

Wandering in the Wilderness¹

Rev. Myke Johnson

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Allen Avenue Unitarian Universalist Church

Today we join with other faith communities across America to mark Faith Climate Action Week. We begin with a moment of gratitude for all that is beautiful on the earth, for the water, the air, the fire, the stones, and the spirit which connects all beings in a vast network of interbeing.

Prayer Climate Blessing from Faith Climate Action Week²

We hold the Earth.

We hold brothers and sisters who suffer from storms and droughts intensified by climate change.

We hold all species who suffer. We hold world leaders delegated to make decisions for life.

We pray that the web of life may be mended

through courageous actions to limit carbon emissions world wide.

We pray for right actions for adaptation and mitigation to help our already suffering earth community.

We pray that love and wisdom might inspire our individual actions and our actions as communities

So that we may, with integrity, look into the eyes of brothers and sisters and all beings

and truthfully say we are doing our part to care for them and the future of the children.

May Love transform us and our world with new steps toward life. Amen.

Our reading today was "Hope" by Lisel Mueller³

Excerpt:

It hovers in dark corners
before the lights are turned on,
it shakes sleep from its eyes
and drops from mushroom gills...

Sermon:

This week I read that scientists have confirmed that 93 % of the coral in the Great Barrier Reef has bleached. According to an article in the Washington Post, "Severe bleaching means that corals could die, depending on how long they are subject to these conditions. The scientists also reported that based on diving surveys of the northern reef, they already are seeing nearly 50 percent coral death."⁴ The cause of coral bleaching is warming ocean waters combined with El Nino weather patterns. This is the worst bleaching in 15 years. It is possible that the coral will recover. It is also possible that the Reef will be devastated. The scientist reporting this information said that he and his students wept.

My colleague, Rev. Kurt Kuhwold, speaks about worship as the place where we can be real with each other, where we can find transformation. He says: "Here we enter an alternative moment, a time-altered moment ... where we can touch what we are *really* made of, where we can let the truth speak . . . unafraid of any consequences, unabashed, unsullied, unrepentant, unvarnished, unruly, unlocked, unhinged and unstoppable."⁵

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2 <http://www.faithclimateactionweek.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/02/GeneralBlessings.pdf>

3 From *Alive Together: New and Selected Poems*

4 <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/energy-environment/wp/2016/04/20/and-then-we-wept-scientists-say-93-percent-of-the-great-barrier-reef-now-bleached/>

5 http://www.faithclimateactionweek.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/10/UU_GroundedinResilience.pdf

Day by day, most of us can get so busy with ordinary survival, that we don't risk letting the truth speak, we don't risk hearing the truth about the deeper crises we are facing as human beings. It takes all our energy to manage the basics—job, food, kids, bills to pay. So when do we get a chance to ask the bigger questions, and especially the very big question about how our human habits are destroying the earth? When can we ask the question about how to find transformation so that there will be a future for our children?

We are a bit like the Israelites in the Jewish story of Passover—though I am not sure if we are like the slaves laboring for generations under Pharaoh in Egypt, or if we are like those who were wandering in the desert for 40 years. In the Passover story, it took ten plagues for the Pharaoh to relinquish his grasp on the slaves. But then it took another generation for the freed slaves to relinquish their own internalized self-destructive ways. Transformation is never easy.

In the Passover Haggadah, participants in a Seder say together, “We were slaves...” Not “our ancestors were slaves”, but we ourselves—the ritual is to remind us that it is about us, now. So we are encouraged to borrow that metaphor for the challenges we face in our own day. And it seems to me that our current climate crisis hinges on a kind of modern day slavery, our human attachment to over-consumption which is destroying the earth.

It is not really a problem of individuals, but a whole cultural problem. We can't escape this captivity on our own. Rather, we must face it together as a culture. And it begins in being able to speak the truth to each other about what is really going on.

