

2009.04.26 Forever Turning: Earth Day

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Did you know that the average length of a Unitarian minister's tenure with a congregation is seven years? Does that seem long or short to you? Reasonable? Surprising? This is my seventh year as your Parish Minister, and I may have discovered this past week, *one reason* why ministers and congregations part company after seven years. I don't normally re-read my sermons from the past. The principal reason is that given the passage of time, the breadth of topics to delve into, the novelty and suddenness of events and issues to address, I've had few occasions to look back and assess what I had said at a previous worship service. No, I don't tend to re-read, rehash, recycle. I haven't needed to; I haven't been here that long. Or have I?

It's a good thing I re-read my 2006 Earth Day sermon last Wednesday; because I discovered with a shock that I was heading toward saying *today almost exactly* the same things I wrote and preached about three years ago. What is it about seven?—seven days of creation, seven worlds in the Hindu universe; seven the lucky prime number, seven virtues, seven deadly sins, Seven Years War, seven primary directions. Unitarians covenant to affirm and promote Seven Principles. And after seven years, their ministers begin to repeat themselves.

I feel particularly challenged by today's occasion—challenged by the fact that I am not an ecologist or eco-activist. I'm just a bus rider, a pedestrian, a father, a minister. As well, I feel challenged by the words of the Sixth Source of our living religious tradition. Listen to what it says: "The living tradition which we share draws from many sources" including "spiritual teachings of Earth-centred traditions which celebrate the sacred circle of life and instruct us to live in harmony with the rhythms of nature."

The challenge here, for me is that, first of all I have lived almost all of my life in urban landscapes of concrete, glass, and steel; a landscape built up and powered by carbon fuels and the industries and utilities that produce and deliver them. I am deeply embedded, deeply implicated in a complex, structured landscape that pays little heed, nor draws from traditional earth-centred spiritualities. A world with its own incessant, feverish, polyrhythmic tempo disconnected from nature's annual cycles, its daily ebb and flow, its abiding grandeur. With one eye on bus schedules, concrete under foot, standing at the corner of 49<sup>th</sup> and Oak—in my urban world, it's hard to celebrate, to experience the sacred circle of life and to live in harmony with nature's living pulse.

As well, I am challenged by our Sixth Source, due to the fact that most of my religious life and professional training did not take place within a traditional, earth-centred spiritual world. Instead of a tradition animated by a profound sense of reverence for the immanence, for the immediate, extensive, and abiding presence of the divine in all things, western religions—the ones I know best—have tended to revere a transcendent, creator deity, revealing *his* power and will not in and through the cycles and rhythms of nature, but through human history; that is, history conceived as providentially moving in one direction, with an ultimate redemptive goal *beyond* nature and this world.

And the challenges, the obstacles for me, don't end there. Any "free and responsible search for meaning and truth," a value central to our Unitarian worldview and practice, is contingent on sound information and evidence. In the absence of that, all we are left with is mere opinion, conjecture, tradition, and superstition. Without knowledge provided by sound science, we become easy prey for peddlers of denial, of half-truths, misinformation, and inadequate public policy. We end up without a voice, paralyzed in a country without a sane national environmental and energy policy; a nation led around by the nose by a one-party Province addicted to oil; oil produced by means so devastating to the environment that Roman Catholic Bishop Luc Bouchard of Alberta called it "morally unjustified." In a pastoral letter issued last January, Bishop Bouchard wrote: "Active steps to alleviate this environmental damage must be undertaken...Surface mining of oilsands destroys the boreal forest eco-system, pollutes water, creates greenhouse gases and toxic tailing ponds...When we allow

creation to be damaged and degraded we risk losing our sense of the natural order and even our sense of the existence of God." ("Catholic bishop slams Alberta's oilsands...", *The Province*, Jan.28, 2009, A24)

Setting aside the question of the existence of god for a moment, the news from the sciences, the facts, that must inform our search for meaning and truth with regard to the ways we are damaging "the natural order" is very grim indeed; they constitute "a clear and present danger" for all of us, and a challenge to me in speaking to you on this, our commemoration of Earth Day. Oh, the earth will continue turning, as we sang in our opening hymn, but what of the "silent majesty...of mountains, hills and pastures," "the seasons' harmony," and our "joyful song of peace"?

