The Blue-Green Hills of Earth

Earth Day

An important part of Unitarian Universalism is the sense of mystery and wonder that triggers a "wow!" feeling inside us. This Earth Day (April 22) service uses the congregation's imagination and a system of maps to draw our gaze outward, from our street, to our city, to our state—all the way to our Milky Way galaxy. This service contains special suggestions for those congregations interested in projecting images using Power Point or Keynote software programs.

Preparation (significant)

- This service will be most effective with some complementary activities in the religious education program, the social justice committee, and similar church programs. For example, your congregation could hold a "bike to church" day or a composting Sunday, show the documentary film *An Inconvenient Truth*, make reusable shopping bags (see www.earthdaybags.com), or install bat boxes on the property.
- Announce ahead of time that this service will include a Recycling Offering: each person/family should bring a recyclable item, such as a plastic water bottle or an empty soda can. (Note that after the service, the service coordinator will be responsible for making sure the items actually get recycled!)
- If you want to "walk the talk" of environmental stewardship, decide whether to forgo printing the order of service for this Sunday.

- Prepare a list of small ways to be environmentally conscious: turn off lights when you leave the room, bring your own mug to coffee hour, give rides to friends, etc. Print the list on a large dry-erase board or chalkboard. If using projection technology with this service, you may include this list as a slide in the Power Point or Keynote presentation, outlined below.
- If not using projection technology, find an Earth flag or a poster with a photograph of the Earth taken from space.
- If not using projection technology, find a poster of the famous 1990 photograph called the "pale blue dot," taken by NASA's Voyager 1 spacecraft.
- If using projection technology, obtain a screen to project images onto. Create a Power Point or Keynote presentation. It should display the following slides in this order:
    - Lyrics to "Blue Boat Home," *STJ*, 1064.
    - Photograph of the Earth taken from space.
    - Lyrics to "For the Earth Forever Turning," *SLT*, 163.
    - Several images that illustrate the text read by Reader D and Reader E. Consult that text for inspiration. The series of images should begin with the solar system and end with the "pale blue dot" photograph, which is easy to find online. Suggestions for others images include Carl Sagan, the NASA logo, Voyager 1, and the Milky Way galaxy.
    - List of small ways to be environmentally conscious (see above).
    - Lyrics for "This Is My Song," *SLT*, 159.
- If you'd like to incorporate more media into the service and are using projection technology, make a DVD of one of the music videos available from Symphony of Science (www.symphonyofscience.com) to show during the Offering.
- Obtain a poster-size map of each of the following: your town or city, your city's region or county, your state, your section

of the United States, the United States, and the world. Also obtain a poster of the solar system and of the Milky Way galaxy. Clip them all to an easel. The Milky Way poster should be clipped on first, at the back of the stack, and the rest should be stacked in descending order by size, with your town or city's map showing on the front of the stack. Put star or dot stickers near the easel.

- Buy chocolates wrapped in foil to look like the Earth. These are available at many food co-ops and natural food stores.
- Place a clearly marked receptacle for recycling at the front of the sanctuary.
- *Rehearsal will take about 1 hour.*

Roles (5, all should attend rehearsal)

5 Readers

As the service begins, the easel with maps, the stickers, the dry-erase board, and the container for recycling are in place, and a photo of the Earth is hanging in or projected onto a clearly visible spot. Reader A is at the front.

Welcome

Reader A welcomes congregants and visitors.

READER A Our Unitarian Universalist Principles affirm that, from fruit flies to giant sequoia trees, all life is interwoven and interconnected. That interdependence moves us to a sense of awe, and invites us to care for the life that moves among us. Today, as a community of all generations, we celebrate our place in this earthly home, with its skies and seas, and its blue-green hills. Let us begin this hour by lighting the symbol of Unitarian Universalism.

