

Pale Blue Neighborhood
We're All on this Planet Together
By
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After visiting our Partner church in Felsorakos, Romania a couple of years ago, I took the opportunity to spend a little time in Budapest on my way home. On my first night there, after settling into my hotel, I walked to the nearest pub for a beer in the hope of meeting some of the locals. I had hardly sat on a barstool when a very friendly fellow named Michael Charmant, now a friend on Facebook, struck up a conversation. I won't go into all the details of our memorable conversation, but I do want to mention some of what has made a lasting impression on me. First, Michael told me, in his words, that he is an "African Irish Hungarian." I thought, "Wow, I really am in an International city when so many diverse ethnicities can be rolled up into one person." Another thing that impressed me about Michael, a Black man with a thick Iris brogue, is how well he understood American politics. In fact, as I would soon learn, just about everyone I met in that region of the world seemed to know U.S. politics better than most Americans do. Before long, for example, a Polish fellow drinking alone in the corner overheard our conversation and politely asked to join in. It was apparent that he and Michael not only knew the state of our current politics, they also understood our political history and the connections between events now and those that occurred decades ago.

Why is this so? Not because they are required to study U.S. politics in school, or because Eastern Europeans are all world history nuts. On the contrary, they are interested in our politics and know our political history because many of the decisions we make and have made here impact what happens and has happened there. So even though they can't vote, they too sit at the edge of their seats on our election night worrying and wondering what the outcome will be.

In theory, I have long believed we are one world, that we are interconnected, that what we do here has an impact elsewhere, that the flap of a butterfly's wing in Brazil can cause a tornado in Texas, that tugging on a loose thread in my neighborhood can lead to the undoing of another's. But meeting with the members of our Partner church in Felsorakos and talking with others in Budapest, helped me understand the stark reality of this principle. The interdependent web of all existence isn't just a nice thought, it's a daily occurrence and its consequences aren't always so nice.

This point was proven just a few weeks ago, when, according to crowd scientists, somewhere close to half a million-people participated in the Women's March on Washington in protest of Donald Trump, and hundreds of thousands more in places all over our country. But these demonstrations didn't just happen in the United States. They happened around the world, in as many as 60 other countries on all seven continents. They happened in Peru, Kenya, Israel, Georgia, England, Australia, France, Japan, South Africa, and so on. There was even a march in the Antarctic that happened aboard a ship so marchers wouldn't harm to the sensitive environment. Why would so many around the world go to such lengths if what our nation

does, doesn't have real consequences everywhere? It's easy to think some are fortunate and others not, but more often these circumstances have more to do with the decisions we make and the actions we take than with fortune or fate. Nations and neighborhoods where poverty and violence and oppression abound may be the unintended consequences of the choices made by those who live in prosperity and peace.

Here's just one example; less than 20 percent of U.S. corn accounts for 60 percent of the global corn market, which is just one indicator of how our nation's food policies can have a huge global impact. When, for instance, we subsidize American farmers by paying them for crops they can't sell, encouraging them to actually grow more than is necessary, they glut the global market and drive down the value of the crop everywhere; meaning those with small farms, and those outside the country, especially, who are already a marginal part of the market and get no subsidies for their losses, are driven further into poverty. According to Robert L. Thompson, professor of Agriculture at the University of Illinois, "70 percent of those in absolute poverty [around the world] live in rural areas and depend on farming for their livelihoods."¹¹ So the impact from just this single practice has tremendous impact on farmers everywhere, and is, thus, a part of the reason half the people on our planet live daily on less than what it costs us to buy a cup of coffee at Starbucks.

During the past century, the U.S. government has continued to support known dictators and authoritarian regimes in the name of national interests, including some as notorious as Augusto Pinochet in Chile, Manuel Noriega in Panama, Ferdinand Marcos in the Philippines, King Abdullah in Saudi Arabia, the Shaw of Iran, Saddam Hussein in Iraq, and now, apparently, Vladimir Putin in Russia. We know these names well because relations with these once favored sons ended badly, though not for their terrible human rights violations or the brutal murder of their own peoples. Donald Trump recently made the claim that President Obama created ISIS by pulling out of Iraq too soon, an invalid argument that isn't supported by his premises. It is reasonable, however, to conclude that ISIS is the product of America's unjustified war in Iraq, which has cost the world trillions of dollars, millions of innocent lives, and increased acts of Terror and terrorist organizations round the globe. So, this is another example of the world community suffering because of U.S. actions.

One more example, the TPP, or Trans Pacific Partnership trade agreement that was just effectively killed by Donald Trump, had several conditions that alarmed many of us. I'm not sure why Trump doesn't care for it, but one of the biggest concerns for a lot of us is that it would have given foreign corporations the right to ignore any nation's laws that conflict with their own economic interests. Under the TPP, for example, we would not be able to enforce laws protecting the environment, like laws restricting the flow of fossil fuels through our country, or blocking pipelines, at least not without taxpayers paying a heavy price.

