

# Just the Planet

Rev. Lynn Harrison  
First Unitarian Congregation of Toronto  
28 November 2021

Late last month, on a Sunday afternoon, just after my last sermon for you in fact, I took a long walk in the Don Valley, as I often do.

I was pleased to see that my favourite rocks were clear of both water and other people.

These are the rocks where I like to sit and pray--that is, where I like to sit and let go of my words and my thoughts for awhile, and simply open up to the Presence, alongside the rushing water.

No sooner had I sat down that day, when I noticed a furious thrashing about in the rapids just slightly down river.

In this spot, the river descends significantly, changing from a calm and still river upstream to my right, to a stretch of rolling whitecaps to my left.

Usually, watching the waves is drama enough.

But on this day, something was different.

The thrashing I saw was clearly a fish-- and then I remembered that Allan Brand had told me about watching the salmon in the Humber River a few weeks earlier.

Could the salmon also be running now, in the Don?

Well, clearly they were, because I as continued to gaze at the churning water, every so often I'd see a rogue splash rise up that didn't fit the regular pattern of waves.

And from time to time I'd see the dark profile of a muscular fish, making its way improbably forward, swimming against the current.

It seemed completely impossible.

The furious splashes I saw, here and there in the rolling water, were many meters downstream of the concrete step up just to the north.

How could any salmon possibly make its way up and up... swimming against the rapids...to somehow ascend to the calmer and higher altitude?

As I sat there, for perhaps a half-hour, I saw the occasional fish making only incremental progress.

It seemed like a truly lost cause.

And then, just as I stood to leave, I caught sight of a particularly breathtaking movement forward.

A salmon was furiously gaining ground, like a linebacker miraculously gaining yardage.

My heart leaped in my chest and I couldn't help but whisper, "Go, go, go!!" cheering on the salmon, even though it seemed unlikely that it could possibly reach the finish.

I couldn't tell which particular fish moved forward and which slipped back...the breaches of the water's surface were unpredictable and non-sequential...

But then, just before I thought, "I really should be heading home..."

I finally saw one salmon leap up above the water and over the barrier that separated the calm upper river from the rapids below.

Against all odds, it had made it!

And then it slipped below the surface of the dark water again, to continue its journey towards its spawning grounds.

§

Several years ago, I remember watching an environmentalist speak on some YouTube video.

I don't remember her name or the specific subject of her talk, but I remember her saying that if anyone watching was a writer, they should stop writing about anything else...and only write about the climate crisis.

Just the planet.

It made an impression on me at the time, and part of me wanted to follow her advice and her example...

And yet, I didn't. I proceeded to write lots of other things.

Songs, on a variety of subjects, and eventually sermons, about one thing and another.

All of them worthwhile enough, I hope.  
Meaningful or inspiring in some way.

Try as I might, I couldn't seem to find the pure and singular focus that she said was urgently necessary.

The pure and singular focus not unlike the salmon I watched swimming upstream that Sunday afternoon.

Whatever it is in the salmon's DNA that compels it to push itself against the force of a river to ensure its own survival...

I hope and pray that the human species may find it, too.

§

A few weeks ago, Shawn shared an insight about ministry-- when he said that most ministers have just one or two sermons that we preach over and over.

His, he revealed, is "This Is It."

"This is the one life we have...short and not always sweet." (These are Shawn's words.)

"We are companions on the journey...and we would do well to try to love each other while we have the chance."

Hearing this, two thoughts went through my mind.

First of all: "Wow, that's one heckuva good one sermon."

And second: "I hope nobody asks me what my one sermon is, because I have no idea."

Thinking about it the next day though, I realized that while I may not be able to boil down my sermons to one or two, I probably do have "Lynn's Greatest Hits."

In the spirit of collegial balance, I feel it's only fair to share them with you now. So, here they are, in no particular order.

"You are enough."

"Do what you can."

"We can get through this difficult time."

"A lot of wise people know a whole lot more about this than me. Let me introduce them to you."

"Slow down."

"We are fully and deeply intertwined."

