

Hear the Earth Call
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UCV

I suppose I have now reached an age at which I can conform to the traditional stereotype of an elder and make the classic declaration that times are not what they were. And indeed it's true that I grew up in a time and place where people didn't lock their doors or chain up their bicycles or wash their fruit. My grandmother was paranoid about the possibilities of my getting sunstroke if I didn't wear my little sun-hat, but this had nothing to do with depletion of the ozone layer – in fact, very few people at that time had even heard of the ozone layer. If it had suddenly been discovered in those days that the world's oil reserves had been completely exhausted, life could still have gone on without any great sense of catastrophe. And as I look back, it still gives me a strange feeling to remember that there were considerably less than half as many people in the world then as there are now.

Our ability to damage the life-sustaining environment seemed quite limited. At school we learned Byron's words:

*Roll on, thou deep and dark blue Ocean – roll!
Ten thousand fleets sweep over thee in vain;
Man marks the earth with ruin – his control
Stops with the shore...
.... and no one doubted that our capacity to create ruin did in fact stop with the shore.*

Well, no. I exaggerate. I need to remember also that even in those there were people who saw more clearly the way things were going. It was the period in which T.S. Eliot wrote his great poem *The Waste Land*, and W. B. Yeats wrote those striking words:

*Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world.*

The poets, as usual, saw more clearly than the political leaders. So too did religious prophets. Albert Schweitzer declared that our civilization was like a great ship that had lost its rudder, and that our response was to rev up the engines and plunge wildly through stormy seas towards disaster. Not many people paid any attention, of course. The rudderless ship, the centre that cannot hold – such themes seemed to be contradicted by the dreams of the more comfortable life promised by technological progress.

Today we are uncomfortably aware, at least with part of our minds, that the poets and prophets of that earlier time were calling attention to things that were unfolding in the real world. But has our response to that awareness significantly modified our behaviour? In this Unitarian tradition of ours, one feature that has been there right from the outset has been a faith in education. A growing knowledge of the truth will produce a growing practice of the good. An educated and democratic electorate will produce government in the best interests of our world. The terrible record of the twentieth century has demonstrated that this just isn't true, but it has required too much of an intellectual effort for us to come fully to terms with that. No doubt some of you read an article which appeared three weeks ago in the *Vancouver Sun*, written by a student at SFU. After giving a list of examples of what we know to be the wrong ways to behave if we are really concerned about the future of life on earth, she concludes:

“Even with knowledge and choice, most of us take the comfortable way out and damage the environment rather than make the less appealing, environmentally correct choice. We know better, but do it anyway.”

And she is not pointing the finger at others; she includes herself:

"My friends and I", she writes, "consider ourselves to be educated and environmentally enlightened. We have or are close to university degrees and some of us are in graduate school.... Most of us claim to care about the environment, but when faced with choices, we choose cars over transit, billowy and smooth toilet paper over scratchy and recycled, convenience over principles in our day-to-day lives."

And that's the way it is with most of us, my friends, in spite of the little efforts we may make – and I too include myself. But as for dealing with the situation, I'm afraid the student-author I have been quoting is as far off the mark as we were in thinking that education would almost automatically lead to right conduct. She thinks that "Legislators should stop giving us the choice. Government is the only vehicle available to counter human nature..." If only it were that simple. Legislators are always looking over their shoulder to see if they have enough support to win the next election. Back in the nineteenth century, a prominent Unitarian minister, James Freeman Clarke, delivered himself of the pungent aphorism: "A politician thinks of the next election; a statesman thinks of the next generation." Most of those in the latter category, unfortunately, find themselves out of office.

So where do we look for answers? Some think that science and technology can provide them, and certainly there are possibilities there. But it all depends upon who is in control of the science and technology. They can just as easily be used to make the situation worse rather than better. Gathered as we are this morning in a place of worship, we need to ask how effectively religious concerns can be brought to bear. Let me begin here by quoting from a famous essay which launched a wide-ranging discussion after it first appeared in a scientific journal nearly forty years ago. Lynn White, in the course of a devastating critique of the history of Western religion as part of the problem rather than part of the answer, wrote:

"Human ecology is deeply conditioned by beliefs about our nature and destiny – that is, by religion.... More science and more technology are not going to get us out of the present ecologic crisis until we find a new religion, or rethink our old one... We shall continue to have a worsening ecologic crisis until we reject that Christian axiom that nature has no reason for existence save to serve man.... Since the roots of our trouble are so largely religious, the remedy must also be essentially religious, whether we call it that or not."

That essay jolted a good many religious leaders into rethinking their position. It was true that Christianity had credited human beings, however sinful, with dominion over the whole of creation, with the assumption that we can remodel everything to fit in with our limited perception of what constitutes our real needs. I could give many examples of the new thinking that resulted, but let me content myself here with a few words from the late Pope:

"The increasing devastation of the world of nature results from the behaviour of people who show a callous disregard for the hidden, yet perceivable requirements of the order and harmony which govern nature itself.. We must go to the source of the problem and face in its entirety that profound moral crisis of which the destruction of the environment is only one troubling aspect.... Theology, philosophy and science all speak of a harmonious universe, of a 'cosmos' endowed with its own integrity, its own internal, dynamic balance. This order must be respected.... I wish to repeat that the ecological crisis is a moral issue."

