

Environmental Justice

A Sermon for the Unitarian Universalist Society of Amherst

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For my preaching class in Theological School, one of our assignments was to attend a service at a Unitarian Universalist church of our choice and then interview the minister about his or her sermon and their methods of finding ideas, researching, and writing. I chose to go hear and interview Fred Small, of whom I had heard through my interest in things ecological. At the time he was the minister in Littleton, MA, and still is, although he will soon be moving to a larger congregation in a very important location around Boston this summer. I probably shouldn't say where, till it's official, so you'll just have to be curious.

Anyway I admire Fred Small very much. He cuts to the quick, is a great singer/songwriter as well as a fine minister, and puts himself out there in the trenches doing the justice work he believes in. Environmental issues have always been very important to Fred, and I want to read to you from a speech he made at the very first General Assembly of the UUA I attended in Salt Lake City in June of 1999. He was the presenter at the annual meeting of the Seventh Principle Project, what we now know of as the UU Ministry for Earth.

Okay. I feel like the dinosaur in the Far Side cartoon, addressing an auditorium full of dinosaurs: "Gentlemen, the picture is bleak. The earth's climates are changing, the mammals are taking over, and we all have a brain about the size of a walnut." Fortunately for us, the human brain is a very good one. The question is whether we are prepared to use it. But the ecological crisis is not simply a crisis of graphs and computer projections, it is a crisis of the spirit. What the world needs now is what religion, at its best, does best: confront, inspire, comfort, and instruct. Unitarian Universalism has been in the forefront of the struggles for peace and racial justice and against homophobia. It is time, past time, for the UUA to take the lead in defending the earth.

Environmental activism is not merely consistent with our commitment to social justice, it is demanded by it. Poor people and people of color are the first victims of environmental poisons and natural disasters. Disparities of wealth and status lead to waste and pollution by both the affluent and the deprived. We simply cannot solve the problems of ecology without facing the problems of inequity, nor vice versa.

All environmental work is justice work. Automobile fuel economy is an environmental issue. But when an Inuit fisherman has to import frozen seal meat because he cannot take it safely from a bay fouled by an oil spill resulting from the rush to meet soaring demand for gasoline, that is a justice issue. Recycling is an environmental issue. But when an African-American develops lung cancer from breathing fumes emitted from an incinerator in her neighborhood that burns recyclable trash, that is a justice issue. The greenhouse effect is an environmental issue. But when a Pacific islander discovers that the rising sea level resulting from profligate energy use in the developed world will obliterate her low-lying nation within decades, that is a justice issue. Organic food is an environmental issue. But when a Guatemalan banana worker becomes sterile from pesticide exposure, that is a justice issue.

An article in the Daily Hampshire Gazette by Chicago journalist Mick Dumke (Sept. 21, 2007, Opinion page) summarized it like this: “If you drive a Prius and buy tofu at Whole foods, going green may be a lifestyle choice. If you live in a poor neighborhood near a toxic factory, going green is a human rights issue.” You don’t have to live in China to be the subject of human rights violations.

You probably don’t know that I eventually got to work with Fred Small (and Jim Scott, and Katherine Jesch, the current director of UU Ministry for Earth) as a member of the Board of Directors for the Seventh Principle Project. Unfortunately, the timing of my involvement wasn’t a good match with the other requirements of my ministerial preparation, as well as the fact that I lived 10 hours away from Massachusetts, so I had to regretfully leave that position. But environmental – and sustainability – issues remain of great interest to me.

I always liked the name Seventh Principle Project. After all, our seventh principle (respect for the interdependent web of all existence, of which we are a part) is the basis for virtually everything we do as Unitarian Universalists, in my opinion. It is from this seventh principle that the other six are born, although for the people writing these principles it must have not worked that way since the seventh principle was added later as an afterthought. For those of you visiting with us this morning, all of our Seven Principles may be found near the beginning of our Singing the Living Tradition hymnal.

The Green Sanctuary program through which Eve Posada and the Green Sanctuary committee have taken us, so that we are now a Certified Green Sanctuary Congregation, began as part of the Seventh Principle Project, now the UU Ministry for Earth. I was corresponding with the Director, Katherine Jesch on Friday, and she is very interested in our program that we began this year on Sustainable Community Initiative. She asked for information on it, and an accounting of our activities under this umbrella initiative, so I have sent it all along to her. She thinks it sounds like a very excellent way to carry on with our Ministry for Earth and I agree with her!