Ostensibly, the TPP was the result of our representative government, but it wasn't really the result of a democratic process. According to an *In These Times* online article, "The more than

¹¹ <http://carnegieendowment.org/2007/06/27/what-are-impacts-of-u.s.-farm-policies-on-developing-countries-event-1017>

600 corporate lobbyists who had access to [its] draft texts used their insider status to shape the deal, while labor unions, environmentalists and others offered testimony from outside, with little impact.”² In other words, the agreement represented the interests of a few multibillionaires, while the voices of the billions of people it might negatively impact went unheard. This, I need not remind you, is Oligarchy, not Democracy.

As Unitarian Universalists, our 5th principle upholds “The right of conscience and the use of the democratic process within our congregations and in society at large.” For this reason, agreements and policies must represent the interests of all who are impacted by them, not just corporate interests, not just national interests, and not just the interests of American voters. If our government is going to make decisions that greatly impact the lives and wellbeing of our global neighbors, then they too ought to have a voice in shaping them. I realize that giving people all over the world a voice and vote in the decisions our nation makes, including who our President will be, may not mesh well with the current notion of what our nation is, nor, apparently, with the direction many wish to take it; but if our goal, as our 6th principle states, is “world community with peace, liberty, and justice for all,” then a system of global democracy must be our aim.

It’s not that we don’t want trade agreements with other nations. On the contrary, the global community needs to come together with many agreements. The issue is that these agreements cannot be made in the interests of the 8 billionaires Oxfam International just reported now have as much wealth as half the people in the world; they must be made democratically, to include the interests of the 99 percent in the world who are increasingly being left out economically and politically. To accomplish this, we cannot retreat to a worn-out idea of nationalism, but must expand the one we already have, so that democracy, such as it is, isn’t reserved only for Americans, only for a privileged few, but for our sisters and brothers everywhere.

Exactly 17 years ago this month, the Voyager I space probe took one last picture of our home before drifting out of our solar system. From 4 billion-miles away our almost imperceptible planet looks like what astronomer Carl Sagan described as a “pale blue dot,” the inspiration for a book he later wrote by the same title.

Look again at that dot. That's here. That's home. That's us. On it everyone you love, everyone you know, everyone you ever heard of, every human being who ever was, lived out their lives. The aggregate of our joy and suffering, thousands of confident religions, ideologies, and economic doctrines, every hunter and forager, every hero and coward, every creator and destroyer of civilization, every king and peasant, every young couple in love, every mother and father, hopeful child, inventor and explorer, every teacher of morals, every corrupt politician, every "superstar," every "supreme leader," every saint and sinner in the history of our species lived there—on a mote of dust suspended in a sunbeam.

The Earth is a very small stage in a vast cosmic arena. Think of the rivers of blood spilled by all those generals and emperors so that, in glory and triumph, they could become the momentary masters of a fraction of a dot. Think of the endless cruelties visited by the

² http://inthesetimes.com/article/18695/TPP_Free-Trade_Globalization_Obama

inhabitants of one corner of this pixel on the scarcely distinguishable inhabitants of some other corner, how frequent their misunderstandings, how eager they are to kill one another, how fervent their hatreds.

Our posturings, our imagined self-importance, the delusion that we have some privileged position in the Universe, are challenged by this point of pale light. Our planet is a lonely speck in the great enveloping cosmic dark. In our obscurity, in all this vastness, there is no hint that help will come from elsewhere to save us from ourselves.

The Earth is the only world known so far to harbor life. There is nowhere else, at least in the near future, to which our species could migrate. Visit, yes. Settle, not yet. Like it or not, for the moment the Earth is where we make our stand.

It has been said that astronomy is a humbling and character-building experience. There is perhaps no better demonstration of the folly of human conceits than this distant image of our tiny world. To me, it underscores our responsibility to deal more kindly with one another, and to preserve and cherish the pale blue dot, the only home we've ever known.

— Carl Sagan, *Pale Blue Dot*, 1994

In 1990, the same year the Voyager I spacecraft took its last picture of our solar system, Communism collapsed in Eastern Europe, and Unitarians in the United States were able to reestablish relationships with Unitarians there, after decades of being apart. But from the Voyager I perspective, our friends in Felsorakos, Romania, at our partner church, were never very far away at all. Just yesterday, after a two-day blizzard, Elemér and his sons warmed my heart as they gathered snow shovels and brooms to not only clear the snow from my driveway and walks, but to also clear the sidewalks and steps of every house on our entire block; this after Elemér had already spent 45 minutes helping a driver he couldn't even communicate with get her car unstuck so she could go to work. They have come far away from their home, yet treat every stranger they meet like a neighbor. The Petos understand that none of us live so far apart on this Earth that we shouldn't treat each other as friends. So we are grateful to Elemér, Yolánka, Elemér (Jr.), and Árpád, as well as our dear friend Ili, our wonderful translator, for reminding us that upon this Pale Blue Dot we are all neighbors, we are all one family, and we must respect each other and take care of each other.