

Earth Day 2013

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delivered April 21, 2013 at the

Unitarian Universalist Church of the Lehigh Valley

Earth Day 2013 – forty-three years and counting. The issues and alarm that filled the air in 1970 have not decreased since then. They have increased. What was a worry then has grown into a certainty: our actions are harming the earth in ways that are far-reaching, with profound consequences for the fate of all life on this planet.

In 2006, the Unitarian Universalist General Assembly endorsed a social justice statement on the threat of global warming & climate change. It points out that “There is a scientific consensus that the Earth’s climate is changing due to global warming/climate change caused primarily by the human use of oil, coal, and natural gas. The burning of these fossil fuels releases carbon dioxide into the atmosphere, which traps more heat from the sun. Global warming/climate change is accelerating as planetary temperatures reach record highs. The melting of polar ice and mountain glaciers may cause sea levels to rise by at least three feet, probably much more, and by eighty feet in coming centuries if the average temperature rises five degrees, warming that will be difficult to avoid. Half the world’s planet and animal species are at risk of extinction by 2100 as habitats are destroyed and ecosystems unravel. . . . Increasing temperatures can devastate human communities and wildlife habitats. Warmer climates are extending toward the poles, dramatically altering ecosystems. Melting polar ice caps raise sea levels and upset the delicate balance of ocean salinity. This imbalance may lead to a shift in ocean circulation patterns, which could wreak havoc with regional climates. Recent increases in sea surface temperatures are linked with more intense hurricanes.” As we all know.

And this was in 2006! What was clear then has only grown clearer in the years since. And this is just the climate change part! There is so much additional harm being done to the earth and its ecosystems by the way we are going about

getting those fuels to burn: mountaintop removal coal mining, fracking, tar sands oil extraction, as well as deepwater oil drilling.

The tasks before us are huge and can seem overwhelming, and this is why the Unitarian Universalist Ministry for the Earth is suggesting that we celebrate Earth Day 2013 with the theme of “Working Towards Sustainable Communities.”

They tell us that “the need for sustainable communities – ones that are economically, environmentally, and socially healthy and resilient – has never been stronger.” They continue, “The current and future impacts of our changing climate and extreme weather events affect the lives of families and communities across the country; our out-of-control materialistic consumer culture challenges Earth’s finite resources and contributes to environmental degradation; local food security is slim... many in our increasingly diverse society endure an unequal burden of economic and environmental injustices; and social isolation and loss of meaning in life continue to be an all-too-familiar fact of life for many.”

They say that, “Resilient sustainable communities offer integrated solutions to many of these challenges when they are based on long-range perspectives, reflect their local circumstances, and speak to the needs of current and future residents. The Unitarian Universalist Ministry for Earth is focusing this year’s Earth Day resources on Sustainable Communities because we believe such communities, with their focus on realizing and sustaining a just and equitable world, embody our mission and reflect key Unitarian Universalist principles.

“For Earth Day 2013, the UU Ministry for Earth is asking congregations to connect to issues related to realizing sustainability and to commit to actions that will help build a sustainable and just world, one congregation and one community at a time.”

This congregational focus is important because, although the problem is global, we need to find ways to act locally. I hope we can all find ways to make a difference in the health of our planet.

We need to act because we can’t continue to deny the damage we’ve done to the Earth, its creatures, its ecosystems, and its climate. Even the corporate-

driven newspapers are finding it harder to hide this news with deceptive headlines and spurious refutations of established scientific research.

The good news is that, as we become aware of the consequences of our actions and the responsibility we bear for the state of our planet, more and more people are accepting that responsibility and its mandate for action and change.

But the larger issues really are huge. When we focus on actions and consequences, policies and issues, we can become so enmeshed in the overwhelming nature of all this that we can miss the bigger picture entirely. There are bigger issues involved than merely economic and ecological choices, issues of moral development that can lead to a fundamental transformation of individuals, of groups, of societies, and of our world community.