Let’s talk about environmental justice. The Environmental Protection Agency defines environmental justice as “the fair treatment and meaningful involvement of all people regardless of race, color, national origin, or income with respect to the development, implementation, and enforcement of environmental laws, regulations, and policies. EPA has this goal for all communities and persons across this Nation. It will be achieved when everyone enjoys the same degree of protection from environmental and health hazards and equal access to the decision-making process to have a healthy environment in which to live, learn, and work.”

(<http://www.epa.gov/compliance/basics/ejbackground.html>)

They have the right idea, especially the part about “equal access to the decision-making process,” but I think the key phrase to keep in mind is “It will be achieved when...” We are not there yet. The United Church of Christ (UCC otherwise known as Congregational) did an initial study in 1987 and a follow-up study just last year, called “Toxic Waste and Race at Twenty: 1987-2007”

(<http://www.ncccojustice.org/toxicwasteandrace.htm>) in which the investigators report clear and continuing patterns of discrimination by race and economic conditions when it comes to where waste sites are located. “People of color are not equally protected by environmental laws. More than nine million people are estimated to live in host neighborhoods within three kilometers of one of 413 hazardous waste facilities nationwide. The study found that the proportion of people of color in host neighborhoods is almost twice that of the proportion of people of color living in non-host neighborhoods. Host neighborhoods are typically economically depressed, with poverty rates 1.5 times that of non-host communities. The 180-plus page report points to the dismal post-Katrina response in New Orleans as one poster example of unequal treatment of minorities in hazardous waste emergencies. The cleanup and reconstruction efforts in New Orleans have been shamefully sluggish and patchy, and the environmental injustice may be compounded by rebuilding on poisoned ground.”

In response to the question of why this is still happening, despite efforts such as the EPA policy I read to you earlier, part of the answer had to do with lack of political motivation. It’s deplorable. In an interview of activist Van Jones in the recent March issue of *The Sun* magazine, Jones is asked what he believes are some of the primary lessons from Katrina. He responds “One lesson is that the right wing’s ideology, which says that we don’t need government and we don’t need each other, is wrong. We’ve spent almost thirty years listening to them say that government is the problem, not the solution; that collectivism is inferior to individual strength and fortitude. ‘Let them sink or swim.’ Then everyone turned on the television one day and saw an American city underwater, and we saw people sink beneath that water as a direct consequence of that ideology. It wasn’t a deviation from what the right wing had been shouting about; it was an inevitable outcome of their policies of defunding government and stripping away essential services. We need a philosophy that says ‘We are all in this together,’” not one that encourages us to “Let your neighbor sink or swim.”

(http://www.thesunmagazine.org/issues/387/bridging_the_green_divide?)

I personally believe that there also remains a great deal of wrong thinking and outright racism in our country. Consider this statement by the negotiator for a possible storage area for radioactive spent fuel rods on Native American reservation land in the western part of our country: “Because of the Indian’s great care and regard for nature’s resources, Indians are the logical people to care for nuclear waste. Radioactive materials have half-lives of thousands of years [and] it is the Native American culture and perspective that is best designed to correctly consider and balance the benefits and the burdens.”

(<http://www.ejnet.org/ej/wmra/html>)

Some cite government laws and policies themselves as encouraging the discrimination they have been created to eliminate, such as the use of “risk assessment” studies when it comes to the disposal or distribution of toxic substances. The criticism is that “the EPA’s self-professed ‘objective’ science of risk assessment, with its one-in-a-thousand or one-in-a-million additional ‘acceptable’ deaths for toxic chemical exposure, [can be appreciated] for what it really is; public relations masquerading as science, with the negative outcomes (as with cost/benefit analysis) still destined to fall upon the exposed

poor, working class, and people of color. To be brief, for the critique is well-documented, the science is just not there, as the procedure, based upon human extrapolation from animal megadose exposure to single chemicals, ignores bioaccumulation over time.” (ejnet.org) Risk assessment, as practiced, also ignores multiple pathways of exposure, and the possible synergistic interactions of exposure to multiple toxins at once or over time.

Looked at from a certain skeptical viewpoint, probably the viewpoint we should have, the calculated exposure of the public to hazardous waste sounds a lot like “premeditated sacrifice as bad decisions are imposed on people of color and low-income communities for the sake of some unchallenged greater public benefit.” (ejnet.org) There is no doubt in my mind, and I imagine this phenomenon has only gotten worse over the course of the last 8 years as regulation and enforcement policies have become more lax so as to favor big business, that we all, and especially certain targeted populations, are being exposed to more and more chemicals as time goes by.

