

TO CHERISH THE WEB OF LIFE  
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November 12, 2006

There is much to celebrate. The ideological logjam that had been obstructing public discourse has been broken. There is new hope for progressive change – if together as a nation we can muster the collective wisdom. The tide also may possibly be starting to turn in favor of same sex marriage with the positive vote in Arizona. Hopefully, Thursday's vote at the Massachusetts State House to recess the Constitutional Convention until January 2<sup>nd</sup> bodes the end of the current ballot initiative to deny marriage equality here in the Commonwealth. On other important issues, there are many worthy priorities being put forward – a new plan for Iraq, minimum wages, health care, education, building the economy, and more. But of all the priorities being spoken, I have heard very little said about saving the environment. This ought to disturb us deeply.

Of all the challenges facing our world, global warming and climate change is by far the most serious and far-reaching. This challenge will have a far greater and potentially more devastating impact on our children's lives than any other problem facing our nation and world. With the exception of Al Gore, our political leaders are not talking about it. As much as this challenge is one of political will, it is fundamentally a spiritual challenge. And that is why I am talking about it this morning.

Lost in all the media coverage of the elections has been notice of the very important international treaty conference that opened this past Monday and will continue through this coming Friday in Nairobi, Kenya. This is the United Nations treaty conference on climate change. It's happening right now. It is the 12<sup>th</sup> international conference since the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change was first adopted in 1992. This 1992 Convention set voluntary goals for countries to reduce green-house gas emissions which are known to contribute to global warming and climate change – goals especially for reducing carbon dioxide emissions, which are released by the burning of fossil fuels and forests. In 1997, 35 industrial nations signed the so-called Kyoto protocol, which was annexed to the 1992 Framework treaty. These 35 countries pledged to reduce green-house gas emissions to 5 percent below 1990 levels by 2012.

The United States accepted the 1992 Framework treaty, but has not agreed to the 1997 Kyoto protocol, arguing that our country's efforts would be voluntary. Now it is 2006. 2012 is only a little more than 5 years away. The United Kingdom and Germany have in fact reduced their emissions substantially below 1990 levels, UK by 14%, Germany by 17%, and France by 1%. (AP 11/6/06) This is the good news. It can be done. But emissions by the United States, despite its "voluntary efforts," have increased by more than 13%, and our country is by far the largest emitter. And China, which is not a party to the 1992 Framework treaty, is expected to become an even larger emitter, surpassing the United States within a very few years.

This week, the Nairobi conference is considering new goals for after 2012. The challenge is obviously daunting. As one energy policy analyst put it, "Right now it

seems that the glaciers in Greenland are moving faster than the negotiators.” The urgency and magnitude of the challenge can, in the words of Thomas Berry, “produce a paralysis of thought and action.” But it can also, he said, “awaken in us a sense of what is happening, and move us to a program of reinhabiting the earth in a truly human manner.” Al Gore, in his important movie, “An Inconvenient Truth,” said that there are three possible responses to the crisis – we can stay in denial – we can fall into despair – or we can choose to do something. In order to do something intelligent and spiritually empowering, we first need to know what is happening.

A number of reports came out over the past two weeks that speak to the urgency of this issue. The British Government issued a massive report warning that failure to act swiftly on global warming would have “a cataclysmic effect on the global economy.” (NYT, 10/31/06). This report brought together the known scientific research on global warming and applied modern tools of economic analysis. The report took into account anticipated effects from climate change including droughts, coastal flooding, reduced crops, degraded water supplies, massive migrations, famine, increasing malaria rates, and more. It warned that if a major global effort to make changes is not undertaken very soon, temperatures by the year 2050, would rise by another 2 or 3 degrees Celsius and hundreds of millions of people would be at the risk of starvation. If little is done, the economic impact by 2050 could consume as much as 20% of the total world gross domestic product per year – an economic impact equal to the great depression of the 1930s plus the two world wars combined, per year. On the other hand, the report argued that a manageable investment of only 1% of gross domestic product per year for alternative energy technology and changes in tax policies and economic policies would go a long way toward slowing the temperature rise and preventing the direst consequences.

A week ago Friday, November 3<sup>rd</sup>, the World Meteorological Organization reported that greenhouse gases set a record high in 2005. The concentration of carbon dioxide increased by a half a percent. Cumulatively, there is now more than 35% more carbon dioxide in the atmosphere than had been the historical norm for more than 600,000 years right up to the beginning of the industrial revolution. This 35% increase in carbon dioxide coincides with an average global warming of about 1 degree Celsius, over the past 100 years.

This may not seem like much, but this 1 degree is already producing dramatic changes in the environment - melting glaciers, the thinning Arctic ice pack, for example. Another 2 or 3 degrees over the next 40 years could well produce the catastrophe warned about in the report by the British Government. Prime Minister Tony Blair publicly pleaded for the world to take heed. He said, “The consequences for our planet are literally disastrous.” Because the UK is already a leader in reducing green-house gas emissions, it seems that Tony Blair was directing his plea especially to the United States to provide the necessary global leadership.

This week, 2004 Nobel Peace Laureate, Kenyan environmentalist Wangari Maathi called on people around the world to plant 1 billion trees next year. This is one

way, she said, that ordinary citizens can fight global warming (AP 11/8/06). That's a lot of trees! But it is imaginable. That's one tree for each six people. This shows the magnitude of what we need to be doing.

Today, this very moment, the world is at a crisis point. Scientists say that these next ten years are absolutely critical if climate change is to be slowed and the world is to avoid catastrophe. A lot is being done, but much more needs to be done. The crisis calls not only for political action, but even more, it calls for a new spiritual consciousness.