Last month, more than 2500 climate experts from 80 countries met in an emergency summit in Copenhagen. Their purpose was to update scientific thinking on global warming and push for public policies worldwide—a new global climate treaty to replace the Kyoto protocols—to respond now to the devastating consequences of global warming. Their plea to world leaders to curb greenhouse gas emissions was desperate and angry. "The climate system," they wrote, "is already moving beyond the patterns of natural variability within which our society and economy have developed and thrived....There is significant risk that many of the trends will accelerate, leading to...abrupt and irreversible climatic shifts....There is no excuse for inaction." Carbon emissions have risen more in recent years than anyone thought possible, and the world's natural carbon stores are losing the ability to soak up human pollution.

Many scientists privately concede that a 2' C. rise in global temperatures is inevitable, and that a 4' rise in temperatures by the end of the century will occur if emissions continue to rise at present rates. That would mean desertification of wide swaths of the world, inundation of coastlines by rising sea levels, the collapse of food production, massive dislocation of populations, and chronic warfare fought over dwindling natural resources. No wonder then that the report of the science conference concluded with a significant break from the scientific tradition of not commenting directly on public policy. Politicians, the conference wrote, must stand up to "vested interests that increase emissions" and "build on a growing public desire for governments to act"; that we must shift away immediately "from ineffective governance and weak institutions to innovative leadership in government, the private sector and civil society." (see "Six ways to save the world...", "Stern attacks politicians...", and "Scientists fear the worst...", in *Guardian*, March 12 &13, April 14, 2009)

Some of you have been following this, and similar apocalyptic stories on global warming and potential climate wars, and have met with me—stricken and depressed with grief; mourning for what may be the passing of the world we knew, "the seasons' harmony," and our "joyful song of peace"; alienated by the knowledge you possess and the mindful, modest good you do, while those around you act as though all is well, or all is lost—so why bother?; or that some fantastic miracle will occur to save our butts. Your grief, depression and alienation are real. A consequence of loss is grief; I acknowledge and honour this feeling of something infinitely precious slipping away, and mourn with you.

*And still the earth turns.* On the seventh day of mourning, of bereavement in the Jewish tradition, after having sat shiva for a few hours that final day with the bereaved, those who have come to comfort then say: "Arise." And for the first time in a week, those who have mourned step outside, walk around the block and come back in, saying that this house and their relationship with it will now be renewed; for it is a home where the living continue to dwell. A house that had been filled with solemnity, memory, and mourning, must give way to life, and to words, gestures and deeds that promote its flourishing for the sake of those who live and for generations yet to come.

The religious scholar James Carse has asserted that there are two kinds of games—games that end and games that don't; games that are finite and those that are infinite. In finite games, the rules are fixed and rigid; we play finite games to compete, gain titles and power, and to win. Finite games always have losers and are called, more often than not, business, war, Monopoly, Bay Street and partisan politics. By contrast, we play infinite games *to play*. Infinite games have no losers because the object of the game is to bring as many persons as possible into play and to keep playing. To be playful is not to act as if nothing of consequence will happen.

When we are playful with each other, we relate as free persons; *everything* that happens is of consequence. Infinite games pay it forward, fill the storehouse of the future, and play for increasing freedom. They are called potlatch, family, tree planting, storytelling, gospel singing, blues dancing, prayer, and pilgrimage, like the one this afternoon to Burns Bog, organized by our own Environment Committee.

Ensuring the future of life on earth is an infinite game, the endless expression of generosity and empathy expressed by the unnamed tens of millions of people striving to safeguard nature and ensure justice in what Paul Hawken has called the “blessed unrest” of the “largest social movement in history.” Any action, any finite game, that threatens nature, sustainability and justice can end the game, which is why groups dedicated to keeping the game going confront harmful policies, laws, and practices with the transformative power of infinite play. They want to keep the climate game going, so they go after carbon emissions. They want to keep the hope game alive in the world, so they go after the roots of poverty. They want to keep the child game going; thus they condemn inadequate housing for First Nations and Inuit people. They want to keep the child game going—so they stop complaining about the taxes they pay for schools; they volunteer to teach in our RE program; they turn off the TV, pull out a book, and read to their children at bedtime. (see Carse, *Finite and Infinite Games: A Vision of Life as Play and Possibility*, 1986; and Hawken, *Blessed Unrest...*, 2007)

Two hundred years ago, the Universalist minister John Murray made this extraordinary statement to his colleagues:

*You may possess only a small light, but uncover it, let it shine, use it in order to bring more light and understanding to the hearts and minds of men and women. Give them not Hell, but hope and courage. Do not push them deeper into their...despair, but preach the kindness and everlasting love of God."*

Those are the words of an infinite game, of infinite play, not one that is finite, closed and with a future predetermined by the past. Hope, not hell. Who would have known ten years ago, that a young African-American man would become the President of the United States? Who would have known that within weeks of taking office, his administration would dedicate tens of billions of dollars to greening the US economy through support of alternative fuels and pollution limiting technology? Who would have known that the US Environmental Protection Agency would reverse decades of climate change denial by formally labeling carbon dioxide and five other greenhouse gases a threat to public welfare and national security—a finding that sets the stage for strict regulation of emissions from coal fired power plants, oil production, and car manufacturers. Bad news for tar sands; good news for the rest of the world.