Gus Speth, a US Advisor on climate change, said: "I used to think that top environmental problems were biodiversity loss, ecosystem collapse and climate change. I thought that thirty years of good science could address these problems. I was wrong. The top environmental problems are selfishness, greed and apathy, and to deal with these we need a cultural and spiritual transformation. And we scientists don't know how to do that."

Scientists can't do it, he says, but we have come together in this time of worship, where transformation is at the heart of what we do. Rev. Kuhwald goes on to say:

So don't be fooled into thinking that this hour is a nice time to be together. ...It's not nice in here ... it's Real. Real ... that's spelled H – O – L – Y, Holy. Real...

What that spells is a different kind of Reality, a reality different than consumerism; a reality far different than the one, ...that denied that the Earth's climate is changing, continued to deny that indeed the whole living body of the Earth is changing.

Kuhwald says:

The reality that we enter here is a cauldron for our aliveness and that aliveness is sourced in the powerful impulses of the deep heart—that great engine of our goodness—impulses that compel us to give to others, to truly engage in work that heals, to choose work that challenges the destructive powers that abuse the Earth and all her creatures and systems—the deep impulses that dissent from human ugliness raw with greed, the deep impulses that unrelentingly transform our tentativeness into courage, that build new and resilient ways of living. That is the reality we enter here ... if we dare.

Are you with me? Our earth, the only home we have, is in dire straits. Today we are joining with faith communities across the nation to take a risk for transformation, to face reality, and make a journey away from the slavery of consumerism, into the possibility of a future for our children.

Once we let into our hearts the reality of global warming, the reality of the destructiveness of our way of life; once we wake up to the detrimental effects of our over-consumption of energy and resources, the painful nature of these contradictions begin to plague us. And that pain can propel us into beginning to make a change.

Scientist Peter Kalmus wrote about his own predicament when he began to realize the problem of his own carbon footprint. He says: “I knew that burning fossil fuels was causing irreversible harm to our planet’s life support systems. And yet I continued doing it for years. I tried not to think about this dissonance, and if I did I could always find a rationalization.”⁶

He goes on to speak of years that he was caught in this bind:

My early intellectual understanding came with a strong emotional response. How could we keep burning fossil fuels at an accelerating pace when this was clearly leading to the end of our civilization and a compromised biosphere for future generations? It seemed insane. At the same time I was immersed in the culture of industrial civilization, which deeply encodes its belief system into every aspect of our lives. One thing this belief system says is that burning fossil fuels is the only sane thing to do, that someone who refuses to burn fossil fuels is a Luddite, insane. I became obsessed with finding some way to rectify this deep inconsistency.

He “referred to this visceral mixture of contradiction, confusion, and separation as the “disconnect.” “Like a splinter in my psyche, the disconnect required me to do something. But what?” First he attempted to convince other people of the problem. But that served to further disconnect him.

Finally, he began to purposefully seek to lower his own carbon footprint. He knew that the issues were more than one individual could solve. But what he found was that this attempt to lower his own carbon footprint became an adventure, and brought him a sense of peace and joy—finally his own actions were matching his deeply true values. Through a series of changes, he lowered his own CO₂ output from around 20 tonnes per year, the average for most Americans, to 2 tonnes per year.

He writes: “In the light of my growing awareness, business as usual came to seem bankrupt and unsatisfying. So I began replacing those parts of my everyday life that felt unsatisfying with new ways of living that I do find satisfying. The changes I’ve been making to my life are simple, but they go far beyond recycling.”

He calls it Be-cycling. “Be-cycling doesn’t require sacrifice so much as exchange. You examine your life and exchange daily actions that aren’t satisfying for daily actions that are satisfying. In this way you bring your everyday life into harmony with your deepest beliefs. My experience is that this congruence between outer and inner life is the key to happiness.”