This June at our General Assembly of the Unitarian Universalist Association in St. Louis, delegates, including Kirt Switzer and myself, voted overwhelmingly to approve a Statement of Conscience on Global Warming and Climate Change. It was a long discussion over several days, including many amendments to make the statement stronger. Delegates who were scientists went to the microphone and stressed the urgency of the crisis. They pleaded with the delegates for the strongest possible language. The final Statement of Conscience sets forth both the spiritual imperative and a comprehensive plan of action at four levels – the personal level, the congregational level, the associational level, and at the public advocacy level, national and global. This Statement is more than worthy of our study, deliberation, and action. It is urgent. You can find it on the <uua.org> website.

It would be easy to despair. It would be easy simply to hope for the best. But the recent elections remind us of an important truth. There is tremendous power in grass roots organizing. Grass roots organizing overcame entrenched power. It overcame the massive expenditures on negative advertising. It overcame the fear mongering by certain national leaders. Grass roots organizing is going to be what saves the planet. You and I are going to save the planet. But not alone. We are also this church. And this church is associated with 1000 other Unitarian Universalist congregations, who are also becoming concerned. As Unitarian Universalists together we have an influence beyond our numbers alone. And we're still not alone. Christian evangelicals all over the country, for example, are also taking up environmental justice as a Biblical imperative to be good stewards of God's creation. And by the way, more than a third of Evangelicals voted for change this election. We can each do our part.

But the crisis is about more than the science, which is persuasive. It is about more than the needed technology, some of which is close at hand. It is about more than economics. It is about more even than the practical necessity of saving the planet for our children's well-being. First and foremost, the crisis is a spiritual crisis. It is about all of us awakening to a new global consciousness, a new ecological consciousness that is just now beginning to inspire a new vision and motivate the needed action.

This is where you and I come in. You and I must wake ourselves up to a new spiritual consciousness, in the words of Thomas Berry, that "the universe itself, but especially the planet Earth, (is) to be experienced as the primary mode of divine presence." We must wake ourselves up to the awareness that we are not only members of one human community, but that we are also and intimately members of a much larger

community of all living beings and of the universe itself. We must wake ourselves up to a new reverence for the sacredness of all being.

Our future well-being depends not only on science and practical ethics. It depends even more on the power of our religious imagination. We would cultivate a “reverent attention.” We would cultivate what Thomas Berry calls “the spirituality of the new ecological age.” This is a spirituality which will transcend and span across the traditional religions. It is a spirituality that will include both the science and poetry of our new age. It will include the new imperatives of environmental ethics. But at the deepest level, this will be a spirituality that awakens us to a deep reverence and awe for the sacredness of all being – a reverence for the water, for the air, for the earth, for each and every living organism, and most of all a reverence for the entire web of life. It is to see the web in its entirety as being itself a living organism which is conscious and spiritually alive.

We are beginning to define the elements of such a new spirituality for the Ecological Age. In 1984, the Unitarian Universalist Association adopted as its seventh principle, “respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part.” This seventh principle is an affirmation of ecological, spiritual awareness. Then about ten years later, our Association added a sixth source from which our living tradition draws inspiration and guidance. We now also look to the “spiritual teachings of Earth centered traditions, which celebrate the sacred circle of life and instruct us to live in harmony with the rhythms of nature.” In the covenant of this church, which this congregation wrote and adopted in 1991, “we unite ... to cherish and sustain the web of life.”

To cherish is to value deeply. To cherish the web of life is to love it deeply. It is to feel and respond with our whole being from our awareness that we are each intimate participants in the web of *all* life. It is our spiritual awakening to the processes of the universe and of planet Earth as manifestations of divine presence. To *cherish* the web of life is to love the earth and to repent of our abuse of the earth. This is *the heart* of an ecological spirituality. To *sustain* the web of life is our call to ethical action. This is *the justice imperative* of an ecological spirituality.

This ethical imperative calls us to an array of practical actions. It calls us to a radical re-organization of our life style both personally and as a society and economy. We need to re-organize our consumption of energy and reduce it by as much as 30%. We need to re-organize our own patterns of consumption and waste and learn to live more simply. We need to become advocates for progressive environmental policies - tax policies that discourage carbon consumption, economic policies that foster technological innovation, legislated changes in market dynamics, carbon credits for example, to favor energy conservation and alternative energy sources. These are things we need to be educating ourselves about. We need to end the war in Iraq - for lots of reasons – but so that we can re-direct our efforts and attention towards saving the planet.

There is a new organization called the Unitarian Universalist Ministry for the Earth. Part of this ministry is the Green Sanctuary movement for congregations to build awareness of environmental issues, to encourage life-style changes, to take community action, and most importantly to build a connection between spiritual practice and environmental consciousness. I encourage United First Parish Church to consider forming our local ministry of the earth – to educate ourselves, to re-form our spiritual consciousness, and begin to re-organize the way we live.

In all this we must keep hope. None of our former religious visions “are quite adequate for the moment.” But, as Thomas Berry reminds us, “even as we glance over the grimy world before us, the sun shines radiantly over the earth, the aspen leaves shimmer in the evening breeze, the coo of the mourning dove and the swelling chorus of the insects fills the land, while down in the hollows the mist deepens the fragrance of the honeysuckle. Soon the late summer moon will give a light sheen to the landscape. Something of a dream experience. Perhaps on occasion we participate in the original dream of the earth. Perhaps there are times when this primordial design becomes visible ... The dream of the earth. Where else can we go for the guidance needed for the task that is before us.”

So let us keep hope. Let us cherish the web of life. This is our spiritual work. This is where we begin. And in this work, may the dream of the earth inspire us and guide us.