Earth Day 2011: Sacred Waters

By Rowan Van Ness, UUMFE Program Associate for Environmental Justice at the UUA

Unitarian Universalists (UUs) all over are thinking about water justice, from the UU Legislative Ministry of California’s campaign to pass legislation on the Human Right to Water to congregations in New York examining the impacts of natural gas hydraulic fracturing on watersheds. Water sustains all life and insufficient access to clean drinking water and sanitation results in disease and dehydration. Many environmental justice issues, from immigration to climate change, deeply impact water.

As UUs, we are called to respect the interdependent web of all existence and water is a common thread. Water’s both live-giving and life-taking qualities have made it an important symbol in many of our world’s religious traditions. UU Ministry for Earth (UUMFE) is asking congregations to celebrate the sacred waters that sustain us all this Earth Day and to commit to actions that will make our world more just.

Unitarian Universalists (UUs) are committing to small and large daily actions over 40 days, from Sunday, April 17, to Thursday, May 26, for the sake of the Earth and all who live here. Our choices affect many aspects of global environmental justice. When 40 people in one congregation make 40-day commitments, that congregation will be included in the roll of participating congregations.

One participant in the 40/40/40 campaign on Ethical Eating in 2010 reported that since the 40 days ended, he has continued to practice his new commitment of turning off the water when he brushes his teeth. Another person pledged to eat local foods for 40 days and, since the campaign has ended, she has continued to look into ways of making her eating habits more in line with her values by exploring vegetarianism. Pledges large and small, held in community, have allowed UUs across the country to examine how they can live in right relationship with the planet and each other and find the support needed to try out a change that would ultimately transform their lives and the lives of those affected by their new choices.

An individual’s commitment for 40 days makes a real difference, and it is only amplified by doing this in community. More than 150 congregations registered participation in Earth Day in 2010—let’s make it even greater this year!

From sample actions around water justice to order of service covers, the Earth Day pages on our Website (http://uuministryforearth.org/2011-ED-MainPage) give congregations tools to plan successful Earth Day events. Be sure to register your congregation’s participation so we can include you in our annual list of participating congregations and share your stories with others!

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As We Begin a New Year . . .

The start of the new year always gives us a reminder to take stock of where we’ve been and where we are going. For many of us the next year looks manageable, though with some challenges, but it’s the long-term view that is truly scary in terms of the changes we see as inevitable for the future.

As Board members for UU Ministry for Earth, we’re at that same point: next year looks pretty good, but we get scared when start looking at the world we’ll be leaving our children and grandchildren. We ask ourselves when we’re planning for the future, how can we as an organization help UUs face the despair around the future in a way that is constructive and in line with our values?

Of course, there are no easy answers to this question, but we do know that both individually and organizationally we feel less frightened when we’re doing something to help reduce the effects of environmental destruction, especially when we’re looking to help reduce the consequences for those who have the least or are unjustly suffering. So, as an organization we feel that the best strategy for helping people cope is our focus on environmental justice and how we can help UUs work together on issues of Earth ministry that recognize the rights of all species.

Our focus on water for our Earth Day materials embraces that direction. Already hundreds of millions of people do not have adequate, clean water. As fresh water supplies dwindle and our oceans are compromised, the need to find ways to deal with water pollution and scarcity is critical. We hope you will find the materials provided for Earth Day to be useful in bringing attention to not only gratitude for the beauty of our rivers, lakes, and oceans, but also how we can help assure that they are available to all of Earth’s people and other species into the future.

I’ll close with this quote from Thomas Merton that reminds us that action is the best antidote for despair:

“Do not depend on the hope of results. You may have to face the fact that your work will be apparently worthless and even achieve no result at all, if not perhaps results opposite to what you expect. As you get used to this idea, you start more and more to concentrate not on the results, but on the value, the rightness, the truth of the work itself. You gradually struggle less and less for an idea and more and more for specific people. In the end, it is the reality of personal relationship that saves everything.”