Chalice Lighting

READER B Happy Earth Day! This morning we celebrate this planet of ours, spinning through space, circling the sun. Before we talk about where on Earth we are, and how to care for our planet, let us practice gratitude. Earth is home to our human family and to millions of other creatures: animals, insects, plants, flowers, birds . . . and our opening words will be an expression of thanks for all of them. Do you think we could name every animal and insect and plant and flower if we spent this entire hour on it? [*allows some responses from the congregation*]

It would take too long; there are just too many living things on our planet. But do you think that we could name just twenty-six creatures that share our Earth—one for every letter of the alphabet? [*gets the congregation's agreement*]

Let's try it. We should make sure that we don't lose our place in the alphabet, though. Is there anyone who'd like to join me up here to be our alphabet leader, so that we go through the alphabet in the right order? [*Reader B chooses a young volunteer. If the child is eager but nervous, parents can be invited forward too. Reader B sets the gentle expectation that—out of fairness—people will raise their hands to be called on.*]

On this [Earth Day/Earth Day weekend], we remember and give thanks for these creatures: [*Reader B asks the volunteer what letter comes first, then calls on someone who can offer an animal or flower—or any part of nature—that begins with the letter A, then B, then C, and so on. Eventually, the volunteer may help call on people. After each item is named—"apples" or "bumblebees"—Reader B provides an affirmation by saying, "Thank you, Earth, for apples" or "We give thanks for bumblebees." When the alphabet is done, Reader B thanks the volunteer.*]

Phew! We did it! Those are all important things to be grateful for, and a reminder that we aren't the only ones on this planet. In that spirit, let us sing our opening hymn . . .

If using projection technology, display lyrics to the following hymn.

"Blue Boat Home," *STJ,* 1064

READER C If we're going to try to think about our "blue boat home" with wonder and awe, we should start there: What do awe and wonder feel like? [*allows a few descriptions*]

Wonder is the feeling that gives us goosebumps, and makes us say, "Wow." It's the feeling we get when we start thinking about questions with no answers. Here's how the first Source of our Unitarian Universalist tradition describes it: "direct experience of that transcending mystery and wonder, affirmed in all cultures, which moves us to a renewal of the spirit and an openness to the forces which create and uphold life."

We're going to see whether we can invite those feelings by using maps. The maps on this easel—and you—are going to help us remember our place on this blue-green planet, and find our place in the universe. Let's start with this map on top. What does this map show? [*waits for someone to identify the top map as your town or city, pointing out major identifying characteristics if needed*]

Would someone like to come forward and mark our [church/fellowship] on this map? [*helps a child or youth place a sticker on the congregation's location on the map and invites the congregation to thank the volunteer*]

This map shows us what we'd see if we were above our town, like a giant bird looking down, or if we were a satellite camera in the sky. We can see all of the roads, parks, and bodies of water that we'd see from above. What would our corner of Earth look like if we went up higher, to get a bigger view? [*flips town map back to reveal a map of the region, such as the county or a portion of the state*]

Will another volunteer come forward and show us where our congregation is on this map? [*invites a volunteer up and helps her to find the congregation's vicinity and put a sticker on it*]

We're going to keep moving outward to see an even broader view of where we live. [*flips to the map of the state or province, selects a volunteer, marks the congregation's general area, and invites thanks*]

We're doing pretty well! Let's move out farther, and look at our country. [*with a map of the country revealed, solicits the help of yet another volunteer*]

So far, these maps have shown the land of our own country . . . but there's a much bigger world out there than just us. Here's a map of the world—can anyone find our congregation on this map? [*calls on a volunteer of a different age than the previous volunteers and thanks him when he is finished*]

Maps were created by humans to show certain information about land, rivers, and roads. They also show borders between states and between countries—but those borders are also human inventions. So far, all the maps we've seen today have shown our city, our country, or our world with those artificial boundaries. But there's a different way of looking at our world, with no dotted lines or declarations about who owns what land. [*indicates the view of Earth from space, whether poster, Earth flag, or slide*]

What about this view is different from all the other things we've seen so far? What do you see here that we can't see on the maps? [*asks for ideas from the congregation, allowing both technical and artistic responses*]

How do you feel when you look at this photograph? [*allows a significant number of people to name how they feel when they see our Earth from space*]

