Opening Words:

“A human being is a part of the whole called by us universe, a part limited in time and space. He experiences himself, his thoughts and feeling as something separated from the rest, a kind of optical delusion of his consciousness. This delusion is a kind of prison for us, restricting us to our personal desires and to affection for a few persons nearest to us. Our task must be to free ourselves from this prison by widening our circle of compassion to embrace all living creatures and the whole of nature in its beauty.” ― Albert Einstein

**In the Service of Nature**

Given that Earth Week is upon us, I thought it would be appropriate to spend today talking to you about serving nature, something I believe is important – if not spiritually necessary – for Unitarians to do. But before I do, I want us to take a few moments to reflect on all of the ways that nature serves us. Nature gives us air to breathe, for without nature we would suffocate. Nature gives us water to drink, for without nature we would die of thirst. Nature gives us food to eat, for without nature we would starve. And nature gives us land to live on, for without nature we would simply not exist. Nature serves our basic needs, but it also does so much more for us.

During the moment of silence, perhaps you thought of watching songbirds returning in spring to a backyard bird feeder, watching an elk bugle in the fall, or seeing jackrabbit prints in the winter snow. Or perhaps your special nature moment is standing next to a babbling brook or listening to the rolling thunder at a waterfall. Or perhaps your special natural time and place is when you smell the aroma of fresh sage on the prairie or smell the pine while hiking up a forest path – whatever it is, or perhaps it is all of the above and more, you know that these natural places and events offer you a sense of peace, solitude, and joy. When I am in nature, I am often reminded of the words of Sylvia Plath, who once said, “I felt my lungs inflate with the onrush of scenery—air, mountains, and trees, and I thought, ‘This is what it is to be happy.’” I know when I am grumpy, or restless, or stressed, I need only go for a walk outside to refresh my mental state. For me, and I hope for you, too, nature offers spiritual renewal and a break from busy life.

But more importantly, nature offers a connection to the larger world in which we live. Through nature, we acknowledge and honor the seventh Unitarian principle of “respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part.” I’m sure that’s what you all think of when you take a hike in the woods, right? But really, even if you aren’t consciously thinking it, I am sure you are subconsciously reminded of it all of the time. When you look up at the clouds or the stars or across a prairie or down from a mountain, and you see the vast sky and land, it is hard not to forget that the natural world is so much more than those of us in this room, and even more than humankind itself. In testimony before a Senate Subcommittee in 1995, Terry Tempest Williams summed it up by saying, “To be whole. To be complete. Wildness reminds us what it means to be human, what we are connected to rather than what we are separate from.” This is the service that nature provides – peace, harmony, and spiritual connection.

So, in the Earth Week spirit in which we find ourselves, how do we give back to nature and honor Mother Earth for all she bestows upon us? Can we ever do justice to the gifts we receive from the natural world? Perhaps not. But I believe we should attempt to try. In fact, given the environmental problems of today, we must try. We must try to serve nature as she serves us.

I agree with E.B. White, who once said, “I would feel more optimistic about a bright future for man if he spent less time proving that he can outwit Nature and more time tasting her sweetness and respecting her seniority.” Unfortunately, in today’s times, I for one can feel quite pessimistic about humanity’s future. I hope today you will join me in getting that optimism back because it is critical to do so, and we all can play a part.

Now we can’t all be Henry David Thoreau and sacrifice all of modernity’s conveniences for a life in the woods. But we can – as he did – “live deliberately” and live more simply with a greater connection to the natural world. We all have the power to choose to make the world a better place and help sustain the resources of today for tomorrow.

And it’s not just about the lifestyle fixes – using less gasoline, reducing, reusing, and recycling (in that order of course), being an energy wise shopper by purchasing energy efficient light bulbs and appliances, and turning down the heat a few degrees at night or when you’re away from the house. I know many of you already do those things (and probably encourage others to make similar personal changes and small sacrifices). But these individual measures will unfortunately not make a big enough difference in the available time we have to address today’s environmental problems.

Our country has achieved a relatively strong environmental sensibility, but by many measures this orientation has yet to translate into meaningful collective action on the biggest, hardest problems facing Mother Nature, such as climate change. In order to address those problems, we must dig deeper and really integrate a service to nature not just into the tasks of the day but into who we are and how we connect with those around us. We must band together, speak with one voice, and create bigger – lasting – social and environmental change. Not an easy task, for sure, but I know you are all up to the challenge.

Service to nature takes many forms. Just here in our Fellowship we have so many great examples. We have conservation ranchers who know caring for the land is a critical part of their bottom line. We have scientists and engineers who study the natural world and help companies, organizations, and our government develop solutions to critical problems. We have master gardeners who help others learn skills to attract pollinators, use water-wise plants, and have a greater appreciation for nature’s beauty. And we have community organizers – both volunteers and professionals – who work to empower others to take action to protect the Earth. And we also have those who serve our community’s working poor, the elderly, and those less fortunate – to help them achieve self-sufficiency and a time and place where they can move beyond meeting their own needs to helping others. I am so awed when I think of the contributions people in this Fellowship make in protecting the natural world. We can learn from each other and appreciate the service each of us commits to daily by going to work or volunteering our time.

My own service to nature has also taken many forms over the years. I have signed petitions for environmental causes. I have organized petition drives for environmental causes. I have donated money for conservation groups. I have raised money for conservation groups. I have volunteered on divestment campaigns to get educational and government institutions to stop funding bad corporations. I have volunteered on campaigns to make bad corporations better. And yes, I have even dressed up as a Disney character with friends in college to protest toxic plastics in children’s toys. Who says serving nature can’t be fun, right? Today, my service to nature takes a more professional bent of filing legal appeals, writing comments to government agencies about long and technical documents, and working on legislation. But even during the weeks that are most busy, I still try and find time to volunteer my time, talent, and treasure (commonly called the three t’s) for other organizations and causes. If my own life has been any example, there is plenty of variety for any skill level or time availability to serve nature.