"There deep sources of strength we can turn to."

And finally, "Each of us is a precious and sacred part of something far more vast, mysterious and meaningful than we can fully understand."

Truly, as I read this list to you, I think that pretty much sums up my core message, in both sermons and songs.

So, I guess you're free to go...

But I might as well speak a few more minutes.

§

When I think about the climate crisis, I see that all of these possible sermons can be applied to it.

So perhaps they are my way of writing only about this one thing.

Another interesting feature about ministry and creative expression is that we're always writing to ourselves...

Opening up a channel for a source of deeper intelligence to flow through us...that may then guide us toward right action that is most beneficial to the Whole.

Whether we take that action or not often has to do with our willfulness as human beings--our desire to control the outcome and gain the most we can

for ourselves--rather than giving ourselves over willingly to the larger process of life that calls us toward healing and wholeness.

That is to say, whether or not we can, or will, devote ourselves to love.

§

In a new book called "The Psychological Roots of the Climate Crisis" author Sally Weintrobe says that when it comes to the climate crisis:

"It's not about which group holds power, but which part of the mind.

Is care or uncare in overall charge?"

Saying that all of us are in a kind of tug-of-war between the aspects of ourselves that might heal the planet and the ones that might destroy it, she writes:

"The uncaring part wants freedom to be self-centered and greedy, while the other part wants freedom to consider others as well as self.

Having radically different conceptions of freedom and opposing ethics, values and framing things, how do both parts reconcile, settle their differences and live together in the same mind?"<sup>1</sup>

How does one part of ourselves learn to say "no" to the other part, for the well-being of all people and life on this planet?

Although she frames the dilemma as a psychological one, I would describe it instead as spiritual.

---

<sup>1</sup> Sally Weintrobe, *The Psychological Roots of the Climate Crisis: Neoliberal Exceptionalism and the Culture of Uncare* (Bloomsbury: 2021), 20.

§

In 2013, the forestry scientist Gus Speth put it well when he said, "I used to think the top global environmental problems were biodiversity loss, ecosystem collapse and climate change.

I thought that with 30 years of good science we could address those problems, but I was wrong.

The top environmental problems are selfishness, greed and apathy, and to deal with these we need a spiritual and cultural transformation, and we scientists don't know how to do that."<sup>2</sup>

Inner conflict and discomfort are necessary parts of spiritual growth...so if we find ourselves experiencing that, we might be on the right track.

To quote again from Sally Weintrobe:

"The starting point for building a more caring society is never forgetting that care and uncaring are inherent parts of us all...and that each seeks expression and dominance over the other. [...]

When the uncaring part becomes [...] a serious threat to life, it is imperative that the caring part reins in uncaring.

The struggle is ongoing.

Because of this, care needs robust frameworks in place, and a culture of care and support to protect them."<sup>3</sup>

---

<sup>2</sup> Shared Planet: Religion and Nature, BBC Radio 4 (1 October 2013)

<sup>3</sup> Sally Weintrobe, *The Psychological Roots of the Climate Crisis: Neoliberal Exceptionalism and the Culture of Uncaring* (Bloomsbury: 2021), 23.

It seems to me that's what we're trying to do, in our small and perhaps imperfect way, when Unitarians try to write principles that might structure our behaviour and guide us toward a more caring way of being as a group.

It's important to remember, also, that the heating of the planet is causing disproportionate suffering for the global poor, for Indigenous, Black and other People of Colour and for people of other marginalized identities.

In what has been called "slow violence," wealthy countries such as Canada hold outsized responsibility for this suffering.

As a result, the rapid spiritual growth and practical changes that must take place must happen here and now.

## §

A significant challenge, of course, is that it's easy for us to get caught in disagreements about what kind of care is most needed...which expression of care is most correct or important.

The recent Climate Rally at Queen's Park on November 6th was led by a coalition of leaders with several areas of specific focus.

Labour leaders stood next to educators next to faith groups, as well as organizers for particular branches of racial justice and social justice....all recognizing that the issues they represent are deeply intersectional, with each one contributing to the health and healing of the whole.

