

Tending the Garden: a Greener Faith to Sustain the Earth

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Good morning! I appreciate the opportunity to share my thoughts about our relationship with Earth, and how that relationship is a core element of our Unitarian Universalist faith . . .

I think it's especially important to maintain a strong connection with the land in these times – the hills, the forests, streams running through, and all the creatures that live there. Nature feeds our spirits in a way that nothing else can. But ... We can't avoid the reality these days that our world is changing, at least partly because of our behavior. The life our children or grandchildren will experience will be quite different from the life we know. And some of those changes will challenge us to the very edges of our capacity to respond.

I'm talking about environmental changes, of course – basic issues such as clean water and air, healthy ecosystems, food production, and how these are all affected by global warming. And how the benefits and costs of these changes will not be distributed evenly across societies. My own sense of what is happening, and what we will need in the near future – over the next decade or two – has caused me to make some quite different choices in my own life. And many others are changing their lives as well. For some, it's a change to a more simple lifestyle, slowing down the pace and accumulating less stuff; looking for ways to save energy, eat more sustainably, drive less, and consider the Earth more often in their lifestyle choices.

I managed to get a bit more radical than that. I decided about a dozen years ago to switch careers and become a minister, – an environmental minister. The primary focus of my ministry is on the theological and spiritual basis in our UU faith that calls us to respond to the environmental crisis, and on our spiritual connection with Earth which nurtures and sustains us, as we seek to heal the brokenness in the world. This morning I want to share some of these perspectives with you.

It's true that this work is a huge challenge, and can sometimes be discouraging, but I see signs of hope all over as I work with people in congregations who are actively living their Unitarian Universalist faith and working to heal the Earth. We are well aware that our Earth home currently faces environmental challenges of a size and scale unheard of in human history. We know, whether we like to admit it or not, that humans contribute to problems such as climate change, species extinction, and degradation of air, water, and soil. And if we are paying attention at all, the exponential growth of human populations has to get our attention.

Around the globe, endless conflicts and wars are inevitably tied to resource depletion – oil, water, land, and food. The problem is, and has always been, that we humans live for short term gain. But on some level we are becoming aware of impending disaster from our profligate lifestyles, and it's hard to avoid the despair that comes with so much loss and uncertainty for the future. So many of us feel overwhelmed at all the brokenness, experiencing deep pain and a sense of loss when we see rivers polluted, air thick with smog, children sick with toxins spread in

water systems or suffering asthma from the emissions of chemical plants in their neighborhood. We see open spaces gobbled up with subdivisions, while we wonder where the next generation of children will play.

We see the results of our short-sighted decisions: Destruction of the vegetation that protects coastal estuaries, making them prone to flooding. Inadequate investments in infrastructure – like the levees in New Orleans that crumbled in the face of the storm surge from hurricane Katrina, or the bridge that collapsed in Minneapolis. Marginalized groups in our communities are often left out of the good times. Decisions are made in one place without regard for their consequences elsewhere. And the impacts usually fall first and most severely on those who derive the least of the benefits, and who have little or no control over what happens to them. In the long haul, no one is immune to environmental destruction, of course, But in the short term, global warming and other environmental problems are not equal opportunity disasters!

Someone always pays the price. It's usually the poor, the disadvantaged, those who don't speak our language, those who don't have our privilege. It's all of those without the technical or financial capacity to protect themselves. They are paying the price for toxic pollution and climate change right now. We saw who got out of New Orleans first when Katrina was bearing down. And we saw who did *not* get out. Looking quickly around the globe: South Pacific Islanders are already negotiating with neighboring countries to move their populations to higher ground.

The Native village of Shishmaref in Alaska is paying a huge price – along with about 165 other Native villages – with the double disasters of melting permafrost and eroding shoreline. And of course it's not just humans paying the price. All beings on this Earth are facing rapid changes in habitat and food supply that they haven't evolved to deal with. Polar bears get all the press these days, but many, *many* other species are at the brink, or close to it, or already lost.

Our scientific understanding of the complexities of Earth's systems, and how our human behavior affects those systems, has become quite sophisticated in the last couple of decades. We know about this scenario, but somehow we're unable to make more than token responses. So why is it that we still resist making fundamental changes in our lifestyles we know are necessary?

