

Dancing the Interdependent Web of Life: Earth As Sacred Text **A sermon preached by Carmen Emerson, Ministerial Intern** **On October 18, 2009**

As the High Holy Days ended last week, our Jewish friends celebrated *Simchat Torah*—or dancing the Torah—a time when their beloved sacred text, the Torah, is unrolled, kissed, and held lovingly as partner in a dance of rejoicing for new beginnings and new possibilities.

I was quite taken with this idea, and given the theological diversity of Unitarian Universalism, and our belief that all of the world's religions have sacred texts that offer wisdom and guidance for our ethical and spiritual lives, I wondered which sacred text I might choose as partner in a dance of rejoicing for new beginnings and new possibilities.

In the midst of my musings about dancing sacred texts, I found myself distracted, comforted, and afflicted as I learned about an environmental debate over the construction of solar power plants in the Mojave Desert. On one side of the debate are environmentalists who support such development, which would affect almost one million acres in the western United States. The economic, environmental, and national security benefits seem obvious: many jobs would be created, and the more we invest in and use solar technologies, the more affordable and available they will become. We are in critical trouble around climate change, and development of clean solar energy is a serious response to a serious problem. Such development sends the world the message that we are determined to wean ourselves from our national addiction to fossil fuels, and to end our reliance on foreign nations as the primary source of our fossil fuels. All of this sounds reasonable, and important.

On the other side of the debate are environmentalists who oppose this project. The isolation that makes the desert such an attractive place for solar development is the same isolation that invites passionate opposition from wilderness conservationists. Solar plants would require the construction of hundreds of miles of power transmission lines through the Mojave, destroying—or at least disrupting—the beauty of the desert landscape and adversely impacting hundreds of thousands of acres of natural habitat for desert wildlife. Additionally, manufacturing photovoltaic solar panels requires the use of heavy metals such as cadmium, mercury, and lead—toxic pollutants to soil and water. All of these concerns are also reasonable, and important.

I took brief comfort in the fact that if the expert environmentalists disagree on the decision, I could surely be let off the hook for not knowing the “right” thing to do, the “right” choices to make, or the “right” actions to support.

Notice I said, “brief comfort.” It was indeed a short-lived comfort, for as a Unitarian Universalist minister and a newly settled resident of New Mexico I was afflicted by my faith and by my conscience, which double teamed me, urging me to be prepared for conversations about environmental issues affecting my new home in this mountain desert region.

This *is* a Land of Enchantment. The beauty of our landscape is stunning. This is a precious place. And, even if I have not yet been engaged in challenging conversations about solar power plants, I have already begun to think about limited water resources,

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water conservation, water pollution by repeat offenders who suffer no consequences, and encroachment onto sacred ancestral lands by development, sustainable or not.

The complexities of these environmental issues range as wide as the Sandias and as deep as Carlsbad Caverns, while our capacities for navigating such complexities may sometimes feel as narrow and shallow as the Rio Grande, the clarity we seek just as murky.

In good UU fashion we could determine to *reason* our way through these environmental complexities by gathering and sifting through all the information. We are good at this—educating ourselves and others, and encouraging one another to make thoughtful, informed, objective choices.

But at the risk of losing my politically correct merit badge, I want to say that I believe we do some of our best work as a faith tradition when we shift from pure objectivity to include a little—or a lot—of subjectivity. We are facing a critical moment in time, about place—our Blue Boat Home—a time when the passions of subjectivity need to be lived without apology and witnessed with pride.

Both reason and science tell us that the biodiversity of our planet is imperiled by climate change and personally, I know that I can no longer do what I might have done in the past, which is to say, “You know, the Earth isn’t really my thing—I’ll leave that to the environmentalists to work out while I pay attention to the other justice issues that really matter to me, like anti-racism, anti-oppression, and anti-poverty.”

But we are now called, with some urgency, to a different understanding: as there are direct correlations between all oppressions and social injustice, so there are direct correlations between protecting the environmental integrity of Earth and the work of justice for oppressed peoples in this city, in this state, in this nation, and in our global neighborhood. Rather than be forced into a false choice between eco-justice and social justice, the time has come to understand that a choice to work for justice in any of these areas commits us to work for justice in all of these areas.

We are called to such understanding by our first principle, our affirmation of the inherent worth and dignity of every person. We are called to such understanding by our second principle, our covenant to promote justice, equity, and compassion in human relations. We are called to such understanding by our seventh principle, the respect for the interdependent web of all life of which we are a part. And we are called to this understanding by the theological diversity of our faith tradition.

Our first principle is deceptively simple: an affirmation of the inherent worth and dignity of every person. I believe it is the first of our principles because it is the hardest of our principles. The inherent worth and dignity of *every* person. Every person. “Every” doesn’t mean just the people I know and love, or even just the people I know. “Every” means every—and every means those I don’t know well, those I don’t know at all, those I don’t like at all, those who don’t like or don’t care about me.

“Every” means every. We read and we heard it in our responsive reading this morning, “Our own pulse beats in every stranger’s throat . . . ,” and if that is true then the reverse of that is true, as well, “Every stranger’s pulse beats in our own.” Clean air, clean water, safe shelter, healthy food—these are the basics—*the basics*—that honor the inherent worth and dignity of another person, of every person, and without these basics of life, further human fulfillment is simply not possible. We cannot create more water, more soil, or more air—we must rely on the biodiversity of our planet for these

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essentials to live, and we must rely on one another for conservation and protection of these precious resources. A faithful responsibility for environmental integrity is directly related to our affirmation of the inherent worth and dignity of every person.

