

Sermon - First Unitarian Congregation of Toronto

Judy Vellend June 26, 2011

“To fly or not to fly: is that the question?”

Several years ago when I went to the dentist for my check-up, he told me I should floss my teeth every day. I went home. I did nothing. The next time I went to the dentist, the hygienist took one look in my mouth, gasped, and told me that I really should floss every day. I went to the drugstore, bought a little box of floss, went home, put it in a visible spot in my bathroom and then, I did nothing. At my next check-up the dentist gave me a hands-on demonstration showing me exactly how to do it. I went home. The little box of floss stared at me accusingly. I thought I'd better give it a try. It was awkward. I wasn't sure if I was doing it right. I was annoyed at having to add this to my morning routine. But finally, finally the adult part of me stepped forward, and I started to floss every day. It took a long time. Change is hard. We tend to like things to stay the same.

Now granted, some changes are much easier than others. If my doctor, for example, saw that I was feeling blue, and advised me to eat a big bowl of ice cream every night to cheer me up, I'd be out the door and off to the store before you could blink an eye. It's much easier to make change in the direction of more pleasure and more convenience, than in the other direction. You're probably wondering where this is going. I hope you'll stick with me.

I grew up in a semi rural area at the edge of Minneapolis and spent much of my childhood playing outside. This was the beginning of my love of being outdoors and my deep connection to the Earth. I worked for 12 years for the Recycling Council of Ontario doing education on waste reduction and recycling.

I then moved onto other work, but when I retired I was clear in my mind that I wanted to return to environmental work. I was learning about climate change and peak oil, and feeling worried and frightened. I felt I had to do something. I helped form an environmental group in my neighbourhood, Green Neighbours 21, and that's where I've put most of my energy.

I continue to read and learn and worry. I worry a lot about what life will be like for my children and grandchildren. It will certainly be very different from today.

Climate change is happening faster than initially predicted. We are seeing an increase in the number and severity of extreme weather events around the world. The price of oil and food are going up, causing human suffering and social unrest. Just a few years ago these were the things we worried would happen, and now they're happening.

I struggle daily with how to live at this very unique point in history. It all feels a bit crazy-making. There's such a disconnect between what we know and what we do. I know about the dramatic reductions in GHG emissions that are being called for (George Monbiot in his book *Heat* calls for an 80% reduction by 2050), but I don't see that we're taking the steps to realize those reductions. There are a lot of people doing wonderful work all around the world, but it's no where near enough.

I'm aware of the changes and challenges, but at the same time I don't hear them being talked about much in the mainstream media or in everyday conversation. I want to be able to talk about it, but I'm not always sure where to begin. Introducing scary information into a conversation often elicits an uncomfortable silence, and being the sissy that I am, I often don't try. So this sermon is one way for me to be able to talk about it.

As a brief aside, let me say that I by no means consider myself to be a paragon of virtuous green living. Not long ago I went to the website Zerofootprint and completed a short questionnaire to get my own environmental rating. Somewhat to my surprise I didn't do very well, for 2 reasons. One, my living space is big for one person. And two, I fly, I travel by plane, or at least I did at the time.

I quote "On an individual level, a single flight across the country can wipe out the benefit of a person's environmental good deeds for an entire year. A return flight from Toronto to Vancouver will produce the equivalent of over 1.5 tonnes of greenhouse gas emissions per passenger. A trip to an exotic destination does as much damage to the climate as driving an SUV for a year."

My younger son recently moved from Vancouver to Quebec, so, much to my relief, I no longer need to fly in order to see him. So, inspired by Kate Chung's no-fly pledge, I will try to do the same – fly only under special circumstances such as a family emergency. And if my son hadn't moved – that would be a hard. I can't imagine not seeing him, and I would find a 4-day train trip across Canada pretty exhausting. I'm sure that many of you are in the same situation, with family living far away. Monbiot refers to this as "love miles." It's a tough one.

Perhaps rather than going cold turkey, someone who does fly frequently could begin by flying less – taking holidays closer to home, or taking the train for shorter trips. Change often needs to happen in small increments. When I discussed this with a good friend of mine, she said it brought to mind the following analogy. Picture this – I'm at home in the evening, relaxing, sitting at my dining room table and eating a big piece of chocolate cake. I'm really enjoying that cake. I'm savouring every sweet creamy chocolately mouthful.

