

## **Earth Day: Restoring the Creation Connection**

**by Janet Wood**

Lay Sermon presented April 13, 2008 at the  
Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Visalia

Reading:

“It’s a beautiful day in the neighborhood, a warm bright September afternoon. A group of elementary and middle-school students walks home from the school bus stop. As usual, they have first stopped at a local fast-food establishment. Not that there is anything distinctly local about it, since there are millions more just like it all over the world. The children munch their burgers and sip their caffeinated soft drinks as they make their way toward empty houses and noisy TV’s.

Some of the children have spent part of the day sitting in a darkened classroom watching a video about a rain forest somewhere in Central America. If pressed, they could provide you with several facts about it.

What they might not know is that there is a critical relationship between the rain forest and the hamburgers they are eating. According to Jeremy Rifkin in *Beyond Beef: The Rise and Fall of the Cattle Culture*, more than 25 percent of the forests of Central America have been cleared since 1960 to create pasturelands for cattle whose beef is imported by the United States at the rate of *several hundred thousand tons* per year. Based on Rifkin’s evidence, each quarter-pound hamburger eaten by these kids may have cost the destruction of 165 pounds of living matter, including a staggering number of plant, insect, bird, mammal, and reptile species.

Here is another intriguing connection. The students, whose homework tonight includes finding out more about the rain forest, are themselves walking through a forest. At least they are walking through what is left of one. Like the rain forest, this local forest is under threat. Houses and an extravagant number of malls have encroached upon the area. A freeway bypass is under consideration. Cars greatly outnumber pedestrians and native animals. The children know--even if the few remaining animals do not--that resident drivers rarely obey the 25 mile per hour speed limit but take the blind, narrow-shouldered curves as fast as they can.

But were you to ask the children to describe this environment--to name its common plants and animals and to tell you a little of its history--they would look at you blankly. The rain forest is an environment. This is just some boring place they see every day. They pass by it. They do not explore it. Indeed, the younger children, many of whom are still curious about it have been cautioned that wooded areas are inherently dangerous, places where shadowy predators might lurk. They know never to walk

through the forest alone, Nor have they gone for walks there with Mom and Dad.

At home, the TV, the CD player, computer games, and the telephone await. A sunny autumn day is no competition, and besides, the kids have already had recess on the asphalt playground at school.

When one or both parents come home, the TV gets switched over to the news. The family may or may not eat together, depending on everyone's schedule and degree of tiredness. At any rate, dinner is less likely to come from the backyard or a local farmer's market than from the convenience aisle of a major grocery chain. Or--as a "treat" that has become more and more the norm--the family may pile into the car and go out for fast food. As they drive along, nobody speaks. The car radio is on, private reverie has given way to individual distraction, and the surrounding area is so familiar it has become invisible."

"Feeding the Roots of Childhood" from  
*Gardening by Heart* by Joyce McGreevy

What is wrong with this picture? Everything. This scenario taken from Joyce McGreevy's inspiring book *Gardening by Heart* is an unfortunate description of the lives of most American families. And it reveals the alienation from nature that is endemic in our modern society. Not only do most people lack a fundamental understanding of the natural world, they rarely consider how their lives are dependent upon it. They don't stop to consider that food comes from farmland before it gets to the local supermarket; that fresh water comes from snow melt in the mountains and the water table underground before it reaches their faucet; that fuel for their automobiles comes from nonrenewable reserves deep inside the Earth before it reaches the gas station; and that most of the hamburgers they indulge in at fast food restaurants come from poor countries that have cut down their rain forest resources for cattle grazing to provide Big Macs and Whoppers for people in the US. And very few stop to consider the consequences should anything happen to poison, infect, or deplete these natural sources.

In our culture, direct contact with nature, not just by children but by adults as well, has become an endangered species. And when people of all ages lack an intimate relationship with nature their sensory perceptiveness measurably decreases and so too does their compassion and sense of personal responsibility for their actions-- qualities that signify a willingness to share the world, not just with other human beings, but with all other life forms as well.

