

The Writing on the Wall

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Passover & Earth Day

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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.

Whenever I find myself unable to sleep,
instead of counting sheep,
I tend to renew my complicated relationship
with late-night televangelists.

I worried I'd miss out on this spectacle when I moved to Canada.
But, I can attest that they can be found, even here, if you're up late enough.

The disturbing theology, the garish sound stage chapels,
the big hair, the frightening, overdone make-up:
all of it both frustrates and fascinates me.

A few years ago, at the end of one of these programs,
there was a horrifying little film about the imminent apocalypse
due to usher in the end of the world as we know it.

The narrator explained that the increasing trials and tribulations
of our world offer the clearest indicators that we are living in “The End Times.”

When viewers were then invited to subscribe
to the televangelist's monthly publication, *The End Times Magazine*,
I made a swift move for the remote control.

But before I could change the channel,
I was fascinated to learn that one could purchase
either a two- or four-year subscription to this no-doubt fine publication.

What a fabulous business plan!
Convince people that the sky is falling,
and then have them send you money in the meantime!

In trying to find this magazine online,
I stumbled across another website, this one called RaptureReady.com.

It features a tool called the “rapture index,”
a handy little measure of the specific conditions
that are supposedly predictive of the coming apocalypse.

The index weighs various signs—
such as earthquakes and floods, famine and war,
and, of all things, the rise of liberalism and civil rights.

An overall score under 100 is considered low, or “slow prophetic activity.”
A score of 160 comes with the warning to “fasten your seatbelts.”

Well, I’m sure you’ll be glad to know
that today’s score is – brace yourselves – 181.

Most Unitarian Universalists don’t spend a lot of energy fretting
about the possibility of living in the end times.

A looming apocalypse isn’t something we tend to chat about at coffee hour.

But perhaps it’s time we did. Or that more of us did.

Though we might well come to very different conclusions
from the folks at RaptureReady.com about the meaning
of famines and floods, and other such “signs,”
we need not look far, of course,
to see that the natural order of things is seriously out of whack.

The writing is on the wall.
The writing is everywhere.

Our best minds have been telling us for quite some time
that our planet is going to hell in a hand-basket.

And, if ever there were an inconvenient truth, this must surely be it:
that we, ourselves, share most of the responsibility
for the troubling state of things.

If there is to be a coming apocalypse, we are bringing it on ourselves.

Such an uncomfortable insight easily sends us searching for the culprits
in the halls of government and the temples of commerce.

But, of course, it's much more complicated than that,
because in our interdependent web,
we, ourselves, are, of course, the government
and the engine that drives the economy.

The simple fact of living in North America in the 21st century
means that our lives are mired in so many unwelcome ways
in webs of injustice, oppression, and environmental degradation.

Whether we like it or not, the shape of our lives may not,
and perhaps cannot, fully reflect the principles of our faith.

In this interconnected world of ours,
the most seemingly minute details of our lives
are increasingly tied in traceable ways to everything else.

As the early conservationist John Muir put it:
“when we try to pick out anything by itself,
we find it hitched to everything in the universe.”

And so it is with us,
and with questions of responsibility
for the pickle that we're in on this little planet of ours.

The daily decisions we make, make a difference,
not only to ourselves, but to people living half the world away,
to frogs in shrinking forests, and polar bears on melting ice floes.

What we do and what we eat;
the things we buy and the things we throw away;
how we get around and how we get away from it all.
All of it is “hitched to everything in the universe.”

Yet, over the past century or so—if not longer—
we've done a spectacular job of pretending that this isn't true,
of successfully living an “out-of-sight, out-of-mind” existence.

So much so, that if you're like me,
you rarely know exactly where your food comes from
or where your garbage goes.

We say that we throw things away,
as though “away” is an endlessly expanding location on the map,
just somewhere out there beyond the boundary of our concern.

On some level we all know better—
that there is no place that can be truly called “away,”
that our lives and the lives of those we love
are impossible to set apart from the future of everything else.

To be sure, some of us find ourselves worrying about all of this—
and for good reason— to the point that there’s a movement
underway among therapists to establish
a new category of treatment for “eco-anxiety disorders.”

I can’t quite decide if that’s a promising or distressing sign.

But what is clear is that in ways we humans have yet to fully grasp,
all of us on this planet are, indeed, in this together.

This isn’t actually news to any of us.
But it’s a fundamental truth we seem prone to forget.

Reflecting over the last few days on Passover,
which our Jewish friends and neighbours began celebrating Friday night,
I’ve been reminded of the importance of resisting forgetfulness.

I’ve been reminded of the amazing power
of telling and retelling the enduring story of survival and freedom
found in the words of the Passover Haggadah.

It is an epic tale that has stood the tests of time
by making palpable in story, symbol, song
the struggles and the triumphs of those who went before;
imparting to Jews the world over for thousands of years
the enduring story of how a people emerged from bondage to find freedom.

We need such a story.

If *we* make it,
if humanity somehow survives the tremendous challenges
that we are almost certain to confront in the coming decades,
we will need a story just as powerful

to tell future generations how we did it—
a handbook for the human spirit that tells
how we overcame overwhelming odds
and eventually found our way back to a promised land
of peace, harmony, and balance with our natural world.

Now, the first part of that story has been told for decades now,
by committed women and men who have long laboured
to warn us that something precious is being irretrievably lost.

With slideshows and statistics, films and protests,
they've helped our governments and our largest corporations
finally begin to see that we can't keep going like we are—
that our lives, especially as we live them here in North America,
are ultimately unsustainable.

The sharing of the most dire facts and figures
has compelled many of us to change our behaviours,
causing us to think differently
about the decisions we make in our daily lives.

