

# “Things Have Changed”

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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.

## Song:

### “Planet in a Plastic Bag”

I don't have time to take it nice and slow  
I'm in a hurry, I'll get that to go  
Rushing home and feeling so jet-lagged  
Put my planet in a plastic bag  
I've got some things I need to get wrapped up  
A handle on important stuff  
Take a look at this fantastic swag, I got a  
Planet in a plastic bag,  
planet in a plastic bag...

Holding on through thick and thin  
Giving it a certain spin  
Betting that we're gonna win  
But hold on tight, I'm climbing in.

I've got a strategy that's so air-tight  
I know the secret of my heart's delight  
I keep on moving in a cool zig-zag  
Put my planet in a plastic bag  
I did not want it in a paper sack  
I went forward, I did not look back  
I lit up and took a nice long drag  
On my planet in a plastic bag  
Planet in a plastic bag...

Holding on through thick and thin  
Giving it a certain spin  
Betting that we're gonna win  
But hold on tight, I'm climbing in.

It was handed down to us, my dear  
Like a present given free and clear  
And we were fine until we hit that snag,  
put our planet in a plastic bag  
And if you carry it away with me  
We'll display it so the stars can see  
We will fly it like a big white flag...  
Planet in a plastic bag,  
Planet in a plastic bag...

Holding on through thick and thin  
Giving it a certain spin  
Betting that we're gonna win  
But hold on tight, hold on tight,  
Hold on tight, hold on...

- Lynn Harrison, from "Simplicity" (2008)  
<http://lynoleum.com/mp3/PlanetInAPlasticBag.mp3>

**Sermon:**

I tried to let go of plastics this month,  
and I ate quite a few bananas.

Trying to unplug from plastics for the month of April,  
I often found myself in cafes and grocery stores,  
hungry and needing to eat lunch,  
but not wanting to buy anything in a plastic container.

I wanted to honour a commitment I'd made  
to reduce the amount of disposable plastic  
I used during the month of April.

In short, I wanted to try to live up to my song.

I did pretty well.

I carried with me this bamboo fork and spoon set  
so I wouldn't need plastic cutlery...

...along with this little cloth towel that replaced the paper kind.

I toted trusty cloth bags,  
and when I'd forgotten one,  
I sometimes carried grocery items in my hands,  
where everyone could see them.

When I was hungry and in need of fast food,  
I often bought a banana instead of a sandwich in a  
plastic case.

Sounds virtuous, right? Well, maybe.

## §

Except that according to the Canadian Fair Trade Network,  
bananas are the most heavily sprayed food crop in the world...  
with four of the chemicals used classified as "extremely hazardous"  
by the World Health Organization.

The intensive production methods used to ensure high yields,  
cause significant damage to soil, water and fish...

And the major corporations farming the bananas

spend more on chemicals than they do on paying their workers, whose lives are, of course, endangered by the chemicals.<sup>1</sup> Equifruit, based in Quebec, is one of two importers of Fair Trade bananas in Canada.

It works hard to ensure fair wages and working conditions for people in Peru and Mexico.<sup>2</sup>

But of course, even those Fair Trade bananas have to be shipped from Peru and Mexico to Canada...where we eat about three billion bananas each year.

## §

I bring up the banana problem as a kind of confession...

To admit that as a fully participating person in this society, I find it difficult to disengage from products and practices I know to be harmful to the earth and its creatures.

Things have changed, since the days when disposable plastics and other convenience items were seen as the ticket to happiness.

We now see the toll they're taking on the planet... and around the world a movement is underway to reduce our use of plastics through legislation,<sup>3</sup> to replace them with more eco-friendly alternatives,<sup>4</sup> and even break them down in new ways using enzymes and bacteria.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Canadian Fair Trade Network - <http://cftn.ca/products/bananas>

<sup>2</sup> <https://earthsgeneralstore.ca/important-update-fair-trade-organic-bananas/>

<sup>3</sup> West Coast Environmental Alliance, "Reducing Single-Use Plastics: Local Government Actions in Canada," January 2018 <https://www.wcel.org/sites/default/files/file-downloads/appendix-plastic-regulatory-actions-jan2018.pdf>

<sup>4</sup> "10 Ways the Anti-Plastic Movement is Taking Over" Jan. 24, 2018 <https://www.buzzworthy.com/10-ways-anti-plastic-movement-is-taking-over/>

<sup>5</sup> The Guardian: "Scientists Accidentally Create Mutant Enzyme that Eats Plastic Bottles" April 16, 2018 <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2018/apr/16/scientists-accidentally-create-mutant-enzyme-that-eats-plastic-bottles>

We're no longer so in love with plastics.  
Things have changed in that regard.  
But what hasn't changed so much  
is our relationship to consumer goods in general...  
and to a way of life that keeps us moving at a pace  
likely impossible to sustain.