David Korten has sounded the call for such a transformation in his book, *The Great Turning: From Empire to Earth Community*. He describes how our relationship with the earth mirrors our relationships with our fellow humans. He frames his discussion with stages of moral development as described by Lawrence Kohlberg and others. Korten points out that people approach relationships differently depending on which of five moral developmental stages they occupy.

He describes the first stage as the way a young child experiences the world, and calls it “magical consciousness.” Limited in its ability to recognize the connection between one’s actions and future consequences, this consciousness depends on external figures to make things magically right.

Korten calls the second stage “imperial consciousness.” This normally appears around the age of six or seven, when the child develops a greater capacity to distinguish between real and imagined events and learns about cause and effect. There is an appreciation that others have their own points of view, which are primarily useful to help you get what you want. At this stage, justice is punishment, and there is a limited ability to constrain emotional impulses.

You can see why Korten calls this stage Imperial, because in it each person constitutes an empire, just like that of Rome or England, or perhaps 21st century America. Empire sees the world in terms of opportunities for profit and gratification where good behavior is motivated more by a desire to improve one’s

position, or to avoid being caught, than by any selfless concern for others' or an internalized ethical code.

Korten calls his third stage, “socialized consciousness,” and it normally begins around eleven or twelve. Unfortunately, it is also the highest stage of moral development most people attain. He describes this as bringing “a growing emotional intelligence and an extension of self-interest to that of a group.”

Like Imperial Consciousness, this stage sees morality as obedience to rules and justice as punishment. He continues, “The Socialized Consciousness constructs its identity through its primary reference groups, as defined by gender, age, race, ethnicity, religion, nationality, class, political party, occupation, employer, and perhaps a favored sports team. It is commonly militantly protective of its own group and prone to take any criticism of it as a serious affront. . . . It is the consciousness of the Good Citizens, who have a ‘Small World’ view of reality defined by their immediate reference group, play by the existing rules, and expect a decent life in return...”

These first three stages, then, dominate the civilized world, as civilizations compete to dominate and exploit each other. These first three stages tend to see the earth the same way they see each other: as a resource to be exploited.

Korten’s great achievement is that he understands that revolution is impossible without evolution – the realization that a true revolution toward a sustainable earth community requires a commensurate evolution in ethical values. As long as self-interest is the norm, as long as the lowest price is seen as a virtue, as long as profit and convenience outweigh consideration of long-term environmental consequences, we will remain trapped in a declining spiral of ecological degradation. What we need is to transcend self-interest and ascend to higher levels of moral development.

And this is the great news. The challenge before us is not merely economic, technological, or ecological – it is fundamentally religious! A commitment to the principles outlined in *The Great Turning* entails a commitment to personal and cultural moral and ethical transformation.

Korten’s stages of Cultural and Spiritual Consciousness describe just such transformations. This leads, ultimately, to an understanding of the

interdependence of all life: that the Earth does not belong to us; that we belong to the Earth; that the interests of each person are as valuable as our own; that people and planets are not to be seen as means to an end – they are ends in themselves and must be appreciated and respected as such.

This is a fundamentally religious issue because it is based on our basic beliefs about the nature of the world – and it comes down to what and how we love – because our actions are always based more on what we love than on what we think.

I would encourage you all to consider the message of *The Great Turning*. You could read it; think about it; talk about it. It can help us understand how to expand our thinking from the need to change our actions to the need to change our hearts.

Changes in the heart will always find their way into our actions, but if we try to change only the actions of ourselves and others, we run the risk of becoming just another noisy player in the competitive marketplace of political action. Making noise may feel satisfying, but it rarely changes much, and it certainly is not going to achieve the profound cultural transformation that we need.

Of course, keep doing all those important actions to work for a greater, healthier planet and sustainable communities. Let's create those sustainable communities that we dream of. But let's not forget where it all begins – in the heart.

May it be so.