

For the Home That Gives Us Birth
The Rev. Paige Getty
Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Columbia
Sunday, April 13, 2008

Call to Worship: “Earth Day,” by Gary Kowalski (*All the Gifts of Life* (Boston: Skinner House, 2002) p. 6)

Sermon:

As different as we in different religions might appear on the surface, and as sectarian and divisive as religion seems to have become, the human compulsion to be part of religious community is nearly universal. Every one of us who gathers in a worshipping community, gathers to acknowledge the truth that we are part of something greater than ourselves alone... and, yes, that we alone do not get credit for our own existence. And whether we call that greater reality a name like ‘God’ or ‘Spirit’ or ‘Life’ or give it no name at all, we are compelled to honor it, to be grateful to it, to be humble in its midst, to admire it’s beauty... and *that’s* why we gather.

As Unitarian Universalists, we express our awe and appreciation in different ways. We do so formally by covenanting to affirm and promote respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part. And we do so by singing hymns like our opening hymn (“For the Earth Forever Turning”), in which we sang the words from which I drew the sermon title – *For the Home That Gives Us Birth*. “For the world we raise our voices, for the home that gives us birth; in our joy we sing returning home to our blue-green hills of earth.” It’s lovely imagery – Earth as the home that gave us birth. The womb in which humankind has been nurtured for millennia. It sounds so poetic and lovely. But that’s part of the problem, I think, as we have relegated the earth to a place of poetry, an object of our adoration, to be used and enjoyed on our terms. In so doing we are avoiding the very real, tangible, practical ways in which we are abusing that home.

I know that you probably already are aware of the science of what is happening on (and to) the earth today. You have committed yourselves to being better stewards of the earth by reducing your carbon footprint in whatever ways you can. You’re recycling and buying local foods and driving hybrid cars. You’re living in smaller homes and reusing gray water and taking fewer and shorter showers. You’re taking reusable bags to the supermarket and paying a little more money to buy recycled office paper for your printers.

You know that those actions are important on an individual level—that they’re better than the wasteful alternatives. You are responding to the moral imperative that says we *must* change how we live on this planet, lest we should destroy it altogether. (Many comparisons are being made these days between the abolition of slavery and environmentalism. In the same way that we now would be repulsed by the thought of a company basing its profit on human slavery, we should be repulsed by the thought of a company basing its profit on carbon dependency, too. In the same way that slavery is now illegal, we need legal change to protect the environment.)

So you are taking action on an individual level in response to that moral imperative. *And* you know that things are bad enough that those individual actions alone aren’t adequate to reverse the problems, or even to impact them significantly on a global scale.

I suspect that I don't need to argue that global warming is real. You've heard the stories about snow melting on Kilimanjaro and seen graphic images of what is happening to the polar ice caps. You've heard about the intensity of recent hurricanes, the increase in temperatures around the world, and the extinctions of species related to changes in climate and food supply. (Geller) And perhaps you've heard some of these other sobering statistics—some of which were new to me:

- Although we represent only 4.5% of the world's population, the United States contributes an estimated 25% of the greenhouse gases that are endangering the planet. (Geller)
- The average house size has doubled in the U.S. since the 1970's. (Leonard)
- Each person makes 4.5 lbs of garbage a day – twice as much as 30 years ago. (Leonard)
- A daily ten-minute shower generates up to four pounds of carbon dioxide. Reducing it to five minutes would cut emissions by 175 pounds per year. (Geller)
- “If you drive a normal car and then you go out and trade it in and get a big SUV and you drive them both the same average distance for a year, in that one year the differential in the amount of energy you use, hence the amount of CO2 you put in the atmosphere, is the equivalent of opening your refrigerator door and leaving it open for six years.” (McKibben)
- The majority of fruits and vegetables produced in the United States come from only 3 states: California, Florida, and Washington. (foodroutes.org)
- In the U.S., the average food item travels 1550-2480 miles. (foodroutes.org)

The statistics *are* sobering. And we could spend the morning wringing our hands about how horrible everything is. But the truth is that there's hope, too... And the hope lies in the fact that *we* are powerful. Now we need to embrace that power.

Author, educator and environmentalist Bill McKibben says,

...the message that comes through [the] television all the time every day and it comes through most of the other instruments of our consumer society is simple. It's that “you're the most important thing on earth. You're the absolute center of the universe, you're the heaviest object and everything is going to orbit around you.”

