

A Leap of Faith

A Sermon for the Unitarian Universalist Society of Amherst

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There is no need for me to belabor the frightening facts of our ecological crisis this morning. We are all well aware of what human beings have done to the earth, its resources and the other living creatures with whom we share this planet. Some of this has been done out of arrogance and greed, but much of it has been done merely in ignorance or in need.

Nor will I be admonishing us to recycle more glass and paper, or car pool, or have fewer children. This is an educated crowd. We know the facts and the predictions for a dim future given current trends of environmental degradation. We know the changes that are coming and the major adjustments in behavior they will require.

No, this is not a sermon about guilt or about recycling. This is a sermon about a different aspect of environmentally friendly living, one I believe is going to be absolutely necessary if any real change is to be possible. This is a sermon about a new way of thinking; a new global consciousness that will hopefully, in time, become as systemic as the ways we think now that have so subtly enabled our subjugation of nature. A leap of faith I call it, in which our faith, our trust, our fascination even, takes a leap, down from the clouds of dualistic misconception, to the here and now of earth. This is what I call the “greening of theology”: bringing religion to the earth.

Bringing religion back to the earth. This means, first of all, adjusting our thinking so that it is consistent with current scientific understandings of the interconnections and interdependencies of our world. This is an ecological way of thinking that understands that our physical environment and our psychological well being and our socioeconomic interactions and our concepts of justice are all connected in significant ways. This way of thinking is what our Unitarian Universalist seventh principle is all about: promoting and respecting “the interdependent web of all existence, of which we are a part.”

The last six words of that principle are particularly important: “of which we are a part.” These words mean we are not above, we are not separate, we are just a part. This is a huge departure from the religious notions of the last few thousand years in which human beings have thought of themselves as just a little lower than the gods, and certainly of more worth and importance than other creatures, or plants. Thinking of ourselves as “a part” and not as “above” would also have difficult ethical ramifications.

Peter Singer is a rather controversial (I call him brave) ethicist who has dared to say out loud some of the changes in our ethics that will come when more ecological ways of thinking are carried to their logical conclusions. In his words: “It is time for a revolution....against a set of ideas we have inherited from the period in which the intellectual world was dominated by a [particular] religious outlook. [But] because it will change our tendency to see human beings as the center of the *ethical* universe, it will meet with fierce resistance from those who do not want to accept such a blow to our human pride. For many the ideas will be too shocking to take

seriously. Yet eventually,” Singer continues, “the change will come. The traditional view that all human life is sacrosanct is simply not able to cope with the array of issues that we face.” These are going to be very controversial issues. There is no question about that. Our leap of faith will be a frightening one.

There are plenty of other reasons, just as difficult as losing our human egos, that will make the greening of our theologies hard for us. Primary among these will be undoing the dualistic underpinnings of our thought processes for the past few thousand years. Body vs. mind, physical life vs. after-life, science vs. religion; these dualisms need to disappear. The imbalance in our world between the masculine and the feminine is a prime example. That women have been oppressed and subjugated is a fact, and ecofeminists like to point out that there is a connection between the subjugation of women and the despoiling of the earth, as both can be seen as nurturing “mothers.” An earth-based faith, as I am proposing, would find its ground in the natural balance of all dichotomies, the physical and the spiritual, the masculine and the feminine, as in the yin and the yang of Buddhism.

There are some who believe that it has been religion itself that has given us some of these damaging dualisms in the first place. Particularly the masculinization of the world. Merlin Stone is a writer who theorizes that the Levite priesthood of ancient Judea rewrote what has become our primary creation myth in order to justify their destruction of the shrines of the female pagan deities they were so anxious to eliminate. Basically, he writes, they announced that male supremacy was not a new idea, but in fact had been divinely decreed by the male deity at the very dawn of existence. The domination of the male over the female was not simply added as another Hebrew law, but was written into the Bible as one of the first major acts and proclamations of the male creator. With blatant disregard for actual history, says Stone, the Levite leaders announced that women must be ruled by men, declaring that it was in agreement with the original decree of Jahweh. The myth of Adam and Eve, in which male domination was explained and justified, informed women and men alike that male ownership and control of submissively obedient women was to be regarded as the divine and natural state of the human species. Dominion over the earth has been similarly written into the most basic of our thought processes. We are here to subjugate and control.

Another religiously inspired bit of misinformation that I think has kept us from living in right relationship to the earth has to do with end times theology. For thousands of years people have been convinced (and some still are) that the end of the world is immanent. Even though that belief may have dulled as each millennium came and went, there still lingers today the idea that our life on earth is merely preparatory for what really matters in our life hereafter. Although it may be subtle, this kind of thinking seemingly does little to foster responsible behavior when we are just biding time here on earth, waiting for the end.

