



# EXPLORATION

## Interdependence

### Readings



#### 1. *No Them, Only Us*

by Krista Tippett

The Northern Irish poet Pádraig Ó Tuama writes: “When I was a child / I learnt to count to five: / One, two, three, four, five. / But these days, I’ve been counting lives, so I count / One life / One life / One life / One life ...”

...A genius of the Enlightenment that formed the modern West was a new ingenuity of categories and parts. Our ability to see and study intricacy grew hand in hand with a sophistication, with mechanics and a value of specialization. We divided our sense of ourselves into separate compartments called body, mind, and spirit. We perfected systems for defining an “us” and containing the “other.” We made of the natural world an “other.”

Now, we’re understanding that we live in stardust-infused bodies — and that we’ve inhabited ecosystems while we organized around parts. For us, all of life is revealed in its insistence on wholeness: the organic interplay between our bodies, the natural world, the lives we make, the world we create.

...As hard as we try to see where one begins and the other ends, we are shown how interwoven and uncontainable such distinctions remain. The deepest truth held within this, our most elemental category and binary, is the inescapability of interdependence — the sometimes joyful, sometimes maddening, always fact that we need each other.

“There is no them,” the poet, journalist, and novelist Luis Alberto Urrea says. “There is only us.”

Source: <https://onbeing.org/blog/three-callings-for-your-life-and-for-our-time/>

#### 2. *A Universe of Possibilities*

by Jill Tarter

We live on a fragile island of life, in a universe of possibilities. For many millennia, humans have been on a journey to find answers, answers to questions about naturalism and transcendence, about who we are and why we are, and of course, who else might be out there. Is it really just us? Are we alone in this vast universe of energy and matter and chemistry and physics? Well, if we are, it’s an awful waste of space. But, what if we’re not?

What if, out there, others are asking and answering similar questions? What if they look up at the night sky, at the same stars, but from the opposite side? Would the discovery of an older cultural civilization out there inspire us to find ways to survive our increasingly uncertain technological adolescence? Might it be the discovery of a distant civilization and our common cosmic origins that finally drives home the message of the bond among all humans? Whether we’re born in San Francisco, or Sudan, or close to the heart of the Milky Way galaxy, we are the products of a billion-year lineage of wandering stardust. We, all of us, are what happens when a primordial mixture of hydrogen and helium evolves for so long that it begins to ask where it came from.

Source: <https://www.uua.org/worship/words/reading/universe-possibilities>

#### 3. *A Map of Balance & Harmony*

by Robin Wall Kimmerer

At the height of the summer, when the days are long and bright, and the thunderers come to soak the ground, the lessons of reciprocity are written clearly

in a Three Sisters’ garden. Together their stems inscribe what looks to me like a blueprint for the world, a map of balance and harmony. The corn stands eight feet tall; rippling green ribbons of leaf curl away from the stem in every direction to catch the sun. No leaf sits directly over the next, so that each can gather light without shading the others. The bean twines around the corn stalk, weaving itself between the leaves of corn, never interfering with their work. In the spaces where corn leaves are not, buds appear on the vining bean and expand into outstretched leaves and clusters of fragrant flowers. The bean leaves droop and are held close to the stem of the corn. Spread around the feet of the corn and beans is a carpet of big broad squash leaves that intercept the light that falls among the pillars of corn. Their layered spacing uses the light, a gift from the sun, efficiently, with no waste. The organic symmetry of forms belongs together; the placement of every leaf, the harmony of shapes speak their message. Respect one another, support one another, bring your gift to the world and receive the gifts of others, and there will be enough for all.