That's what we're talking about in realistic terms and in symbolic terms. What we're talking about is the endless, gullible elevation of necessary levels of comfort and status and everything else at the complete expense of all around us. It's going to take us a long time to learn how to climb down a little bit from the heights on which we have put ourselves. We've been at this work for a very long time. All the witness of our religious gurus from Buddha to Christ to Francis to Thoreau notwithstanding, we've done a good job of paying all that lip service and going on about our ways. Now the signals from the physical world, from God's creation, tell us that we have definitively gone

too far and it is time to turn around in some new direction. We will need each other's encouragement and help in doing that.

[And] our religious communities are deeply important, almost the only institutions left in our society that posit some goal other than accumulation for our existence here on this planet. Take good care of each other, but don't just take good care of each other - push each other a little bit too. This work has to be done fast and it has to be done lovingly, and it has to be done not only with an eye on the temperature around us, but with an eye on the temperature inside of us - on our understanding of who we really are, not who we've been told we are over and over and over again by all the images that flow through the cable or through the billboard or any of the other places that we increasingly have come to find our identity. (McKibben)

Last year, McKibben "challenged Americans to act on behalf of the environment with a series of demonstrations on global warming. He asked: 'Where will this demonstration have the most impact? Church steps. Why church steps? Because, to put it crudely, politicians pay attention to people on church steps.'" (Gilbert)

Unitarian Universalists have been demonstrating – perhaps more than other religious groups – for a long time. But we are not alone now.

The question of our human stewardship of the earth has become more prevalent among our more conservative Christian counterparts. In 2005, the National Association of Evangelicals published a statement explicitly throwing its weight behind the growing "creation care" environmental movement, which asserts that Christians are stewards of God's creation. That movement is led by the Evangelical Environmental Network, which you may know because of its "What Would Jesus Drive?" campaign. (Johnson)

Just last month, Archbishop Gianfranco Girotti, from the Vatican's office on Apostolic Penitentiary, announced several new sins for which Roman Catholics will be expected to confess. One of those sins is environmental pollution. (Willey)

In preparation for today's sermon, I read several sermons posted on the web site of Interfaith Power and Light—"an interfaith ministry devoted to deepening the connection between ecology and faith." I read Muslim sermons based on the Qur'an, and Christian ones based on the Christian bible, and a Jewish one by a rabbi at Temple Emanuel Beverly Hills. On the first day of Rosh Hashanah last September, Rabbi Laura Geller announced:

Today we are launching a Greening the Synagogue Campaign. We are going to challenge ourselves as individuals and as a congregation to reduce our carbon footprint by 20% by 2010. A carbon footprint is the amount of carbon dioxide created by a person or an institution. U.S. homes account for 8% of the world's emissions, with the average U.S. household emitting 55,000 pounds of carbon dioxide annually. If we could lower our carbon footprint by 20%, then we could make a significant difference. Not just Temple Emanuel, of course, but if we do it, and other religious communities do it, we will have begun to repair the world ["tikkun olam"], literally, before all that is left is a stump.

They asked each family to use the Low Carbon Diet Personal CO2 Calculator (which you, too, can find on their web site – tebh.org) and then take steps to reduce their carbon footprint. But they also made the commitment on behalf of their entire temple. Recognizing that their building and their schools and their

programs all generate carbon dioxide, their “Greening Team” committed to taking the carbon footprint of the entire institution between Rosh Hashanah and Hanukah. And then, between Hanukah and the next Rosh Hashanah, they promised to make the necessary changes to reduce their institutional carbon footprint 20%. (Geller)

And that *is* where we must start—always, we must begin right here, in our homes and in our congregations. But as I said earlier, we are at the point now where we can’t ignore the fact that those efforts must go hand-in-hand with more organized, systematic change.

Robert F. Kennedy, Jr. has published what he calls “A Manifesto” in the current issue of Vanity Fair. In “The Next President’s First Task,” he asserts that, “Carbon dependence has eroded our economic power, destroyed our moral authority, diminished our international influence and prestige, endangered our national security, and damaged our health and landscapes. It is subverting everything we value.” The President’s first task, he says, must be to “decarbonize” our economy by instituting measures that would encourage an “entrepreneurial revolution” in “energy innovation”, which is just waiting to happen. And, he says, with the right incentives, it *can* happen. “The benefits to America are beyond measure. We will cut annual trade and budget deficits by hundreds of billions, improve public health and farm production, diminish global warming, and create millions of good jobs.”

