
Testimony – Jake Lyonfields, Love First Coordinator

Being the child of two psychologists has its pluses and minuses. When I was a kid, I thought it was horrible – I never, ever won an argument with my parents.

But as I grew older, I realized the litany of resources at my disposal. If I were paying for all the coaching hours they've given to me, I'd have a pretty hefty tab. However, the most valuable thing they've given me hasn't been their career advice or their unyielding support, it is their strong sense of social justice, which I'm just beginning to understand myself. My desire for social justice has also been augmented by the Emerson community, and for that I am grateful.

A year ago, I didn't know where to direct this feeling. In a way, you could say I was looking to find something that would make my heart break. It was only when I began college that I discovered what I would like to be my life's focus.

Our planet is dying. There is a scientific consensus on the matter; the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, a global scientific body tasked with reviewing and assessing the most recent information relevant to climate change, said in its 2007 report that "Most of the observed increase in globally averaged temperatures since the mid-20th century is very likely due to the observed increase in anthropogenic (meaning human) greenhouse gas concentrations". In the same report, they concluded that the people who are to be most affected by climate change will be those who have the least power and the fewest resources. Ironically, in a lot of ways climate change works very much like free, unrestricted capitalism.

Armed with this knowledge, I began to openly complain about the terrible things happening to our planet. I felt a strong sense of self-righteousness about my views, and I was scared, angry, and frustrated with the institutions of which I found myself a part. WashU has the CEOs of Peabody Coal and Arch Coal, two of the nation's biggest coal producers, on its board of trustees. People I knew left their lights on constantly. And my roommate, despite my chagrin, was still taking 30 minute showers.

It was only during this past summer, when I was interning for the Environmental Protection Agency in DC, that I discovered what I needed to do. In DC, there is a developed culture of sustainability. There are farmer's markets everywhere on the weekends. People pay 5 cents for each disposable bag they take from stores, and the bike lanes are wide and clearly marked. Moreover, while working for the EPA, I had a chance to examine in-depth our institutional environmental protections as well as institutional practices that facilitate corporate action that harms our planet.

I have since concluded that while moving forward individually is a good thing, we can only truly mitigate greenhouse gas emissions when we act as a community. Our 7th Unitarian Universalist principle, "Respect for the interdependent web of which we are a part", calls us to recognize our social responsibility to the Earth.

JFK once said, "Let us focus instead on a more practical, more attainable peace, based not on a sudden revolution in human nature, but on a gradual evolution in human institutions..." Emerson, our institution, has the potential (and, if I might add, the responsibility) to evolve accordingly to meet this challenge.

I am committed to doing my part. I have accepted the position of coordinator of Love First, our congregation's social justice team, and together we have decided to make environmental sustainability our social justice focus for

this year. I want to thank Love First and this congregation's leaders, for supporting me in taking this on, and I look forward to what we can do together this year, as individuals, and as a community, to support the health of our planet.

Children's Story "What can I do?" By Kim Moon. <http://holidays.kaboose.com/earthday-cando.html>

Reading "untitled" Wendell Berry - writer, cultural and academic critic, farmer

So, friends, every day do something that won't compute. Love the Lord. Love the world. Work for nothing.

Take all that you have and be poor.

Love someone who does not deserve it.

Denounce the government and embrace the flag.

Hope to live in that free republic for which it stands.

Give your approval to all you cannot understand.

Praise ignorance, for what man has not encountered he has not destroyed.

Ask the questions that have no answers.

Invest in the millennium. Plant sequoias.

Say that your main crop is the forest that you did not plant, that you will not live to harvest.

Say that the leaves are harvested when they have rotted into the mold.

Call that profit.

Prophesy such returns.

Put your faith in the two inches of hummus that will build under the trees every thousand years.

Listen to carrion – put your ear close, and hear the faint chattering of the songs that are to come.

Expect the end of the world.

Laugh. Laughter is immeasurable.

Be joyful though you have considered all the facts.

So long as women do not go cheap for power, please women more than men.

Ask yourself: Will this satisfy a woman satisfied to bear a child?

Will this disturb the sleep of a woman near to giving birth?

Go with your love to the fields.

Lie easy in the shade. Rest your head in her lap.

