

## "To Love the Earth More"

Reading and sermon preached by Reverend Carolyn Patierno

April 3, 2022

All Souls New London, CT

Reading from "Cherishing Our World: Avoiding Despair in Environmental Justice Work" by Rev. Dr. Adam Robersmith

From *Justice on Earth: People of Faith Working at the Intersections of Race, Class, and the Environment*

Whether we are concerned with other people or the planet, we should limit our impact not because we're afraid, but because it's the right thing to do. Let us not make change because of some future hell, lest we link acting faithfully to fear, rather than love; lest we link action to disaster, rather than reverence. It is time for each of us to make one more choice that decreases the impact we have on the Earth, to use less to enrich more. Let us make change because it is the right, respectful, loving thing to do now. Let us make more room for the other forms of existence that share the planet with us; human, plant, animal, mineral. Let us make change because sin – breaking relationship with that which we value and love – is not fun.

... If we act out of our love for this Earth and all its inhabitants, we can avoid despair. In this, as in all things, our theology tells us to choose faith and hope and deep, abiding love over fear – to act from the knowledge that we will save what is of great worth and sacredness to us. Let us refuse to be made immobile by fear and despair, instead choosing one more faithful action in every moment. Let us remember Universalist heritage and use that wisdom to chart a just, holy, and sustainable path forward.

.....

Last week I reached back to my previous work as a sexuality educator and this week again, I'm going to conjure that time of my life to share wisdom with you that would begin many a program or speech on safer sex.

With a show of hands, how many of you do something that you know isn't so great for you. Maybe you smoke. Maybe you drink alcohol more than you'd like to. Maybe take to the road with a foot too heavy for our country roads and highways. Maybe you eat more Reese's peanut butter cups than you eat broccoli. Show of hands.

Now another question. Show of hands: how many of you know full well why you do this thing that isn't so great for you?

Sermon © Reverend Carolyn Patierno. All rights reserved. Reproduction by permission only.

Caring for the Earth is a lot about behavior change. Changing harmful human behaviors that impact the earth. What you've all just proven is that even though we humans know full well when something isn't good for us, that isn't motivation enough to change behavior. So it is for the way we treat the Earth. We know that a lot of our behavior isn't good for the Earth but knowing isn't enough to get us to change. If only it were that simple.

As well, scaring people with the truly terrifying consequences of climate change doesn't seem to shift behavior either. Note the raging fires on the west coast. The seemingly never-ending drought in California. I travel to CA every year to see my in-laws (By plane. Yes. I do hear myself.) The scale of development is bewildering there – especially since so little of that development seems to be in response to the devastating problem of housing affordability and homelessness.

Neither does shaming folks effect behavior change. Never was this clearer to me than when one afternoon while walking down the street I watched a teenager throw trash down to the ground. I walked up beside her and made a show of picking up the trash and placing it in the trash can that was – I'm not kidding you – two feet away from her and kept on walking without saying a word. But here's the crux of the story. She called after me and to my astonishment she said, "Thank you so much for not making me feel bad about that. Other people make me feel so guilty!" Flabbergasted, I said, "But you should feel guilty!"

So guilt – in this case, guilt that is justified – doesn't necessarily inspire us to do the right thing.

Then, what *will* move us to do the right thing for the Earth? Adam Robersmith (who some of you may remember was a guest preacher here at All Souls back in February) offered up inspiration taken from the Universalist theology playbook. His is a compelling theory. Adam takes us back to the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Hosea Ballou was a prominent theologian – he wrote the "Treatise on Atonement" that was the blueprint on the theology that said that salvation was available to all and offered by a loving God – to put it very (very) basically. Ballou counsels us on arguments still being debated all these centuries later. Hear his words as he says that ...