Part of it may be greed, or indifference, I suppose, but I think it goes deeper than that. I think we have fallen into fear and hopelessness. We feel helpless, overwhelmed, paralyzed — symptoms of a deep and pervasive despair. In the view of Joanna Macy, a Buddhist scholar, environmental teacher, and activist, the problem is that we separate ourselves from each other and from nature, and then we use others – other people, other species, other resources – we use others for our own gain.

Wendell Berry observes the results of this. He says: *It is the destruction of the world in our own lives that drives us half insane, and more than half. To destroy that which we were given in trust: how will we bear it?* he asks. Some faith traditions call this a sin. We Unitarian Universalists don't like that word, but we certainly have to recognize it as a mistake. Contemporary society makes it particularly hard to find a sense of meaning. The endless stream of commodities we have to have has actually become a substitute for love, for community connection, and for really feeling at home in the world. Thus, to ask us to buy and own less to preserve “nature” feels like asking us to *be* less. And that, my friends, is *at root* a profoundly spiritual crisis.

Steven Rockefeller, a Professor of Religion at Middlebury College in Vermont, claims that *Our environmental problems will not be fully addressed until we come to terms with their moral and spiritual dimensions. And we will not find ourselves religiously until we fully address our environmental problems.*

I think he's right. You see, science and technology can explain what we observe about the Universe. But our faith gives us the framework for meaning: for which questions we ask, and how we think about what we know, and what we don't know. It no surprise we're feeling overwhelmed. So many serious issues. So much work to do. So many changes we must make in our lives. But wringing our hands in despair at the magnitude of the challenge is simply no longer good enough. We MUST roll up our sleeves and get to work!

So how do we find the courage, and energy, and imagination to respond to the crisis and to sustain our commitments over the long haul? Well, whenever I'm faced with such an overwhelming task, I find it helpful to fall back on a couple of familiar cliches, with a profound message. First the question: how do you walk a hundred miles? The answer: one step at a time. And second - a reminder that I am not alone, and neither are you.

Our UU principles give me framework for getting to work in this hurting world. At first, it was all about the seventh principle, what I saw as the source of our environmental wisdom. When I first learned about the 7th principle, I knew I was home. "We affirm and promote the interdependent web of all existence, of which we are a part." This was a truth I felt at a very deep level.

Over the last 15 years, I've come to understand that all of our principles collectively give us a richer more complex understanding of how we should live on this planet, with its abundance of life now at risk.

- The individual search for truth and meaning: each of us trying to understand what science tells us, and searching for the right response which is not always clear.
- The inherent worth and dignity of every being: not just for humans, but for all of Earth's creatures.
- Encouragement to spiritual growth, deepening our relationships with each other and with Earth, taking sustenance from our relationship with nature to stay strong to carry out the work.
- And of course justice, equity and compassion: compassion for those who are powerless to protect themselves from the destruction of the Earth; compassion for ourselves and each other as we feel the uncertainty and confusion, as we stumble to an appropriate response, often feeling inadequate, or powerless, wanting to work towards a better world, but finding as individuals we don't have enough power.

I'm finding new meaning as I return to the principles with a lense of Earth consciousness.

Our faith asks a lot of us in terms of living those principles. Most of us join a church to satisfy a need for a sense of community. Seeking a place to nurture and grow a faith to sustain ourselves as we work to sustain the future for our children and grandchildren. When I first became a Unitarian Universalist – only about 15 years ago now – it took me a couple of years to understand the full measure of what this could mean.

Once I opened myself up to the possibilities of these special relationships, I could never *not* be a part of this community again. From sharing pot luck suppers, to marching in

demonstrations; from adult education classes and covenant groups to the annual work day when we cleaned the grounds and took care of basic maintenance tasks for our building. All these activities are ways of building community. Now, no matter where I go, whichever UU congregation I'm visiting, I am nurtured by this connection.

In the face of the environmental crisis, there are many ways to make a difference, to act together on our covenant to respect and promote the interdependent web. In fact, there is a national program that offers a way to join your efforts, both symbolically and explicitly, with thousands of other UUs in congregations across the country. It's called the Green Sanctuary program. A few of you might have heard of it, but let me explain the overall concept.

