

## A MONTH OF SUNDAYS: From Inspiration to Despair and Back Again

By Janelle Gray

I think I need to begin with a giant disclaimer: I have struggled with this topic. I apologize that this is not up to say, Ronn's or Janet's or Eisenstein's standards, but since I'm going to borrow from them liberally, maybe it doesn't matter!

I heard Ursula Goodenough speak about Religious Naturalism at the MDD conference in Denver in 2006. It was definitely an 'ah ha' moment. Prior to learning about Religious Naturalism, I didn't really have a framework for my spiritual quest. There would be moving presentations, inspiring quotes, religious encounters here and sometimes out there – and it was all a bit like Jeopardy: random religious truths that didn't form a cohesive whole. Religious Naturalism gave me context. It was my hammer for every nail. The thread that led me to spirituality. The hub of the wheel I wanted to be on. The encompassing spiritual idea that made the most sense to me. You get the idea...!

So I really thought this month would be joyous. Five Sundays of talks on my favorite topic! Week after week of inspiration! Fresh insights from fellow travelers! New ways of looking at things! All of it resulting in me reaching spiritual heights I'd only dreamed of before....

Instead, I found myself about as down as I could be – or as Jay Griffiths put it in an article about climate change – I was “debilitated, depressed and disturbed”! A couple of weeks ago, Robert, our own self-professed heretic – who is really just a heretic among heretics, though arguably maybe the head heretic or the heretic-in-chief or the grand pooh bah of Heretics – called this the “Religion of Global Warming”. This month was not supposed to be about Global Warming, but that has been the elephant in the room. Religious Naturalism is not just about an appreciation of mother nature – it is about a way of finding wonder in the entire natural world: the environment, certainly, but also biology, physics, biochemistry, evolutionary psychology, math, astronomy and so on, as well as the processes of the natural world; i.e., science. It is about finding spirituality in the very fact of our existence. But how can I feel wonder, awe and joy when that damn elephant is sitting on my chest? It's like reminiscing with a loved one who is dying: bittersweet at best.

Since next month's theme is Hope in Troubled Times, maybe my talk is a good bridge. Because, even though I'm first going to take you down the troubled path I've been travelling, rest assured I also intend to find something positive to say.

Six major thoughts have been weighing on me. First, I will never convince people about Global Warming. Many just simply refuse to believe it is happening. Others believe it

is not caused by humans. Still others believe it is happening, that it is worsened by humans, but that it doesn't matter in the long-term; this is a blip on Earth's radar. All of this is particularly distressing since to slow it down requires pretty much drastic action on the part of everyone. We are not on the same page and it seems, can't get there.

Second, it is too late to stop it.

Third, we will not see the results of our efforts in our lifetime. Jeffrey Lockwood used the analogy of Sisyphus pushing the stone up the hill. Sometimes I find that comforting, sometimes I don't.

Fourth, greed seems to rule the day, at least on a national and global scale.

Fifth, there are too many people.

The sixth point is harder to explain. Sometimes I get the feeling that we want our speakers, our sages, our leaders – anyone, really – to come forward and pat us on the spiritual head and say, "its okay, everything is going to be alright, don't worry." We long for this SO badly, that I wonder if this is the mal-adaptation to which Lockwood was referring in his Adaptation and Defiance talk. How do we find hope and joy and a way to act without crossing the line to capitulation? Are despair, debilitation and depression a sort of capitulation?

For this talk, I asked myself if Religious Naturalism provides any counterpoint to these moments of despair. What hopeful words did our presenters offer this month that were perhaps just temporarily out-weighed by that elephant?

And I did find my answers, in three Religious Naturalism-related tenants: emergence, stewardship and joy. First, emergence:

I sometimes wonder if Unitarian Universalism would have been so attractive to me if it weren't for the 7<sup>th</sup> principle. I love that it emphasizes connection to the environment, at least in my interpretation of it, without slipping totally into earth-based mumbo jumbo. The other principles are interesting and becoming more rich and meaningful over time, but that last one really speaks to me. I do find my spirituality primarily in nature, rather than in interactions with people, although I like the way Janet tied several of our other principles to #7. She said "UU's believe it is up to all of us to look out for those who suffer from injustice, inequality, and the absence of compassion (our second principle). Our awareness of the interconnected web spreads our responsibility even further. We share the fate of the whole biosphere (seventh principle) and seek the goal of world community with peace, liberty and justice for all (sixth principle)."

Because it means so much to me, to see the destruction of the natural world is quite painful. I remember hiking a few years ago when the soil was so bone-dry it was a fine powder on my socks, shoes and legs. Thankfully, that drought eventually lifted. At Lake Solitude, where solitude is now the last thing you expect, I found myself doing this peculiar mental “squinting” just to be able to be there. Mentally cataloging the beauty of the rocks tumbling down to the water, the trees, the hills – and blocking out the trash, the stench of human waste and the noisy campers who, despite being the only other ones there, pitched their tent not 50 yards from ours.