*All who preach the doctrine of future punishment, have relied on the terrors of that punishment to induce people to be pious and virtuous; and yet they know that the most vicious and most abominable [individuals], have been brought up from childhood to believe that doctrine; and at*

*the same time have been educated in the belief, that sin brings many enjoyments in this world.*

*They have been educated in the belief,  
that sin brings many enjoyments in this world*

Adam invites us to consider Ballou's thinking and then ask, is sin truly fun? Conversely, and more pointedly, "does disrespect of self and others count as pleasure and value?" And then Adam invites us to consider this idea in terms of environmental sin. He says,

*Living lightly on the Earth is sometimes portrayed as having to give up all that is fun and freeing, that somehow we are losing something by increasing fuel efficiency, recycling, and composting, and no longer using incandescent light bulbs. Do we truly lose anything by using a different light bulb? ... By recycling or composting? Are we somehow freer by disrespecting the Earth on which we live? Is this sin fun? Is environmental sin -ecological degradation – a pleasure?*

Like all behavior change, these no doubt require some adjustment. But does it mean that we are somehow less free or fun? No, we do not. That said, and truth be told, even if we aren't any less fun, maybe we do become a little bit more persnickety. Since Kate and I started composting I have been known to take a banana peel out of Tammy's garbage pail in her office and wrap it up to take home to my compost bucket at home. But I like to think that that makes me more fun.

What *should* inspire us to go to these not-really-such-great lengths is Love. Loving the Earth more than whatever we think the Earth is worth. Love of the Earth. Not fear. Not shame. Not guilt. Love .... And a deeper understanding of the Earth's value.

I'm leaning heavily on Adam this morning because his essay is so good. Hear this wisdom once again. In the same essay Adam says:

*Is the Earth itself without value? Are the nourishments, life-sustaining cycles, and blessings of this world only worth saving because we should be afraid of some hellish future? Our climate discourse has failed because we as a people have not understood the real value of our environment. Our environment is not valuable because it has a financial equivalent. It is not valuable because scientists and some activists tell us that if we do not stop sinning against the Earth ... we will create an apocalypse. The Earth is valuable because it is good and is a dynamic, living ecosystem.*

*If people, creatures of this Earth, have worth and dignity, we must recognize that the Earth itself, the home and origin of those creatures, has worth and dignity as well. If we, as a nation, a people, or a species, loved this planet as our Universalist ancestors understood loving God, we would have already made so many different choices about how we live on the Earth and with each other.*

I'll say it again for the folks in the back:

*Our climate discourse has failed because we as a people have not understood the real value of our environment. Our environment is not valuable because it has a financial equivalent. It is not valuable because scientists and some activists tell us that if we do not stop sinning against the Earth ... we will create an apocalypse. The Earth is valuable because it is good and is a dynamic, living ecosystem.*

The Earth is good. The Earth is deserving of our Love. And this Love is what will best lead us to care for the Earth, our home.

Plus, when we are caring for the Earth we are less likely to let despair get the better of us.

Have you noticed a theme over the course of the last three weeks during which we've contemplated embodying peace while the world wars; the inherent worth and dignity of trans and queer youth in the face of draconian blow back in state legislatures throughout the country? In the midst of these horrors the seduction of overwhelm and despair is real. But we struggled together as we considered how to keep both at bay.

Today's conclusion is no different: do something ... because doing something – ANYTHING – will keep despair at bay. We are no good for the Earth – or for each other or for ourselves, for that matter - if we resign ourselves to the truly demoralizing attitude that says that there's nothing we can do.

This month's ministry theme is Unitarian Universalism's 7<sup>th</sup> Principle: our covenant to affirm and promote respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part.

Let me share with you that we are nearly at the finish line that will see solar panels on the roof of this building. As a congregation, we recognize that there's something we can do. (With thanks to Jonathan Harger, Katrina Bercaw, and Janet Beebe for their work to get us to this end.)

At the April Board of Trustees meeting, there will be further discussion of what more we can do as a congregation to decrease our footprint on the earth as a community. You'll be hearing more about that soon. Stay tuned.

On April 24<sup>th</sup> the service will focus on the many ways that we can care for the Earth more deeply and the way some Souls have done so. All of these steps are taken through loving the Earth more deeply than we do – not for its intrinsic value but because the Earth is good. Because as Unitarian Universalists we honor the inherent worth of the interdependent web of existence of which we are a part.

I hope you'll be there. I hope you will be inspired by Love to do more to walk gently upon the Earth.

Blessed be. Amen.