6 His book is available as a free download at: <http://becycling.life/wp-content/uploads/becycling.pdf>

I had a similar experience during this past year, as Margy and I set out to change our living situation so that we would use less fossil fuel, and lower our own carbon output. I had been feeling the brokenness of the situation for many years—how even though I wanted to live my life with care on this earth, every day my presence was destructive to other beings.

So while I was on sabbatical last summer, we began to think about what we could do. Right there, I notice an incredible privilege—that we had a chance to step away from every day life to ponder all of this. Because our world is set up to ensure that it continues as it is. It takes a lot of effort to make a change. Naively, I thought we'd be able to do it all during the sabbatical. But what we were able to do was to make a start—to get enough clarity to make an intention for change, and to lay out a plan to begin that journey.

For us, that journey included some basic ideas to lower our carbon footprint:

One, was to downsize our living space by finding a smaller and less expensive home. Two, was to find a house with a southern exposure that would be suitable for solar panels on the roof. Three, we hoped to use the equity we had built in our current house to finance the purchase of solar panels for the new house. Four, we chose to move closer to Portland, where most of our lives were centered, and thus to require less gasoline for transportation, and also have the possibility of public transportation. And five, to have room for gardens to eventually grow more of our own food, in a small and manageable way.

We sat down with each other to create this list, and also to list the other needs for our living space, especially for one-level living because of Margy's disability. And then we set out to find this new place. I want to acknowledge that a good deal of luck had enabled us to consider these plans. We had equity in our home because of the way our path intersected with the rise and fall of the housing market. It could so easily have been otherwise. We could have been caught in the mortgage scandals and collapse. But in our case, we ended up with some equity, so that shaped what we were able to imagine.

Each person who begins to imagine lowering their carbon footprint will find different ways to make that journey. Perhaps for some, a move to the country makes more sense, where they might grow a great deal of their own food. Perhaps for others, apartment living or cooperative living or even tiny house living would work. But first of all it takes the intention to explore that goal, and some in-depth thinking to figure out a path. It is not easy. As I said, our whole culture conspires to keep us on the path of consumption. Our whole culture is moving downstream toward collapse. To turn around is to begin swimming upstream against the currents that surround us. I share my stories with you, not because what we did was remarkable, but to encourage others to know that it is possible to find a new way, even though it is difficult.

It took Margy and I over three months to find a house that would work for our hopes and needs. Even looking at real estate was an exercise in swimming against the stream. The listings for houses don't mention south-facing roofs, and most development has proceeded without any attention for solar orientation. The listings also don't mention insulation or other environmental upgrades. When I saw a listing that seemed promising, I would map it out online, and try to tell from Google Earth whether there was a south-facing roof or not.

It really helped to have a realtor who shared our values. We learned about our realtor, Russell, through Lisa Fernandes at the Resilience Hub. He stuck with us through the long process of finding just the right house, and the long process of investigating each option, and then the long process of selling our

current house. We couldn't have done it without a network of people who share these values, and who care about the earth. I learned how hard it is to make a change like this—it was exhausting, expensive, included lots of tough decisions to make, and lots of potential for complications. So that was a most important lesson that I brought away from this experience—how important it is to find other who share our values, and who support our intentions, our dreams of transformation.

Another important lesson was to be present to the journey as we take it. There were so many moments when I wanted it to be completed already. But the journey itself was a treasure trove of spiritual growth. Blogging helped me to stay patient about my experience. It helped me to notice each part of the journey toward more ecological living—there were ups and downs, griefs and challenges. It was difficult to leave behind our old house and yard. That yard had been the place where I felt so connected to the earth—there were trees and birds and critters that I grew to love deeply. So by paying attention to the journey, I was able to make room for all the feelings that came up in the process.

The journey isn't over yet. We've moved into our smaller house, we've had insulation installed, and energy-efficient air source heat pumps. We've had the other repairs and renovations that we needed to have done. We've sold our old house. Now we are in the midst of considering proposals for solar energy. There are a lot of decisions to make about that. We need to install gutters and rain barrels. There are a lot of invasive plants around our boundaries, and we probably won't even begin on any garden plants until next year.