Green Sanctuary is designed to reach all dimensions of our congregational life. It's part of our worship and spiritual practice where we ground our work and deepen our relationships with each other and with Earth. Here we strengthen our spirits, nurturing and supporting each other through hard times and confusion, mourning together what we've lost on this Earth. Worship is also where we create a context for celebrating our gifts, and reinforcing those bonds that hold us together in community.

It's part of Religious Education. For our children, we provide RE programs that teach them how caring for the Earth is part of their Unitarian Universalist faith. We want to prepare them to live sustainably, understanding they are part of nature, not separate and outside of it. That's not something they're likely to learn in the mainstream culture. This fundamental understanding of where we fit into the scheme of all life must be woven into the ethics of how we treat each other.

Environmental education would also be part of our adult religious learning. We might sponsor discussion courses, presentations by experts, film festivals, book groups, and field trips to learn about specific environmental issues. These learning experiences help us understand the complexities of Earth's systems, providing an integrated context for understanding how these issues relate to each other in the interdependent web, and seeing our role as a species that's both part of the web, and capable of consciously manipulating it.

Presumably with all that understanding, we feel compelled to integrate new choices into our lives, both personally and as a community. So the third dimension of Green Sanctuary includes our day-to-day choices, like energy use and landscaping, building management and waste management, transportation, food choices, water use, and I'm sure you can think of lots more. Our goal then becomes reducing our overall footprint on this planet.

As usual, our UU faith doesn't give us the definitive answers to the dilemmas of every day living, but if we're paying attention, it can help us collectively find appropriate responses. We also have to realize that changing our own day-to-day actions isn't enough. We must also become pro-active in mitigating at least some of the damage that results from our comfortable living. So the fourth dimension of the program is Earth justice. We are called to recognize all those connections I talked about before, how environmental impacts fall first and most severely on those who receive the least of the benefits. It also means that justice is extended beyond human societies to include all beings whose lives are shadowed by the burdens imposed on them by the inappropriate, unsustainable, and destructive life-styles of just one species. In many ways, environmental justice becomes the intersection where all the problems of our modern life come

together, all the oppressions, the isms of racism, classism, consumerism, and so on.

Green Sanctuary is a framework for addressing them all. It's a formal program, with specific steps and reporting requirements, and national recognition when you've completed the program. Sixty-one congregations have accomplished this milestone so far, and another 80 or so are enrolled in the process. It's also a concept – helping us see how our efforts are connected to everyone else's efforts. You can start taking action wherever you are right now, together, one step at a time. If you're interested in knowing more, be sure to ask me at coffee hour. I can offer suggestions about how to get started.

I think that reading Rev. Tichnor shared with us earlier is particularly appropriate for these times: *Tikkun Olam, Repair of the World*. Though the world is broken into shards, it's still so full of hope! Think of it: God is in every part of the world. And it's our job to reconnect the pieces so that we can learn there is no place that is not God. Our longing for a healthy future for all beings may sometimes seem too much to bear, and everything in our world seems to conspire against our efforts to reach that vision.

With daily news reports of a global situation which often seems pretty grim, we struggle, as I've said, with the despair. We all need something to give us hope these days. For me it's my 7-year old grandson who lives with his parents across the river from Portland in Washington State. I worry about what Andrew's life will be like in 20 or 25 years, as he reaches adulthood and starts his own family. How healthy will they be? How much freedom and choice will he have? Will there even be enough nourishing food and clean water? And what will he think of his parents' and his grandparents' efforts to provide a livable future for him?

So that's the bottom line. We're creating the future with our every day choices today. Will it be a future we're proud to leave for our children and grandchildren? We hope it will. But hope is not what we find in evidence. It is a choice built on the faith that we have the imagination and creativity to create such a future. And that we are, in fact, creating it. My work allows me to personally see stories of real change written in communities all over the country, especially in communities of faith. And I must say, it feeds my dreams about the future!

So hope is what we become in action. And our hope can spur us on – to take our own stand, to choose to commit our efforts to repairing the world. So let us imagine our congregations as a garden where the seeds of a just and sustainable future are planted and nurtured, where the invasive species of self-and planet-destroying consumerism, oppression, and violence are rooted out and recycled into nutrients for a life-sustaining "Earth Community" which we can create together.

Let us work to create this garden as if our lives depended on it.

Because, in fact, they do.

May it be so.

May *we make* it so.

Amen and Blessed Be.