But, I hope that the story told centuries from now
will ultimately be one of a people,
who, when confronted with the horrific realization
that their quality of life came at the expense of people
on the other side of the planet
and at a cost to countless generations to come,
finally found the courage to live in a radically different way.

What will it take for us to be that people
that future generations will look back upon
with gratitude rather than scorn?

What will it take for us to be that people
who refused to allow the window of opportunity
to be closed by our own hand?

It's safe to say it will require more of us than we can imagine.
And that it will demand more of us than we have done.

Yet, if we are to make it, if we are to survive—
we must find our way to freedom

by a more creative route than the one we have traveled to date.

I'm no longer convinced that meaningful, lasting change
will come about by our continuing to recite
the litany of woes that threaten the pulse of life on this planet.

I'm not even optimistic
that a rapid onslaught of ecological disasters will truly get our attention.
As a species we seem to have an amazing capacity to adapt, move on, and forget.

Instead, I believe that the solution we most desperately need
is a profoundly spiritual one,
for it is a deep crisis of the spirit
that perpetuates among us the false and damaging notion
that our lives are not bound up with each other
and with every living thing on this planet.

What is needed, then, in meeting this spiritual challenge
is not merely a change in our thinking, but a lasting change of heart.

For, if the story of the survival of life is to be told in centuries to come,
it will almost surely hinge on what we, in this generation,
decided to do with our lives—whether we,
sufficiently grateful for inheriting the gift of life ourselves,
were willing to repay our debt of gratitude to the universe
by ensuring that the grand venture of life itself continues on.

Joanna Macy, whose work Stephanie spoke of earlier,
calls this deeply-needed change of hearts and minds
The Great Turning.

The Great Turning is the response to what she sees as the Great Unraveling,
which is defined by what Buddhist social thinkers
call the three poisons at the root of all human suffering:
greed, aggression, and delusion.

To turn away from these poisons
which undergird our present Industrial Growth Society
to a Life-Sustaining Society is, admittedly, an enormous endeavour.

It involves a radical shift in direction,
and will require a revolution in human understanding.

What Macy puts forward as the process for this is aptly titled the “work that reconnects.”

The workshops she and her disciples hold around the world are meant to engage people in the hard work of reconnecting, of coming back to life.

I took part in one of her experiential workshops last spring. I found it powerful, challenging, and life-changing. I'm grateful Stephanie will be offering this workshop here in a few weeks.

One of the things that remains with me from the workshop I did is an exercise we did in pairs.

We took to the outdoors on a crisp, sunny day. One partner, with eyes closed, was guided by the other on a nature walk.

For the first forty-five minutes, my friend Debra was my guide, leading me through the world, inviting me to see with my other senses things I typically failed to notice with my eyes.

Without the benefit of sight, I depended on her descriptions of things. As she placed dandelions and pine cones in my palm, I relied on her to tell me what each object was like.

Sometimes, through touch or smell, I could conjure an image of what was, quite literally, at hand.

At other times, I couldn't figure out exactly what I was holding. My task was simply to experience it through my available senses.

Occasionally Debra would position me directly in front of a pine bough or the trunk of a tree and then invite me to open my eyes.

Slowly, as my eyes adjusted to the light, I would come to see in amazing detail the kind of wonders I too often race past without thinking, without recognition, and certainly without gratitude.

Eventually, it was time to switch roles,

and I found myself leading Debra through the same area,
all while needing to carefully notice and narrate what was around us.

It is a simple exercise.

Two people could recreate this scene most anywhere.

And, yet, we don't. Unless we slow down, and truly begin to see.

Unless we do the work that reconnects.

What I appreciate about Macy's approach
is her effort to ground this work in our emotions.

She knows The Great Turning can't truly take place
unless we're able to have a genuine change of heart.

But rather than focusing on doom and gloom,
and scaremongering people to action out of fear and guilt,
she invites us to undertake The Turn for ourselves
by connecting deeply with our love and gratitude for the earth.

Last week, in his wonderful sermon,
Professor Stephen Scharper invited each us to bring to mind
some specific spot, some place in our past
where we felt most connected to the natural world.

He asked to hold that memory close to our hearts, and then later
asked what had become of that particular plot of earth.

Standing beside Stephen as the congregation came through
the receiving line at the end of the service, I was struck
by how many people shared an anecdote about their special place,
and then told of its demise, for one reason or another,
with sadness in their voices.

In Macy's work, there's also a place for our pain.
An opportunity to lift up our angst and anxiety
at the state of the world,
and a place to honour the grief we feel
for what has been, and what is being, lost.

Like so many situations in life, it is only by naming our pain
that we can begin to do something about it.

That something, Macy says, is to embrace an “active hope” that is grounded in love and gratitude.

Active hope isn’t something we have, but something we do; when we set our hearts on what we deeply long to see in the world, and then do our part to help bring that vision into being.

Friends, let us, then, become a people of active hope.

May we live out of an active hope by deepening our commitment to tend the sacred bonds of life that bind us one to another.

May we live out active hope, being led not by our fears, but by our love for the great gift of life itself.

Now, it must be said that the road ahead will be long and hard; yet it is the path we must travel if we are to truly serve life.

Like the Israelites of old,
who held a vision of the Promised Land
long before they entered in,
we, in this generation and for some time to come,
may find ourselves wandering in the desert,
with fervent hopes of reaching a distant land,
moving ever onward, toward the promise of a future
that we ourselves may never actually see.

But let us never forget that to keep moving toward that vision is nothing less than an act of faith.

So, may the generations to come
find that we, in our time, were faithful, and filled with active hope.

Amen.