Suddenly I smell smoke. I see flickers of flame. The house is on fire. What are my options? I could continue to sit there and eat my chocolate cake because I'm just enjoying it so much, or I could leave the house immediately and call 911. If we see the cake as representing all the luxuries and pleasures of our time, and the fire as climate change, we open up the possibility of seeing our choices in a new light.

Why is change so hard? There has been a lot written on the subject, and I can only touch on it here. I read an article a while back with the attention grabbing title 'Change or Die'. The author refers to a study of heart patients to illustrate his argument that even when people are told that they will die if they don't make certain changes, the chances are good that they still won't make those changes. In the study patients who received bypass surgery were advised to change their diet and to quit smoking, to prevent the return of pain or the need to repeat surgery. A large majority - 90% - failed to make these changes.

The author explores the reasons for this. He argues that if we want to encourage change it's less effective to provide facts and information than to speak to people's feelings. He says that we need to bring in the psychological, emotional, and spiritual dimensions. When the patients took part in support groups, the percentage who stuck with the new regime, greatly increased. Another strategy for success involved aiming to motivate not with the "fear of dying" but the "joy of living", anticipation of the things they would be able to do and enjoy in their lives.

We can talk about change in different ways. We can talk about you and I making changes in our lives to live more lightly on the earth - taking the TTC, adding insulation to the attic. But we can also talk about the huge changes that are happening in our world - changes in climate, energy, population, biodiversity, water, soil and so forth.

In the book *Eaarth*, Bill McKibben says, "Global warming is no longer a philosophical threat, no longer a future threat, no longer a threat at all. It's our reality. We've changed the planet, changed it in large and fundamental ways. We need now to understand the world we've created, and consider - urgently - how to live in it."

To illustrate the change that is underway, I'd like to refer to a graph I saw in a book. It grabbed my attention and has stuck with me. I've always liked to see the big picture, so seeing where we fit in the long expanse of human history appeals to me. Powerpoints don't have a place in a sermon, so please try to visualize this. The graph illustrates the supply of oil over time. The lower left hand corner of the graph is year 0. The lower right hand corner of the graph is year 4,000. Right in the middle of the graph, from about 1880 to 2030, is a skinny mountain.

The skinny mountain shows that period of time from when oil was first discovered to that time when we will have used up most of our oil supplies.

I believe we're at the top of the mountain. What this means is that in the coming years the supply of oil will decrease each year, and the cost will increase. Our whole economy and way of life depend on cheap abundant oil – so life will indeed be very different. The trip up the left side of the mountain was a great ride for many of us. We've enjoyed the wealth, ease, and luxury that has been part of the fossil fuel era. But that era is coming to an end, and the trip down the mountain will be quite a different experience.

How can we respond to this kind of awareness? We can hold on tight to the life we know and pretend it ain't so. Or we can accept that things are and will be different and get ready. We can easily get side-tracked by denial or sink into despair, or we can look reality in the eye and prepare for the future with a sense of hope and imagination. I am trying my best to do the later.

I quote from a book called "The Great Turning": "People will say that green activists wants to change everything'. They miss the point. Everything is going to change. The question is whether we let the changes play out in increasingly destructive ways or embrace the deepening crisis as our time of opportunity... It is the greatest creative challenge the species has ever faced."

Transition Towns give us a model for making that change. The model begins by acknowledging that the end of The Age of Cheap Oil is near (or here),and that this will mean enormous change, but it can be change for the better if we plan in advance. It invites us to create a positive vision of the future and then to work together to make that vision a reality.

To fly or not to fly – it's a good question. On a personal level - if we want to reduce our carbon footprint – it makes sense without a doubt, even though it seems to be one of the most difficult things for people to do. But let's also keep our eye on the big changes underway. This can help us see our own lives and personal choices in a new way.

Back to flossing. I am happy to report that I am still flossing every day (or to be perfectly honest, most days). But not without an effort. I have to give myself a little push every morning. Often doing the right thing requires an effort every single day. And by the way, as much as I love chocolate cake, I think I'll put down my fork and leave the burning house.