My daughter came home from Kindergarten this week with a picture of three ships: the Nina, the Pinta and the Santa Maria. I was surprised… even though this is the same art project that American school children have brought home for decades, in the week leading up to Columbus Day.

I thought teachers these days might be a bit more nervous- or nuanced- when approaching Columbus Day- even with Kindergartners. Hasn’t it become more complicated, after all? It was eleven years ago, in 1992, that the National Council of Churches called on Christians everywhere to veto the quincentennial celebrations of Columbus. The Council said, “What represented newness of freedom, hope and opportunity for some was the occasion for oppression, degradation and genocide for others.”

What a downer. I mean, can’t we just talk about ships and eat good Italian food? But there it is- available to read- the first hand accounts of greed, cruelty, slavery, exploitation, torture, disease and genocide that Columbus and his men brought to this continent. There are the records of the many Indians who were transported to Spain as slaves beginning in 1495, many of them dying en route. And then the words our fading hero Columbus: “Let us, in the name of the Holy Trinity, go on sending all the slaves that can be sold.”

It is not unusual to discover what seems like salvation for some means damnation for others. We see this not only in history and politics, but of course in religion, which at times has been used to justify things like greed, slavery and war.

Yet what I want to reflect on today is a more subtle concern—the way that religion can lead, if we’re not careful, to a self-centered, myopic view of self and world. Lord knows, Goddess knows, there are plenty of things that encourage self-centeredness in our society, but one might argue religion should not be one of them.
As individuals, as communities and as nations, self-centered living can be pretty fun, but can also lead to isolation and disconnection. As global beings, as spiritual and ethical beings, self-centered living at the expense of other forms of life has brought us to the edge of a global environmental crisis and a global spiritual crisis as well.

Why is it, then, that some religions and self-help movements are still focused on that most self-centered question - the question “Am I saved?” If personal salvation is one’s ultimate concern, it makes sense to approach religious community with the question “What’s in it for me?”, not “What purpose may I serve?” If individual salvation is God’s ultimate concern, then it makes sense to focus on oneself and the state of one’s own soul, rather than the community at large and it’s soul, the world’s soul.

Surrounded as we are by an individualistic culture, the fact that much religion focuses on personal salvation can seem “normal”. But some minority religious do not do this – and I’d argue that we need to hear more from these other religions— including Universalism.

Since the 1700’s American Universalists set aside the question of personal salvation, because they felt it was moot. They said personal salvation is not in question. Like it or not- they said- everyone is already saved, embraced by divine love. There is no hell, there is nothing to worry about after death! So stop wasting time on silly concerns, try feeling holy and happy, and start spending your energy loving the hell out of this world! Love the hell out of it, so all beings can be holy and happy! This was their counter-cultural message- 220 years ago.

They were Universalists.

In the very name is the prefix “uni” and the word “universal”—meaning unity, oneness, including and affecting all. This orientation towards unity, oneness, and all people has been with us since the beginning. And more recently, in the mid-1980’s, this universal embrace was expanded beyond other human beings to explicitly include all life.

In 1985 and 86, Unitarian Universalist congregations adopted a statement of ethical principles that affirms we are part of an interdependent web of life. We adopted a set of wisdom sources that includes earth-centered religious traditions. We declared
we have much to learn from those that put the earth as a whole - not individual salvation - at the center of spiritual practice and concern.

One such earth-centered tradition is that of the Sioux nation. Joan Halifax writes in *The Fruitful Darkness*, “Spiritual practice among Lakota peoples is grounded in the expression ‘All my relations’, which proclaims that spiritual activity is not only for those immediately participating in it but for all beings everywhere.” The words ‘Mitakuye Oyasin’—meaning “all my relations” or “all my relatives”- - are included in many Sioux prayers, including among the Lakota, Dakota and Nakota peoples. They point to an understanding of an underlying oneness, a sense of interconnectedness in all creation, a kinship among all forms of life and even non-life on earth: people, animals, birds, insects, trees, plants, rocks, rivers, mountains and valleys.

Now, what would your response be if I were to ask you:

“How deeply connected do you feel to rivers and valleys, or to rocks and mountains, or to trees and plants… or to birds and insects, or to animals, to other people?”
Do you think of them as your relatives? Tell the truth, now!
Do birds feel more like relatives to you than a river or a mountain?
Do you sometimes feel more connected to animals than to other humans?
If you had to get to know some cousins from the interdependent web of life, which cousins would you choose? (You can answer that one at coffee hour!)

The truth is, we naturally feel closer to some of our “relations” than others. Yet as Albert Einstein who once said, “A human being is part of a whole, called by the ‘Universe’ – a part limited in time and space. He experiences him or herself, his thoughts and feels as something separate from the rest – a kind of optical delusion of one’s consciousness. This delusion is a kind of prison for us, restricting us to our personal desires and to affection for a few persons nearest us. Our task must be to free ourselves… by widening our circle of compassion to embrace all living creatures and the whole of nature and its beauty.” If you replace the phrase “circle of compassion” with “circle of kinship” the statement becomes, “Our task must be to free ourselves from this prison… by widening our circle of kinship to embrace all living creatures and the whole of nature and its beauty.”
You may already have ethical or spiritual practices that help you consciously widen your circle of kinship. If not, you might try this week. For example, if you put something into the recycling bin you might say to yourself, “for all my relations.” Or as you sit on your meditation cushion or pause for prayer, you might dedicate your practice “to all my relations.” Or as you enter into the sanctuary, or put money in the collection plate, you might repeat silently to yourself, “for all my relations.” Or as you hand out food to hungry people, tend a garden, write emails to your senator, or settle into silence in a circle of support, you might recall that your actions are on behalf of “all my relations.”