Source: <https://www.uua.org/worship/words/reading/map-balance-and-harmony>

#### 4. *A Single Cell* by Lewis Thomas

Viewed from the distance of the moon, the astonishing thing about the earth, catching the breath, is that it is alive. The photographs show the dry, pounded surface of the moon in the foreground, dry as an old bone. Aloft, floating free beneath the moist, gleaming, membrane of bright blue sky, is the rising earth, the only exuberant thing in this part of the cosmos. If you could look long enough, you would see the swirling of the great drifts of white cloud, covering and uncovering the half-hidden masses of land. If you had been looking for a very long, geologic time,

All human beings are interconnected, one with all other elements in creation. Henry Reed



Photo by Ludwig Heidenberg on Pixels

you could have seen the continents themselves in motion, drifting apart on their crystal plates, held afloat by the fire beneath. It has the organized, self-contained look of a live creature, full of information, marvelously skilled in handling the sun... I have been trying to think of the earth as a kind of organism, but it is a no go...it is most like a single cell.

Source: *The Lives of a Cell: Notes of a Biology Watcher* by Lewis Thomas

## 5. *Fundamental Interdependence*

by Rev. Susan Frederick-Gray

A beautiful quilt hangs on the wall in my home office where I now do so many of my sermons and recordings and meetings.

It was made by Jennifer Centric, then a member of the First Unitarian Universalist Church of Youngstown, Ohio, where I served as minister.

...I love this quilt. It brings me joy—the cacophony of rainbow colors that signify the values of welcome, belonging, and diversity. It reminds me how we are all stitched together—an expression of our fundamental interdependence. More than this, it reminds me of the beauty and wholeness that is possible in our interconnectedness.

...In his Letter from a Birmingham Jail, the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. wrote, “We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly.” With this compelling image, King captures a truth that shapes our UU theology. Interdependence guides how we can shape our spiritual communities and energizes our commitment to social justice. Like the quilt, each of us brings our beautiful and unique self, yet we are undeniably stitched together into one whole.

Source: <https://www.uuworld.org/articles/president-spring-2022>

## 6. *Insisting on Interdependence*

by Rev. Ken Collier

Unitarian Universalists went through a study process for four years that culminated at the 1984 General Assembly with the proposal for a new statement of Principles. The ...proposal contained versions of each of the first six principles, but it did not directly mention interdependence. The concept was, perhaps, implicit in a number of other principles, especially the first concerning the inherent worth and dignity of every person, but even that one did not extend to non-humans. Many of us thought that there was something important missing, and some of us were prepared to vote against the proposal unless it was changed. As the debate wore on and patience grew thin, the Rev. Paul L'Herrou stood up and proposed this seventh Principle. Some word crafting ensued, but because almost everyone agreed with it in substance, it passed with few, if any, dissenting votes. A funny thing has happened since then. We appeal to these Principles for all sorts of things from supporting social action projects to theological projects and beyond. Of all seven, it is this last Principle that is appealed to by far the most often.

Source: <https://firstuunilms.org/wordcms/wp-content/uploads/2018/05/Seventh-principle-Rev.-Roberta-Finkelstein-6-17-2018.pdf>

## 7. *Trees* by Peter Wohlleben

Wherever forests can develop in a species-appropriate manner, they offer particularly beneficial functions.... Current discussions between environmental groups and forest users... give hope that in the future forests will continue to live out their hidden lives, and our descendants will still have the opportunity to walk through the trees in wonder. This is what this ecosystem achieves: the fullness of life with tens of thousands of species interwoven and interdependent.

And just how important this interconnected global network of forests is to other areas of Nature is made clear by this little story from Japan. Katsuhiko Matsunaga ...discovered that leaves falling into streams and rivers leach acids into the ocean that stimulate growth

of plankton, the first and most important building block in the food chain. More fish because of the forest? The researcher encouraged the planting of more trees in coastal areas, which did, in fact, lead to higher yields for fisheries and oyster growers.

Source: *The Hidden Life of Trees: What They Feel, How They Communicate—Discoveries from A Secret World* by Peter Wohlleben

# Wisdom Story

## *Interdependence of Humanity and Earth* by Marcelo Gleiser

...Our existence is completely and inextricably dependent on ... [Earth].

