

Selected Readings by Stephen Shick



supporting

Spring for Change: A Season of Sacred Activism

March 22 - May 22, 2019

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Introduction

The Unitarian Universalist Ministry for Earth wishes to extend deep gratitude to the Reverend Stephen Shick for his willingness to share the following pieces of writing as worship resources to support *Spring for Change: a Season of Sacred Activism*.

Spring for Change is an invitation to the Unitarian Universalist faith community to embrace and embody the transformational, regenerative power of Spring through sacred activism for Earth and all our relations.

Spring for Change is an invitation to deepen connections, intentions, understandings and commitments; in ourselves, in our congregations, in our denomination at large.

This resource is published with permission by Stephen Shick, who retains ownership of all his material. The first section contains new unpublished works, and subsequent sections are organized by their original publication.

About the Author

Reverend Stephen Shick is Minister Emeritus of the Unitarian Church of Marlborough and Hudson. Professionally he has been a local peace activist, national radio broadcaster, parish minister, founding director of national Unitarian Universalist programs to end the nuclear arms race, childhood poverty and protect human rights.

He is the author of two Skinner House books: *Be the Change: Poems, Prayers and Meditations for Peacemakers and Justice Seekers* and *Consider the Lilies*. He also produces “*Momentary Meditations*”, a series of brief weekly video poems available on Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube ([youtube.com/user/stephen435527](https://www.youtube.com/user/stephen435527)).

Stephen Shick’s new book *Speaking by Heart: Freeing Your Spirit for Unscripted Speech* will be published later this year along with its interactive website (for more information contact speakingbyheart@gmail.com).

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New Resources for UU Ministry for Earth

Responsive Reading:

A New Way

We have only begun to learn to live on this earth.

But the water is rising, the air is foul, the fires are burning, the storms are raging.

We have only begun to breath in earth's beauty and breath out earth's peace.

But the sky is heavy with whirlwinds of our neglect.

We have only begun to listen to the wind, how it roars and whispers for our attention.

But the land has been laid waste, robbed, raped and ruined.

We have only begun to reclaim the earth, to recognize it as the ground of our being

But so many have been lost, extinctions of our siblings are everywhere.

We are learning again to call them our brothers and sisters.

We must learn to live a new way on the earth.

Poems:

Poppies Know

Poppies in Flanders Field
flowers in Hiroshima and Nagasaki
after those bombs were dropped

tell us something, don't they?
hope growing in ashes?
a phoenix rising?

Could it be that simple?
light follows darkness,
joy follows sorrow.

Have you ever seen a poppy seed?
Looked inside a flower, seen its maps,
contours, design?

It knows nothing of hope.
It only knows to grow.

Like we do.
Like that mustard seed did,

always in the dark,
always waiting to be released.

Heartwood Remembers

out of sight
without pulse
hardened and hidden

heartwood remembers
lifting life upward
widening trunks and branches
carrying life outward
budding leaves and flowers

sending life downward
into roots fine and filigreed
delivering life laterally
through hard and moist darkness

heartwood remembers
holding the center
in nights of lightning, wind and rain
when branches ripped and dark bark peeled in pain

heartwood remembers
when promises were made in the spring
to mark eternity with a new ring

There are times

There are times
when oneness speaks so loudly
nothing else is heard.
In those moments I awaken
silenced by an immense
sense of safety
and assured
by a knowledge
of
who I am
and
what I can do

Meditations & Prayers:

A Glorious Tension

Spirit of Life, I long to be the individual I was meant to be, while at the same time I long to be united with all creatures and substances of the universe. Help me accept these two longings knowing that the link between them is my willingness to give myself away through acts of compassion and service to the great diversity of life. When I hunger for unity alone, show me the beauty of my individuality. And when my selfish ego arises walk me to the smallest stick in the forest. Tell me to lift it gently and watch unseen worlds teeming with life. Then whisper to me that these too are wonderfully made.

Help me accept this tension between my longing for unity and the blessing of my individuality, to see it as a sacred key to unlocking the door to new possibilities for love.

Longing

Spirit of Life awaken me to your presence. Here, in my anxious moments, when the good I seek is unattainable, quiet my fidgeting and pensive mind. Let me feel your deeper truth as it arrives on the rhythm of my beating heart. Let me hear it sing its comforting melody -- that all my longings, all my desires, and all my hungers are soaking the seeds of change that will sprout in their own season, not mine. Teach me also to rejoice knowing that my unfulfilled longings are, at this very moment, shaping who I am and who I am becoming.

From the Garden

He drove out the man; and at the east of the garden of Eden he placed the cherubim and a sword flaming and turning to guard the way to the tree of life. Genesis 3:24

How we long for re-entry that imagined garden, that place where all creatures live in harmony, where there is no poverty or war, greed or injustice, and the knowledge of good and evil is not necessary.

This longing has lingered in the human heart, not because we love utopian fantasies, but because we know we can do better than we are doing now, to live in peace with justice for all. We can evolve into a people of this planet who celebrate our diversity in unity.