With Earth in mind,

Nancy King Smith, Co-Chair, UU Ministry for Earth Board
News From UU Ministry For Earth

Staying Present for a Troubled World – New Workshops Offered to UU Congregations and Districts

By Irene Keim, UUMFE Board Co-Chair

“If the world is to be healed through human efforts, I am convinced it will be by ordinary people, people whose love for this life is even greater than their fear.” – Joanna Macy

UU Ministry for Earth (UUMFE) is partnering with Barbara Ford to offer new experiential workshops to churches and districts across the country to address the spiritual concerns of congregants who are wondering how to keep doing the work of justice without succumbing to burnout, and with a clarity of intention and joy shared in a loving, mutually-supportive community.

As Barbara reminds us, “We are bombarded by news...news of horrific war, of dying seabirds coated with oil, of unbounded greed by corporate profiteers, of disappearing mountaintops, of families separated by borders and fear...how do we stay present to this world we live in without succumbing to despair, anger, or paralyzing fear?

“These feelings lie less in concern for our personal self, as much as a manifestation of the apprehension of our collective suffering. We know it is not just we who are suffering, but our children and their children, and the living body of Earth. This awareness is the natural and revered quality of compassion – the quality of “suffering with,” to join with the world with a sense of shared destiny and responsibility.”

These new workshops are based on the transformational and ground-breaking work of eco-philosopher Joanna Macy, called The Work That Reconnects. These workshops offer the opportunity to find ground in gratitude, honor our pain for the world, deepen our sense of interconnectedness, and strengthen us for the work of healing our world.

The workshops – entitled “Staying Present for a Troubled World” – are facilitated by Barbara Ford, an artist, singer, facilitator, activist, and a colleague of Joanna Macy. Barbara is a former board member of UU Ministry for Earth and served as the Board Chair for three years. Presently, she facilitates workshops on activism, spirituality, and creativity through GAIA Workshops – Growing Awareness Into Action.

Joanna Macy says of her: “As an inspiring guide in the Work That Reconnects, Barbara Ford combines a contagious vitality and a firm faith in the power of the human spirit. It is a joy for me to watch how she enlivens groups with her humor, intellect, and creativity. I rejoice that she is bringing this life-changing work to our world."

One workshop participant said of her experience: “Staying on task with our work of healing the Earth is hard these days, especially with the denial and resistance to change we see all around us. Barbara’s workshop was like an oasis in the desert offering respite, confronting the despair, and finding strength in a community of companions."

UU Ministry for Earth with be sponsoring workshop tours to be offered to districts and congregations throughout the country. A portion of the workshop proceeds will go to support the important work of UUMFE. If your congregation or a group of congregations are interested in bringing a workshop to your area, please contact the UU Ministry for Earth office: e-mail; office@uuministryforearth.org; US mail, UU Ministry for Earth, 1034 SW 13th Ave., Portland, OR 97205; telephone, 503-595-9392.

For more information about Barbara Ford, go to www.gaiaworkshops.net.

Northwest Earth Institute To Publish Gulf Coast Resource

By Ellen McClaran, UUMFE Board Member

The Northwest Earth Institute will offer a new discussion resource in February – Just Below the Surface: The Gulf Coast Oil Spill, a study guide addressing the Gulf of Mexico Oil Spill and exploring opportunities for change. This one-session guide includes articles and discussion questions to facilitate a deeper investigation into the BP Deepwater Horizon oil spill, cont’d on page 4.
News From UU Ministry For Earth

Gulf Coast Resource . . . from page 3
which spewed over 200 million gallons of oil into the Gulf of Mexico, making it the largest environmental disaster in U.S. history. The $5 guide explores how the Gulf of Mexico oil spill is connected to our daily lives and how we can make meaningful and lasting changes. This guide is free with any order of NWEI's climate change guide, Global Warming: Changing CO2urse.
Gather together with others for one session of critical reflection and action planning, or use this one-session reader in addition to any of NWEI's other guides. If you would like to reserve your copy, please e-mail lacy@nwei.org. You will be able to order this resource online in February at www.nwei.org.
If you select UUMFE/Green Sanctuary as your “connection” when you order this or any of the other excellent discussion guides, NWEI will share some of the profit with UUMFE.