Swear allegiance to what is nighest your thoughts.

As soon as the generals and the politicians can predict the motions of your mind, lose it.

Leave it as a sign to mark the false trail, the way you didn't go.

Be like the fox who makes more tracks than necessary, some in the wrong direction.

Practice resurrection.

Sermon

When I was just a young girl, my parents made the gutsy decision to go into the lambing business. So they retrofitted our century-old barn and one memorable day 40 sheep arrived – 39 females and 1 male. That's what it took to start a lambing operation. We sent them into the pasture to do their thing with the hope that we would have at least 39 lambs for the Easter market, more if some had twins.

It soon became clear that we had a lot to learn. My parents had raised hogs, cattle, horses, chickens and goats. Could sheep really be that different? Well they were, and sometimes the lessons were learned the hard way, as in a sheep dying in labor, or a lamb not being accepted by its mother because my father cleaned it himself when it was born instead of letting the mother clean it. You have no idea how many lambs we bottle fed that first winter before figuring that one out!

So, we had some avoidable losses in the first winter, just because my parents didn't know as much as they thought they knew. Because most of these losses happened during lambing season, which is in winter, the ground was frozen, and we couldn't bury the ones we lost, so my dad piled them at the back of the farm and waited for spring. What else could we do? Then spring came, and my dad got busy with planting season, and they thawed. What do you think started to happen?

For a 10 year old girl, it was both horrifying and fascinating! When I got home from school, I would run to the back of the farm to see what had changed since my last visit. I know that must sound terribly gross because we live in such sterilized environments today. But something about the process that was taking place had captured my imagination and curiosity. I watched what happened, day by day, to their bodies, the animals and insects that fed on them, the effects of the summer heat, and the warm rains, and the musky soil. It was the perfect biology lesson. Within months all that was left were bleached out bones scattered across the field, and even those flaked away as the temperatures dropped in autumn. I am reminded of one of the lines in the poem by Wendell Berry that Ryan read this morning, "Listen to carrion – put your ear close, and hear the faint chattering of the songs that are to come."

For Wendell Berry the natural world is a pure raw chaotic poetry that we will never fully understand. It is tragically uninterested in the well-being of individual life forms, it is profound mystery and it is painful possibility, and when we mess with it, we're messing with ourselves, because we're physiologically not much different from sheep. Our bodies too would disappear in a matter of a few hot months if left at the back of a farm.

Many of us have become emotionally distanced from the sights and sounds of the less romantic dimensions of nature. We like our walking trails and our bike paths and our neatly mulched gardens, but that other part, like what happens at the bottom of our compost bins, can feel uncomfortable and dirty. Put on your rubber gloves and don't breathe! In reality, we're as close to it as the sheep at the back of our farm that melted into the elements 30 years ago. We are so intimately woven into this world at a cellular level. It is everything.

So when our Love First Coordinator Jake Lyonfields stands before us and says, “The planet is dying,” it means that something is happening to us as well. We can’t just turn on the air conditioner and close the door. This is not just the story of what is happening to the earth. It is our story too, and there have been environmental activists working tirelessly to try and get us to see and understand and be willing to act on the truth that it’s our story, and that the story is not sustainable. As a species we’re like not unlike a farmer getting 40 sheep who thinks he knows how to raise them. But unfortunately, the mistakes we’re making aren’t going to melt harmlessly into the soil over a hot summer.

I don’t want to spend this morning going through a long litany of all the ways human activity is damaging the earth. All that information is available and I suspect most of you know it, and we know that we are the ones who cause it. And of course we should note that there are many in political and economic circles who are trying to dispute that, but I don’t really feel like giving those in denial much of my energy by devoting a sermon to how wrong they are. I am trusting that those of us in this room get it. We know we’re in trouble and we know it’s our fault.

What I’m more interested in, is how we hold onto hope for our earth and hope for ourselves on this earth when the evidence seems stacked against our ability to get our act together. Global warming is well on its way. Species are disappearing. Water shortages are spreading. The use of fossil fuels continues to grow. It’s like we’re standing on that beach surrounded by thousands of stranded starfish. Sometimes it’s so tempting to be like the man in the story, and say there’s no point.

What do we do to hold onto hope for our earth?