When we look at the Earth we see a planet of beauty and abundance. Its dynamic systems are wonderfully intricate and incredibly complex. Our planet is unique in the solar system and perhaps in the universe, a place where rock, water, atmosphere and life are interconnected in a web of amazing complexity. It is a world that has sustained life for 3.5 billion years as recorded in the fossil record and is home to millions of species, in addition to human beings. From our perspective on Earth, our planet appears to be big and sturdy with endless resources of ocean, land, and forest. Yet when Earth is viewed from space, we see that it is, in the words of Carl Sagan, "a pale blue dot" enveloped in a thin, fragile layer of atmosphere.

In the late 19th century, naturalist and visionary John Muir, began to recognize the intimate relationship between the Earth's living and nonliving systems. In 1911 in his book *My First Summer in the Sierra*, he wrote: "when we try to pick out anything by itself, we find it hitched to everything else in the Universe." He was a man far ahead of his time.

Our actual understanding of the relationships between the living and non-living systems of Earth and the scope of human impact on those systems did not begin to develop until after the Second World War. During the decades of the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s, several events illustrated the magnitude of environmental damage caused by humans. In 1954, the 23 man crew of the Japanese fishing vessel Lucky Dragon was exposed to radioactive fallout from a hydrogen bomb test on Bikini Atoll. In 1962, publication of the book *Silent Spring* by Rachel Carson drew attention to the impact of chemicals on the natural environment and particularly on wildlife. In 1967 the Torrey Canyon, the first of the big supertankers went aground off the southwest coast of England spilling 120,000 tons of crude oil, and in 1969 oil spilled from an offshore well in California's Santa Barbara Channel released 200,000 gallons of crude oil into a 800 square mile slick which was rapidly spread by high winds and swells. In 1971 the conclusion of a law suit in Japan drew international attention to the effects of decades of mercury poisoning on the people of Minamata, caused by the release of methyl mercury in the industrial wastewater from the Chisso Corporation's chemical factory, which began in the 1930's and continued until 1968.

### **Earth Day 1970**

Responding to widespread environmental degradation, Gaylord Nelson, a United States Senator from Wisconsin, called for an environmental teach-in, or Earth Day, to be held on April 22, 1970. Over 20 million people participated that year, and Earth Day is now observed each year on April 22 by more than 500 million people and national governments in 175 countries. Senator Nelson, himself an environmental activist, took a leading role in organizing the celebration, hoping to demonstrate popular political support for an environmental agenda which he modeled on the highly effective Vietnam War protests of the time.

Earth Day 1970 achieved a rare political alignment, enlisting support from Republicans and Democrats, rich and poor, city dwellers and farmers, business and labor leaders. The first Earth Day was tremendously successful, leading to the creation of the United States Environmental Protection Agency and the passage of the Clean Air, Clean Water, and Endangered Species acts.

The environmental movement which advocated the sustainable management of resources and stewardship of the natural environment through changes in public policy and individual behavior grew dramatically, drawing large numbers of enthusiastic young adults, mostly college students.

The next few years following the first Earth Day saw the implementation of many new laws and regulations to protect the environment, and there were also new ideas for sustainable energy sources being discussed, like the use of solar and wind energy to replace coal and as an alternative to nuclear power. And it also saw the election of a new president, Jimmy Carter, who had a strong commitment to environmental protection.

Then suddenly, at the end of the decade of the 1970's the environmental agenda was turned on its head. Provoked by a prolonged energy crisis, there was a surge of sentiment against environmental protection, and a staunch anti-environmentalist Ronald Reagan was elected to be president in a stunning victory. And for the more than 25 years since his election, opponents of environmental protection have held a stranglehold on both the presidency and the Congress. As a result, the ensuing years after the first Earth Day were a struggle against well-financed corporate opponents of conservation, and small incremental gains in environmental protection were the best that could be achieved. Furthermore, despite the fact that our scientific understanding of the cosmos had by this time shifted away from creation stories in which humans were created by God to subdue and have dominion over the earth, our planet still fell victim to that theology. Influential fundamentalist ministers, like Jerry Falwell and Pat Robertson, joined forces with anti-environmental corporate and political leaders, and filled the airways promoting the doctrine that Jesus would soon come back to earth and rapture believers away and the deteriorating earth would be left behind and eventually destroyed. So why bother taking care of it?

What happened? With all the momentum after the first Earth Day, all the widespread and enthusiastic support for conservation and preservation of our resources, how could the tide of sentiment be turned so quickly?