A rather significant shift in philosophical thought that has contributed to “our separation” from the natural world lies in the change over time of that to which we choose to give importance in this life. Presocratic philosophies, with their pagan deities and deification of the material, put importance on the trees and animals, heavenly bodies and human bodies. Their sacred objects were natural things. But with the propagation of monotheism and its Hellenistic dualism, the world became one in which men, not animals or birds, or trees, or planets, were the

true messengers of divine communication, chosen as God's prophet. Matter would no longer be worshipped, but rather the Maker of matter. (Richard Tarnas, The Passion of the Western Mind, pp. 108-109). This is a major change in thought and philosophy that has had, in my opinion, a devastating effect on our relationship with the natural world.

Daniel Maguire goes a step further, and questions the value of theism itself. "Theistic conclusions [can] short-circuit our sense of wonder and detract from the miracle of life." (Visions of a New Earth, with Harold Coward) Has theism [itself] been a root cause of the problems we face on this planet today? "What happens when we see the world and say 'God' rather than seeing it and saying 'Wow!' Does creation theology not belittle nature by reducing this primal miracle to an artifact, prompting us to worship the purported cause while draining us of wonder at the effect? If the earth could speak, would it say it would have been better off without [the distraction of] theism?" (Daniel Maguire, Ethics for a Small Planet) I think these are interesting and excellent questions that seriously reflect on the causes of "our separation" from our connection and emotional affiliation to our earth.

One last giant leap we are going to have to make will be one that takes us out of the bank vault, away from the religion we have made out of economics. We have, for too long, been putting our faith, trust, gratitude and love on money. And the great tragedy is that any culture that has up to now escaped this down-spiraling path is curiously tempted to follow in the Western footsteps of what appears to them to be the way to success. In "Hymns to an Unknown God," Sam Keen writes "From the emerging ecospiritual perspective, what could be more myopic and deluded than the belief that worldwide marketplace economics can preserve the sacred bond that unites human and nonhuman life?"

This is going to be some leap of faith! Out of the abstract clouds of male oriented monotheism to an earth where we are but one species among many in the interconnected web, where we live for the here and now, not the "hereafter," and money is discovered not to be the end all, be all, after all.

It is easy to try and imagine all these changes and the effort it will take – and get very discouraged. It is easy to get bogged down in the difficulty and frightening facts of our world's environmental situation. But, as Eve pointed out in her editorial this morning, we must find our ways to hope. And the reality is that people all over the world are doing something to reverse our environmental disasters. Previous generations did not know what we know, but this generation does know and is beginning to make a difference. Perhaps not quickly enough, but both in terms of specific new practices and remedial actions, we are addressing environmental issues all over the world. (Although I would like to see the United States in the forefront of these things, not acting like some reluctant overgrown toddler, unwilling to give up its toys <read money and quality of living>.)

A leap of faith into a new earth-grounded way of religious thinking. Joanna Macy calls it "The Great Turning." "The most remarkable feature of this historic moment on Earth," she writes, "is not that we are on the way to destroying our world..... It is that we are beginning to wake up, as from a millennia-long sleep, to a whole new relationship to our world, to ourselves and each other." For many, like Joanna Macy and myself, the emphasis is on re-establishing our

relationship with the earth around us. A re-enchantment of our lives in nature, a re-enchantment of the earth. For if our connections and our love are in the right place – *within* that interdependent web and not “out there” somewhere – our behavior and our ethics will be in the right place as well.

These changes to our thinking and our religions are going to take time. Getting to where we are today took thousands of years, after all. But I have hope that it will happen. I would suggest that ours is an era ripe for this change. Witness the swell of interest in working to overcome the break between science and religion, or the post modern philosophy that there are many ways to know things, many routes to understanding. I would also suggest that our Unitarian Universalist Association is in a unique position, because of our connection to so many of the world’s religions and our openness to earth based spiritualities to help create and encourage new theologies that will accommodate the reality as well as the hopes of our times.

I have been talking about old ways of thinking and leaps into new theologies today in part because knowing how we got this way may be helpful in the transition, but mostly because I believe any attempts to try and live in a new relationship with the earth without a sincere religious and spiritual basis behind those attempts will never be sustained. Without an ecological faith, anchored in the interdependent web, our efforts to live ethically and in right relation within that web will ring hollow. But if our faith truly makes that necessary leap back down to earth, our actions, our behavior will follow.

May it be so.