

# Transition Towns & The Spiritual Sense of Place

First Unitarian Congregation of Toronto  
26 September 2010

N.B. – These sermons are made available with a request: that the reader appreciate that, ideally, a sermon is an oral/aural experience that takes place in the context of worship – supported and reinforced by readings, contemplative music, rousing hymns, silence, and prayer – and that it is but one part of an extended conversation that occurs over time between a minister and a covenanted congregation.

## Meditation

In the Zen tradition, there is a well-known teaching:  
“Before Enlightenment, chop wood, carry water.  
After Enlightenment, chop wood, carry water.”

May these meditation words, from Joan Murray’s poem “Her Head,”  
lead us to consider the ways each of us is called to chop wood and carry water in our own lives.

Near Ekuvukeni,  
in Natal, South Africa,  
a woman carries water on her head.

After a year of drought,  
when one child in three is at risk of death,  
she returns from a distant well,  
carrying water on her head.

The pumpkins are gone,  
the tomatoes withered,  
yet the woman carries water on her head.

The cattle kraals are empty,  
the goats gaunt-  
no milk now for children,  
but she is carrying water on her head.

The engineers have reversed the river:  
those with power can keep their power,  
but one woman is carrying water on her head.

In the homelands, where the dusty crowds  
watch the empty roads for water trucks,  
one woman trusts herself with treasure,  
and carries water on her head.

The sun does not dissuade her,  
nor the dried earth that blows against her,  
as she carries the water on her head.

In a huge and dirty pail,  
with an idle handle,  
resting on a narrow can,  
this woman is carrying water on her head.

This woman, who girds her neck  
with safety pins, this one  
who carries water on her head,  
trusts her own head to bring to her people  
what they need now  
between life and death:  
She is carrying them water on her head.

- Joan Murray, *Looking for the Parade*

*Before the following reflection by Shawn Newton, Professor Blake Poland offered a talk on Transition Towns.*

### **Reflection: “A Spiritual Sense of Place”**

“The blue-green hills of earth.”

As you might recall, those words were inspired by a scene  
from Robert Heinlein’s science-fiction classic *The Green Hills of Earth*,  
in which a blind poet living on a spaceship composes a ballad of yearning, for “one more landing  
on the globe that gave us birth.”

His poem ends: “May we rest our eyes on the fleecy skies  
and the cool green hills of earth.”

That poignant image lives on now in our hymnal (and in our hearts)  
as an affirmation of the Seventh Principle of Unitarian Universalism,  
the principle that calls us  
to respect for the interdependent web of life, of which we are a part.

It is a beautiful sentiment. A lovely and lofty idea.  
And it is an incredibly demanding article of this faith.

That's because to truly honour the web of life in this world,  
it's becoming ever more clear (as you've just heard again)  
that we must learn to live our lives differently.

We know this, of course.  
The truth is, we've known it for quite some time.

And we have—often willingly, and sometimes grudgingly—  
made vital changes in our everyday lives,  
from the decisions we make about transit and what we eat  
to becoming compulsive recyclers  
and conserving energy in whatever ways we can.

But, for all of the ways we've changed in recent years,  
what is being asked of us is something deeper still—  
a radical realignment of how we relate to one another and to the earth.

While there are certainly many outward, practical steps involved,  
I believe that the deeper work we are being called to is ultimately spiritual.

Because what is required is not merely a simple shift in human behaviour,  
but a transformative turn of the human heart.

This turn is about coming to see ourselves  
not as being set over and above the web of life,  
but as an intrinsic and ultimately interdependent part of the web itself.

It's about deepening our reverence for the great gift of life  
and responding out of gratitude for that gift by how we live our every day.

And, it's about together finding ways to walk softly on this earth,  
knowing that it is the only sustainable path into the future.

In their book *No Foreign Land*, the Canadian authors Wilfred Pelletier and Ted Poole write:

Wherever you are is home  
And the earth is paradise  
Wherever you set your feet is holy land...  
You don't live off it like a parasite.  
You live in it, and it in you,  
Or you don't survive.  
And that[, they say,] is the only worship of God there is.

What I most appreciate about the Transition Town movement is that in the face of the doom and gloom forecasts, it offers a hopeful, energetic vision of a world made better than the one we now know.

With its emphases on responsibility and resilience, community and collaboration, it holds out a viable method for restoring our connections with the web of life itself, beginning with the very community and resources that are around us.

I find this an incredibly compelling approach to the spiritual task before us.

Living as we do, at the heart of this great urban centre, it is a very real challenge to be mindful of the wider web and of our place in it.

Without a great deal of vigilance, it's nearly impossible to know where every bite of our food comes from, and where every bit of our garbage goes.

It is difficult to truly see our personal impact on the planet, or the countless faces, scattered around the globe, who make possible our lives as we live them today in Toronto.

And when we can't see these things clearly, they can so easily seem not to matter.

That is, until we see the faces of our children and our grandchildren, our students, our neighbours, and the kids of this congregation,

and we begin to wonder and worry about the world we are leaving to them.

It isn't easy to confront the ways that we, in this age,  
have broken our covenant with the web of life—  
that we have too often lost sight of our connection to the earth  
and to those with whom our very lives are bound up.

But when we begin to wrestle with what it means to live a life of integrity within the  
interdependent web, a world of possibilities starts to open.

For all the technological marvels of the modern world,  
I believe the only thing, in the end, that will save life on this planet  
is a deepening devotion  
to the sacred web that makes it possible.

May we take up this work anew, with hopeful, happy hearts,  
even if the work simply involves  
hauling the water that needs to be brought in.

That we might be like the woman from South Africa, who:

Trust[ed] her own head to bring to her people  
what they need[ed]. . .  
between life and death:  
. . . carrying them water on her head.

So be it. Amen.