...Earth is approximately 4.53 billion years old. During its first 600 million years, ...constant bombardment from asteroids and comets ... brought a host of precious compounds and water.... Still, as things quieted down, the stage was set for the primordial stew to brew the first living creatures....

These simple, one-celled creatures ruled the day. ...Some 2.4 billion years ago, these unicellular beings went through a fundamental mutation that made them capable of photosynthesis, essentially the property of turning sunlight into food. ...Slowly, these creatures promoted a global change in Earth's atmosphere, which became progressively richer in oxygen.

We owe our existence to these little photosynthetic bacteria. ...Despite the many dramatic changes that Earth underwent during its existence, it has remained fairly stable for the last 2 billion years. ... [Although,] The great Permian-Triassic extinction event ...starting 299 million years ago and lasting for 15 million years, ...eliminated more than 95 percent of marine and 70 percent of terrestrial species.

Compared to other worlds we know, Earth stands out as an oasis for life. Its atmosphere protects surface dwellers from lethal solar ultraviolet rays. Its magnetic field also acts as a powerful shield against radiation from space, especially particles from the solar wind. The slow drift of tectonic plates recycles carbon dioxide between oceans and atmosphere. Our large moon stabilizes

Earth's tilted rotation axis, allowing for the seasons and for water to remain liquid in much of its surface. These properties, taken together, make our planet home for countless life forms, from the cold and dark depths of oceans to frozen mountaintops.

We are not here by chance. We are the product of this story, of the mutations that transformed bacteria into people, of the cataclysmic accidents that redefined the conditions on our planet, of the climatic and geologic changes that unfolded over billions of years.

...If we plan to remain here for a few more thousands of years, the only option we have is to treat Earth with humility and respect.

Source: <https://www.npr.org/sections/13.7/2017/11/08/562668359/the-interdependence-of-humanity-and-earth>

## Snippets

"Members in the Commonwealth of God are not bound together by the specifics of their religion, for the nature of our interdependency does not require this. Rather we are bound by the shared recognition that when one person suffers, all suffer; when we violate one life, all lives are violated; when we pollute the earth, all living things are stained; when one nation threatens the security of another, it, too, becomes less secure; when we place the planet in mortal danger, we hazard the future of our own children as well as the children of our enemies." *Rev. Forrest Church*

"Colonial, white supremacist organizational practices seem inevitable because they were so universally adopted over the next centuries, and they still govern the great majority of our institutions, but they were design choices. This means that other choices are available, even when they seem far-fetched. We know what spices and organizations look like, feel like, and function like when they are inspired by the colonizers' principles of separation, competition and exploitation. How would they be different if they were based on principles like integration and interdependence, reciprocity and relationship?"

*Edgar Villanueva*

"Capitalism's grow-or-die imperative stands radically at odds with ecology's imperative of interdependence and limit. The two imperatives can no longer co-exist with each other; nor can any society founded on the myth that they can be reconciled hope to survive. Either we will establish an ecological society or society will go under for everyone, irrespective of his or her status."

*Ursula Le Guin*

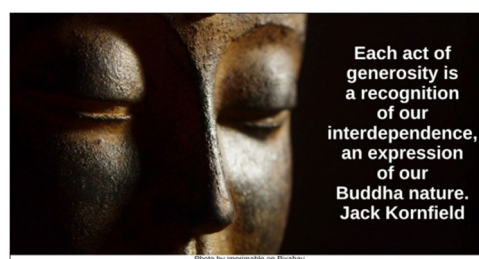
"Perception of the miraculous requires no faith or assumptions. It is simply a matter of paying full and close attention to the givens of life, i.e., to what is so ever-present that it is usually taken for granted. The true wonder of the world is available everywhere, in the minutest parts of our bodies, in the vast expanses of the cosmos, and in the intimate interconnectedness of these and all things.... We are part of a finely balanced ecosystem in which interdependency goes hand-in-hand with individuation. We are all individuals, but we are also parts of a greater whole, united in something vast and beautiful beyond description."