There were Indigenous, Black, People of Colour and white people all leading side by side, as well as people of many ages, orientations and abilities.

One of the most inspiring speeches came from the Indigenous activist Skyler Williams.

Along with singer-songwriter Logan Staats, he was on his way to join the forest defenders in B.C. the next day.

In the following days, according to a CBC report,<sup>4</sup> Skyler Williams was among the group of protesters arrested, as they defended the Wedzin Kwa River against the proposed Coastal GasLink pipeline.

The river is described by local Indigenous people as essential to their livelihood, and it's also a place where salmon spawn.

In his speech at Queen's Park, Skyler Williams pointed out that "nobody can be harder on the left than the left"...and that progressive people fighting against each other are one of the greatest threats to planetary healing.

The answer of course to this dilemma is not for either side to convince the other that we or they are correct...

But that we come to learn, as Einstein said, to "widen the circle of concern so that it includes all beings"...

To welcome each other as we are.

To open our hearts to one another, in kindness and respect.

That is, to love one another.

Which brings me back to Shawn's sermon.

---

<sup>4</sup> CBC News, *RCMP arrest 14, clear road on Wet'suwet'en territory in ongoing dispute over land rights, pipeline*

<https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/british-columbia/rcmp-wet-suwet-en-pipeline-resistance-1.6254245>, Nov. 18, 2021.

Kindness, compassionate listening,  
non-judgmental loving presence...

These are the ways of healing...rather than harm.

This is the way to stick together...  
rather than push each other away.

The capacity to do this, to love rather than judge and reject,  
that is a capacity we have to develop...and that we have to  
renew constantly.

Because the tendency to slip into "uncare" will always be a temptation  
for us.

As the poet Rilke said: "It is good to love, because love is difficult."

And that is exactly what we must do:  
we must love the world.

Come to think of it, that's a sermon I'd like to deliver more often,  
to both you and to myself.

"Love the World."

Love the world in both the receiving way:  
of taking in and appreciating its deep beauty and meaning  
despite the enormity of all that is wrong.

And in the active way: of loving fiercely.

Of insisting on caring for  
that which we love so deeply.

"Love the world."

I admit to you that all too often, this essential message slips from the forefront of my mind.

It slips countless times a day.

So, I need the reminder of spiritual teachers who say:

"Please come home" for the love of Earth.

I need the reminder to "return again" to the home of my soul, which is love and only love.

And I need the example of the salmon in their fierce determination to survive and fulfill their purpose in living.

Yes, there are many times when I drift from this homing instinct and I need to be brought back.

And yet, the insistent call to love the world is always with me, always present...

As it is in every moment, for each one of us.  
In the place that we are, with the tools that we have.

In the ancient words from the Jewish holy text The Talmud:

"Do justly now, love mercy now, walk humbly now."

"You are not obligated to complete the work,  
but neither are you free to abandon it."

It is in the small acts of justice each of us can do now,  
I believe...

That we can--and will--find in ourselves the ability  
to "not be daunted" by the enormity of the world's grief.

It is a meaningful paradox:

That in the small, humble acts of love--  
and perhaps only in those small and humble acts--  
that we find the capacity to care for the enormity.

§

The night after I watched the salmon,  
I spoke to a close friend who works as a hospital chaplain.

She has worked in the Intensive Care Unit at  
Toronto General Hospital throughout the Covid pandemic.

Recalling our time at seminary, and speaking from her own religious  
perspective, she offered a theological angle  
to the salmon story.

"I often think that God's will for me is ease and comfort," she said.  
"I think that God wants me to be peaceful and at rest..."

Yet maybe also I am being called to do the thing  
that is extremely difficult, in order for me to get to that place."

"Maybe it's not wrong, that I'm in the struggle.

Maybe this is exactly what I'm supposed to be doing...  
struggling against the current, like that salmon."

Bless you all, in your journeys  
toward love,  
toward justice,  
and toward the healing of this earth.

Amen.

§