Who would have thought that Margaret Mead's rash statement might actually be true—the one where she says: “Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world.” One example, one person. Five years ago, Shai Agassi, a young Israeli software creator, didn't think of himself as an environmentalist. But at a world global forum where the question arose: “How would you make the world a better place?”—the answer seemed clear to him: end the addiction to oil by getting people to drive electric cars. To do this, he realized that he had to solve the problem of refueling by re-engineering not the electric battery, but the car itself, and the means of delivering the energy. His plan is so ingenious, that Renault, the French car manufacturer, has dedicated billions to produce the vehicles and delivery system, with Israel, Denmark and Hawaii already lined up as the first test markets. Renault officials have said “we're not talking about niche markets here...we're going to arrive on the market massively in 2011. It's going to be about global volumes.” (for the whole story, see Clive Thompson, “Batteries Not Included,” *New York Times Magazine*, April 19, 2009, pp. 44-9.)

Hope, not hell: one person decided to play an infinite game, where five years ago he wasn't even thinking about the environment. When I told this story to a young person last week, I can't tell you how he brightened up, and said to me: “you've just made my day. Thank you, I needed to hear that.”

I want to end by contrasting two stories. No matter how many times I have heard the story of Abraham and Isaac his son; no matter how many interpretations I have heard either praising Abraham's faith, or trying to find something uplifting in a tale of a father prepared to sacrifice his beloved son in response to what he believed was a command from god—no matter the praise, the excuses, the convoluted interpretations, I have always felt this story is a tragedy; and that Abraham failed the test.

Abraham should have said "no, I will not play this sick game. I will not go to Mount Moriah, lay my son out on an altar; I will not pull out a knife and slay him. A god who demands this of me is not fit to worship." Of course *we* know there was a ram waiting to be substituted at the last minute; but neither the father nor his son knew this. And tellingly, from that moment on, Abraham and Isaac never see each other again. They go their separate ways; Abraham returns alone to his wife Sarah who, and in the Genesis story, dies immediately thereafter.

Second story. On January 29, 1781, two days after his twenty-fifth birthday, Mozart directed the premiere of his first, great opera, *Idomeneo*. The source of the opera's libretto is drawn from an ancient Greek myth about Idomeneus, King of Crete, who, because of a rash vow, is confronted with a scenario like that of Abraham and Isaac. Believing that he is about to perish in a raging storm at sea, Idomeneus vows to Poseidon that if the god spares his life, he will sacrifice the first man he comes across once he reaches dry ground. In that world of implacable gods and bloody rituals, fate would have it that it is his own son, Idamante, whom he first meets ashore. In the Greek myth, bound by the strait jacket of his vow and driven mad with grief, Idomeneus sacrifices his son to appease the gods. Tragedy. Finite game. End of story.

Now fast forward to 1781. You are twenty-five. You're Mozart and writing this opera. You believe profoundly in the Enlightenment values of free-will, justice and compassion. What do you do? *You RE-WRITE THE ENDING*. Mozart re-wrote the ending. Moved by a father's grief, the courage of his son and of the love of a young Trojan woman for the doomed youth, Poseidon relents, and cancels his decree. Father and son reconcile. The young Greek prince and the Trojan maiden wed. Idomeneus yields his throne to the loving, youthful pair; and thus he makes way for the next generation and a new age of reconciliation. Mozart, age twenty-five, rewrote the ending of *Idomeneo*, because he believed that life is an infinite game; a story of hope, not hell—he re-wrote the ending for us.

Like Abraham, like Idomeneus of ancient myth, we can fail the test; see life as a finite game; and with bloody devotion as to an implacable god sacrifice future generations and our planet on the altar of an idolatrous faith in a lifestyle addicted to fossil fuels. Or, with that blessed unrest that moves within us, we can *re-write the ending*, arise from our lethargy, hopelessness and bereavement, saying that this house and our relationship with it will now be renewed—for it is a home where the living continue to dwell now and for generations to come.

On this Earth Day, may we re-dedicate ourselves to life as a domain for infinite play, and thus contribute to restoring grace, justice, and beauty to the world.