News From Members and Congregations

Mt. Vernon Church Breaks Ground for Net Zero Energy System on Winter Solstice
By Mary Paden, Mt. Vernon Unitarian Church

On the snow-patched lawn of Mt. Vernon Unitarian Church (MVUC), on the chilly afternoon a few hours before the church's Winter Solstice celebration, Rev. Kate Walker, clad in black robes, bade a ceremonial goodbye to a black-draped rusted heating and air conditioning unit before a small crowd that included U.S. Rep. Jim Moran and State Sen. Toddy Puller.

Rev. Walker began by noting that the congregation had been kept “comfortable” for many years by an energy system that allowed coal miners to “die deep beneath the Earth, mountaintops to be torn apart, soils to wash into the sea, and streams to turn orange with acid and metals.” She said the congregation has decided to enter a new world “where lives are not devalued and the Earth is respected.” Turning to the unit, she said “Today, I offer these words for our old-world heating and air conditioning system: You have served your duty. But your time is up. We say ‘no more’ to what you represent. We created you in a time of need and we shall terminate you now for our needs have changed. We have created your replacement.”

Board of Trustees Chair Joan Darrah stepped forward to cover the unit in a tasseled black cloth, as Rev. Walker pronounced, “Your existence is over, as ours begins anew.”

With that, Rev. Walker and Ms. Darrah, broke ground for a new geothermal heating-cooling system that, together with solar panels, will allow MVUC’s 5,200 square foot meeting house to become a net zero user of energy from the grid by spring, possibly making it the first church in Virginia to do so. As she took the shovel, Rev. Walker said, “May this represent the turning over to a new future of living our deepest values.”

Inside the Meeting House, Rep. Moran praised the church for its leadership in converting to renewable energy. “Unfortunately, we will not be able to get new energy legislation through Congress this year,” Moran said. “So programs must be done at the grassroots level, like here at MVUC, which has put its money where its mouth is. It is one thing to say wonderful, inspiring things and another to do them. “MVUC could have gone the easy, cheap way and replaced its fossil fuel system, but it decided to do the right thing, and, as a result has set a high standard and become a national model. It is right for a faith-based community cont’d on page 5
News From Members and Congregations

Net Zero Energy System . . . from page 4
to help make a better future for our children. You
found a way of using federal financial incentives and
a creative company to make it work for you. You
have made the right investment and others will
come from around the country to see how you did it.
This is a really big deal and I couldn’t be more
pleased that it is being done in our district.”

Sen. Puller, who lives near the church, noted that,
“This church has been on the cutting edge for many
years. This project is historic.”

MVUC member Albert Weinstein, one of the instiga-
tors of moving to renewable energy, presented the
church with a check for $10,000 toward the new sys-
tem. Of his donation, Weinstein said, “A lot of peo-
ple talk about solar energy. I decided to jump start
the process.”

MVUC went through a months-long process of eval-
uating alternatives to its ailing conventional heating
system. According to the report of the committee,
headed by Ken Pilkenton, the equipment costs of
purchasing a new conventional system would have
been about $50,000 plus maintenance and monthly
utility bills, while buying, installing, and maintain-
ing a geothermal system would have cost about
$300,000, a very high initial cost for the church.

Then Zachary Fettig, President of Shenandoah
Sustainable Technologies (SST) of Harrisonburg, Va.,
proposed to design, install, operate, and maintain a
geothermal system under a 20-year contract, during
which time MVUC would make a monthly payment.
SST was able to offer this long-term package
through a combination of favorable private financ-
ing, various government tax incentives for alterna-
tive energy projects, and the virtually no-grid-based
power consumption costs once all the equipment is
in place. At the end of the contract MVUC would
own the equipment.

The MVUC finance committee determined that the
SST proposal was comparable to purchasing geo-
thermal equipment, but without the high initial cost.
The conventional option was somewhat cheaper, but
did not figure in likely increases in the cost of energy
over 20 years or the environmental damage caused by
burning fossil fuels.