If you try this, notice who comes to mind when you say the phrase, “all my relations.” Do family or blood relations come first to mind? Do the people of a certain group to which you belong? Do only those who have already lived come to mind, or is there room for those who have yet to arrive?

No doubt, each of us has slightly different understandings of who is included in the circle of all our relations, our relatives, our kin. Indeed, it’s not uncommon for those circles to change and widen over a lifetime, whether through marriage, children, adoption, friendship, spiritual practice or investigation. Some of us may have learned about unexpected kin in our families of origin—say a branch that was of another ethnic group or religion. There’s an article in today’s Boston Globe about John Kerry discovering his Jewish roots, for example. Some from the 9:00 service shared the difference it made to discover a Native American ancestor. Has that happened to anyone here?

Such discoveries can affect our sense of self and kinship, or shift our concern for justice—especially if our new found kin are part of a historically oppressed group - if you’ve thought your family was Christian and found Muslim or Jewish members, or Anglo-American and found African-American members or African-American and discovered an Anglo branch of relatives.
The truth is, truly sensing kinship with other people—never mind the animal world—can be a challenge... even for Universalists who believe in the unity of all peoples and the interdependent web. We humans come from very different cultures, experiences, and positions of power, which can be stumbling blocks to connection.

Recently, I was introduced to a model of culture that suggests why this is so. It’s called the Iceberg model, and to explain it I will ask you to imagine a huge iceberg—like the one that sank the Titanic, sitting in the ocean. It looks big above the water, but in fact all you can see is only the top 10% of the iceberg—90% of it is under the water, invisible.

Culture is like that—90% of the culture we’re raised in is primarily outside of our awareness, and 90% of other peoples’ cultures are outside of our awareness. So if we want to widen our circle of kinship to embrace all people, we need to nurture a profound sense of curiosity, about that hidden 90%. We need to learn a lot about the cultures that shape us. And we may need to build our capacity to let our own experience not be primary— but to see that another’s story, experience and sense of history, is as true and important as our own.

So I’d like to invite us to practice this, this morning. I invite you to find someone sitting next to you, and take just a few minutes to share with them a small piece of your story. If you can, think of a time when you felt marginalized. And then think of a time when you felt you really mattered... (pause)

Now that you’ve shared your stories, I’ll share one of my own.

When I was a young adult, and had a few months off in between a job and divinity school, I signed up for an international work camp out in California. The work camp brought together young adults from all over the world to do a series of volunteer projects, in this case, at an inter-tribal Native American college. Our job was to prepare the place for a summer camp for Native American kids—a group that, I must report, was as diverse a looking group of kids as any.

When we weren’t painting and cleaning, there was also an educational, intercultural element to our several week stay: learning about the history of various native nations in North America through films, talks, conversation and the invitation to
attend pow-wows with the children. It was an amazing opportunity, but also, for me, a challenging one.

As we know, the history is chock full of injustice and horrible betrayals. It does not paint European American immigrants in a good light. The Europeans were horrified. I was horrified...so much so that I decided to pretend I was not a white American, but a European like the others. For the first few days, I found myself pretending to be European. I barely talked. I tried looking confused. Of course, the ruse didn’t last long.

Pretty soon I was “out” as an American kid. But there was still more “outing” to be done. Later in the week during a discussion of religion, I explained my Unitarian Universalism. One of the Native American college students- a Christian himself-yelled out, somewhat aghast, “You’re a pagan!?!?” At the time, I had never thought about it that way. But I did appreciate the delightful irony of the Christian Native American calling out the paganism of the Unitarian Universalist Swedish-German American. I no longer pretended to be anything else.

In the poem you heard this morning, Naomi Shihab Nye wrote, “The Arabs used to say, When a stranger appears at your door, feed him for three days before asking who he is, where he’s come from, where he’s headed. That way, he’ll have strength enough to answer. Or, by then you’ll be such good friends you don’t care. Let’s go back to that.”

Yes- let’s go back to that.

*Let’s go back to treating one another as kin.*

*Let’s go back to turning strangers into friends.*

*Let’s go back to remembering, in the words of Margaret Wheatley,*

“Relationships are all there is.

*Everything in the universe only exists because it is in relationship to everything else.*

*Nothing exists in isolation.*

*We have to stop pretending we are individuals that can go it alone.*

Our Universalist faith has something so beautiful to offer the world: From the old days, a sense that there is no need for personal salvation, no need to compete; as all are equal and embraced by love, by God.
From modern days, a sense that we are deeply connected, part of an interdependent web of life.

This sense of kinship with all beings can help us shift from self-centered thinking from “What’s in it for me?” to “What’s in it for all my relations?” from “I practice my faith just to feed myself” to “I practice my faith for all my relations.” It’s a shift from them feeling alone to knowing we can take refuge in the earth and the kinship circle of all our relations, a circle that is wide enough and deep enough to help us save the world.

Amen.