I suppose we could all of us endorse that, as so many others have done. A new religious attitude is beginning to emerge everywhere. And yet even as I say that, I am beset by doubts as to whether in the light of all the damage that established religions have done and are doing, they can effectively lead in the struggle to give life on this planet a viable future. I am uncomfortably aware that I quoted only the couple of lines from that poem by W.B. Yeats in which he said that "things fall apart; the centre cannot hold", when I should have gone on to add an indictment that is as true today as when he was writing:

"The best lack all conviction, while the worst

Are full of passionate intensity."

Where do we place ourselves in this picture? Our record in the past has been no better than that of Western religion as a whole – a fact that I suppose we shouldn't find surprising. We, like the mainstream Christian churches, accepted the traditional idea of the Great Chain of Being, which stretched upward from its lowest levels in lifeless matter through plants and animals to human beings and then on up through angels and archangels to the Supreme Being, God. We amended that a bit by chopping out the angels and archangels, some of us by chopping out God as well, which in practice left the human being as the Supreme Being. And then we sang hymns of praise to what not so long ago we used to call Man, with a capital "M". The service book we used in the first part of my ministry here contained such words as:

*The spirit of man shall reign over all the earth...
Rock of the earth hath he turned into great towers,
With metal from the mine he hath girded them...
Beautiful is the work of man, though black with smoke and slag..*

I'm not making that up. But I think we have got a bit beyond that in recent years, as the terrible results of what we have done to the earth in the processes we celebrated so jubilantly have become more and more apparent. Now we, no less than those who have guided mainstream Christianity, have to confess our need for what Jews have called a teshuvah – that is to say, a turning away from the old destructive ways and a setting out on a new and more productive path. The traditional Christian term for this is repentance, a word that like so many others has come down in the world, so that a lot of people think it means wallowing in remorse, whereas what it really means is turning away from the paths that are leading in the wrong direction and finding the path that will lead in the right direction – and then setting out along that path with determination.

Let me come back again to that phrase of Yeats's, "the centre cannot hold". I think we can apply it to where we have been in our own religious movement. There was a time when we thought we had a centre that was really holding. That centre, for a number of generations, was an alternative version of Christianity that would be more reasonable and inclusive. More recently, to a great many of our members, that centre was a humanistic view of life with a deep faith in rational progress and control over our environment. More recently still (and I'm speaking now of the '70s and '80s of the last century, a time many of us remember well) we had become acutely aware that there was no centre that was holding. We even had contests to try to identify one, with no very spectacular results. It was regarded as a triumph when the present principles and purposes of the North American movement were eventually agreed upon in 1984, though they didn't give us as much of a centre as the earlier points of focus had done. More recently, a number of people have given thought to just where we would find what has been variously called the centre, the core, the heart of our religion. One of the more productive of these contributions, I think, was provided by David Bumbaugh, an American minister who for a brief period had an interim ministry in this country. A decade ago he tried to look into the present century and say where our centre would lie.

He found it in the seventh of our current principles: *"respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part"*, and suggested that this would provide a theological base for the new century, representing *"our peculiar contribution to the religious agenda"*. *"It challenges us"*, he wrote, *"to understand the world as reflexive and relational rather than hierarchical"* (and let me note here that the two previous centres I identified were both of them hierarchical). He went on: *"It calls us to trust the process, the creative, evolving, renewing, redeeming process which brings us into being, which sustains us in being, and which transforms our being. It offers a vision of a world in which the holy, the sacred, is incarnated in every moment, in every aspect of being...."*

I quoted that because I agree with it so fully. It provides a unifying centre around which we can build our individual personality, our community, our world-view, our sense of the way in which everything ultimately hangs together. That is expressed when we call ourselves Unitarians. If we take these things seriously, we can together build a richly productive religion that will sustain us through the difficult times that are surely in store for us as a result of so many wrong choices made in the past. The only part of what Bumbaugh said that I question is his assertion that this is our peculiar contribution to the religious agenda. I believe that we will find many allies from many different religious traditions, but I do believe also that if we are more single-minded about it than most people in those traditions are, we do have a special role of leadership here.

We can, if we will, reach out to join hands with people of all faiths who are looking for ways to combat the trends toward what the late Pope called "instant gratification and consumerism" that are wrecking our planet, and to substitute what according to all religions is the only enduring foundation for a full and meaningful life, as expressed in that one little word LOVE. We may misuse that word and misunderstand it and confuse its deep religious significance with ideas that are not at all religiously defensible – but it won't go away. It gives us the spiritual underpinnings for effective ecological action. In fact, the word ecology itself simply means the study of how everything hangs together, and love is the practice of how everything hangs together. That is one of the oldest insights in the world, and it's still valid.

Efforts to work for the integrity of the environment not based upon love result only in burnout. To be able to stay the course we have to be able to love the earth and to love one another, to draw the strength we need from the binding together that love demands. People who use traditional theological terms can say that love of God entails a love for God's creation; people who prefer other language can speak of love for Mother Earth, or simply of that love which consists in recognizing and acting on our feeling of oneness with all things; for as Erich Fromm put it so simply and beautifully, love is the drive towards the reunion of the separated. There we will find a centre that will hold, and it's infectious enough to make a real contribution to the efforts to avert catastrophe.