*M. Scott Peck*

"Why is your HOW message today more timely than ever? All progress now depends on How. We have entered the Era of Behavior. Of course, our behavior has always mattered, but in today's world, it matters more than ever and in ways it never has before. We live in a more connected and interdependent world. Yet we tend to speak about the world in amoral terms. The single most profound implication of an increasingly interconnected world is that it has rendered us ethically, if not morally, interdependent."

*Dov Seidman*

"What several decades of research has revealed about Earth's location within the vastness of the cosmos can be summed up in this statement: the ideal place for any kind of life as we know it turns out to be a solar system like ours, within a galaxy like the Milky Way, within a supercluster of galaxies like the Virgo supercluster, within a super-supercluster like the Laniakea super-supercluster. In other words, we happen to live in the best, perhaps the one and only, neighborhood that allows not only



Each act of generosity is a recognition of our interdependence, an expression of our Buddha nature.  
*Jack Kornfield*

for physical life's existence but also for its enduring survival." *Hugh Ross*

"Difference must be not merely tolerated, but seen as a fund of necessary polarities between which our creativity can spark like a dialectic. Only then does the necessity for interdependency become unthreatening. Only within that interdependency of different strengths, acknowledged and equal, can the power to seek new ways of being in the world generate, as well as the courage and sustenance to act where there are no characters." *Audre Lorde*

"Perhaps the most urgent task facing us is to create a new educational curriculum that will make each child aware, from the first grade on, that life in the universe is interdependent. It should be an education that trains the mind to perceive the network of causes and effects in which our actions are embedded, and trains the emotions and the imagination to respond appropriately to the consequences of those actions."

*Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi*

"Independent thinking alone is not suited to interdependent reality. Independent people who do not have the maturity to think and act interdependently may be good individual producers, but they won't be good leaders or team players. They're not coming from the paradigm of interdependence necessary to succeed in marriage, family, or organizational reality." *Stephen R. Covey*

"The Newtonian vision describes a reliable place inhabited by well-behaved and easily identifiable matter. The world view arising from these discoveries is also bolstered by the philosophical implications of Charles Darwin's theory of evolution, with its suggestion that survival is available only to the genetically rugged individual. These, in their essence, are stories that idealize separate-





ness. From the moment we are born, we are told that for every winner there must be a loser. From that constricted vision we have fashioned our world. The Field [i.e., all matter and energy in the universe are made up of fields interacting with each other] tells a radically new scientific story. The latest chapter of that story, written by a group of largely unknown frontier scientific explorers, suggests that at our essence we exist as a unity, a relationship – utterly interdependent, the parts affecting the whole.” *Lynne McTaggart*

