and promote the inherent worth and dignity of all people and the interdependent web of life of which we are a part. We affirm both the individual and the communal in the web of life.

If there is anything that we've learned from the pandemic, it's that we are connected. And not only are we connected, but we are dependent on each other. The pandemic has reminded us that what we do matters. We realize that we need each other and that the survival of all of us is connected in ways that we may not even know. Your mask protects me; my mask protects you. Vaccines protect us all. Our health as a society depends on each of us doing our part. Interconnection and interdependence, both.

Our interdependence can be a positive and healthy thing when good actions travel through the strands of the web. And there is another perspective to our infinite web: when we damage one strand, we damage ourselves and others. The strands of the web will convey evil as well as good.

The infinite web has the capacity for both good and evil to travel through it because we humans have the capacity for both good and evil. With each action, we make a choice. We choose to see oppression or not. We choose to name injustice or not. We choose to resist or not. We choose to learn or not. This tension between good and evil in our web

reflects the tension within us.

There are times when I really don't want to acknowledge that there is also the capacity for evil in our wondrous web. I want the web to remain magical and awesome, and I want to ignore the capacity for evil in myself and others. I recognize this tendency in myself and others, and I call it sin. For me, sin is when we ignore, avoid or deny that we are interconnected and interdependent, because harm comes from that denial.

It is my privilege as a white, educated, middle class person that even allows me to entertain the idea that I can choose not to acknowledge our capacity for evil and injustice; many people experience it in their daily lives. There are days when I'd rather someone else took care of it. And this is part of the sin of denial.

I believe it is the work of a faith community to support each of us as individuals as we discern and live into our values. And it is together as a community that we discern and live the values that we share. A faith community helps us develop our moral compass and holds us accountable to our aspiration of living a moral and faithful life. We don't always get it right. And, being a learning people, a learning community, we open our minds, our hearts and our hands, willing to try new things, to fail and try again. This is our shared ministry.

A colleague once gave me a lifeline when I was feeling especially discouraged and overwhelmed by the state of the world and the state of humanity. She reminded me that we are all connected. Just as evil can travel through the strands of the web, so can good. "So, just pick a strand in the web and pull it toward justice," she said, "it pulls everything else toward justice, too. When you work for immigrant justice, it impacts environmental justice. When you work for LGBTQ rights it impacts reproductive rights. When you work to combat climate chaos, it impacts everything because it is all connected. So, just pick something to work on, it doesn't matter what, just pick something, it doesn't have to be big, and pull it toward justice."

Dear ones, we will have many hard decisions before us. Coming up is decisions about booster vaccines. Right now, about one third of the world population is vaccinated. In

low- and middle-income countries, about 20% of people are vaccinated. Only 3% of people in Africa are vaccinated. In upper middle- and high-income countries about 80% of people are vaccinated. Does a booster in wealthy countries take away from vaccines for people in poorer countries? Do the benefits of a booster justify letting people worldwide go without any vaccines? What do our values and principles tell us? What does our freedom allow us and what is our responsibility?

At the beginning of the service, we sang the hymn “May Nothing Evil Cross This Door.” When I served at First Unitarian Portland, I suggested this hymn once in a worship planning meeting and received total silence in response. Crickets, until the minister leading the service finally shared that it was their least favorite hymn because we bring evil in with us.

I learned an important lesson that day. Yes, there is evil in the world, and we must work against it. And we bring the capacity for evil with us. Whether that evil in us is manifest or not is up to us: we have a choice. The choice may not be easy, and we don't have to make the hard choices alone. Our faith tradition claims that we all minister to each other and to a broken and hurting world. Based on our shared values, this is our shared ministry. We journey with each other as we discover and live into our values and highest aspirations. We support each other, especially when the learning is hard. We can celebrate that, in the interdependent web, we are never alone. Our learning and our salvation is in the interdependent web.

Let us commit to keeping open our minds, hands and hearts. Let us commit to learning. Let us commit to a journey of shared ministry; together we create the possibility of transformation within ourselves and of justice in the world.