Kennedy is not alone in insisting that what we need is formal, legal intervention and systematic change. Cormac Cullinan and others suggest that our current laws continue to reflect conditions and thinking from centuries ago, when we didn’t acknowledge our interdependence with the earth, and instead have continued to believe it’s our responsibility to domesticate the earth for our purposes, demanding that she respond to our needs, rather than us responding to her nature. (Hessey)

Over and over again in my research, I am reading and hearing reminders of our interdependence – not only our human interdependence with the earth, but also how all the different facets of our lives are interdependent – economics, social issues, the environment. In addition to the individual, local steps that we can and must take in our lives, we must participate in re-visioning a human world which is attuned to that interdependence.

Environmentalist Paul Hawken recently published the book Blessed Unrest, in which he describes “what may one day be judged the single most profound transformation of human society.” At the dawn the 21st-century, he says, we have seen both “the appearance of systemic problems that are genuinely global in scope, *and* the growth of a worldwide movement that is determined to heal the wounds of the earth with the force of passion, dedication, and collective intelligence and wisdom.” Whether they are ad hoc neighborhood associations or well-funded international organizations... whether they’re confronting the abuse of the environment, or of free-market fundamentalism, or the loss of indigenous cultures, or other social justice issues, “Across the planet [there are] groups... [that] share no orthodoxy or unifying ideology; they follow no single charismatic leader; [and yet] they remain supple enough to coalesce easily into larger networks to achieve their goals.” (from front flap) He says,

When asked... if I am pessimistic or optimistic about the future, my answer is always the same: If you look at the science that describes what is happening on earth today and aren’t pessimistic, you don’t have the correct data. If you meet the people in this unnamed movement and aren’t optimistic, you haven’t got a heart. What I see are ordinary and some not-so-ordinary individuals willing to confront despair, power, and incalculable odds in an attempt to restore some semblance of grace,

justice, and beauty to this world. ... Healing the wounds of the earth and its people does not require saintliness or a political party, only gumption and persistence. It is not a liberal or conservative activity; it is a sacred act. It is a massive enterprise undertaken by ordinary citizens everywhere, not by self-appointed governments or oligarchies. (4, 5)

So... what can *you* do as part of that massive enterprise?

- First of all, push yourself to make some kind of difference, but set reasonable expectations. You alone cannot undo the damage of global warming. But neither can it be undone *without* you. We all must participate.
- Start by getting informed. Watch the 20-minute video at storyofstuff.com. Pick up a copy of the just-published (and updated from the 1989 original) 50 Simple Things You Can Do To Save the Earth, or go to the web site at 50simplethings.com, and choose *one thing*—just one!—that you'll commit yourself to doing.
- Get informed by talking to our own Ned Tillman about sustainability. Ask him about the triple-bottom-line: Environmental, Social and Economic.
- Sign on to the Environmental Action pledge about Reducing Energy Waste in Transportation when our EAC launches it in the next few weeks, and then follow through by actually doing the things you pledge to do. Go to uuccjustice.org and review the two pledges they've already introduced about Reducing Solid Waste and Reducing Energy Waste at Home.
- Make a concerted effort to buy and eat local foods. Join a CSA – Community Supported Agriculture – such as the one at One Straw Farm, where each week for 25 weeks members receive enough fresh fruits and vegetables to feed a family of four for a week – maybe with leftovers to freeze for the winter. (onestrawfarm.com)
- Regardless of where and how you buy your food, you can be intentional about it... and humbly grateful for it. Say grace before meals. At our table, we've begun singing grace. The words are, "Thank you for this food, this food... this glorious, glorious food... and the animals, and the vegetables, and the minerals that made it possible." Acknowledge that your food came from somewhere.
- Vote. And vote for representatives who take seriously your commitment to re-vision the world and who will write and support legal action to make necessary change. (League of Conservation Voters: lcv.org)
- And once your elected officials are in office, *talk* to them. Democracy is about more than just voting once every few years. It's about communicating with elected officials so they enact the will of the people.
- Register with a group like GoLoco and get serious about ride-sharing. We could even set up a group specifically for UUCC so that you can share rides to worship and other activities. (goloco.org)

That's just a start – but it's a start. As Bill McKibben said, "This work has to be done *fast* and it has to be done *lovingly*." So let us continue gazing out the window at the beauty of our gardens, and let's keep reading Wendell Berry and Mary Oliver's poetry that helps us celebrate nature. And then, let each of us take one new action... make one new commitment to caring for that beauty and helping to save our earth from ruin

For the world we raise our voices, for the home that gives us birth; in our joy we sing returning home to our blue-green hills of earth. May they be forever so.

Amen. Blessed be.

Benediction:

My heart is moved by all I cannot save:
So much has been destroyed
I have to cast my lot with those who, age after age,
perversely, with no extraordinary power, reconstitute the world.

(Adrienne Rich, Singing the Living Tradition #463)

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