

“A New World Waiting To Be Born”

Rev. Shawn Newton

First Unitarian Congregation of Toronto

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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.

I wonder where you were,
when you first knew something was wrong?

When you truly knew that climate change is real,
and that it is going to affect our lives
and the lives of those who follow after us
for a very long time to come?

Where were you?
Go ahead, take a moment.

My moment happened just four years ago.

Of course, I've been aware of negative human impact on the planet
and the tremendous risk it poses all of my adult life.

In fact, on my first night of university, in August 1988,
I remember watching the film *Koyaanisqatsi*.

Over a haunting score by Phillip Glass,
we watched scene after scene of the natural world
being dramatically degraded by human industrial activity.

The title *Koyaanisqatsi* is a Hopi word
meaning, “life out of balance.”

Across the thirty years since seeing that film,
I've read countless books and articles,
listened to numerous podcasts,

and watched documentaries and films meant to wake me up.

I've attended various social justice events,
and taken part in many workshops.

I've even preached about it several times,
and helped three congregations become Green Sanctuaries.

But it wasn't until I was confronted by a simple sign
explaining the washrooms of a state park in California
were closed—because there was no water—
that something in me shifted in a powerful way.

I was attending a gathering of UU ministers
for a week of continuing education that occurs every three years.

On an afternoon off,
Debra Faulk, the minister in Calgary, and I
took a drive along the coast, stopping at the state park,
with every hope of being able to use the washrooms.

But the washroom doors were shut tight,
with a brief note blaming the ongoing drought.
The note also said there were Port-o-Potties
to be found in the parking lot.

After the drive and some hiking along the way,
I had hoped to wash my hands and face.

But that wasn't an option.

The ironic thing was that across from the entrance
to the state park is the very large body of water
otherwise known as the Pacific Ocean.
Water, water, everywhere, and not a drop to drink, or wash with.

I was suddenly aware that the closest drinking water to be found
was likely some 20 kilometres away from this remote spot,
in a small town farther down the coast.

I have lived my entire life being able to turn on a faucet

and have a more-than-reasonable expectation
that water will come pouring out.

The very few times that's not actually happened
have involved calling a plumber,
or learning the city was repairing a nearby water main.

Never had I been forced to face the fact that there was no water,
because the well had run dry.

My life went on that day, of course.
I was able to wash up when we returned to the retreat centre.
But that moment left an enduring mark on me.
It was a visceral reminder
of how precarious our life truly is on this planet.
That the things we so easily take for granted can simply run out.

It made me more mindful of communities facing water shortages,
from Sao Paulo to Cape Town,
and the Indigenous peoples across Canada,
who still live with boil-water advisories.

And it made me feel a deeper solidarity with the Water Protectors
Lynn and I met when we were at Standing Rock in 2016,
who have been reminding us all,
in the face of pipelines that could poison their drinking supply,
that water is sacred—that water truly is life.

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This morning, we begin an eight-week series of services
meant to invite us all to deepen our relationship with the earth,
to deepen our awareness and appreciation
of the sacred web of being,
that connects us with all of life.

Part of that deepening requires us to grapple
with the state of life—and the prospect of future life—
on our planet.

Now, I realize eight Sundays of sermons on climate change

may not sound like a particularly good time.
I promise this series will be so much more than that.

I believe the conversation we are starting today, as a congregation,
has the potential to be deeply life-giving, if we allow it to be.

Truth is, most if not all of us
are living already with feelings of dread and fear
that we rarely, if ever, express out loud.

Climate change isn't something
we tend to talk about in polite company.
The best way to spoil a dinner party
is to bring up rising sea levels and mass extinction. . .

But, still, don't we know, somewhere deep inside,
that we are living in a world out of balance?

And doesn't that cause us to worry—
for ourselves, and for generations still to come?

Such feelings can easily overwhelm us,
leaving us not knowing quite what to think or do.

Even as we sit with such unsettling thoughts,
we are bombarded by more and more information.
By wave after wave of bad news.

Like the UN climate change report in October
that made clear humanity has twelve years—
now eleven-and-a-half—
to avert the worst effects of climate change.

Or the news just this week that Canada
is warming at twice the rate of the rest of the globe.

It's hard to know what to do with such information.

It's no surprise that increasing numbers of people
are reporting serious psychological distress.

It's no wonder that more and more young people
are making a choice to not have children,
out of fear for what their children's future might hold.

It's not unreasonable that people, these days,
are feeling rocked by despair, and completely bereft of hope.

We are in a pivotal moment crying out for a new story.

While alternative energies and carbon taxes are strategies
for addressing technical aspects of climate change,
what we most desperately need
for meaningful progress to actually be made
is a revolution of the human heart
that moves us away from self-centredness
and towards an ethic of radical interdependence.

In the coming weeks,
though we won't and can't singlehandedly solve climate change,
we will seek to understand
what it means to be people of faith in a moment such as this,
for the climate crisis that we face is, I believe,
ultimately a spiritual crisis.

We will try to sit with our discomfort
until we learn what it is trying to teach us.

We will hold fast to wonder and imagination
as sources of strength—
and vital tools in the work for climate justice.

And we will encourage each other
to summon the courage to live out our values
in these challenging times
in a way that serves life, and sustains it.

