

Green Sanctuary

An Environmental Challenge for UU Congregations

A Sermon by Fred Small

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The house where I grew up stood on a quiet corner in Plainfield, New Jersey, surrounded by a hedge. To my sister and me as children, our hedge was a source of security and magic, like a year-round Christmas tree. In autumn, the wind would sweep fallen leaves into its lower branches, trapped in their embrace until my dad raked them out into great piles for burning.

One fall afternoon when I was about six I thought it might be fun to light a match and burn some of the leaves caught in the hedge. They were dry as paper, and the flame spread surprisingly quickly. I rushed inside to fetch a glass of water, but by the time I returned the blaze was beyond my abilities to extinguish. I ran to my mother, who called the fire department, who put out the fire before it spread more than a few yards along the hedge. Soon afterward I was a guest of the fire department, where I was given a comic book about fire safety and a badge making me an official junior deputy fire chief. But where it had burned, the hedge never really recovered, stunted forever by my shortsightedness and self-absorption.

But I was just a child.

In January 1995 a mass of ice the size of Rhode Island broke off the Larsen ice shelf and plunged into the Antarctic sea. Scientist Rodolpho del Valle, stationed nearby, flew overhead. "A platform of ice more than forty miles wide," he reported, "had been broken up into pieces that looked like polystyrene foam... smashed by a child. The first thing I did was cry." Scientists had predicted that global warming would someday melt the ancient polar ice. "[B]ut the whole process," says Dr. del Valle, "has been much quicker than we anticipated.... Recently I've seen rocks poke through the surface of the ice that had been buried... for twenty thousand years."

Global climate change has arrived. The fire we have set is out of control.

In this century the earth's surface has warmed nearly one and a quarter degrees Fahrenheit. The ten warmest years ever have all occurred in the last fifteen, with 1998 the hottest of all. The world scientific consensus holds human activity responsible. Although climate scientists differ on the exact rate of change, most agree that over the next century the planet will warm faster than ever before recorded, resulting in far-reaching ecological stress, rising sea levels, extreme weather events, and damage to human health.

Many believe these impacts are already being felt. Last year in the United States, extreme heat caused massive wildfires in Florida and crop damage throughout the South. Guyana experienced severe drought, Indonesia devastating fires, China record floods that left over three thousand dead. Off the coast of southern California, zooplankton, a key link in the aquatic food chain, have declined a stunning seventy percent in the last two decades. In the course of the last century, Alpine glaciers have lost almost fifty percent of their ice. Spring now arrives a full week earlier to the Northern Hemisphere than it did just twenty years ago.

Consider these possible feedback loops. As global warming melts the permafrost, stored methane is released. But methane is a greenhouse gas, so global warming accelerates, releasing still more methane. As temperatures rise, entire forests die off, releasing as they decay staggering amounts of carbon dioxide, further warming the atmosphere. Meanwhile, as the ozone layer depletes, ultraviolet radiation decimates the phytoplankton that absorb carbon dioxide, speeding global warming while triggering a crash in fish populations that feed on the plankton. These scenarios do not include other environmental threats like biodiversity loss, nuclear and chemical waste, lead and asbestos poisoning, and endocrine disruptors implicated in human birth defects, cancer, and decreased fertility. They do not include what we have yet to detect or to imagine.

Okay. I feel like the dinosaur in the Far Side cartoon, addressing an auditorium full of dinosaurs: "Gentlemen, the picture is bleak. The earth's climates are changing, the mammals are taking over, and we all have a brain about the size of a walnut." Fortunately for us, the human brain is a very good one. The question is whether we are prepared to use it. But the

ecological crisis is not simply a crisis of graphs and computer projections; it is a crisis of the spirit. What the world needs now is what religion, at its best, does best: confront, inspire, comfort, and instruct. Unitarian Universalism has been in the forefront of the struggles for peace and racial justice and against homophobia. It is time, past time, for the UUA to take the lead in defending the earth.

Environmental activism is not merely consistent with our commitment to social justice, it is demanded by it. Poor people and people of color are the first victims of environmental poisons and natural disasters. Disparities of wealth and status lead to waste and pollution by both the affluent and the deprived. We simply cannot solve the problems of ecology without facing the problems of inequity, nor vice versa.

All environmental work is justice work. Automobile fuel economy is an environmental issue. But when an Inuit fisherman has to import frozen seal meat because he cannot take it safely from a bay fouled by an oil spill resulting from the rush to meet soaring demand for gasoline, that is a justice issue. Recycling is an environmental issue. But when an African-American develops lung cancer from breathing fumes emitted from an incinerator in her neighborhood that burns recyclable trash, that is a justice issue. The greenhouse effect is an environmental issue. But when a Pacific islander discovers that the rising sea level resulting from profligate energy use in the developed world will obliterate her low-lying nation within decades, that is a justice issue. Organic food is an environmental issue. But when a Guatemalan banana worker becomes sterile from pesticide exposure, that is a justice issue.