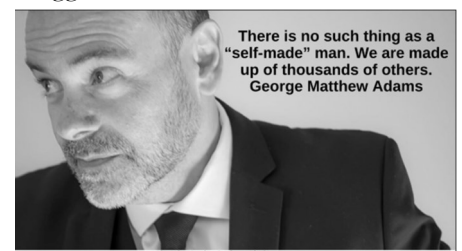
## Questions

1. In reading #1, Krista Tippett laments that the Enlightenment divided our stardust-infused bodies into body, mind, and spirit and reality into “us” and “other.” Tippett writes, “We made of the natural world an ‘other.’” What have been the consequences of “othering” nature? When we focus on wholeness, we learn, writes Tippett, that “The deepest truth ... is the inescapability of interdependence....” Did your education train you to focus on the parts, the whole, or both? Does our culture honor wholeness? Why or why not? Interdependence? Why or why not?
2. In reading #2, Jill Tarter writes, “We live on a fragile island of life....” Do you agree? Why or why not? Does the vastness of Earth mask its fragility? What “parts” of the Earth have been harmed through human activity? How does that affect the whole? Tarter asks, “Are we alone in this vast universe of energy and matter and chemistry and physics?” What do you think? Why? What might it mean if there is life in other parts of the universe? What would it mean if the only life in the universe was here on Earth?
3. In reading #3, Robin Wall Kimmerer describes the Three Sisters planting method, which involves planting corn, beans, and squash together in a mound. The corn is the trellis for the beans. The beans add nitrogen to the soil. The squash leaves provide shade to retain moisture in the soil. Its use by the Iroquois in America and Canada goes back 4,000 to 5,000 years. How does this planting method symbolize the value that indigenous people placed on interdependence? How does it contrast with mono-crop planting, where one crop is planted yearly on a farm, degrading the soil?
4. In reading #4, Lewis Thomas wrote in 1974, “Viewed from the distance of the moon, the astonishing thing about the earth ... is that it is alive,” compared to the “dry, pounded surface of the moon.” Is the Earth alive? Why or why not? If yes, when did you come to this point of view? What influenced you? How might our relationship with the Earth change if we regard it as being alive? Thomas concludes, “I have been trying to think of the earth as a kind of organism [like the Gaia hypothesis advanced by James Lovelock,] but it is a no-go... it is most like a single cell.” Which view makes the most sense to you, a kind of organism or a single cell? Why?
5. In reading #5, Rev. Susan Frederick-Gray describes a quilt that symbolizes interdependence, beauty, and wholeness for her. What things illustrate interdependence for you? Why? She quotes a passage from Martin Luther King Jr.’s Letter from a Birmingham Jail: “We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly.” What meanings do you take from his words? Frederick-Gray concludes, “King captures a truth that shapes our UU theology. Interdependence guides how we can shape our spiritual communities and energizes our commitment to social justice.” Do you agree? Why or why not? What promotes interdependence in our congregations? What hinders interdependence in our congregations (e.g., cliques, conflict)?
6. In reading #6, Rev. Ken Collier recounts the history of the 1984 GA that led to the 7th principle. Which of our seven principles is most important to you? Why? He wrote, “Of all seven, it is this last Principle that is appealed to by far the most often.” How do you regard the 7th principle? What does the web of all existence mean to you? The UUA’s Article II Study Commission has underlined the importance of the 7th principle by making interdependence one of the seven values they have proposed to replace the seven principles. Do you agree with including interdependence as a value? Why or why not?
7. In reading #7, Peter Wohlleben, author of the remarkable book *The Hidden Life of Trees: What They Feel, How They Communicate—Discoveries from A Secret World*, writes that forests provide “the fullness of life with tens of thousands of species interwoven and interdependent.” (Forests contain 60,000 different tree species, 80 percent of amphibian species, 75 percent of bird species, and 68 percent of the world’s mammal species.) Have you spent time in a forest? What was the experience like? How was it different than being in a meadow? On a beach? In the United States, less than 5% of original old-growth forests remain, while in Canada, the amount is about 25%. What does it mean that we have destroyed so many of these old-growth forests and their ecosystems? In addition to clear-cutting, forests are increasingly subject to drought and wildfires, making reforestation increasingly important. Trees are known as the “lungs of the world,” but their impact is more complex than imagined. As Wohlleben reports, researchers in Japan found that leaves from trees falling into streams and rivers leach acid into the water, which promoted increases in plankton that led to increases in the number of fish.

What are trees to you? What do you make of the complexity of forests? What do you make of the complexity of the Earth? Why such complexity?