MVUC wanted a system that met its environmental
and social values, and also provided a solid invest-
ment for the future. Finding an affordable renewable
ergy system would fulfill a long-term dream of
MVUC, which had constructed its Meeting House in
the mid-1880s with the chapel roof designed for
solar panels and with a previous generation of a
geothermal heating-cooling system, which had
failed after a time.

The church contracted with SST in late November
and broke ground on the Winter Solstice.

The geothermal system relies on extensive under-
ground fluid-circulating pipes branching-out from
opposite ends of the Meeting House (which contains
a chapel, commons area, kitchen, nursery, and church
offices). The pipes are buried several feet
underground where
the ground maintains
a steady temperature
of about 55 degrees.
SST will remove all of
the Meeting Houses’
conventional heating
and cooling equip-
ment and replace it
with state-of-the art
gеothermal equip-
ment. In addition, the
greenhouse will be run
on the south roof of the
chapel to generate the electricity for the building
and the heat exchange pumps for the geothermal
system.

Last year SST installed a modern closed-loop geot-
thermal system at St. Mark’s Church in Springfield,
which has received praise from church officials
there. The MVUC system is different in that it incor-
porates solar energy for electricity to make the
Meeting House a net zero energy user from the
power grid.

The transition will come none too soon, Rev. Walker
said, “because the old system has required half a
dozen visits from the furnace repair people in the
past ten days, including today.“♦
Earth Jurisprudence: Beginning
To Bud

UUMFE member Joe DuRocher, First Unitarian Church
of Orlando, contributes this thought-provoking article
about a ‘new jurisprudence’ from Sister Patricia Siemen,
OP, Esq. More information about the Center for Earth
Jurisprudence may be found at www.earthjuris.org.

But we have only begun
to love the earth.
We have only begun
to imagine the fullness of life.
How could we tire of hope?
– so much is in the bud.¹

As the poem alludes, Earth jurisprudence is only
“in bud,” yet the urgency of ecological
destruction is bringing this bud into blossom
across the planet.

The term “Earth jurisprudence” was conceived by
Thomas Berry in 2000. He said we need a new
jurisprudence, a set of laws and governance for our
time of unprecedented ecological destruction: law
that flows from Earth’s integral functions and recognizes the interdependence and intrinsic value of the
natural world. Current law is grounded in protecting
short-term human interests. It does not adequately
dress the needs of future generations nor recognize the interconnectedness of all the members of
the wider Earth community.

As a legal response, Earth jurisprudence is aligned
with a strand of environmental law that seeks to pro-
tect the natural world because of its inherent value
and not solely for its usefulness to humanity. Berry is
known for his signature “three rights” of nature:
“Every being has three rights: the right to exist, the
right to habitat, and the right to fulfill its role in the
ever-renewing processes of the Earth community.”²
While a few environmental lawyers have advocated
legal protection of nature,³ Berry issued a call for a
re-envisioning of law and governance from an Earth-
centered, rather than human-centered perspective.
In The Great Work, Berry stated:

“In this new context (of humans becoming present
to the Earth in a mutually enhancing manner)
every component of the Earth community would
have its rights in accord with the proper mode of
its being and its functional role. In each case the
basic rights would be for habitat and the opportu-
nity of each being to fulfill its role in the natural
systems to which it belongs. Humans would be
obliged to respect these rights.”⁴

Earth jurisprudence proposes that it is nature, not
humanity that is the primary architect of law and
governance. Human governance systems should stem from and be consistent with the geological,
biological and ecological laws (and limits) of nature.
Foundational sources of Earth jurisprudence are the
customary laws of indigenous peoples and other
ancient traditions, as well as contemporary science,
environmental ethics and a spectrum of legal areas
including environmental, international and human
rights laws. The laws of the universe and the laws of
nature are the primary laws that govern the health
and well-being of Earth; they constitute a “great
jurisprudence”⁵ that originates in the story of the
universe, the developmental process out of which
Earth and all life emerge.