Perhaps the greatest justice issue of all is intergenerational theft. The Eighth Commandment says "Thou shall not steal," but every day we live unsustainably we steal from our children and their children. When we speak of community, we must understand that community occurs not merely in space, but also in time, extending backward through memory and tradition and forward through vision and legacy. The Great Law of the Iroquois Confederacy provided that "In our every deliberation, we must consider the impact of our decisions on the next seven generations." Today's political leaders seem oblivious to any future beyond the next election. However reckless a lifestyle we might choose for ourselves, however little we may value other

species, surely we owe our descendants a duty of care. The same compassion that moved the Samaritan to bandage the wounds of a stranger not of his tribe must today move us to care for future generations.

Well before the first Earth Day in 1970, Unitarian Universalists began to express mounting concern about environmental deterioration. Since 1966, General Assembly has passed 23 general resolutions on ecology, energy, and population issues. The seventh principle of our association, affirming "respect for the interdependent web of all existence," was conceived and embraced as the environmental plank of Unitarian Universalism. It lends its name to the Seventh Principle Project, which since it's founding a decade ago has provided the vital activist core of UU environmentalism. Individuals and congregations throughout our association have undertaken countless innovative projects from recycling programs to simplicity circles, from fighting incinerators in the inner city to creating hiking trails in the woods.

But our Association has lagged behind. The UUA has failed to implement the environmental priorities repeatedly and resoundingly endorsed by GA. It has never sponsored a major forum on environmental issues. It has never prepared a religious education curriculum on nature or ecology. It has never published a pamphlet on Unitarian Universalism and the environment. It has never mounted a lobbying campaign for environmental legislative priorities. With 170 employees, not one UUA staff position is dedicated to environmental concerns. The Seventh Principle Project can only do so much without professional staff and institutional resources. It is time for the Unitarian Universalist Association to step up to the challenge of environmental leadership.

For a Unitarian Universalist environmental program to succeed, it must pass seven tests. First, it must conform to congregational polity, the centuries-old principle that each congregation has the exclusive authority to control its own affairs. Second, it must provide accountability: it must set clear standards and demand specific and measurable results. Third, it needs flexibility to invite and honor the wisdom and creativity of each congregation. Fourth, simplicity. Environmental problems remedies are so complex that people are easily overwhelmed. An environmental program must boil down complicated issues into digestible portions. Fifth,

integrity. It must involve the congregation as a whole, not just a handful of marginal zealots. It must work within and without the four walls of the church, engaging the surrounding community and the larger world. Sixth, it must squarely face issues of environmental justice and foster coalitions across race and class. Last, it must have sustainability: it must provide sufficient emotional and spiritual nurture – and just plain fun – to keep us going for the long haul.

The UUA already has a successful program to serve as a model: the Welcoming Congregation. This program invites our congregations to educate themselves about homophobia and take specific steps to welcome people of all sexual orientations. As of March of this year, 199 UU congregations -- nearly one in five -- had earned formal recognition as Welcoming Congregations, while between 200 and 300 others have begun the process, bringing the rate of participation to nearly fifty percent. Other models may be found in the environmental programs of the National Council of Churches and the U.S. Catholic Conference and the interfaith Green Sanctuaries program launched by Rev. Jim Eller of the Seventh Principle Project in Tulsa, Oklahoma, in 1993. An indispensable resource is *The Green Sanctuary Handbook*, by Rachel Stark, Brian Reddington-Wilde, and Robert Murphy, issued in 1991. Drawing upon these models, I propose a Green Sanctuary program for the Unitarian Universalist Association. I offer this program as a draft for discussion, and I invite all of your input and insight. It would invite every UU congregation to be recognized as a Green Sanctuary upon formation of a Green Sanctuary Committee, completion of key tasks in several action areas, and an all-congregation activity. The action areas I propose are:

Energy Conservation and Environmental Practices

Conduct a professional energy audit of all church buildings at least once every ten years. Each year, challenge the congregation to achieve a target percentage in improved efficiency of energy use by the following year, until no further improvement can reasonably be expected.

At least every five years, conduct an environmental audit of the church using the *Green Sanctuary Handbook* and make recommendations to the appropriate committees.

Reduce, Reuse, Recycle

Each year, separately weigh trash and recycled materials for at least one week, and calculate the amount per church member. Each year, challenge the congregation to achieve a target percentage in reduced trash and increased recycling by the following year, until no further improvement can reasonably be expected.

Adopt a procurement policy for church supplies requiring price comparison with recycled alternatives and purchase of recycled products available at a cost within five (or ten) percent of the cost of the equivalent non-recycled product.

Adopt a policy requiring use of washable, non-disposable dishes, cups, glasses, and cutlery at church events. (Rachael Stark points out we have to make sure men are pointedly encouraged to share equally in dishwashing and clean-up!)

Environmental Justice

Contact local and regional environmental justice organizations and explore opportunities for cooperation.

Offer at least one environmental justice speaker, workshop, or program each year.

Religious Education

Teach at least one children's environmental curriculum per year.