I wonder whether we have the ability to change...  
whether we have the "plasticity" if you will...  
to imagine another way of life,  
and to transform ourselves so it might be possible?

## §

Right now, it seems to me, we're witnessing and living through, the  
clash of two value systems:

One that honours and encourages high productivity,  
immediate gratification, personal comfort and  
individual achievement...

...and another value system that calls for mindfulness,  
voluntary simplicity, and personal sacrifice for the well-being  
of the whole.

Human beings are so oriented toward accomplishment  
and improving things, we've created products that seem to  
nurture us by making our lives more comfortable and efficient, when  
in fact we're harming ourselves.

We see the same pattern in addiction,  
when a substance that provides immediate  
comfort and pleasure compromises the user's health,  
while also creating a dependency.

If allowed to escalate, addictions can be fatal.

And so it is, too, with the addiction to comfort and convenience we're experiencing now as human beings in the developed world.

## §

Today, most of us are surely aware of how inadequately prepared we are, to unhook completely from plastics or fossil fuels.

Even trying to do so for one day will show us how difficult this is.

I'm not saying this to be self-critical...

But to point out how completely enmeshed we are in the interdependent web of existence...to quote our Unitarian 7<sup>th</sup> Principle.

How "caught" we are in a web we've helped create.

Becoming more and more agitated about our situation is not likely to help...but there are wise teachers who can show us other ways.

Buddhist nun Pema Chödrön describes our predicament as "The Big Squeeze," when...

"On the level of social action,  
on the level of our family,  
at work or in our community..."

Our ideals and the reality of what's really happening don't match."<sup>6</sup>

She says that in these times we're often tempted to run away or escape or give up.

Likewise, Quaker teacher Parker Palmer speaks about "the tragic gap" between the good we know is possible and the profound suffering of the world.<sup>7</sup>

I tend to draw on contemporary interpreters of the ancient religions, but you can find this idea in scripture going back through the centuries.

Embedded in virtually all wisdom teachings, you'll find examples of paradox:

The "crux," or cross, of things that seem irreconcilable.

And in these teachings we hear the call to stay present in that uncomfortable place where we're aware of problems we cannot easily solve.

## §

In her 2014 book "This Changes Everything: Capitalism vs. the Climate," Naomi Klein suggests that:

"The reason so many of us have failed to act is not because we are too selfish to care about an abstract or seemingly far-off problem—but because we are utterly overwhelmed by how much we do care."<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Pema Chodron, *Start Where You Are: A Guide to Compassionate Living* (Boston: Shambhala, 1994), 122-123.

<sup>7</sup> Parker Palmer on Standing in the Tragic Gap - <http://www.couragerenewal.org/723/>

I think she's absolutely right...and so, we need cultivate the tools to address how overwhelmed we feel.

That is, tools that can change our consciousness:  
change the way we respond to stress, fear and anxiety.

Klein writes that “the task is to articulate not just an alternative set of policy proposals, but an alternative worldview to rival the one at the heart of the ecological crisis—

[A worldview] embedded in interdependence rather than hyper-individualism, reciprocity rather than dominance, and cooperation rather than hierarchy.”<sup>9</sup>

This vision is, of course, very much in line with our UU principles.

Inconveniently, though, Unitarian Universalism doesn't provide a simple path toward the personal change needed for us to live in this new way.

Put in traditional religious terms, it doesn't offer us a simple path toward “salvation” or “enlightenment.”

Our UU principles call us to a “higher” or more ethical way of living...one that is essentially counter-cultural...

But in themselves, they don't provide instructions to learn to live that way.

What Unitarianism does do is point us toward a comprehensive list of wisdom sources—

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<sup>8</sup> Naomi Klein, *This Changes Everything: Capitalism vs. The Climate* (Knopf Canada, 2014), 461.