I think part of the answer can be found if we examine the mindset of the generation of Americans who endured hardship during the Great Depression or who came as immigrants to this country seeking a better life. They held to the vision of the American dream that promised prosperity and material goods in exchange for their hard work. They wanted their children to not have to struggle as they did to earn a living; they wanted them to have a good education and career opportunities so they could become doctors and lawyers and business executives instead of butchers, and seamstresses, and auto mechanics. So when in the mid-70's they were told they had to turn down their thermostats and be restricted to buying gas for their cars on certain days of the week thereby limiting the mobility, many may have come to regard conservation as an affront to their vision of what life in America should be like.

Furthermore, the environmental movement spawned by the first Earth Day had as its most ardent followers college students most of whom came from well-off families. Their support of conservation was enthusiastic and sincere, but perhaps not very deep. And once they found themselves having to join mainstream society, they too may have considered an affluent lifestyle to be their birthright. So when conservation came into conflict with convenience, convenience won.

In 1995, my husband Harold wrote an insightful article for *Pantheist Vision Journal* entitled "Why Earth Day Failed". He wrote:

"As a college student, I thought that Earth Day heralded a new beginning for our country's relationship with nature, and I envisioned continual, ever-growing progress toward our society learning to live in harmony with the Earth. Over the 25 years since, I've learned that progress is not linear, that things come and go in cycles and that environmental protection is not regarded by others as Mom and Apple Pie as I consider it to be.

The first Earth Day was founded on passion, true enough, but it was a passion fueled by fear, not by love and respect for the Earth. The students who wore gas masks in protest of pollution and buried cars were doing so out of an honest fear that the future would not be livable if pollution and overpopulation were not controlled.

And so, we adopted a few laws, wrote a few environmental impact statements, tinkered with cars so their pollution levels decreased, and now the passion is not merely over, but the new oracles of our day, people like radio commentator Rush Limbaugh can say with a straight face that the "doom sayers" were wrong after all, that profit is a better moral value than conservation, that the values of prosperity and protecting the rights of private property are more important than the values of practicing stewardship.

Modern environmentalism is *often* based on fear, especially insofar as the public perception of it is concerned, and if the thing we fear doesn't come to pass right away, it is easily dismissed and laughed off as a hoax played by "green-on-the -outside-red-on-the-inside" environmental "extremists" (ie. liberals).

Events have shown us that while modern environmentalism has sowed seeds of fear, the opponents of stewardship *in response* have sowed seeds of distrust, and we now reap what was sowed in the last 25 years - which amounts to little more than ongoing political rancor. If we are to attain any vision of man living in harmony with nature, we must embrace the positive values of love, respect, and reverence for the Earth; we must return to sowing seeds of hope." [End quote]

As a result of this legacy, today, 38 years after the first Earth Day, living creatures from the smallest microbe to humanity, as well as the air, soil, and water that support them, still face unprecedented threats. Many threats are now global; most stem directly from human activity. Continuation of our current practices may so alter the living world--and even global climate --that it might be unable to sustain life in the manner we now know.

Over the past several years we have witnessed how the processes of environmental degradation feed on one another. Decisions affecting an immediate locale have been found to affect the entire planet. The resulting damages to environmental systems are immense:

- depletion of nonrenewable resources, especially oil;
- loss of the variety of life through rapid destruction of habitats;
- erosion of topsoil through unsustainable agriculture and forestry practices;
- pollution of air by toxic emissions from industries and vehicles, and pollution of water by wastes;

Even more widespread and serious, according to the preponderance of evidence from scientists worldwide, are:

- the depletion of the protective ozone layer, resulting from the use of volatile compounds containing chlorine and bromine; and

- dangerous global warming, caused by the buildup of greenhouse gases, especially carbon dioxide.

The idea of the earth as a boundless warehouse has proven both false and dangerous. Damage to the environment also has the potential to affect large numbers of people through increased conflict over scarce resources, decline in food security, and greater vulnerability to disease.

Tragically, the degradation of the environment often occurs where people have little or no voice in the decision making that directly affects their lives. This degradation aggravates their situation and swells the numbers of those trapped in urban or rural poverty.