When Frances Ellen Watkins Harper addressed the World's Congress of Representative Women in 1893, she was nearly 70. She was a free born African American woman who had distinguished herself as a courageous abolitionist, popular lecturer, and a creative and widely read poet and novelist. As she spoke to this distinguished gathering, she wanted to share a glimpse of the garden that had guided her life.

*Let the hearts of women of the world. . .throb as one heart
unified by the grand and holy purpose of uplifting the human race
and humanity will breathe freer, and the world grow brighter.
with such a purpose Eden would spring up in our path,
and Paradise be around our way.*

We need not believe in the Genesis story as history, or even sacred myth, but we risk our well-being and the hopes for the future if we dismiss the power of longing in the human heart.

From *Be the Change: Poems, Prayers and Meditations for Peacemakers and Justice Seekers* ¹

Poems:

Living Waters

We float on a sea
hidden beneath dry surfaces
covered by stones.

Isn't this why we drink and dive so deeply
go down to the sea in ships
risk drowning, again and again?

Isn't this why Moses parted the waters
to begin his journey?

Why Jesus crossed the waters
to comfort and challenge us?

We were born in water.
We float free in water.
We are washed clean by water.

Isn't this why we long to find our inward sea?
To help us wash clean the world?

¹ Skinner House Books, 3/13/2009: <https://www.uuabookstore.org/Be-the-Change-P17028.aspx>
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Born of Urgency

A bristlecone pine crawls
out of a seed buried in rocks
above the tree line.
It sets its roots
in star dust,
born from an urgency
that traveled through
dark space
at light speed
until I gazed upon it
and hope and desire
rooted me in the unfinished
work of the universe.

Meditations:

Making Sacred

On a desert expedition, the scientist-priest Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, found himself on a Sunday morning without his sacraments. In a way that satisfied his priestly obligation to say Mass, he took what was at hand and fashioned a holy moment.

Without the symbols of his faith—the bread, the wine, the altar—he proclaimed the whole earth his altar upon which he offered all the labors and sufferings of the world.

Pointing to the rising sun, he said, “Beneath this moving sheet of fire, the living earth wakes and trembles.” And into the chalice of his mind, he said, “I shall pour all the sap which is to be pressed out this day from the earth’s fruit.”

We become a sacred force of nature when we recognize opportunities to create a sacrament from only the elements at hand. Picking courage from the barren ground of oppression, lifting calm from the whirlwinds of rage, holding our wafer-thin egos to the light of truth, we make the moments of our life a living sacrament. Nothing more is needed, nothing less than what we have at hand will do.

The Mourning Cloak Butterfly

This is the true joy in life, the being used for a purpose recognized by yourself as a mighty one; the being a force of nature instead of a feverish, selfish little clod of ailments and grievances complaining that the world will not devote itself to making you happy.

—George Bernard Shaw

Matted and torn, thawing brown leaves blanket the ground. Under a quilted patch-work of old wounds and new defeats we rest.

From this landscape a mourning cloak butterfly takes flight. Aptly named, this creature knows something about being a force of nature. It does not fly away or die when winter approaches. In its black cloak trimmed with gold, it waits through the long winter under a blanket of rotting leaves. After a rain, when the world starts turning toward spring, it opens its wings on a rock and is warmed by the sun. Vital energy reenters its body, giving joy to its flight.

We too can push aside the ailments and grievances that bury us, spread our wings toward the light, and let our spirits soar.

Nature is No Metaphor

We must draw our standards from the natural world. We must honor with the humility of the wise the bounds of that natural world and the mystery which lies beyond them, admitting that there is something in the order of being which evidently exceeds all our competence.

—Vaclav Havel

The chameleon shoots forth its sticky and deadly tongue and the unsuspecting praying mantis dies. Observing this, we conclude that life is cruel and murderous. Then, with a sigh of relief, we watch the behaviors of creatures living in a pride, a pack, or a pod and we see loving affection.

Nature has enough rich variety to support any conclusion we wish to draw from it. We seem incompetent to grasp its full meaning. Beneficial symbiotic relationships and destructive parasitic relationships are all around us.

The conclusions we draw and the metaphors that we create from them, however, are less important than the humility we gain from the encounter itself. Reverently pausing to watch the drama of the chameleon and the mantis, we learn there is something in the order of being that exceeds all our competence.

From *Consider the Lilies: Meditations* ²

Poems

Reflections

We have gathered,
bearing our presence,
carrying our countenance.

Like mirrors we reflect
 all we have suffered,
 all we have celebrated,
 all we have collected from life
 before arriving here.

Darkness of winter,
rebirth of spring,
abundance of autumn:
 they are with us.

We make this space sacred
by all this
and by our resolve
to project onto the pathway of tomorrow
our best reflections.

² [Skinner House Books, 12/1/2003](#)

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Consider the Lilies

It is not newness we seek
but the fresh return of the eternal.

He said, the truth is not hidden in mountains, it is not far off,
it is in your hand, your heart, your mouth.
“So do it,” he said.

He spoke in parables, mostly about money □
and the truth it can’t buy.

Consider the mustard seed, he said,
how it grows into the largest shrub.

From it, he said,
know your true wealth and power.

