

Earth Sunday, 2015
Janet Ashear 4/18/15

This coming Wednesday, April 22, 2015, is the 45th Anniversary of Earth Day. In my talk this morning I want to spend a few minutes remembering what the world was like on that first Earth Day (Wednesday, April 22, 1970). I don't remember the day itself, but I remember the week before, and especially the two days preceding Earth Day. On Monday, April 20, I was finishing my senior year at the University of Kansas, preparing for final exams and graduation, enjoying spring on its beautiful campus.

That April in Lawrence, Kansas, events occurred which became known locally as the days of rage. In that week before Earth Day, there were anti-war demonstrations, racial conflicts, student protests, bomb threats, acts of arson, and sniper fire directed at firefighters. A black student organization responded to threats by encouraging members to arm themselves, and I walked in and out of my apartment complex past members of the football team leaning out their windows brandishing guns. Fire bombs destroyed a fraternity house, a local furniture store and half of the Student Union, one of the largest buildings on campus. The morning after the Student Union burned, April 21, instead of the usual swarm of students walking across campus to classes, buses appeared to shuttle us from one building to the next. I remember the quiet, the tension, and the smell of a dead fire. Finals were cancelled so students could get out of town. For me, April 21 marked the end of my college life. Two weeks later, at Kent State University in Ohio, members of the Army National Guard fired on student anti-war protesters, killing four. Some pundits referred to the Kent State event as "the day the 60's died."

Interestingly, such pundits refer to that original Earth Day as the birth of the Environmental decade. I must give a nod here to Rachel Carson, whose

watershed book on the effect of DDT on birds, *Silent Spring*, was published in 1962. But here's what else was going on in April of 1970: The Beatles announced their split-up and released their last album, *Let It Be*. Apollo 13 was launched for a moon landing, but returned to earth after an oxygen tank exploded. The US conducted nuclear tests in the Nevada desert. A group of farmers sued the organizers of Woodstock for \$35,000 in damages. The soap opera, *All My Children*, premiered. The Boeing 747 took its maiden flight. Thirty-seven percent of Americans (44% of men) smoked cigarettes pretty much anywhere they felt like it. Lake Erie was too polluted to support fish or plant life. The Cuyahoga River in Cleveland, Ohio caught fire in 1969 and didn't look any better in April of 1970. Los Angeles had some of the dirtiest air in the world (comparable to Beijing's today).

In 1969, US Senator Gaylord Nelson, a Democrat from Wisconsin, partnered with conservation-minded Republican Congressman Pete McCloskey to launch a "national teach-in on the environment." Inspired by the student anti-war movement, Senator Nelson realized he could infuse the energy of the young student activist population with an emerging public consciousness about air and water pollution. If his plan worked, he hoped it would force environmental protection onto the national political agenda. Nelson and McCloskey recruited Denis Hayes to coordinate the teach-in. Hayes built a national staff of 85 to promote events across the land, and on April 22, 1970, 20 million Americans took to the streets, parks and auditoriums coast to coast to demonstrate for a healthy, sustainable environment.

Earth Day 1970 achieved a rare political alignment, enlisting support from Republicans and Democrats, rich and poor, city slickers and farmers, tycoons and labor leaders. The first Earth Day led to the creation of the United States Environmental Protection Agency and the passage of the [Clean Air Act](#), [Clean Water Act](#), [Endangered Species Act](#), [National Wild and Scenic Rivers Act](#), [Federal Pesticides Act](#), [Environmental Education Act](#), [National Hiking Trails](#)

Act and the National Scenic Trails Act.

Twenty years later, a global Earth Day was organized, mobilizing 200 million people in 141 countries and lifting environmental issues onto the world stage. Earth Day 1990 gave a huge boost to recycling efforts worldwide and helped pave the way for the 1992 United Nations Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro. It also prompted President Clinton to award Senator Nelson the Presidential Medal of Freedom (1995) -- the highest honor given to civilians in the United States -- for his role as Earth Day founder. In spite of our current crisis, I hope you take some comfort when you consider where we might have been without Gaylord Nelson and his colleagues, and what can happen over a short period of time when people come together to address a shared concern.

