

Welcome to Green Vespers

June 16, 2018



Pyramids & Flying Saucers in the Land of the Free

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Below you'll find a sample Green Vespers text, a monthly service dedicated to seeking right relationship with Earth, and centered on the seventh principle of Unitarian Universalism, *Respect for the Interdependent Web of all existence of which we are a part*. It's an updated version of a service of the same name from 2007, © Helen R. Kaar.

OPENING

Out of the vessel of darkness comes light

Let ours be a living faith
Let ours be a living chalice

Out of the vessel of Earth comes water

Let ours be a living faith
Let ours be a living chalice

Out of the water of Earth comes life

Let ours be a living faith
Let ours be a living chalice

In this time of peak green

Let ours be a living faith
Let ours be a living chalice

FILLING

THE CHALICE

a chalice can hold many things-if it usually holds fire
let the evening chalice hold this quenching water
water that sinks to common depths
to connect everything it touches
water, whose quiet insistence
can sculpt great canyons
water that transforms
heals and
refreshes
that gives life
Let this water be a Yin
to our daytime Yang

MUSIC

PYRAMIDS & FLYING SAUCERS in the Land of the Free, I

Who here has seen *The Matrix*? I can't recommend this movie for any other reason, but the premise, the central metaphor, keeps coming back to me as a haunting expression of what contemporary life can feel like. If you haven't seen the movie, picture this. A young man, our hero, learns that he has always been asleep, just dreaming a life he thinks he leads. In reality, our machines, our devices, have colonized us, and hooked all of us up to a piece of tentacled headgear that sucks out brain energy. In effect, our machines, our devices are using us as batteries. All our concerns, our frenzied activities, our preoccupations amount to no more than illusions they feed us to keep us feeding them.

Let's at least admit that we don't need the *Matrix* to explain why this might strike a chord. Over years, we may have had many moments when an almost inaudible inner voice struggles to get our attention. It wants to alert us that we are not quite living our real life, the life meant for us, the life that would feel whole and satisfying. In our busyness, we dial down that inner voice. We know, of course, that we cannot afford that real life; we dare not listen and we dutifully block the message in favor of living as we think we must, and so, we colonize ourselves. That's why we lead a sleepwalking life, a life that teaches us we are not good enough for the aspirations, the real dreams that we have postponed and finally sacrificed. We may even have denied ourselves permission to know what they are. It's like we're missing a goal or a way. Missing a goal or a way – hang onto that phrase. You'll hear it again.

So, what kind of world is our busyness making? We are not just accomplices in our own enslavement. but complicit in creating the most colossally wasteful and destructive societies in human experience – and all, all of it to a mantra that keeps telling us that this expresses freedom. The freedom, the democracy I learned about in grade school had everything to do with empowering us to strive for great civic and personal goals; it had everything to do with removing artificial barriers to achievement. Our teachers depicted personal good as a microcosm of public good. And that's how a just society was supposed to emerge,

inevitably, from the pursuit of happiness – that is, from the pursuit of worthy goals. How could we, the heirs of this dream, be waking up in the nightmare of *The Matrix*; how could the heirs of this dream have so completely missed the goal or way? What has reduced freedom to survival of the richest?

Here's a clue. We can detect the decline from our grade-school standards in the indiscriminate way we pepper the landscape with the word free, all tricked out in red, white and blue – as in “Free Gift Enclosed.” Of course, inwardly, we all know we will have to pay. The giver of any gift called free intends to exact a price. And yet, so seductive is the promise of something for nothing, that enough of us swallow it, hoping this time, we will receive something wonderful, something of value, something as precious as the hope we traded it for. That turns free into just another four-letter word, a synonym for swallowing the hook – imagine, free, a synonym for swallowing the hook! – just another step in our sleepwalking life in the *Matrix*.

I think we can safely assume two things about these shrill and unrelenting offers of something for nothing: first, advertisers wouldn't make them if they didn't work; and second, they wouldn't work if enough of us actually felt free. Just as no sensible person would accept an offer of dinner after dinner, no free, satisfied person needs to swallow the hook of something for nothing over and over again.