It is this tunnel vision that I kept thinking of during and after Lockwood’s talk. Although it is tempting to keep my rose-colored glasses on, it isn’t helpful or even possible to leave them on forever. Eventually, I have to take a cold, hard – and painful look at reality. This is the only way that I can make an informed decision about what I’m going to do: stop camping in high-use areas, figure out even more ways to have less of an impact myself, decide how I can help others camp more responsibly, etc.

Now, while I’m probably completely misinterpreting the concept of emergence that Ronn shared with us in his talk, I’ve found my take on this idea to be fairly comforting! It’s like this: who knows what will emerge in the post-Climate-Change environment? I have to acknowledge that a huge part of my grief is based on loss – I know what places like Lake Solitude used to be like. But future generations won’t know, and it’s entirely possible that the new environment will be beautiful – and spiritual – to them. In that future, Religious Naturalism will still be valid.

Next up, Stewardship:

Whenever I define Religious Naturalism to myself, I come back to the philosopher Lloyd Rue, who said that religions address two interrelated human concerns: How Things Are and What Things Matter. The first – how things are – results in cosmology, such as the Creation story in Genesis or the many Native American origin stories. These stories inform the second concern, Which Things Matter, as they attempt to make the case for a morality or ethos, such as the Ten Commandments. For Religious Naturalists, how things are is, well, science, and what things matter, is then basically all things, and the connections between them: people, plants, environment, psyche, universe.

But notice that the Religious Naturalist has a cosmology that is of THIS world; in other words, what is here now is all that we can know, so *it* is what matters. This fits very much with the UU Theology that salvation is in this life.

Here’s how Ronn described Religious Naturalism’s spiritual connection to nature:

*The mission of religion is to help humans grapple with mystery and morality – cosmos and ethos. Kant could not escape these “two things that fill me with constantly increasing admiration and awe ... the starry heavens without and the moral law within.” Religious naturalism illuminates and integrates these two dimensions of human experience. Mystery entices us to explore and contemplate the natural world. The insights gained invoke a sense of kinship and responsibility to all life. As Rachael Carson wrote, “The more clearly we can focus our attention on the wonders and realities of the universe around us, the less taste we have for ... destruction.”*

Gary Senier said it in a couple of discussions this month, and if he hadn't, I was about to: isn't the answer Stewardship? It doesn't matter what you believe about Global Warming, when we're talking about finite resources such as oil and water, isn't conservation the better part of valor? Furthermore, won't people do just about anything, make any sacrifice, for their children or grandchildren? Again, in regards to finite resources, saving some for your descendants, preserving an environment they can survive in, certainly has more identifiable appeal than preventing a rise in ppm of Nitrogen.

Stewardship is intrinsic to Religious Naturalism. But it's also a biblical concept (of course, so is “have dominion over the earth” and “go forth and multiply”, but let's pick and choose, shall we)?! I don't have first-hand knowledge of how or even whether or not stewardship is advocated in other religions, but I'll bet it is. It taps into our basic morality; religion is about connectivity, even though the specifics might be different. Here's Ronn again:

*Research suggests that natural selection has operated to tune human morality; sympathy and altruism confer evolutionary advantages. Moral reasoning is tied to neural structures in the brain, as well as to cultural origins. Both forms of evolution create and conserve socially beneficial values.*

While the connection that many religions emphasize is to a god, they still seem to end up at the Golden Rule. I loved Eisenstein's take on this. He said:

*“We're transitioning into a new Story of the People, a new Story of Self, and a new Story of the World. I sometimes articulate it as “The connected self living in joyous cocreative partnership with Lover Earth.” ... to a lover we desire to give as well as to receive, and we desire to create together, each offering our gifts towards a transcendent purpose, so that our union becomes greater than the sum of our individuality.....As for the connected self, this is the self that realizes that its being includes all the other creatures.....more for me is not less for you. It is the self of the Gift, the self that knows that as we do unto others, so we do unto ourselves. And, that as we do unto ourselves, so we are doing unto others. This self no longer lives in an objective universe of impersonal forces. Its every choice shifts the cosmos, and everything that happens in the cosmos happens within the self, too.”*

Which brings me, at last, to joy. I don't know about you, but hearing Eisenstein's essay last week on Rituals for Mother Earth filled me with joy. And I think this is the main antidote and answer to the despair I've been feeling.

On November 15<sup>th</sup>, there was an article on the Religious Pages by Don Derryberry entitled "Religion is not necessarily a good thing," so naturally, I had to read it! He said: "It's not up to me to judge another person's religion. But it is for me to make some judgments about my own expressions and experiences of the faith. I figure if my religion is more of a load than a lift, there's something wrong with it. If my religion cuts me off from people more than it draws me towards them, it's somehow deficient. If my religion puts me down on myself because of my failures rather than encouraging me because of my possibilities, it leaves something to be desired. If my religion invites me to judge and condemn others rather than reach out in love, it misses the point."

