

“Within the Web of Life”

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What do you need to survive?

There is, of course, the common short list: food, water, and shelter.

Perhaps you would also add oxygen to the list. We need to breathe to live. Eric Garner’s cries of [“I can’t breathe”](#) reminded us all of that.

So, it that what we need to survive? Food, water, shelter, oxygen?

What if you are an infant? Or a toddler? As children we are all dependent upon others for our survival. Even as adults we can become injured, ill in body or mind, or otherwise find ourselves in need of others to meet our basic needs. No human goes from cradle to grave without help from others at some point.

Moreover, as a human population we are differently abled. Some of us move differently. Some of us have brains that think differently. Some of us are stronger in body. Some are more resilient in spirit. Some have gifts of caring. Some have gifts of humor. Such diversity of human capacity and skills raises the question—do we each have what it takes to survive? Or might we all need something from another in some circumstances, at certain times?

Since I was a child, I’ve been drawn both to post-apocalyptic stories and to tales of pioneers. In both genres, the core question is how to survive in an unknown environment. Such tales abound in our cultural media. Some stories convey experiences of working together to survive, such as in the TV series *Lost* or in my childhood favorites, *Gilligan’s Island* and *Little House on the Prairie*. However, there is also a strong thread of heroically surviving on one’s own, including: the shipwrecked Robinson Crusoe, Tom Hank’s island adventures with “Wilson” the volleyball in the movie *Cast Away*, and Matt Damon alone in space in *The Martian*. Such stories both challenge us to consider what *do* we need to survive and assure us that survival *is* possible even in the most difficult of circumstances.

In my ongoing fascination with such stories, I recently downloaded an audiobook about “one spirited girl alone in the wilderness, trying to survive.” I won’t tell you the name of the book because I’m going to spoil the ending.ⁱ A somewhat short book, the narrative initially unfolded as expected. After fleeing an oppressive and dangerous situation, the teenage girl is hungry, dirty, and cold. She is also tenacious and clever in her endeavors to survive.

Suffering from exposure, poor quality water, and lack of food, her survival is precarious. Nonetheless, she makes it through one day and one danger and then the next. I expected her to survive. I wanted her to survive. Sure sometimes in such stories the protagonist dies alone in his bus in the Alaskan wilderness ([Into the Wild](#)) or characters we like get eaten by zombies ([Walking Dead](#)), but usually there's the relief of survival.

She didn't survive. At least, not in the way I expected her to survive. By the book's end, she is feverish and ill. The narrator first presents one *possible* path for the girl, describing how she could rally to build shelter and slowly recover by careful use of nearby resources. In this possible future, the girl survives to live for many more years, but she remains alone, never to be reconnected, 'rescued', or 'discovered' by others of her society. The narrator then turns from what might have been to what *is*. There *is* a girl dying in the wilderness. A girl dying in a place she chose to risk entering. A girl whose body feeds the animals, birds, bugs, and soil that sustained her own efforts to survive. A girl whose vertebrae shelters the seedling of a tree which grows, embedding her bone within a massive trunk that rises into the sky and endures for more than a century.

What does it *mean* to survive?

Both of these endings disrupt the expected survivalist narrative. On the one hand, is it enough to physically survive but to remain socially isolated? There are large bodies of research that suggest we do not need other people only for practical reasons of shared labor, economic systems, or reproduction of the species, but also because we are pack animals with social needs. From Surgeon General [Vivek Murthy's](#) research on *loneliness*, to [studies on infants](#) who can die from lack of human contact, to studies of the crippling mental impact of [solitary confinement](#), the evidence clearly shows our need for healthy human relationship. By portraying the girl's survival *and* her isolation, the narrator challenges the reader to ask oneself . . . would survival be worth a lifetime alone?

On the other hand, the failure of the girl to survive is depicted as anything but an end. Rather, by dying, she changes form to become life in the animals, birds, bugs, and soil. Even as she had survived through the death of the animals, fish, and plants she consumed; she now enables the life of others. And, when her bone becomes one with the tree, she rises to tower above the forest floor, remaining magnificently present in a different way. Dead but not gone. Dying, but giving life. Surviving, in a different form within the web of all existence.

We too are part of the web of all existence.

Living as we do in a late capitalist society in a global city, it can be readily apparent that our lives are *interdependent* with vast networks of human political and social economy. From

the bricks of the sidewalk to the electricity in walls to the food on our dining room tables, we know at some level that we did not, could not, provide such things on our own. We are in fact dependent upon farmers and truck drivers as well as municipal workers doing sidewalk repairs and collecting taxes. In a 1967 "[Christmas Sermon on Peace](#)" the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. wrote,

Did you ever stop to think that you can't leave for your job in the morning without being dependent upon most of the world?... Before you finish eating breakfast in the morning, you've depended on more than half the world. This is the way our universe is structured. It is its interrelated quality. We aren't going to have peace on earth until we recognize this basic fact of the interrelated structure of all reality.

The fact is we are all dependent on others.

