

**“Eco-Justice and Eco-Spirituality an Earth Day Sermon” Rev. Brian J. Kiely
Unitarian Church of Edmonton April 20, 2008**

Most often, when a Unitarian minister takes to the pulpit, you can expect an optimistic interpretation of events. Oh, there might be an incisive and damning critique of current failures shining with the clear blue flame of the speaker’s insightful intelligence, but on the whole we look for an upbeat way to send people home. As a species UU ministers are a positive lot who build our comments on an unstated faith in our human ability to get ourselves out of whatever messes humans have made.

When it comes to the environment, I have a hard time finding that optimism. My recent trip to Kenya taught me more about eco-justice and eco-spirituality than any other single experience.

I told you about Kevin and Divinah who live in two cinder block rooms with their three children. They have no running water, no toilet, no cooking area, no heat and few economic prospects. And they are far from being the poorest people we met. They have to scramble to find food and clothing and it’s not getting easier. I am sure you have all seen that the prices of staples like rice and wheat have risen dramatically in developing countries, between 75 and 120 per cent.

Theirs is a story repeated in many places in the world, and yet we look with horror as third world forests are clear cut for fuel, or when plains and seas are hunted and fished to dangerous levels for food. When I finally met people struggling with basic needs I realized that we have no right to judge their environmental consciousness. I, who live in a modest home that costs more than they will make in a lifetime, who has two cars at my disposal and electronic toys that probably suck more energy in a resting state than their families consume in a year, I have no right to judge.

And funnily enough, I feel trapped by my social environment. The folks taking Karen Stevenson’s Sustaining Wonder class were musing this week about lessening their personal environmental footprints. How do you do that when citizens are unwilling to sacrifice enough to provide good public transportation? How do you do that when you pretty much have to shop in grocery stores and increasingly in big box stores that are far from home? How do you do that when children grow up expecting designer clothes, iPods and various after school activities? How do you lessen your footprint when no one else is doing it? We don’t. That’s the simple truth. Sure, we recycle and maybe install better furnaces and use energy efficient appliances when we can, but those are small things. Important things. But small things.

I believe, deep in my heart, that a reckoning is coming, a catastrophic reckoning. We cannot sustain the lifestyle we have in the developed world. Why? It is unjust for us to have so much while the rest of the world does not. There is an unhealthy accumulation of resources and economic power, but already that power is shifting to China and the rest of Asia. The west is in decline, a slope that may well grow steeper. Things will change and it is unreasonable to expect that the people who have done without for so long will not follow our consumerist lead. They want more, and their need and ours will add to an already overstressed planet.

A reckoning is coming because we use a disproportionate amount of resources that are already emptying the earth of non-renewable materials. I am unconvinced that a world can exist with everyone at our level of prosperity. We will have to give up a lot of the things that drive our economy and that will cause suffering.

Finally, a reckoning is coming because we are wearing out the environment. I am not a full convert to the global climate change prophets of doom. History shows that there have been severe climate shifts in the past. We may be aiding the next one, but I doubt we are the sole cause...but that's irrelevant. The change is coming whether we willingly make sacrifices or not. I doubt we will...at least not enough of them. We, and I definitely include my electronics-loving, car-driving, carnivorous self, will not be able to make the cuts and sacrifices willingly. We're addicted to what we've got. And we can't expect our politicians to sign their own death warrants by legislating the necessary sacrifices. I believe that something very bad is going to happen, perhaps in our lifetimes, perhaps farther away. I have faith that humanity will survive it, but it won't be pretty.

Unless there is a sudden and amazing paradigm shift. I suppose that may be possible. In fact a few months ago Scott Harrison sent me a YouTube video clip that laid out an argument for action that I cannot challenge. It is nine minutes long, and while I could summarize JohnQ5's comments, I don't feel I could do them justice. The video quality is poor, but that's not really a problem.

It is called "The Most Terrifying Video You Will Ever See"
www.youtube.com/watch?v=bDsIFspVzfl

JohnQ5 has convinced me that we have to act, but on first listening I didn't really grasp just how dramatic the required action will be. Yes, we have to use better light bulbs and hybrid cars and all of that, but that won't be enough. We will not willingly give up what we have as long as someone else has it. Trying to fix this will be cripplingly expensive. Any action will bring about massive change to economics, transportation, social structure and the geo-political map. Whether this is a year away, a few decades or a century, I cannot say. Whether or not we can find a way to mitigate the upheaval and make it easier I also cannot say. In my pessimism I tend to think that nothing really will change until the environment – and society-- collapses to a significant degree. But who knows? Maybe we'll bet that nothing will happen and nothing will, but somehow I doubt that. That's sort of what happened in New Orleans when they failed to maintain the dykes, and that wake-up call has had no effect yet.

The kinds of sacrifices the salvation of the human race will require will be much more dramatic than proper recycling. Life will not be as we know it. There will be suffering. But then, my trip to Africa showed me there already is suffering. There already are people dying in the tens of thousands from AIDS, war, pestilence and starvation. Still, more hopefully, there are people building and rebuilding and finding hope and working out new ways.

In this brave new world, the question for Unitarians will be how can we help rebuild a society that is more mutually respectful to people and to Nature, more cooperative and less insular. Whenever those days of challenge arrive, our liberal faith will be tested like it never has been before. Will we have the courage to be Unitarians when the time comes?

Well, I told you this wouldn't be optimistic. It's why I have not often preached on environmental concerns in the past few years. I like to give messages that help people grow and feel better about life. On this subject, I can't do that very well.

I can only restate that I do believe the human race will survive the global environmental challenges coming our way. I choose to believe that given a massive

amount of real, tangible sacrifice and goodwill, that we in the developed world can have a positive effect on climate change. I will even allow that we may be able to save ourselves and some of our way of life if we have the courage, as entire societies, to live very differently starting very soon. Will we have the courage to try? Will we have the will to heed JohnQ5's warning? That is the question, isn't it?