So, yes, we will talk about climate change in the coming weeks.
Because we must contend with the reality we are facing,
if we seek to have any real chance to transform our future.
And because we must—
if we are ever to find our way to a deeper hope.

But, in the coming weeks,
we will also be talking about beauty, awe, and love.
About power and healing, gratitude and reconciliation.

About life abundant, and the resilience
that connects us to so much of the natural world.

We will be talking about a new world waiting to be born.
And about the role we are called to play as midwives.

Personally, I have found great comfort and inspiration
in the work of Buddhist scholar and environmental activist Joanna Macy.

She speaks of “The Great Turning”—
the revolution that is already underway,
through our bringing together our love of life
and our awakening to the ecological distress of our times
to create meaningful change in the world.

Macy says there are three stories, or versions of reality,
by which people are understanding our current predicament.¹

In the first of these, Business as Usual,
the defining assumption is that there
is little need to change the way we live.

Economic growth is regarded as essential for prosperity,
and the central plot is about getting ahead.

The second story, the Great Unraveling,
draws attention to the disasters
that Business as Usual is taking us toward,
as well as those it has already brought about.

The third story[, May says,] is held and embodied
by those who know the first story is leading us to catastrophe
and who refuse to let the second story have the last word.

¹ Joanna Macy and Chris Johnstone, *Active Hope*, 4-5.

Involving the emergence of new and creative human responses,
it is about the [epic] transition
from an industrial society committed to economic growth
to a life-sustaining society committed to the healing and recovery of our world.

There is no point in arguing
about which of these stories is “right,” she says.

All three are happening.
The question is which one we want to put our energy behind.

What I find most powerful in Macy’s work
is her focus on what she calls “Active Hope.”

For her, this is the type of hope that “starts our journey.”
We have a strong sense of what “we hope for
and what we’d like, or love, to take place.”

But it’s what we do with such hope that really matters.

Passive hope is about waiting for something outside of us
to bring about the longing of our hearts.

Active hope isn’t wishful thinking.

It “is about becoming active participants
in bringing about what we hope for.”²

Active Hope is a practice.

Like tai chi or gardening,
it is something we do rather than have.

It is a process we can apply to any situation,
and it involves three key steps.

First, we take in a clear view of reality;
second, we identify what we hope for
in terms of the direction we’d like things to move in

² Macy and Johnstone, 3.

or the values we'd like to see expressed;
and third, we take steps to move ourselves
or our situation in that direction.

Let me repeat those—because they apply to so much of life:

- We take in a clear view of reality.
- We identify what we hope for.
- We move ourselves or our situation in that direction.

Since Active Hope doesn't require our optimism, [Macy says,]
we can apply it even in areas where we feel hopeless.

The guiding impetus is [all about] intention;
we choose what we aim to bring about, act for, or express.

Rather than weighing our chances
and proceeding only when we feel hopeful,
we focus on our intention and let it be our guide.

Macy tells the story of walking along,
at the end of a two-week intensive workshop she had led,
with a young monk from the retreat centre
where the workshop was held.³

The monk said to her that he expected that, it being the last day,
she would be giving the people vows.

She explained that wasn't something that she did.

"Pity," he said, "I find, in my own life, vows so very helpful
because they channel my energy to do what I really want to do."

As she walked along, she took the monk's advice,
and quickly came up with five, one for each finger of her hand.

They are simple but powerful promises.

They are vows I would love to see us take, as a community.

³ Macy and Johnstone, 202-203.

Commitments I ask you to consider making,
at least for the months of April and May,
as we seek out the Sacred Depths of Nature.

I vow to myself and each of you

To commit myself daily to the healing of our world
and the welfare of all beings.

To live on Earth more lightly and less violently
in the food, products and energy I consume.

To draw strength and guidance from the living Earth,
the ancestors, the future beings,
and my [siblings] of all species.

To support each other in our work for the world
and to ask for help when I feel the need.

To pursue a daily practice that clarifies my mind,
strengthens my heart and supports me
in observing these vows.

Friends, we live in a time of unprecedented change.

We are facing the greatest moral challenge in human history.

A moment when we are being called to summon
uncommon courage in the service of life itself.

Let us, today,
in the weeks to come,
and across the years ahead,
be among those who rise to meet the challenge of our times.

Let us labour on with active hope
in the cause of climate justice,
that we and generations to come
will live out a different story.

Let us truly serve life, with all that we have.

Amen.

Dialogue

Through the course of this worship series,
we hope to bring about greater dialogue in the congregation.

We'll do this in different ways each week.

Today, I would ask you to take a few moments
to reflect on the opening question in my sermon—
about a time when you felt that something was wrong,
that life on our planet was out of balance.

A moment when you've worried for our future.

In truth, this is a question about what you love,
and about what breaks your heart.

After a minute of silent reflection,
I'll sound the singing bowl
and then ask you to share very briefly,
in two or three sentences, with a neighbour.

Let us now hold silence together.

Benediction

The words of Joanna Macy:

To be alive in this beautiful...universe—
to participate in the dance of life
with senses to perceive it, lungs that breathe it,
organs that draw nourishment from it—
is a wonder beyond words.

Truly it is.
May we go forth into our day,
to love and serve life, for the wonder that it is.