Meanwhile, things were happening back at the Unitarian Universalist Association. In 1989, a group of UUs formed The 7th Principle Project, a UUA-affiliated environmental organization. The group published the **Green Sanctuary Handbook** in 1991, introducing UU congregations to the concept of integrating our environmental consciousness into our faith communities. By 1999, Fred Small had developed a proposal for a comprehensive Green Sanctuary program modeled after the very effective **Welcoming Congregation** program. He presented this new program at General Assembly, inviting congregations to carry out a series of actions addressing various environmental issues. Successful completion of these actions would bring the congregation recognition or "accreditation" as a Green Sanctuary. Further refinements and editions of the **Handbook** followed, with congregational participation increasing each year. As of March, 2015 there are 245 accredited Green Sanctuaries out of about 1000 to 1100 congregations.

In 2005, the 7th Principle Project became the UU Ministry for the Earth. One of their annual projects is to contract for an annual sermon written for Earth Day. What follows is a portion of the sermon for 2015, written by Matthew

McHale. I have edited out sections designed to educate us about the seriousness of our current environmental challenges, since I know I'm speaking to the choir, so I begin part way through his talk.

Excerpts below from "Shifting Energy: From Fossil Fuels to Climate Action" by Matthew McHale (uiministryfortheearth.org)

It's this reality (of our current situation) that scares so many of us, and so we respond alternately with numbness, denial, guilt, resignation, minimization, and paralyzing despair. And we end up going through our days with an indistinct but pervasive sense of unease, because we are living in a double reality—caught between carrying on with business as usual and the awareness that our way of life is totally unsustainable, and is leading us headlong toward a crisis which threatens most life on this earth.

As the problems continue to worsen, our inability to look at things as they are, prevents us from envisioning alternative possibilities, and our inaction leads to an even greater sense of overwhelm and powerlessness. It's a vicious cycle; and the only way to break the cycle is to take actions to help bring into being the world we want to live in. You see, once we start to act, once we begin to engage, to use our concern as a human fuel to act for a just transition, we can truly realize: we do have power and another world is possible.

When it was proposed in 2008, the Keystone XL pipeline, which would transport tar sands from Canada to the Gulf Coast, seemed like a done deal. But then NASA scientist James Hansen said its construction would be "game over" for the climate. Soon protesters were being arrested in front of the White House, and attorneys were fighting it in court, and a grass-roots movement grew—an unlikely coalition that included climate scientists, Indigenous tribes, and conservative ranchers—that elevated the pipeline to a national political issue and brought the project to a halt. Seven years later it still hasn't been approved and there is a significant possibility that it will be permanently blocked. Moreover, this campaign has prevented other companies from moving forward with similar developments, because they are afraid of losing money should they face similar opposition.

Tim DeChristopher, a Unitarian Universalist activist, became a hero in the environmental movement after he successfully prevented over 100,000 acres of federal land from being leased for oil and gas drilling. He had originally intended to protest the auction of land leases, which had been challenged for not adhering to environmental regulations. But in the moment, he decided to join the auction and ended up derailing the auction by outbidding his competitors, although he had no money to support his bids. Despite the whole auction being later declared unlawful and therefore invalid, Tim was arrested and spent two years in prison for his act of civil disobedience. At his sentencing

hearing Tim said, “At this point of unimaginable threats on the horizon, this is what hope looks like. In these times of a morally bankrupt government that has sold out its principles, this is what patriotism looks like. With countless lives on the line, this is what love looks like, and it will only grow.” Tim’s spontaneous act not only saved that land and inspired countless others, but it also transformed him. As he said, “principled action is the salvation of the soul. I may have to go to prison, but every day since that auction, I walk a little taller, and I feel a little more free.” Tim is currently a student at Harvard Divinity School, studying to be a UU minister.

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Once we take action, the realm of what’s possible actually starts to change. ...

This is the vision we must keep in our minds. Too often, when we think about the climate crisis and the world that is coming into being, we focus on what will be lost—and there will certainly be luxuries we have to give up. But there is so much about the current system that we would be glad to see change.