Lead an annual field trip to a power plant, recycling facility, landfill, incinerator, sewage treatment plant, water supply, or organic farm.

Worship

Dedicate at least one Sunday worship service per year to the environment.

Request that the minister and/or worship committee incorporate environmental prayers, meditations, or readings in regular worship.

Communication

Set up an Environmental Information Center in a loose-leaf binder and on the church website, if any, providing practical information regarding energy and environmental practices at church and suggestions for the home.

Include a Green Corner in the church newsletter with environmental tips and updates on environmental activities.

As in the Welcoming Congregation Program, an explanation of why a key task is unnecessary or irrelevant to a congregation would be an acceptable alternative to its performance.

In addition, at least one all-congregation activity would take place each year. This might be stewardship of a local natural resource, such as a river, forest, or park; a Walk to Worship Weekend when people leave their cars at home and walk, bicycle, or share a ride to worship; or a letter writing campaign for legislation or corporate reform.

Recognition as a Green Sanctuary would include a certificate signed by the UUA President, the right to display a congregational Green Sanctuary banner, and the right to wear a Green Sanctuary ribbon or sticker at General Assembly. A congregation's Green Sanctuary recognition would lapse after five years unless renewed.

A Green Sanctuary program will require:

- An updated and expanded Green Sanctuary Handbook.
- A Program Coordinator to administer, promote, and evaluate the program.

- Funding for the revised Handbook and salary and expenses for the Program Coordinator. Possible sources include the Veatch Foundation and the Unitarian Universalist Funding Program.
- The imprimatur of the UUA. After multiple GA resolutions urging environmental initiatives by congregations, no further authorization by GA is necessary. However, the Green Sanctuary program will need the support of at least President Buehrens, the Board of Trustees, and the Faith in Action Department.

This Green Sanctuary Program satisfies all seven criteria proposed: congregational polity, accountability, flexibility, simplicity, integrity, environmental justice, and sustainability. It offers a clear set of achievable goals to activists in our congregations. An off-the-shelf package of initiatives, standard yet flexible, will encourage environmental leadership because leaders will know they are not alone, but acting in concert with others throughout our association.

Like the Welcoming Congregation program, the Green Sanctuary program challenges our congregations to live their ideals. If parishioners consider themselves environmentalists, the logical question will be, "Why aren't we a Green Sanctuary?" It sets standards that are ambitious without being rigid or demoralizing. And while a certificate may seem a trivial acknowledgment, many Welcoming Congregations display theirs proudly. However wrongheaded their anti-gay policies, the Boy Scouts are not stupid. They know that everyone at some level wants a merit badge: recognition of a job well done.

An all-congregation activity removes ecology from the convenient confines of children's religious education. Like a barn raising, it calls upon everyone to pitch in, to give according to their ability, and to pass along skills to others.

Cost is always a consideration. But I suspect that a UUA environmental program is so long overdue that funding sources may free up that would not otherwise be available. Another potential worry is that environmental action will distract us from other work, especially social and racial justice. Fortunately, the environmental justice movement has made tremendous progress in persuading activists in both camps that our work is interrelated and mutually

beneficial, and that cooperation is wiser than quarreling over scarce resources. Instead, by working together we expand the scope of the possible.

The objection may be heard that, given the urgency of the problem, a modest program emphasizing congregational responsibility rather than radical political change and corporate accountability is inadequate. It's a fair point. But as new behaviors reinforce new attitudes, new possibilities for change emerge. Unitarian Universalists do not just go to church. We lead in many sectors of society – corporate, political, educational, social. What we learn in church ripples outward and touches everyone and everything we touch. Any program demanding radical change at the outset will surely be rejected by our congregations. Better to begin with something people can accept and build from there.

Last year the motion picture *Titanic* shattered box office records. The story of a life awakening, a life ending, and a love transcending death, all set against a spectacular shipwreck, brought startled tears to the eyes of hardened cynics. But for me the tears started before the fateful romance of Jack and Rose had even begun. Titanic bolted from Southampton for the open ocean, the soundtrack swelled with French horns and digitally sampled sopranos, and as the great ship sliced the surface dolphins sported off the bow, leaping and diving as if welcoming a huge cousin to their world.

And I cried. I cried because I knew the ship and most of those aboard were doomed, but more for the beauty and innocence of the dolphins and the generous naivety of their welcome. I saw the ship, this crown of technology in the bright morning of the twentieth century, as a metaphor for our hubris, our conceit that we are clever enough and strong enough to conquer nature, as Titanic would rule the waves. Like the designers and commander of Titanic we are full of ourselves, for the sake of wealth and status plunging into dark and unknown waters, convinced we are unsinkable.

But imagine instead that you and I are standing watch on the bridge. Squinting into the telescope we can barely make out the terrible iceberg glinting in the moonlight. We look again. There's no mistake. We sound the alarm. We don't know at this speed if there's time to stop

or even slow the ship before impact. We can't know if anything we do will make any difference in the end. But we have to try.

We have to try.

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