So, what exactly do such gifts cost? I have here an example of a free gift. But what is it? This red plastic disc around a raised core kind of suggests a flying saucer, doesn't it? Maybe it carried tiny aliens who will colonize what's left of us after the *Matrix*? But, no, it didn't come from outer space. It says “W. J. Makoc, DDS.” He was my mom's dentist. Why would he give her this? What's it for? Oh, look! A key ring dangles from it. That's it! It's a key ring! But there has to be more to it. Why this odd shape? What else is going on here?

When you flip it to the flat side, you see that the core houses a sample 15 yards of shard resistant, unwaxed, dental floss. How about that! It's hard to overestimate the value, of a key ring that dispenses dental floss. Say you're stuck in traffic (and that happens almost every day), what to do? Now, you don't have to waste your time on the telephone anymore, you can floss instead. But that's not all. You see a series of holes around the circumference, 12, to be exact, each set in it's

own separate lobe. You notice one month of the year stamped beside each hole, and the key ring dangles from October Hm. What is this trying to tell you? Ah, yes, of course! See your dentist in October! How clever! For this the ancients mapped the heavens and codified the cycles of time into a calendar. Picture the Aztecs, the Babylonians, the Druids building Stonehenge, all working toward this. Yes, you can do that while you floss.

And when you've finished, while you're still stuck in traffic, picture the life cycle of this free gift – from its inspiration, the design, someone scouting out a site in an impoverished country where producing these little saucers represents economic hope – a bright future for the coming generations. Picture everything that has to happen before it gets to you –the miners, the smelters, the chemists the contracts, the orders, the secretaries, the lawyers, the accountants, the paper suppliers, the whole, vast pyramid scheme that passes for free enterprise.

Now, picture the little saucers marching off the assembly line into boxes by the gross, and then the boxes piled by the thousands into vast containers, and then, the containers trucked and stacked so snugly in the cargo ships that ply the oceans, discharging the most toxic fossil fuels in use across the trackless seas and into our harbors. Then, see them as they travel by truck to the distributor, who in turn carts them to the manufacturer of the dental floss, who personalizes them with a dentist's name. Then the sales people divide them up and drive them to your dentist, who gives you one for free. See how multitudes gain honest employment as the wheels of business grind to a profitable conclusion? – that is, until they saturate the market for little, red, floss-dispensing, flying saucer key rings and have to come up with something else. What about blue?

But you, do you really appreciate it? Are you really grateful for all the sacrifices that brought you this free gift? Was that you yesterday, trying to purge your home of a threatening tide of useless objects washing over you on a daily basis from just about everywhere? Is that when you tossed it and all its equally useful and well made companions into a plastic garbage bag, a bag you pay taxes to truck to a landfill where it will persist undegraded, longer than the pyramids? Can we even begin to guess at its carbon footprint, that is, the cradle to grave energy cost for making it, and carting the damn thing from place to place? But

why shouldn't it persist longer than the pyramids? If future generations survive our sleepwalking way of life, or if aliens in flying saucers ever do alight on this suffering planet, wouldn't they want to know what mattered to us? Why shouldn't they find lots of little, red, floss-dispensing, flying saucer key rings – the detritus of a morally bankrupt pyramid scheme that hawks the illusion of living without limits? As an emblem of our driving belief system, this relic would serve as well as any splinter from the true cross. Take a good look at it. This may be our Rosetta Stone.

MUSIC

PYRAMIDS & FLYING SAUCERS in the Land of the Free, II

About five years ago, (the most recent industry statistics I could find online) there were over 17 million shipping containers in the world. Five or six million plied the globe annually, making around 200 million trips a year. We lost about 10,000 at sea, almost 28 a day. At that time, US Customs and Border Protection tallied 11 million containers entering through our seaports, another 11 million by truck, and 2.7 million by rail. That comes to 24.7 million containers, most of them going back and forth, which brings us close to 50 million border crossings. Today, who knows? I hope this impresses you. We mustn't dismiss the floss saucer as a personal nuisance. It's the tip of the giant junkberg that is sapping our energy, killing us, killing our planet. Junk is endangering us more surely than any terrorist threat.