I do not think that the term environmental justice should apply only to communities of color or lower paychecks or less education. We all deserve the kind of environmental justice that bans, totally, the offending pollutants, rather than finds ways to distribute them equally around to everyone. Environmental justice is different than environmental equity. Justice gives people, the people involved now and the people who might be affected later, a voice in whether the total cost, in dollars and in deaths, in hormone deficiencies and increasing rates of asthma, is worth the benefit that will be had from any given process, product or pharmaceutical panacea. It’s called risk avoidance, as opposed to risk assessment, otherwise known as exposure management. “Risk management, with its quantified priorities and exposure standards, assumes that these risks are already an unavoidable fact in our lives.” (www.ejnet.org/ef/wmra.html) This does not have to be our standard operating procedure. “What are the alternatives to acceptable risk or, as many would term it, death assessment, were society to move toward a production system that is environmentally sustainable, economically sound, and socially just?” writes Michael Heiman for the journal *Urban Geography*. (ejnet.org) Let’s talk about alternatives assessment and risk avoidance, not exposure management! That would be justice for everyone, all life, and for the earth itself.

By suggesting that environmental justice should be extended beyond efforts to equalize the risks forced in disproportion upon different communities, I am not minimizing my disgust or my mortification that these things continue to happen still, now, today. I merely think that given the dire predictions of global warming, and the sluggish response of our country, in particular, to take the steps necessary to do something (anything) about the future of what – just our whole world - that environmental justice is something we will all need to hope and pray for, and work for, too.

Earlier I mentioned the Sustainable Community Initiative that was introduced this year as a mean to tie together and see the connections between the ideas we talk about on Sunday morning and the various projects we are involved in as individuals and as a congregation. You will recall that we held a conversation about Ten Principles for Sustainable Societies

proposed by a group interested in alternative global economics, and I wrote a newsletter article about those ten principles, including summaries of each. There are a number of these ten principles applicable to my topic today. Environmental justice is part of creating a sustainable world by supporting the **democratic process** and encouraging local politics, where decisions will be made by the people bearing the consequences of their own decisions. Environmental justice requires **subsidiarity**, the second principle of sustainability, the re-empowerment of local communities to educate themselves and decide their own future. Justice requires the restoration of **ecologically good practices** by creating the appropriate balance between politics and economics, and, very importantly, the accountability of private ownership. Environmental justice is certainly involved with **human rights** issues, as I have mentioned, and has everything to do with the tenth principle of sustainable societies, the **precautionary principle**. The precautionary principle says wait till new technology and products are proven safe before they are used. Think ahead to foresee negative potentials. What a difference this last principle would make toward environmental justice for everyone, rich or poor, of any color or nationality. We are all too aware that decisions are often motivated by greed on someone's part – the precautionary principle would at least slow down the process of decision making, putting greed into perspective.

I've tried to point out, this morning, the connections between the topic of environmental justice and some of the principles and values we, as Unitarian Universalists, hold dear. In our Seven Principles that help us think about how we are to be with each other in this world, and in the ten principles of sustainable society that we have taken on as a study issue, we can see the connections and interdependencies that both define and complicate the problems and the answers. It's always more complicated than we might have thought or would have wanted.

Finally, Fred Small and I are in agreement (yet again) about the saddest aspect of environmental injustice as it exists today. He writes "Perhaps the greatest justice issue of all is intergenerational theft. The Eighth Commandment says "Thou shall not steal," but every day we live unsustainably we steal from our children and their children. When we speak of community, we must understand that community occurs not merely in space, but also in time, extending backward through memory and tradition and forward through vision and legacy. The Great Law of the Iroquois Confederacy provided that 'In our every deliberation, we must consider the impact of our decisions on the next seven generations.' Today's political leaders seem oblivious to any future beyond the next election. However reckless a lifestyle we might choose for ourselves, however little we may value another species, surely we owe our descendants a duty of care. The same compassion that moved the Samaritan to bandage the wounds of a stranger not of his tribe must today move us to care for future generations." (from An Environmental Challenge for UU Congregations, delivered at General Assembly, June 26, 1999, Salt Lake City)

I want environmental justice for everyone. Everyone.

Blessed Be.