“Choosing Hope in Uncertain Times, ”

Marilyn Gottschall, Ph.D.

Unitarian Universalist Church of Long Beach

I’d like to talk with you today about Climate Justice Month. During the next thirty days Unitarian Universalists are charged to join with other denominations across the country to begin a “spiritual journey for climate justice.” That sounds like a very laudable thing but I’m not sure what it means. They’ve sent us some guidelines, but no instructions. So that’s what I’d like to explore with you today: what might it mean for us to undertake a spiritual journey that has at its heart the fate of the earth and all living things.

Here at this church we have been concerned about the fate of the earth for decades and we have responded in myriad ways …we drive fuel efficient cars, we plant drought tolerant gardens, we aspire to simpler lives, and now we are working towards putting solar panels on the church roof. All of these are good things and provide tangible evidence that we are acting towards a sustainable planet. But I suspect that in the back of every person’s mind lies a bit of fear and dread about the climate future. And we’ve been living with that for some time.

Many of you remember the 1972 study called the “Limits to Growth” where MIT computer models charted the relationship between economic and population growth trends and the planet’s finite and diminishing resources. The study concluded that a sustainable future could be achieved only if humanity were to take responsible steps to manage environmental resources. If we carried on “business as usual” we would overshoot the planet’s carrying capacity, resulting in the collapse of our environment and economic structures.

Forty five years later the predicted trends have been borne out. The “Limits to Growth” conclusion is now incontrovertible: human intervention in natural processes on a finite planet does not end well. We now have hard and sobering data about the human effects on planetary systems. Science tells us that human impact has been so significant and so pervasive as to cause irreparable changes to all of the planet’s biophysical systems. We are now living in what they call the anthropocene, the age of man. An era in which the paradigm of unlimited growth has resulted in the rapid deterioration of all planetary systems that sustain us…the air, the water, and the land. Typically we talk about climate change in terms of rising temperatures and extreme weather, but the range of complex consequences of burning of fossil fuels are beginning to engulf us:

Let me provide some examples…

* The oceans have been absorbing huge quantities of our CO2 emissions. Consequently oceans are warmer, and they are 30% more acid which means the coral reefs are dying and the marine food chain is deteriorating.
* Arctic ice fields and glaciers are in irreversible melt and are already raising sea levels around the globe, displacing millions of people and threatening the stability of nations.
* Freshwater resources are increasingly scarce and polluted…and we are still fracking in California
* Biodiversity is diminishing as species go extinct at an unprecedented rate, 1000 times greater than natural rates, 1000 times.
* Methane, which is a greenhouse gas 80% more effective at trapping heat in the atmosphere than CO2, is being released from Arctic permafrost, creating a feedback loop that accelerates the warming of the planet.

This list can and does go on, but the point is that life in the anthropocene, life as we have lived it and loved it will never be available for our children, much less our grandchildren. To all appearances humanity seems hell-bent on self-destruction. And the tragic part of this is that we… you and I…and other good people… never meant to cause harm. The changes that hover over the future are the unintended consequences of our own prosperity. We did not realize until it was too late that our lifestyle was a weapon of mass destruction. We did not know…we did not mean to cause harm. And now we find ourselves riding on a runaway train and we don’t know how to stop it.

So given such a scenario, I find myself wondering what Climate Justice Month could possibly mean. And more to the point: what does it mean to undertake a spiritual journey for climate justice? Who wants to look at this? Who, when faced with the promise of an uninhabitable world, would not want to turn away? Who would not prefer to think that the so-called scientific uncertainty means we don’t have to act today? Who would not prefer to hope that some miraculous yet-unknown technology will save us? Who among us would not prefer the sweet pleasures of the everyday: the joys and sorrows of raising children, caring for loved ones, or savoring our delicious spring days?

So we turn away from this reality to preserve our equilibrium and in doing so we collaborate with millions of our fellow citizens in a socially constructed culture of silence and denial. We all agree to go about our business pretending that we do not notice the ice caps plunging into the Arctic ocean, or the Central Valley turning to dust, or the bodies of sea lion pups washing ashore along the California coast.

But avoidance and denial are becoming increasingly more difficult. Everyday in the news we are reminded that climate change is upon us. We can no longer claim that we don’t know. Our innocence is gone.

Climate change is in fact the moral issue of our time. That means that as a society and as individuals every single action that we take (or do not take) represents a moral decision we have made-- consciously or unconsciously. If we do nothing different tomorrow, our most banal everyday actions will ensure a sentence of absolute misery for future generations. Sadly, we are mired knee deep in the economic system that is destroying the world . Our challenge is to extricate ourselves

So I ask again, what does it mean to commit to climate justice? How does one chart a spiritual path into this landscape? In the face of such overwhelming odds, how do we make of our lives an expression of our spirituality? Sharon Welch, one of my favorite theologians says: “We know that we will not be able to reverse the changes that are already in motion, that dramatic environmental upheaval will occur in our children’s lifetime, if not our own. But that is not a reason for despair and hopelessness. For hope “resides in the appreciation of one’s own dignity.” To be fully human is to “love life enough to struggle against all that diminishes it.”

Let me repeat: Hope resides in the appreciation of one’s own dignity. To be fully human is to “love life enough to struggle against all that diminishes it.”

The spiritual journey for climate justice does not begin with complex strategies and actions for reversing climate change. Rather it must begin with a recognition of this capacity we have to love unconditionally this beautiful place we call home; our capacity to love it, to love all its creatures and to love life itself. To love this world is a holy act, one that lifts us up beyond ourselves to the larger reality of which we are a part.