***The following questions are related to the Snippets***

8. The Rev. Forrest Church noted that people are not bound together “by the specifics of their religion” but by the reality of their interdependence. He wrote, “When one person suffers, all suffer; when we violate one life, all lives are violated; ... when we place the planet in mortal danger, we hazard the future of our own children as well as the children of our enemies.” Do you agree? Why or why not? What does it mean to you that Unitarian Universalism has emphasized “the interdependent web of all existence” since 1984? Has this emphasis shifted your sensibility about connecting with other people and the Earth? How?
9. Edgar Villanueva writes that pervasive “colonial, white supremacist organizational practices” shape who we are. Do you agree? Why or why not? While UUs have focused on the reality and problem of white supremacy and its relationship to Blacks, there has been less focus on colonialism and its relationship to indigenous peoples in the US. Unitarians in Canada have addressed the relationship with Canada’s First Nations. How does racism undermine the reality of interdependency? How does colonialism distort the truth of interdependency? How do both contribute to ongoing social, economic, and political disparities? In place of “the colonizers’ principles of separation, competition, and exploitation,” Villanueva asks, how would things be different if we operated under “principles like integration and interdependence, reciprocity and relationship” found among Indigenous peoples? How could this affect our values and actions?
10. Ursula Le Guin contrasts “Capitalism’s grow-or-die imperative” with “ecology’s imperative of interdependence and limit,” writing that they can no longer coexist. Do you agree? Why or why not? Is it possible to leave a capitalistic society behind? Why or why not? What steps could we take to move toward an ecological society? Can a “softer” capitalism exist within the ecological means of Earth? Why or why not?
11. M. Scott Peck found the miraculous “in the minutest parts of our bodies, in the vast expanses of the cosmos, and in the intimate interconnectedness of these and all things....” Where do you find the miraculous? While he lauded the “finely balanced ecosystem” in which we lived, he did not anticipate that human activity could disrupt the balance. What concerns do you have about global warming and other environmental issues? Regarding these concerns, what gives you hope?
12. Influencers like Simon Sinek have focused on knowing your “Why” because it empowers behavior, yet Dov Seidman writes, “All progress now depends on How.” How do you compare the importance of “why” versus “how?” Seidman’s focus on “how” grows out of the reality of our interdependence. In terms of caring for the Earth, in what ways does the “how” of what we do make differences that matter?
13. Astrophysicist Hugh Ross writes, “The ideal place for any kind of life as we know it turns out to be a solar system like ours” within the Milky Way, within the Virgo supercluster, and the Laniakea super-supercluster of galaxies. How do you view that life emerged on Earth at all and perhaps alone within this vast area of the universe? How do you view the incredible complexity of life on Earth? How do you view the web of amazing interdependence of lifeforms reflected in each of Earth’s 431 unique land-based ecosystems?
14. Audre Lorde saw difference as necessary for creativity. Do you agree? Why or why not? She built on this by writing, “Only within that interdependency of different strengths, acknowledged and equal, can the power to seek new ways of being in the world” emerge. Why might this be true? How can our interdependence be illuminated through the fact of human diversity?
15. Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi advocates an educational curriculum for children that makes them aware “that life in the universe is interdependent.” What examples might such a curriculum include? When did you first appreciate how interdependent you were with other people? With the Earth? What brought about that understanding? How might a fundamental appreciation of our interdependence affect other values and actions?
16. Stephen Covey valued interdependence. He saw thinking and acting interdependently as a sign of maturity. Do you agree? Why or why not? How can thinking and acting interdependently enhance a marriage? A family? An organization? Covey asserted that effective teamwork required working interdependently. What are some characteristics of effective teams?
17. Lynne McTaggart writes that the Newtonian view of a well-ordered world bolstered by Darwin’s survival of the fittest idealized separateness and the rugged individual. What have been the benefits of this ideal? The downsides? She refers to the Quantum Field Theory, which posits that all matter and energy in the universe are made up of fields interacting with each other. Taggart writes this “suggests that at our essence we exist as a unity, a relationship—utterly interdependent, the parts affecting the whole.” How might our behavior change if we accepted the reality of our utter interdependence over the illusion of rugged individualism?



There is no such thing as a “self-made” man. We are made up of thousands of others.  
George Matthew Adams