The problem transcends taste. It's a moral problem. Ugliness is not just skin deep, it seeps out from within. Because it treats Earth's sacred substance as dead, this traffic in junk is smuggling a dangerous contempt for Earth into us. Imagine all the gifts of Earth, the potential, how is it possible to reduce that potential to this? How deadened, how damaged, do you have to be to do it? How deadened, how damaged do you have to be not to see it, to just brush it off? How asleep do you have to be, how out of contact with reality to think of it as a nuisance instead of a mounting desecration?

Plainly, we do inhabit The Matrix. We are dreaming a life, victims of a valueless belief system, a superstition of freedom, and we were born in the middle of a surrender to it. At a deep, gut level, I think many of us recognize that the manufacture of little, red, floss-dispensing, flying saucer key rings is corrupting us. We sense that at some point, a single, last, plastic straw could start an avalanche that entombs not just us, but much of life as we know it. There's a name for what we're doing, an unfashionable name. It's sin.

Maybe, like me, that word, sin, makes you uncomfortable. Let's let the Anglican Bishop of London help us with that. Over a decade ago, when he called unnecessary jet travel a sin, he defined it in the original Old Testament way, which meant "a missed a goal or way," Remember earlier I asked you to listen for that idea, "a missed a goal or way"? I think we can live with this definition and apply it here. It doesn't mean we're born evil or damned. In living, we are bound to miss many a goal and way, so it's not an indictment, just a call for a course correction, a wake-up call. Knowing this can help us to understand and forgive ourselves and then understand and forgive the entire chain of people sucked into the matrix that produces little, red, floss-dispensing, flying saucer key rings, people whose motives were not all bad, people with varying degrees of responsibility for missing the goal or way.

All life entails sacrifice – that's what gives it its tragic beauty and dimension. We all eat. We all use things up. We live by sacrifice. As a people of faith, we must stand in awe of the responsibility that the constant sacrifice of Earth's sacred substance imposes on us. When I say sacred, I mean no more than something worthy, something to treasure. If ever there were something to treasure, it is the substance of this planet of our birth. Every place, every pebble, every plant partakes of it. Holding it and all of its potential close to our hearts obliges us to make our sacrifices worthy. The little, red, floss-dispensing, flying saucer key ring and the civilization that can produce it without shame mark a missed goal or way, a sin, an unworthy sacrifice.

What can we do about it? Right here and now, I mean to begin by apologizing. To your every atom, your every particle wrenched from Nature to achieve this squalid end, in my name and in the name of my species, I apologize. As a token of it, I have made you a shrine, a new home, composed of kindred examples of abused Nature. Like

everything torn out of right relationship with Earth, you still retain the shards of an offended holiness. No amount of apology can undo these offenses. Rather, what I'm saying, I say to remind myself of what I have come from and what I have wittingly or unwittingly contributed to Earth's degradation. Taken in this way, I believe you are a fitting object of religious contemplation.

(Hang saucer in shrine)

And now, I invite you to a time of spoken prayer, a chant, and then silent meditation that ends with music. Before beginning, you may want to sit up straight in your chair; put your feet flat on the floor; relax your breathing; rest your hands comfortably in your lap; you may want to close your eyes.

Earth, may you put us in touch with our grief for you;
may you warn us off unworthy goals and ways;
may we move through our remaining life,
awake and grateful for the bounty that you give us,
roused from the sleepwalking that has stolen much of our freedom,
and blinded us to the misuse of your substance.
May we cease to do all that dishonors you.

Earth, womb of our world,
you are the real Matrix, mater, matter, martyr.

Outside of you, we are nothing;
we experience nothing;
we know nothing.

Bring us down to you, down to you
Bring us down to Earth
Bring us down
Root us in you

I invite you to join me in chant as I toll the gong.
Enduring Earth forgive us
Enduring Earth forgive us
Enduring Earth forgive us
Enduring Earth forgive us
Enduring Earth forgive us
Enduring Earth forgive us
Enduring Earth forgive us, etc.

SILENCE

MUSIC, America The Beautiful

REFLECTIONS ON THE EVENING'S THEME

(shared discussion)

CLOSING

Like us
Every stone, every pebble
Locks within it
A history as old as time

Time connects everything.

To honor that connection
I invite you to come forward
And drop a pebble into the chalice
May its unspoken story
Ripple out into the world

*May all our unspoken stories
Ripple out into the world*