But I know even those of us who spend our days (and sometimes our evenings and weekends) in some way or another serving nature can do more. I know I can do more, and I hope you will join me in the commitment to do just that.

Digging deeper to truly serve nature takes contemplation, reflection, and reverence. It takes humility and a level of personal sacrifice. Unfortunately, it is something that is not easy for most people to do. It is much easier to live life the way you always have and not make the sacrifices necessary to allow others to have the same quality of life into the future. It is easy to say, yes, I support clean energy, but much harder to pay the extra money to allow your utility to make it happen. It is easy to say, yes I want to buy local food, but much harder to take the time to track down the local producers or to spend more money shopping at the farmers’ market, which around here only happens in the summer. It is easy to say, yes I will drive less, but much harder to walk to work when it is less than 10 degrees outside. It is easy to say I won’t use plastic bags, but then hard to remember your reusable bags that are too often left at home.

The idea of sacrifice is the unspoken issue of the environmental movement. We talk around the issue to avoid flashbacks to Jimmy Carter in a sweater or to avoid the old “jobs versus the environment” debate. Instead, the environmental movement of today spouts rhetoric like “we don’t have to sacrifice a healthy economy for a healthy environment” and talks about technological innovation and progress as the answer to our problems. We talk about smart cars, the smart grid, and climate-smart agriculture. It’s almost as if clean energy, healthy forests, and sustainable water supplies will just happen because humans are smart enough to make it happen. We don’t talk about the personal sacrifice necessary to make it happen because frankly, the environmental movement would have a lot less support if we did.

But for us to truly serve nature, we will all have to sacrifice a little bit. Otherwise, we will collectively sacrifice so much more for future generations.

And then there are those around us in our society that ignore that there even is a problem. For all the facts, scientists are too often rebuffed by corporate and political forces that seek to demoralize, defund, and ultimately defeat any advances we seek to create. Leading a life of “ignorance is bliss” can be appealing. But serving nature requires us to educate ourselves and challenge those who ignore the lessons nature is trying to teach us.

Now I know sometimes nature makes it hard for us to like her let alone serve her. When snow gets in your eye, hail damages your roof, rabbits eat your garden, hurricane force winds blow in your face, or a swarm of mosquitos attacks you, it is a bit hard to love nature. But even when nature is at its worst, we must always respect the natural world and its power, because even nature’s power for doing things that annoy us or impact us, is awe-inspiring. Even in the dead of winter – when you wonder if your summer clothes will always have to stay in a box in your closet – or in the midst of yes, another “spring” snowstorm, nature is worth serving.

Because in these days of climate change and extreme weather events and times when “average” temperatures and weather patterns just don’t exist anymore, nature’s power has been impacted by all of us, and it is up to all of us to help nature adjust to this new reality and hopefully prevent it from getting worse. We cannot honor the season’s turning and celebrate spring without acknowledging that these are urgent times in which “spring” is no longer normal or average, and we must acknowledge that unless we act, one day spring may not return because nature is running out of time to renew itself.

I certainly don’t have all of the answers. The environmental movement of today is good at talking about the problems and not so good at figuring out the answers. Unfortunately, that’s partly because with the lack of political leadership we have these days, we might not be capable of getting the answers. And it’s partly because the problems we face are incredibly complex, systematic, and ok, I admit it - daunting. We have a consumer-based economy that could collapse if we actually honor the earth and stop buying things we don’t need. We have a corporate controlled political system that recognizes the rights of corporate citizens more than the rights of you and me. And we have politicians who only think of the next November as opposed to seven generations from now. This is quite the problem because to create the systematic change we must create, we need political will even more than perhaps we need personal sacrifice. However, that is not say that we should do nothing or feel powerless. We all must take responsibility and transform that responsibility into action. Again, I don’t have all the answers, but all I know is that we have to do more than we are doing now by taking one step at a time, acting deliberately, and getting others to make the same commitment and sacrifice.

I leave you with the words of Archbishop Desmond Tutu, a far more brilliant person than I could ever aspire to be. He recently wrote an editorial in the Guardian newspaper,[[1]](#footnote-1) which was a call to action for people around the world to address climate change. He said:

. . . The bottom line is that we have 15 years to take the necessary steps [to address climate change]. The horse may not have bolted, but it’s well on its way through the stable door. Who can stop it? Well, we can, you and I. And it is not just that we can stop it, we have a responsibility to do so. It is a responsibility that begins with God commanding the first human inhabitants of the garden of Eden “to till it and keep it.” To keep it; not to abuse it, not to destroy it.

Hopefully that is enough God references for you here on Easter Sunday. But, no matter whether you believe in God or just some higher spiritual connection – perhaps the Unitarianism interconnectedness – I hope you answer Archbishop Tutu’s call to action and do what you can to serve nature.

Thank you for letting me share a few words with you this morning, and I look forward to the discussion and getting more ideas and learning more solutions from you all.

Closing Words:

“If we are at all sensitive to the life around us, to one another’s pains and joys, to the beauty and fragility of the Earth, it is all about being broken open, allowing ourselves to step out from out hardened veneers and expose our core, allowing ourselves to be vulnerable in our emotional response to the world. And how can we not respond? This is what I mean by being ‘broken open.’ To engage. To love. Any one of these actions of the heart will lead to a personal transformation that bears collective gifts.” - Terry Tempest Williams, from an interview

1. <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2014/apr/10/divest-fossil-fuels-climate-change-keystone-xl/print> [↑](#footnote-ref-1)