I was processing this, when along came Maya with Eisenstein, who talked about the apparent irrationality of sorting your garbage. He said:

*"In the old story, it simply does not matter if you, one person, recycle or not. It doesn't matter if you buy lots of plastic packaging, or eat beef from a deforested Brazilian jungle, or save a few gallons of water every day by conserving toilet flushes. In any event, the juggernaut of destruction rolls on. These actions only matter if everyone else does them too, and if they do, then it doesn't even matter if you do them or not. Therefore, it is irrational to do them if they involve any expense or inconvenience, as they often do."*

*"Because they do not make sense from within the old story, we find all kinds of ways to make ourselves do these things anyway. The favorite means is to connect them to our self-image, so that we get to think of ourselves as worthy and good because we recycle or care about the environment. We can understand them as rituals – which is what comes to mind naturally as I watch people sort different kinds of cans into different bins – whose symbolic meaning is "I am doing my part," "I am good," "I am right," or "I am worthy of love." Unfortunately, they actually feed a deeper story, which is something like, "I am not really good, so I must recycle, I must try hard, I must be a good boy or girl. In the case of many environmental activists, these efforts usually accompany a sanctimonious attitude: a conditional approval of the self and a resentment toward those who are less enlightened, less ethical, less conscious. There is little joy to be found in sanctimony."*

Guilty, guilty and guilty as charged, but what Eisenstein is saying, and what Religious Naturalism says, is that guilt, etc. isn't the point. If we act out of ego, sanctimony and sorrow, we miss the idea of connection, and miss the chance for joy. Eisenstein encourages us to think of these rituals not "in terms of ethics, doing your part, or being good" but "as gifts to Lover Earth. When you pay triple for a fair-trade shirt, or do without one; when you plant a tree or help stop a new road; when you make any contribution, no matter how small, to the well-being of the planet and its animals,

plants, waters, air, soil and people, source that act in the spirit of gratitude and offer it in the spirit of a gift.”

Earlier I worried about adapting to the point of capitulation and I asked if despair, debilitation and depression were types of capitulation. I think they are. In fact, I think joy is our responsibility – as religious naturalists or religious people in general. Joy is definitely more effective than the triple d’s. Eisenstein said: “No one ever did anything great by fighting themselves and trying hard to be good. No will is strong enough. But when we give ourselves to a story, it carries us towards acts which, from outside it, look brave and magnanimous.” The story he dreams of is this: “...out of the sacred union of humanity and earth, a third thing will be born. At the peak of our separation from nature, we fell in love with the earth, a moment marked by the first satellite photographs of our gorgeous planet.” He continues: “As we release ourselves into the story of the connected self and Lover Earth, as that story becomes real to us and we believe it in every cell, we become capable of miracles: things which were impossible from the old story, but possible from the new.”

There’s a mini-discussion taking place among some of our members about something called the Transition Initiative. This movement, which began in England, seeks to deal with transitioning to a future without fossil fuels on a localized, community basis. It takes whatever form the community gives it, which might be a local foods movement or a ride sharing enterprise or any number of things. I bring it up today because, like Eisenstein, it calls us to take joy in even the small actions we are taking, to “get up and do something constructive.” The Transition Initiative website says “We demonstrated great ingenuity and intelligence as we raced up the energy curve the last 150 years. There’s no reason why we can’t use those qualities, and more, as we negotiate our way up from the depths back towards the sun and air.” And “We can build a future far more fulfilling and enriching, more connected to and more gentle on the Earth, than the life we have today.” Like Eisenstein, the Transition Initiative emphasizes “the role of hope and proactiveness rather than guilt and fear.”

As our own Edward Everett Hale said:

“I am one  
But still I am one.  
I cannot do everything,  
But still I can do something.  
And because I cannot do everything  
I will not refuse to do the something that I can do.”

I think it is entirely appropriate to end this Religious Naturalism month with thoughts from the woman who inspired nearly all of these presentations: Ursula Goodenough. She writes: “Our story tells us of the sacredness of life, of the astonishing complexity of

cells and organisms, of the vast lengths of time it took to generate their splendid diversity, of the enormous improbability that any of it happened at all. Reverence is the religious emotion elicited when we perceive the sacred. We are called to revere the whole enterprise.”

She says, “For me, the existence of all this complexity and awareness and intent and beauty, and my ability to apprehend it, serves as the ultimate meaning and the ultimate value. The continuation of life reaches around, grabs its own tail, and forms a sacred circle that requires no further justification . . . other than that the continuation continue.”

And finally, she says: “We are the dominant species and stewards of the planet – we should be able to figure out how to share the Earth with one another and with other creatures, how to restore and preserve its elegance and grace.”