And our journey will always be partial. Our house will not be a fully carbon-neutral home. We still use gasoline for our cars. We have a back-up oil burner for really frigid weather. But we've come further along on the journey of our values and our hopes for the future.

Even as we speak, the political climate for solar energy in Maine is in crisis. The current administration is trying to undo net-metering which is the financial mechanism that makes solar power viable for home producers. The legislature passed a compromise solar bill, but they don't have enough votes at this moment to override the governor's veto. So these setbacks and challenges face us at every turn.

This is the part that feels like wandering in the wilderness for forty years. Perhaps we will need a whole new generation of people to truly change our culture from over-consumption to earth consciousness. But we can't give up. I know that our efforts, limited though they are, will matter to those who come after us. There is an old maxim, attributed to Rabbi Tarfon, "It is not incumbent upon you to complete the work, but neither are you at liberty to desist from it."⁷

We have this opportunity, with each other, to speak the truth, to face the realities of our time together, to bring each other courage and hope. It is not easy, but we would not be church, if we ran away from the most important crises of our time. Again, I want to acknowledge that it is painful to look at these realities. But I also want to say that it is empowering and joyful to begin to act on our convictions, to make an intention to journey away from the destructiveness of our culture into the wilderness of new possibilities. I would be more than happy to talk further with anyone who has been pondering similar questions, about how to take the next steps on this journey.

⁷ From *Pirkei Avot* (2:21)

I will speak about one more thing that is helpful. Be close to the natural world. There is great strength that comes from the beauty of flowers and trees, the songs of birds, the antics of squirrels, the lapping of waves on the beach. There is strength in putting one's hands in the soil. There is great strength in the gratitude that springs to my heart when I feel the sun on my skin, or the breeze against my cheek. There is grief in this journey, but there is also a deep sense of interconnection with all of life, a deep sense of connection between our values and our actions.

The Buddhists have a practice, one that Joanna Macy brought to *The Work that Reconnects*⁸ in which I have participated, and some practices of which I brought to you last fall. This practice is to make vows that speak to our intention in living out certain values. What has given me strength and endurance during the transition I have been trying to make in my life, is the power of the intentions in my heart. There were times when the way seemed impossible. But I learned that if my intentions were in line with my values, then there was no particular outcome that had to happen right away. The energy of those intentions carried a kind of magic and I could learn from whatever I experienced on the path, and the path would lead me in the direction of those intentions.

When I completed a ten-day workshop with Joanna Macy last summer, I had the opportunity to make vows in the circle of participants. I saw those vows again on the website for the Faith Climate Action Week. I have printed them in the order of service. Perhaps these vows speak to some of you, speak to the values you are seeking to make real in your lives. I invite you to read them and reflect on them during our time of meditation. During our closing words, I invite any of you who wish, to join me in speaking these vows. I also encourage you not to feel any pressure to make these vows—they might not be right for you at this time. Think about the intentions you wish to make for your own life. Those who don't speak the vows are invited to be the witnesses for those who do, to offer support and encouragement.

May we find the strength together to face the challenges of our time, particularly the challenge of global warming and the culture of consumption that has led to this crisis. May we find a way together to enter into a beneficial relationship with all of Earth's beings.

Closing Words Vows for the Great Turning (Joanna Macy)

Please stand and those who wish can say the words with me.

I vow to myself and to each of you:

To commit myself daily to the healing of our world and the welfare of all beings.

To live on Earth more lightly and less violently in the food, products, and energy I consume.

To draw strength and guidance from the living Earth, the ancestors, the future beings, and my brothers and sisters of all species.

To support others in their work for the world and to ask for help when I feel the need.

To pursue a daily practice that clarifies my mind, strengthens my heart, and supports me in observing these vows.

As we extinguish the flame of this chalice, let each of us carry its light into every day of our lives.

8 <http://workthatreconnects.org>