



(Unsplash/Bryan Minear)



by Donna Schaper

[View Author Profile](#)

[Join the Conversation](#)

January 16, 2018

[Share on Bluesky](#)[Share on Facebook](#)[Share on Twitter](#)[Email to a friend](#)[Print](#)

I love the way New Year's cards turn up in my inbox this time of year.

Friends I haven't heard from for a while send a greeting, most of which are full of assurances about what a great time is ahead. I particularly loved this one from a judge and pastor friend of mine (yes, she is both):

There is a Buddhist precept that asks us to be mindful of how rare it is to find ourselves in human form on Earth. It is really a beautiful view of life that offers us the chance to feel enormous appreciation for the fact that we are here as individual spirits filled with consciousness, drinking water and chopping wood. It asks us to look about at the ant and antelope, at the worm and the butterfly, at the dog and the castrated bull, at the hawk and the wild lonely tiger, at the hundred-year-old oak and the thousand-year-old patch of ocean. It asks us to understand that no other life form has the consciousness of being that we are privileged to. It asks us to recognize that of all the endless species of plants and animals and minerals that make up the Earth, a very small portion of life has the wakefulness of spirit that we call "being human."

What I learn from my friend's New Year's greeting is that I can rise from some depth of awareness to express this gratitude to you and that you can receive me in this instant is part of our precious human birth. You could have been an ant. I could have been an anteater. You could have been rain. I could have been a lick of salt.

We are blessed — in this time, in this place — to be human beings, alive in rare ways we often take for granted. All of this to say, this precious human birth is unrepeatable.

So what will you do today, knowing that you are one of the rarest forms of life to ever walk the Earth? You are an unrepeatable form of genome, a combination of materials that doesn't exist elsewhere.

This uniqueness makes these kinds of questions important. How will you carry yourself? What will you do with your hands? What will you ask and of whom? Whom will you thank?

Another friend preached a meaningful sermon Jan. 1, in which she argued that we are all the mothers — and fathers — of God. Just like Mary and Joseph, we are here to carry the divine to birth.

I left church that New Year's Day wondering if humans really are divine or even carriers of the divine. I know that's what the manger wants to leave us with. But I wonder about the elevation of human consciousness to divine status. Couldn't we just be humans?

I'm not saying I'd rather be an ant or be more aware of my God-carrying capacity. Rather, I am saying that when I think about the glories of the creation, down to the very ant, or the majesty of the divine, up to the very holy of holies, I shiver a little. And the shiver is not just from the cold.

Advertisement

Consciousness allows me to worry as well as rejoice. I worry about my use of the word *up* for the butterfly or *down* for the ant. Consciousness separates me from creation as well as bonds me to it. I used those words intentionally so as to show a part of how I want not to think.

I want to use my consciousness to connect, not to differentiate. I want to use my consciousness to shiver.

I shiver out of love of land and sea. I shiver out of respect for others and myself. I shiver because a farmer, Joel Salatin, wrote a book called [*The Marvelous Pigness of Pigs: Respecting and Caring for All God's Creation*](#). I want to use my precious consciousness to do just that, to respect and care for all creation.

I also shiver out of hope. The hope warms me up and makes me stop shivering.

[Donna Schaper is senior minister of Judson Memorial Church in New York City.]