The challenges may seem overwhelming, but fortunately, in recent years people's attitude about the need for environmental protection are beginning to change. As nightly news reports show the melting of the polar ice caps, and images of severe storms, tornadoes and vast flooding in the central and southern US are flashed across the TV screen, the subject of global climate change is no longer being discussed as just a possibility. And the cause for environmental protection has an important new ally this time around. Despite fierce opposition from conservatives, many Evangelical Christian leaders have become vocal advocates for environmental care to their church membership, and they are taking an active roll in lobbying against national anti-environmental legislation. Creation, they are saying now, must be given voice, for present generations and those to come. Their influence is significant.

By whatever phrase they choose - the environment, nature, the biosphere, or creation - evangelicals generally agree that it should be protected. And in fact more than 67% of Americans polled believe that "the environment should be protected because it is God's creation."

And there are also new efforts being made to forge a partnership between Scientists and Religious leaders. In his book, *The Creation*, biologist and author E.O. Wilson meets evangelicals on their own ground, and proves himself their equal when it comes to preaching. The hell fire and brimstone he preaches is not the eternal damnation of the sinful, but the deterioration of conditions we are creating here on earth thanks to the wasteful extravagance of humanity. He asserts that life itself is in grave jeopardy across the planet and half the species of plants and animals will likely be extinct before the end of this century, unless drastic measures are taken to save them. In the guise of a letter to a southern pastor, Wilson calls on Christian fundamentalists to put aside their raging quarrels with science and join the battle to save Creation. Religion and science, he proclaims, are the two most powerful forces in today's world: "If religion and science could be united on the common ground of biological conservation, the problem would soon be solved." He reminds his readers that "People depend on insects for their survival, [like the bees that pollinate our crops]" , but insects don't need us." If humans died out, insects would blithely continue to exist, but were insects to vanish, a truly cataclysmic Armageddon would result.

It is often said, "If you want peace in this world, teach the children: if you want justice in this world, teach the children; if you want a clean and healthy environment, teach the children." I strongly agree it is important to teach the children, the problem is that the children are not making the decisions in this world, the adults are. And peace, justice and the environment cannot wait 25 or more years until they take over the reins of responsibility. Furthermore, we have no guarantee that they won't be seduced by the

acquisition of material wealth as their parents and grandparents were. No, the changes need to be made now, by us.

Protection of species and their habitats, preservation of clean land and water, reduction of wastes, care of the land--these are all priorities. But production of basic goods and services, equitable distribution, accessible markets, stabilization of population, quality education, full employment--must be priorities as well. Neither economic growth that ignores environmental cost nor conservation of nature that ignores human cost is sustainable. Both will result in injustice and, eventually, environmental degradation. We know that healthy environments will only be supported within a healthy economies.

There are obstacles that must be overcome. People, especially in developing countries, often lack the political or economic power to participate fully in decision making. And here in the US we are continually bombarded with manipulative information from aggressive advertisers, and are prey to the pressures of special interests, while the interests of the rest of creation are often inadequately represented in political decisions.

There is hope, but it will require caring, sharing, and commitment to preserving our Earth which must translate into justice in political, economic, social, and environmental relationships. Justice in these relationships means both honoring the integrity of creation, and striving for fairness within the human family. We must listen to the people who fish the sea, harvest the forest, till the soil, and mine the earth for their livelihood, as well as to those who advance the conservation, protection, and preservation of the environment.

And those of us who are committed to preserving our Earth, must be diligent in our efforts to bring about the change that we seek. And we can succeed. Every time we bring reusable bags when we buy groceries, walk or bicycle to our destinations instead of drive, use paper products made from recycled materials, buy our produce from farmer's markets, and invite others to join community supported agriculture networks, we influence the behavior of others, in the most effective way possible -- teaching by example. And if we indeed practice what we preach, others will listen.

We face tremendous challenges if we are to succeed in saving our planet. It will require from the human race a new spirit- a holy spirit; a holy spirit of compassion toward all of creation, a holy spirit of caring and sharing with our fellow travelers in time and space, a holy spirit of commitment to save our beautiful home we call Earth. And as I consider the magnitude of these challenges, I am reminded of a favorite prayer I learned when I was young. "Come, Holy Spirit, fill the hearts of thy faithful and enkindle in them the fire of thy love. Send forth your spirit and they shall be created, and thou shalt renew the face of the Earth".

So be it.

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