<sup>9</sup> *ibid*, 462.



essentially all the wisdom in the world!—  
and gives us the freedom and the responsibility to use it as we see fit:

to seek out our own path toward personal growth  
and spiritual maturity.

There are common threads that run through all the world's religions  
and much secular wisdom as well...and you will find the teachers that  
are right for you, based on your own temperament.

No matter which sources of wisdom you're drawn to,  
you might notice some of these themes.

I've framed them in my own words, and it may be an incomplete list.

- First, living in the present moment. Practicing radical acceptance of the Real, the actual, the present, the full, the whole. Being fully present in the here and now, whatever's going on.
- Cultivating gratitude, awe, curiosity and wonder...again, whatever's going on.
- Acknowledging our “shadow:” our capacity to do harm as well as good. Recognizing the darkness within ourselves and the unconscious motivation of many of our actions.
- Cultivating a “cosmic” consciousness: an awareness of our smallness in a universe of hundreds of billions of galaxies. Honouring all we do not know, and all we cannot control.
- Becoming willing to let go of personal power, control and comfort for the collective well-being of the whole. Practicing non-violence and service to others.

- And developing a relationship with Something More than our limited ego-consciousness, whether that be called God, Higher Power, Inner Teacher, True Self, Source, Great Mystery or something else.

It's generally recommended that these outlooks or skills be developed through some form of regular contemplative practice.

This can take many forms...everything from traditional prayer or meditation, to walking in nature, yoga, creating art or music, chanting or dancing.

Speaking of the brain's plasticity, it's now known that mindfulness meditation literally changes the brain.

It reduces the part of the amygdala which is responsible for fear, anxiety and stress.<sup>10</sup>

That's good news for any of us—myself included—who become overwhelmed by caring too much, as Naomi Klein put it.

## §

In order to be resilient,  
to be courageous and compassionate  
during whatever times of crisis may come...

We will need to maintain a peaceful presence,  
even if (even *as*) we are afraid.

Needless to say, this changed way-of-being

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<sup>10</sup> Forbes Magazine, *7 Ways Meditation Can Actually Change the Brain*  
<https://www.forbes.com/sites/alicegwalton/2015/02/09/7-ways-meditation-can-actually-change-the-brain/#165b52081465>

that is less anxious, less grasping,  
cannot be delivered in any sermon or book.

Nor can it be acquired and held onto forever.

It can only be renewed and refreshed,  
in moments of awareness and love...

Moments in which we feel embraced  
and deeply safe within this imperfect world...  
in communion with all other people and, indeed, all life.

From this place of deeper peace,  
this place of deeper interconnection...

We may find that we are able to slow down and do less...  
to live in a more humble way,  
more focused more on collective needs than individual desires...

To abstain from the blister-pack...  
to mindfully and gratefully pack a simple sandwich made at home...

To join with others working to change legislation on plastics...

Or to seek alternatives to our consumer-driven economic system...

Or to oppose the expansion of the Trans Mountain pipeline in  
British Columbia...which, along with similar projects, perpetuates  
our addiction to fossil fuels in potentially catastrophic ways.

If we allow ourselves to be changed,  
we might find ourselves better able to offer love,  
presence and peace to each other and to ourselves,  
even as we grieve the loss of so much...

And as we acknowledge our own imperfection

when it comes to climate ethics.

§

In the conclusion of her book “Active Hope: How to Face the Mess We’re in Without Going Crazy,” Joanna Macy writes:

“We live at a time when the living body of our Earth is under attack, and when the attacker is not an alien force, but our own industrial growth society.

At the same time, an extraordinary recovery process is under way, a vital creative response we call the Great Turning.

What helps us face the mess we’re in is the knowledge that each of us has something significant to offer, a contribution to make.

In rising to the challenge of playing our best role, we discover something precious that both enriches our lives and adds to the healing of our world.”<sup>11</sup>

So, may we start we are.  
Right now. And right here.

Knowing that things *have* changed,  
in the way we see ourselves,  
our habits, our lives and our future...

Yet at the same time,  
being willing to *be* changed...

In ways we may not yet imagine...

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<sup>11</sup> Joanna Macy & Chris Johnstone, *Active Hope: How to Face the Mess We’re in without Going Crazy* (New World Library: Novato CA, 2012), 238.

In service to this interdependent Earth  
that is our shared and beloved home.

Amen.