Our world is marked by staggering inequality, both nationally and globally, with the super-rich manipulating the political and economic system for their gain. Wars are fought and untold lives are destroyed, in search of ever more wealth, resources and power. Our culture almost pathologically glorifies individualism, at the expense of relationships and community. Despite our increasingly “connected” world, we are increasingly disconnected from one another. And we have become disconnected from the ecological systems that sustain our lives and all life on the planet. In so doing, we have caused irreparable harm to our beloved Earth.

As we think about the changes that will be coming, let us remember all those things we would gladly leave behind, and work towards a world that—despite the challenges ahead—is filled with more love— more beauty— more compassion— more peace— and more justice than we have today!

Let it be that vision— that vision for our future that guides us— guides us as we shift our energy away from a system that relies on burning fossil fuels, and dominating and exploiting people and the planet in the relentless pursuit of profit and growth. Let that vision guide us as we shift our energy toward a low-carbon future, and ultimately a life-sustaining society....

We have a choice about where we choose to spend our energy, not the energy of fossil fuels, but the energy of individual and collective action. How we use our energy is everything. We can either keep putting our energy into continuing business as usual; or we can choose to use our energy to ... help bring about a better future.

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But we have to act!

There is no more important cause. Confronting climate change is perhaps the biggest struggle that human beings have faced in our two-hundred-thousand-years on this planet. We are in a fight for our lives, and for the lives of future generations and the majority of life on this planet.

There is no better time. As Washington’s Governor Jay Inslee says, “we are the first generation to feel the sting of climate change, and we are the last generation that can do something about it.”

(At the least we agree that it will be more costly and difficult for each succeeding generation.)

And there is perhaps no religious community better suited to respond to these global crises and help bring about the world we want to create than Unitarian Universalists. We have a long and profound legacy of justice work to ground and inspire us. We have theologies that uphold our interconnectedness with all of creation. We have the ability to work effectively in multi-religious and secular settings. And, crucially, we have community in which begin to model the type of the future we want to create.

Indeed if Unitarian Universalism is to be relevant in the world that is rapidly coming into being, our congregations need to be engaging in the work of building sustainable and resilient communities.

Recognizing the dire need for action, leaders and organizations from across Unitarian Universalism have joined together in an unprecedented way in support of Commit2Respond, a Climate Justice initiative inspiring individuals and congregations across the continent to take collective action to change the world. We commit to take sustained action on ending global warming, by shifting to a low-carbon future, advancing the human rights of affected communities, and growing the climate justice movement.

What that looks like will be different for each congregation. Here are some ideas:

- Install solar panels on the building, and hire a worker-owned co-op, or a company that employs people of color, to install it.
- Host a weekly vegan potluck or start a community garden or a food forest that donates some—or all—of its food to a local soup kitchen.

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- Become the hub for an alternative economic system, like a community currency or a time bank, or start a tool lending library for the community.
- Install bike racks or organize carpools for those who can’t ride a bike.

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- Develop a disaster preparedness plan for your community, or support a frontline community that’s been hit by a devastating storm.
- Become a Green Sanctuary
- One congregation painted the trunk and branches of a tree. Each time a member made a small step toward reducing their carbon footprint, or some other means of

treading lighter on the earth, they'd add a green leaf to the tree with a brief description of their accomplishment.

There are countless possibilities. But this isn't just another opportunity to simply *think* about all of the things we could be doing—we need to start putting these ideas into action! And then putting more of them into action! If we're not putting our energy behind the transformation to a life-sustaining society, we are continuing to put our energy behind business as usual. So how will we commit to respond?

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The problems we face are so daunting, and the path to a life-sustaining society is still unclear. In order to sustain us, what we need more than anything is a sense of vision and hope—vision for a livable future and hope that we can make it manifest. But vision and hope don't just happen. Vision arises out of taking an honest look at the world around us—at all of its brokenness and its promise. And hope is choosing to take action, however small.

None of us can know what that future will look like, but we can begin to see it in all of the small actions we take to heal and bless the world. And as those actions come together, like tiles in beautiful mosaic, we start to see glimpses of the just and sustainable world we are creating.

May it be so.