Here's a pretty interesting fact: For most of our history, we human beings didn't have this view of Earth. Even though we've been looking up at the stars for hundreds of thousands of years, we had to imagine what Earth looked like. Nobody knew exactly what our planet looked like until 1966, when the U.S. Lunar Orbiter 1 caught its first small peek of our planet. Six years later, in 1972, the crew of Apollo 17 took the most well-known picture of Earth, a photograph called "The Blue Marble" by the astronauts. Even though 1972 sounds like a long time ago, it's not. Just to show how new this view of Earth is, please raise your hand if you were born before this picture was taken (and are willing to admit it). [*waits for responses*]

That's how new this view of our planet is. And that 1972 trip was the last time any humans have visited the moon. Do you think the moon is lonely for our company? Let's keep this image of Earth in mind as we sing our next hymn, "For the Earth Forever Turning."

If using projection technology, display lyrics to the following hymn.

"For the Earth Forever Turning," *SLT,* 163

READER D That hymn, by composer Kim Oler, is an ode to "our blue-green hills of Earth." Our home planet does have blue-green hills, but when we see Earth from space—a view similar to what you see here—we can also see tan deserts, indigo oceans, and ivory cloud cover. Let's keep traveling outward, beyond Earth, and see where we fit into the cosmos. [*Reader D flips the world map back to show the poster of the solar system, or a projector is used to begin a slide show, beginning with the solar system. If the poster is used, Reader D asks for a volunteer to come forward yet again to stick a star or dot on our planet. If the slide show is used, a volunteer can point to Earth. The slide show can continue, as Reader D speaks, to show the Milky Way, the NASA logo, Carl Sagan, and other images.*]

There's no way to find our country, much less our city, in this poster of the solar system! But we're still part of it. We're in that picture, whether we can see ourselves or not. Why do you think it's important to know that we're there, in that photo? [*allows some time for answers, then flips to the next poster, showing the Milky Way galaxy*]

Here's the Milky Way galaxy, where our solar system is located. There are hundreds of billions of solar systems like ours in this galaxy. Some people feel very small when they see the Milky Way galaxy and realize our tiny place in it. Some people feel tingly inside, or goose-bumpy on the outside. That's why it was important for us to try to see Earth from outer space . . . and our next story is about an astronomer who knew that. Does anyone know what NASA is? What does NASA do? [*waits for someone to name the National Aeronautics and Space Administration or explain that NASA is responsible for our country's space program*]

NASA designs the spacecraft and shuttles that travel into space and to the international space station. In the 1970s, NASA asked a scientist named Carl Sagan to help them design spacecraft. One of them was called Voyager 1. Voyager was designed to go very, very far into outer space—way past the moon—a trip so long that

it would take many, many years (that's one reason there were no people on board). In fact, Voyager is still on its trip; it's farther from Earth than any other human-made object. Before it left our solar system, Voyager gave us a present—thanks to Carl Sagan. Carl loved astronomy, but he had ideas that went beyond how to build space ships. He decided that it was very important for us, on Earth, to see our planet from far away. Carl told NASA that they should program Voyager's camera to take a picture of our planet from the edge of our solar system. The photo of Earth that we just looked at was taken from [the moon/space]. It's beautiful, and it shows details of the blue-green hills and oceans. But the people at NASA told Carl that a picture taken from the edge of the solar system—3.7 billion miles away—would be useless, because Earth would be so tiny. Carl didn't give up. In the months leading up to Voyager's launch, he begged and pleaded NASA for the photograph to be taken. He wouldn't let them say no, and he finally got his way. In the spring of 1990, as the Voyager spacecraft was speeding out of our solar system at 40,000 miles per hour, it turned its cameras back towards Earth for "one last glance homeward." [*indicates "pale blue dot" poster, or slide show reveals the "pale blue dot" picture, which remains on while Reader E speaks*] The Voyager picture shows Earth as a tiny pinprick of light sitting alone in a vast darkness. Through an accident of geometry and optics, Earth seems to be sitting in a beam of light. The planet itself emits a light blue glow, thanks to our seas and skies. This awe-inspiring picture is affectionately called the "pale blue dot." Carl Sagan knew that seeing Earth as a tiny blue dot in space would be important for humans. He was right. This is how Carl explained his sense of awe:

READER E Look at that dot. . . . That's here, that's home, that's us. On that dot everyone you love, everyone you know, everyone you ever heard of, every human being who ever lived, lived out their lives. . . . Every hunter and forager, every hero and coward, every creator and destroyer of civilization, every king and peasant, every young couple in love, every mother and father, every hopeful child, every inventor and explorer, every revered teacher of mor-

als, every corrupt politician, every superstar, every supreme leader, every saint and sinner in the history of our species lived there on a mote of dust suspended in a sunbeam. The earth is a very small stage in a vast cosmic arena. . . . Our planet is a lonely speck in a great enveloping cosmic dark. In our obscurity, in all this vastness there is no hint that help will come from elsewhere to save us from ourselves, it is up to us. . . . For me it underscores our responsibility, our profound responsibility, to deal more kindly with one another and to preserve and cherish that pale blue dot, the only home we have ever known.

End slide show, until list of recycling tips is needed.

READER B Those are big thoughts. It can seem like a big job, and a big responsibility, to take care of our pale blue planet and all that lives here. Today, we asked you to bring a piece of recycling for a Recycling Offering. Who's got a recycling bin at home? [*waits for people to raise hands*]

You could have put your one piece of recycling into your bin at home, but putting it all together is a way to remind ourselves of what happens when we all join together. If every piece of recycling you have with you is a promise to do one small thing to help the environment, then imagine what we can do right here.

What are some ways that we can be good caretakers of the Earth? [*asks for suggestions from the congregation*] I have a list here with some of those ideas, and more. [*refers to chalkboard or projection screen; reads a few that haven't been named yet*]

It's time for our recycling offering. If you brought a piece of recycling, please bring it forward and put it in the container. As you put it in, please try to tell us one thing that you can do to help the Earth.

Reader B allows time for people to come forward, one at a time or all at once. Large congregations in which a "communion" for individuals may be unwieldy might instead pass large baskets through the aisles and invite people to tell their neighbors what they can promise to do as Earth caretakers.

When the offering has been brought forward:

READER C Wow! That's a lot of recycling . . . and it's a lot of community power! May we help each other remember our promises to the Earth. Just as importantly, may we look to the skies once in a while, to remember why we've made those promises. We make a difference by coming together, one by one, and putting our strength together. That's true in taking care of the Earth, and it's also true in caring for our congregation and its programs in our larger community. Now that you've practiced giving away your sticky bottles and your crumpled papers, you get to practice giving away something that's harder to part with: a portion of your resources. Let us give in gladness this morning, knowing that our community is nurtured by our generosity—and in exchange for your giving, you'll receive a special treat! [*asks for 2 volunteers to follow behind the offering baskets and hand out chocolates*]

Offering

If you wish, show one of the Symphony of Science music videos during Offering.

READER A As we find a moment of quiet together, think of something that creates awe inside you. What gives you a sense of wonder? What are you most grateful for? Take a moment to think about the sources of your awe and amazement.

[*after a moment*] As we prepare to end our service, please help me create a prayer of thanks for the gifts of life that fill us with wonder. When I ring the chime, please speak out loud the things you just thought about, so that our voices blend to create a patchwork of thanks for these gifts.

[*waits until voices have grown quiet*] Thank you, Spirit of Life, for the mystery and miracle of our connection to life—and to one another.

Please join me in singing, with care and promise, "This Is My Song."

If using projection technology, display lyrics to the following hymn.

"This Is My Song," *SLT,* 159

READER A These are the words of Walt Whitman, from *Leaves of Grass*:

When I heard the learn'd astronomer;
When the proofs, the figures, were ranged in columns before me;
When I was shown the charts and the diagrams, to add, divide, and measure them;
When I, sitting, heard the astronomer, where he lectured with much applause in the lecture-room,

How soon, unaccountable, I became tired and sick;
Till rising and gliding out, I wander'd off by myself,
In the mystical moist night-air, and from time to time,
Look'd up in perfect silence at the stars.

Go out in peace, remembering to look up and remember the stars.

Note: At the end of this service, you might "reuse" the maps by giving them away, reminding people that they make great wrapping paper and homemade envelopes.