Rev. Peter Sawtell, Executive Director of Eco-Justice Ministries, believes that the ecological crisis isn’t just a physical crisis, it’s a spiritual crisis as well, and people of faith are called to respond to the deep spiritual issues that can “trouble and even paralyze those [of us] who are in touch with the earth’s distress.” He asks, can we as people of faith “speak to sin, guilt, repentance, forgiveness, and grace as we individually and collectively participate in the destruction of the earth.” <http://www.eco-justice.org/3layers.asp>

When Jake stands up here and says, “The planet is dying.” I find myself asking, what do we do with the truth that we are sinning against the earth? What do we do about the guilt many of us feel that almost every act of our day, from turning on the shower, making toast, and getting in our car to go where we need to is hurting the planet that we love? Can we forgive ourselves for what we can’t seem to avoid doing? I suspect deep down there is a deep yearning for repentance, and I know that’s a loaded word because it has been misused and abused in so many religious contexts, but in its purest sense, repentance is the act of confessing a wrong, ceasing to do it, and resolving to live a different way.

For Peter Sawtel, a key part of the answer is grace, which is admittedly another loaded word. In conservative religious contexts grace means forgiveness that we don’t deserve. But in a liberal religious tradition that has lovingly overthrown the theology of human depravity, grace is pure empowerment. Grace offers us liberation from having our destinies and our worth defined by the ways we have failed. The gift of grace tells us that despite our failure to stop the destruction of the planet as we know it, we are loved unconditionally, and forgiven completely, and since we are loved unconditionally, and forgiven completely, we are freed to fully engage our covenant with all that is. We can fail over and over again, and will be forgiven over and over again. That is grace. It is our responsibility to take full advantage of the grace that flows unceasingly for us and this beautiful and hurting world by serving the world.

That’s what the little boy in our children’s story implicitly understood. So throw a few more starfish back in the water. Use reusable shopping bags! That’s living into grace. Make the trip to the composter during a rainstorm rather than throwing food scraps in the garbage disposal! That’s living into grace! Cut down to two prepared meals a week from three. Cook one meal a week with organic foods. That’s living into grace! Turn the thermostat

up 3 degrees in the summer, down 2 degrees in the winter, and drive a mile below the speed limit, no matter how many dirty looks you get! That's living into grace. Help your kids focus on what they need, rather than what they want. That's living into grace. Be happy for the critters that break into your compost bin! They got a free meal! That's living into grace.

Here at this Chapel we have an emerging tradition. Every year our social justice ministry team, Love First, discerns what our justice focus will be for the year. We know that our progressive religious tradition isn't just here to make us feel good about ourselves on a Sunday morning. It's to help us harness the liberation we have experienced in our grace filled tradition for the work of our world. The spiritual discipline of Unitarian Universalism challenges us "not to escape reality, but to experience it with open-hearted receptivity. Only then can we be accountable to the spirit which liberates and loves, forgives and renews us in our work." (*Whose Are We*, UUMA 2010)

The task of the Love First Team is to discern, with open-hearted receptivity, how the spirit is leading this congregation in terms of our covenant with life itself. Last year, the organic energy of our people drew us to focus on equality for sexual and gender minorities. This year, that same organic energy has turned our focus to environmental justice. Love First will support this congregation, from the top down, in throwing another starfish into the ocean by focusing on the things we can do to support environmental sustainability. How do we use resources like paper and art supplies? Do we need to burn new candles every Sunday during Joys and Concerns? Can we improve the energy efficiency of our building? Is it really worth the convenience for one family to take two vehicles to church on Sunday morning? What about organizing a carpool from St. Charles County? We can celebrate what we already do, and encourage every single one of us to throw one more starfish back into the ocean.

As we speak our children are likely pasting leaves to a recycled paper tree trunk. So parents, be ready for those going-home-from-church car conversations when you ask them what they learned today! Love First invites also you to join them in the religious education hour to discern where we go from here. How will we act on the liberating grace-filled unconditional love that we have received so generously?

The story of the earth is our story, and together we can tell a new story - a story of unending grace. The value of this earth and all that lives on it cannot be defined by our failures, but rather by a hope that is greater than any single one of us.

Amen and blessed be.