Our second principle gets more specific. Our covenant to promote justice, equity, and compassion in human relations is a direct call to understand the connections between environmental integrity and social justice. Listen to this 1991 quote from an internal memo written by Lawrence Summers, then Chief Economist of the World Bank and now Director of the White House National Economic Council:¹

Just between you and me, shouldn't the World Bank be encouraging more migration of dirty industries to the LDCs [less developed countries]? . . . The economic logic behind dumping a load of toxic waste in the lowest wage country is impeccable, and we should face up to that . . . Under-populated countries in Africa are vastly under-polluted; their air quality is probably vastly inefficiently low compared to Los Angeles or Mexico City . . . The concern over an agent that causes a one in a million change in the odds of prostate cancer is obviously going to be much higher in a country where people survive to get prostate cancer than in a country where under-five mortality is 200 per thousand.¹

Not for a moment do I believe that any person in this room believes that poor people with clean air matter less than affluent people with dirty air. But this is what “justice, equity, and compassion in human relations” is up against: “the economic logic of dumping a load of toxic waste in the lowest wage country” where the air quality is “inefficiently low” and where 5 percent of the children under five die anyway.

Summers was speaking of Africa, but we can observe this attitude a little closer to home. In what parts of our cities are the garbage dumps and the paper mills and the sewer processing plants and the industrial waste plants located? Where do we put the bus depots with diesel-filled air? Where do we dump toxic waste? There are direct links between environmental degradation and poverty, and a faithful responsibility for environmental integrity is directly related to justice, equity, and compassion for the poorest among us.

Our seventh principle—a respect for the interdependent web of *all* existence of which we are a part—also calls us to understand the connections between environmental integrity and social justice for “otherkind.” Notice the emphasis I placed on “all” existence. So often I forget, and I hear others forget, the “all” when we talk about the interdependent web. This “all” is crucial because it is the only place that we acknowledge the “otherkind” that coexist with “humankind” in the web of all existence.

In truth, I think that the way our 7th principle is currently written does not go far enough. Rather than “*respect*” for the interdependent web of all existence, I wish that it said, “A *reverence* for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part.” A

¹ “Conclusion: The Church Ecologically Reformed” in *Earth Habitat: Eco-Injustice and the Church's Response* (2001), eds. D. Hessel and L. Rasmussen.

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good definition of reverence is “respect, tinged with awe”—and I suggest that’s what our 7th principle is all about.

Consider much of the artwork on display in this sanctuary—how much of it reflects a theme from nature? Consider this glass wall behind me—where many people intently gaze into the wildlife refuge during and as an integral part of their worship. Consider the cottonwood tree, the lavender, and the other plants, rocks, and stones so carefully placed in our courtyard and remember, from our responsive reading this morning, that if we listen well, we can hear the pulse of life “in water, in wood, and even in stone. We are earth of this earth, and bone of its bone.”

Remember, also, the words of the poet from this morning’s reading, “Maybe such devotion, in which one holds the world in the clasp of attention, isn’t the perfect prayer . . . but it must be close, for the sorrow, whose name is doubt, is thus subdued, and not through the weaponry of reason, but of pure submission. Tell me, what else could beauty be for?” There is wisdom and knowledge learned from the Sacred Text of Earth that cannot come to us in any other way.²

Perhaps at our rational, reasonable best, we *respect* the Earth because we understand our complete reliance upon the diversity of Earth’s biosystems for the sustenance of *all* life. Perhaps at our spiritual, passionate best, we *revere* the Earth for the beauty and power inherent in the natural world, for the moments of inspiration, and the opportunities for devotion and submission that we otherwise do not often allow ourselves to experience.

“As the world becomes hotter, stormier, less biodiverse, more unequal, more crowded, and more violent,” writes theologian Dieter Hessel, “the church must embody commitment to eco-justice. Not to do so,” he says, “will only induce lamentations, beginning a long requiem for nature.”³

Perhaps it is at the intersection of our rational, reasonable best and our spiritual, passionate best that *we* embody a faithful recognition of the connections between environmental integrity and the dismantling of social injustices. *We* are the church, *we* are the faith community so well prepared by our theological diversity for this work of redemption described by Hessel as eco-justice!

As Unitarians we have not separated God from nature, nor have we separated humanity from nature, nor have we separated humanity from God. As Universalists, we have rejected the notion that the natural world serves as mere “backdrop for the drama of human salvation,”⁴ and by our respect and reverence for the interdependent web of all existence, we have rejected the notion of *dominion* by humankind over otherkind.

May we, the church so well prepared by our theological diversity for the urgent work of eco- and social justice, turn lamentations into rejoicing. And may we, the church

² This morning’s reading was the poem “Terns” by Mary Oliver, and the responsive reading was “Prayer for the Earth” by Barbara Deming (#570 from *Singing the Living Tradition*).

³ “Conclusion: The Church Ecologically Reformed” in *Earth Habitat: Eco-Injustice and the Church’s Response* (2001), eds. D. Hessel and L. Rasmussen (p. 186).

⁴ “Conclusion: The Church Ecologically Reformed” in *Earth Habitat: Eco-Injustice and the Church’s Response* (2001), eds. D. Hessel and L. Rasmussen (p. 188).

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that embraces reason *and* reverence, dance not to a requiem of despair and destruction, but move lively in body and spirit as we dance the Interdependent Web of All Existence, honoring Earth as sacred text.

Please rise and join in singing Hymn # 163, "For the Earth Forever Turning."