In affirming the magnificence of life , we face the choice whether to care for it…whether we will, in fact, struggle against all that diminishes it. The spiritual journey must include the mature courage to see and acknowledge the trouble we are in. To look into the maw of hopelessness and dread and to risk saying “yes” to life. It means not turning away from the irreparable damage that has already occurred, but rather it means facing our fear that there is nothing to be done. Thich Nhat Hanh was once asked what we could do to save the planet. “What we most need to do,” he replied, “is to hear within us the sounds of the Earth crying.” That is to say: we must allow our hearts to break WIDE open.

If , when we look at the state of the planet, there is pain and grief involved in our seeing, then we must acknowledge and honor our grief. Our capacity to suffer with the earth is a mark of compassion and is essential to our survival as individuals and as a species. We know from Kubler Ross’ work that it is only through honoring our grief that we can move beyond it, that turning away from our fear and pain actually incapacitates and disempowers us. Once we take in and digest the bad news of our planetary predicament, we can never again pretend that all is well. But grief is not a bottomless pit. If we are able to tell the truth about what we know, what we see and what we feel, we will be transformed. And out this transformation can come “an increased determination to act and a renewed appetite for life.”

So let us begin to identify our grief as both a spiritual and a political act. Valuing our own awareness and caring is the mature beginning of accepting that our actions do matter.

If our spiritual journey begins with seeing and accepting… then what? Here the classic existential questions take on new importance. What should we do? How should we live? Can there be such a thing as meaningful action in uncertain times? As UUs we have traditionally expressed our spirituality by standing on the side of oppressed peoples: anti-racism campaigns, gay rights, and immigration reform. But this fight is different. The problems are immense, the solutions, if they exist at all, are far beyond our comprehension and our ability. And, the enemy is very structure within which we live.

So perhaps we have to redefine what responsible action might mean. We know that our best actions will not reverse the irreversible. There are absolutely no guarantees that our actions will ameliorate the consequences of the anthropocene. But even if we believe that we are rearranging the deck chairs on the Titanic, we must resist the desecration of the planet because what we are saving here is our own humanity, our ability to face down the odds. We have no control over the fate of the planet, but we can decide how we will respond to this situation. We must struggle against any force that diminishes life in order to be fully human. We must work to change what we can because we are called to act towards justice. We are not liable for the consequences of fossil fuel emissions, but now that we “know,” we are responsible. As Alice Walker puts it, “activism is the rent we pay for living on this planet.”

And action begins with speech. Buddhist activist Joanna Macy says that “By speaking our concerns and giving voice to our feelings, we make them more visible not just to others but also to ourselves.” If we a create space for our fears, we break the code of silence on climate disruption and this is both a spiritual and a political act. I offer this small personal example: recently I made a choice to wear my Citizen’s Climate Lobby button on my shirt front and now, almost every single day people approach me , complete strangers, to talk about climate change. This minute act of personal courage has made me keenly aware of the power of one voice and it reminded me that when I risk the sound of my own caring, I grow stronger. If you and I dare to bring our concerns to our friends and neighbors, we will find allies. When we think and talk together our moral discernment sharpens, our commitment is reinforced, our courage grows, and we create a new cultural discourse, one that is centered on the survival of humanity.

Our minister spoke several weeks ago about the spiritual power that is to be found in clarifying our values and accepting our own agendas. When we are clear-eyed about our priorities we are able to move forward without fear or distraction. I am hoping that in this Thirty Days of Action for Climate Justice we can each consider what it means for us to truly be a part of the interconnected web of life. Acceptance is our first task. Coming to grips with the probability of ecocide will, paradoxically, help us to live more fully. Beyond grief and acceptance, the decision to act, to live fully, to serve is your own, but I suggest that choosing hope is essential. Not a naïve hope but a hope that is grounded in a fierce love for life, and the conscious resistance to despair.

There are no certainties here for right action: Some of us will need to look away, but others will join with the hundreds of thousands of people all around us who are claiming our right and responsibility to protect the only home we will ever know. Your neighbors are building more resilient communities. Some are working to mitigate the damage already done and others are pounding on the doors of our recalcitrant politicians.

I have chosen to work with the Citizens’ Climate Lobby. It is a national grass-roots group that seeks to create the political will in Washington to put a price on carbon…and make polluters pay. Because climate change is a systemic problem, using the machinery of government is an essential step to halt CO2 emissions. I believe that political action is absolutely necessary AND on my bad days I know that it is insufficient, perhaps even futile at this late date. But resignation and despair cost me far too much spiritually… so I choose to work, arm in arm with others who share my values. This group inspires and enlivens me; it enables me to grow; it provides me with community and with joy as we work together, against the odds.

Noam Chomsky sums up our moral dilemma very simply: “no matter how you evaluate what’s happening in the world, you basically have two choices: … be pessimistic, say there’s no hope and abandon all efforts, (in which case you are ensuring that the worst will happen); or you can grasp whatever hopes there are and try to do what you can.”

The goals of Climate Justice Month are broad and not specific: they ask us to shift to a low carbon future, to advance the human rights of those affected by climate change, and to grow the climate justice movement…in the next 30 days! There is a lot of room for you in this process and I invite you, I implore you to continue your spiritual journey by placing climate justice at the center of your being. I urge you to become proactive. Find a group of people to walk with, either in this congregation or in the community, people who will inspire you, cry with you, work with you and celebrate a love of life with you. Find the intersection between what the world needs and what you can do. And then… stand on the side of your love. Even better : shout on the side of love, and not just for 30 days, but for the rest of your life. The Earth and all of life on this planet have a claim on us and our task is to love life enough to struggle against everything that diminishes it.

Let us move forward …together…into uncertain times…armed with hope.

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