Consider the birds that nest in the shrub, he said,
how they sing in the spring.

From them, he said,
know your true heart’s song.

Consider the lilies, he said,
and don’t worry. The truth is at hand.

With the seed and the lilies
nothing new arrives,
and even the mockingbird
sings songs that other birds once knew.

Nothing arrives with newness.
All is waiting to be reborn.

Inescapable

*Where can I go from your Spirit?
Where can I flee from your presence?
—Psalms 139:8*

Haven't we always known that the Spirit lives in water,
awakening, cleansing, washing away
what clings to the wings of morning?

Haven't we gone alone into the empty garden, like Jesus,
to talk with someone we cannot see
but only feel and touch with our hearts?

Haven't we pondered the Spirit that arrives
with a child,
resides in a mountain,
rests in a sea?

What is it we have seen riding on the back of the wind,
rustling grasses, blowing leaves,
touching everyone all over—again?

Why do we flee from the Spirit,
hide from its longing to travel with us?

From water, from mountain, from sea,
from the rush of the wind,
the Spirit of Life calls:

I have known you from the beginning,
tested your resilience,
applauded your compassion.

I have searched for you
and known you.
You are wondrously made.

Rich Earth

In earth rich with memory, love, and hope,
spring is gathering seeds of justice.

One in a million
sinks roots deeply
into the damp soil of ancient struggles
and grows a giving tree.

One in a million
drives shoots upward
through mulch of decaying leaves and wood
to sway in stormy winds.

One in a million
grows strong enough to stand
 in the baking heat of cruel oppression,
 in the raging floods of wasted abundance.

Outstretched and uplifted
branches hold firm
the wounded songbird
long enough for wings to heal
and risk flight again.

In forests of glory,
dead limbs and trunks fall
into the rich earth,
where spring
gathers seeds of justice.

Communion with Earth and Sky

Early spring awakens
memories of a deeper cold
and hopes of a warmer wetness,
sprouting seeds and budding branches.

Gray trees on gray sky screen eyes
from all that lies waiting:
 the color of a million flowers,
 the feathers of migrating songbirds,
 the blossoming smiles of friends.

Soon we will no longer look to the night stars to guide us.
Soon the path will be lit and our task certain.

In the warming days we will plant our future,
 uprooting useless skeletons of last year's harvest,
 breaking the clods of indifference,
 carefully pulling the weeds of neglect
 so that roots can stretch.

Before the harvest moon rises and we wait again,
 images of still distant summer days
 awaken thoughts of a time when
 all is done that can be done.

Then the harvest.
Then the transformation.
Then the baking.
Then the bread.

All we know and love is in this cycle.
All that has been or will be is in this loaf.
Take it.
Break it.
Give thanks
 and pass it on.

Meditations:

Monuments

*On this green bank, by this soft stream,
We place with joy a votive stone,
That memory may their deeds redeem,
When, like our sires, our sons are gone.
—Ralph Waldo Emerson*

A green heron stands motionless on the bank of Emerson’s soft stream. In its beak it holds a fish, just the right size for this small cousin of the great blue heron. A feather-warming breeze rustles the nettles and the shoreline jewel weeds nod.

The votive stone still stands not far away, asking us to remember those who died here on the first day of the American Revolution.

My mind is disturbed by the gentle mingling of bird, water, fish, and history. Behind the heron is another sign. Perhaps you’ve seen one like it. No artist carved its design or chiseled its inscription. No poet was commissioned to write a hymn for the installation. Instead, unceremoniously placed, a bare steel shaft is imbedded in mud. It holds a rectangular sign with the international warning symbol emblazoned over the picture of someone fishing. The stenciled words call to us for a new revolution. They read: “Warning: Mercury. Don’t eat the fish.”

Life Hangs a Wire

It seems as if the wire had touched the chaotic liquid and crystallization had begun. It seems to me that nature wears a new aspect and life has got a new meaning since I came hither.

—Theodore Parker

Sometimes the shore water speaks, wave upon wave gently opening us. The ocean winds whisper too of things unseen, then rush away. They kiss the dune grass in summer and slide across the thin lips of ice on a tidal pool in winter.

Our bifurcated worldview sees such images detached from struggles for peace and social justice. The real world, we say, is not a walk on a beach but a flood of pain and suffering, not a romantic breeze but a whirlwind of destruction.

Theodore Parker, the fiery nineteenth-century Unitarian abolitionist was both mystic and activist. He saw unity where we often discern separation. One observer at the time noted it was impossible to disassociate him from the earth, which revealed to him the divine nature of everything. Early in his life Parker pledged that he would preach only about things he had experienced inwardly.

His encounter with the natural world shaped his vision of justice. While serving his first congregation in the ocean community of Barnstable, Massachusetts, he had a transformative seashore experience. “He tramped the sand dunes and the shore,” the historian Henry Steele Commager writes, “and the grandeur of nature seemed to liberate his mind.”

Parker’s liberation from the religious and social orthodoxy of his day was connected with the confidence and identity he experienced in nature.

Each day, he thought, life hangs a wire before us, waiting for us to touch it to the liquid center of our being, where crystallization can begin.