Dependency is *not* a value Americans are taught to celebrate. We are a nation quite literally begun with a Declaration of *Independence*. Our founding values include a liberty that is often understood through the lens of individual autonomy. To be free is to be uncoerced by another; to be at liberty to think, believe, and act as one's conscience would direct. To be free is to be not dependent.

Unitarian Christianity emerged from this same impulse. Rather than be duty-bound to follow the precepts of religious tradition, our Unitarian ancestors lauded the freedom of the individual conscience to use reason and study to reach one's own conclusion. Even earlier, our Protestant and Puritan ancestors promulgated ideas of individual responsibility for one's spiritual life. To become a member of First Church in its first decades, each person was required to testify to his or her own story of spiritual transformation and relationship with God.

These threads of personal experience, autonomy, and individual freedom of conscience have long permeated both our national and religious discourse. Starting with the value of individual freedom, we might then ask how to reconcile autonomy with dependence? But what changes if we instead start with the fact not only of our dependence on others, but of our *interdependence*? What might our conversations be if we begin with the assumption that we all need one another? How might our ways of working together change if we assumed that everyone had something to give and everyone had a need to be considered? What if we accepted as fact that our actions and inactions would impact others, how would we factor that into our decisions, into our accountability to others? In short, what changes if *interdependence* were valued more highly than independence and autonomy?

Cultural change of values is never easy. Not at an individual level. Not in families. Not in congregations. And certainly not nationally or globally.

But here we are in a novel moment of history as the climate changes from human impact. Here we are where recognizing our interdependence with the web of life will be a matter of survival for species, for eco-systems, for ancestral lands of coastal peoples, for the lives of climate refugees fleeing drought and/or flooding. Here we are after centuries of human activity that extracted *from* nature without truly considering the impact *on* nature. Here we are face to face with the reality of our dependency upon a natural world whose needs we have not really considered.

There have been many, many moments in history when preachers of First Church before me have warned their congregations that *this* is an apocalyptic time. In some ways, there is a persistence to the human condition. There is an ongoing wrestling with human selfishness and pride, with a callousness of heart and an excess of appetite. As the ancient Hebrew Scriptures say, “there is nothing new under the sun.” Indeed, much of what we face today is ancient—violence, war, hunger, natural disasters, tribal conflicts between “us” and “them,” as well as rulers vying for power or to hold on to power. Again and again, individuals and groups have had to choose how to respond to the challenges of their time, their place.

In our time and place, I believe there is something new. We continue to face many of the ancient problems. And we face an unprecedented existential survival of the climate that sustains human life as we have known it. To simply mitigate the worst outcomes possible, global cooperation among nations is needed. And while there are genuine efforts in many places to effect change, there is also war between nations and division within nations eroding the political will for effective change. Here too we find the reality of *interdependence* as one set of challenges effects the capacity to respond to other problems.

So, here we are in this moment, this place. Preachers before me would face apocalyptic times by calling for repentance, hoping this might change the outcome. At its core, repentance simply means “to turn” or “to change directions.” In our time and place, I suspect we are being called to turn away from centering the values of independence and autonomy. By changing directions and instead centering the value of *interdependence*, perhaps we might yet learn *from* nature what is needed to live sustainably on the earth and *from* each other what is needed to live in peace.

In Julie Cadwallader-Staub’s poem, [“Blackbirds,”](#) she describes the experience of a *new* sound out-of-doors—the sound of a flock of blackbirds in synchronized flight. Watching their graceful unity of flight, she feels drawn beyond the limits of a “puny existence” defined

only by “cruelty and fear, apathy and exhaustion.” Rather, she calls us to imagine a human society where:

instead we live and move and have our being
 here, in this curving and soaring world
 so that when, every now and then,
 mercy and tenderness triumph in our lives
 and when, even more rarely, we manage to unite
 and move together
 toward a common good,

we can think to ourselves:

ah yes, this is how it's meant to be.

If we were not already part of the web of all existence, perhaps we could be indifferent to the world around us. But we live and move and have our being within an interrelated, interdependent web of political, economic, and environmental relationships. Recognizing this, perhaps we might seek to protect the earth and all living beings by creating and nurturing sustainable relationships of care and respect, mutuality and justice. Such work is global, but it is also local. It is work for us in a divided nation. It is work for us as a congregation as we work across our differences and conflicts to seek a common good. And it may be work for you in particular relationships with family, friends, or colleagues. All our days, starting with the breakfast table, emerge from interdependence with others and from a web that needs our care and protection, our respect and repair.

What does it take to survive?

The earth with its life-sustaining gifts of water, air, soil, plants, and so much more.

Our connections to each other to work together for the common good.

And a reverence for the sacred web of Life.

Mindful of all that we need to live, may we humbly acknowledge our place within the web as both dependents and as beings with impact on others.

So may it be.

Amen.

ⁱ To give proper credit (and for those who really do want to know), the book was *The Vaster Wilds* by Lauren Groff (2023).