Multiple initiatives are moving the field of Earth
jurisprudence from bud to tender blossom. There is
the Earth Jurisprudence Resource Center (EJRC)⁶ in
London which collaborates with the United Kingdom
Environmental Law Association (UKELA).⁷ In 2008
Ecuador became the first nation to adopt a constitu-
tion that provides protection of the rights of nature.⁸
In April 2010, Bolivia hosted the World’s Peoples
Conference on Climate Change and the Rights of
Mother Earth which issued the Declaration on the
Rights of Mother Earth. The tenets of that declara-
tion were inserted into the negotiations for the
upcoming international conference on climate
change to be held in Cancun in December. In addi-
tion the Center for Earth Jurisprudence (CEJ)⁹ located
at Barry and St. Thomas Universities Law Schools
develops programs, publications and courses. It
offers an annual conference on rights of future gen-
erations, has developed an LL.M in Environmental
Sustainability at St. Thomas University Law School,
and is an essential component of the Environmental
Law, Justice and Jurisprudence

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Earth Jurisprudence . . . from page 6
centrization at the Barry University Law School. It is currently engaged in creating a series of chapters comprising an electronic teaching anthology on Earth jurisprudence.

Despite the escalating processes of environmental destruction, there are numerous buds of “blessed unrest” rising up across the planet. As we look into both the promise and the peril of the future we remember the hopeful words of Thomas Berry:

...the basic mood of the future might well be one of confidence in the continuing revelation that takes place in and through Earth....There is reason to believe that this same guiding process is precisely what has awakened us in our present understanding of ourselves and our relation to this stupendous process. Sensitized to such guidance from the very structure and functioning of the universe, we can have confidence in the future that awaits the human venture.10

5 See Cullinan, Wild Law at 84.
6 See http://www.earthjurisprudence.org/ whose mission is to make accessible materials that “advocate and embed Earth Jurisprudence at community, law and policy levels around the world” as well as nurture and support an international and interdisciplinary network of Earth jurisprudence practitioners.
7 See http://www.gaiainstitute.org/ Accessed 14 June 2009. They issued a 2009 report analyzing selected national laws to determine to what degree those laws supported, undermined or was neutral to three key elements: Earth-centered governance; mutually enhancing relationships; and community ecological governance.
8 See http://www.celdf.org/Default.aspx?tabid=548 Article I of the new “Rights for Nature” chapter reads: “Nature or Pachamama, where life is reproduced and exists, has the right to exist, persist, maintain and regenerate its vital cycles, structure, functions and its processes in evolution. Every person, people, community or nationality, will be able to demand the recognitions of rights for nature before the public bodies.”
9 See http://earthjuris.org
10 Berry, The Dream of the Earth, 137.

I Am the UUA
A poem by Christopher D. Sims

I am the UUA
I am what I believe. I am religion, as I breathe.
I am the UUA. I am of earth, justice-jargon, and community.
I am the UUA. A seeker, a searcher, an explorer. However, I am centered in our Seven Principles And my belief is invincible.
I am the UUA. My colorful community fills churches small and large across America and beyond.
I am the UUA. I am White, I am Black, I am Brown, I am Yellow, and I am Red. By Unitarian Universalism my spirit is greatly fed.
I am the UUA. With passion and fire I sing. Followers of my faith are fighters. They marched with and died for Martin Luther King, Jr's dream.
I am the UUA. Humble, hopeful, happy, and free. No other faith or religious tradition is better for me!
I am a Unitarian Universalist.

Christopher Sims – poet, community organizer, and performer – is a member of the UU Church of Rockford, IL

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How You Can Help . . .
By Irene Keim, UUMFE Board Co-Chair

The resources provided by UU Ministry for Earth (UUMFE) are the product of donations and memberships from UUs who value connection, renewal, and inspiration. When you contribute to UUMFE, you join with others who are also dedicated to Life, Earth, and Spirit. Here are a few ways you can help these values grow within our congregations and communities.

- Plan an Earth Day service for your congregation. See the resources UUMFE has prepared for you online.
- Join UUMFE on Facebook and read the opportunities for action posted – both regional and national.
- Make a donation to UUMFE to support the work of Environmental Justice throughout our denomination.
- Encourage congregation members to join with you in supporting the UUMFE vision . . .

“A world in which all people make reverence, gratitude, and care for the living Earth central to their lives.”

To donate, join, or comment, visit www.uumministryforearth.org.