

Ipswich Unitarians

A SEA OF OIL AND PLASTIC: LIVING IN AN ARTIFICIAL WORLD

Clifford M. Reed, minister

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I expect that many, if not most, of us drove here this morning. And it would be hard for some of us to get here at all on Sunday mornings if we didn't! If our congregation was restricted to those who could walk or cycle to services – or even get the bus – then our numbers would be much reduced. Unitarian places of worship are pretty thinly spread, especially in East Anglia, so we are more dependent than most other denominations on our cars. I don't really think there is much we can do about that, but it should give us pause for thought nonetheless!

As a denomination, we have enshrined, “respect for all creation”, in our Object statement, as have our American co-religionists, the Unitarian Universalist Association, with their stated Principle of, “Respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are part.” This concern for the natural world, and for the need to restore a healthy and wholesome relationship with the Earth and its myriad living things, has been increasingly evident in our movement in recent years, although it can be traced back at least to the 18th century, if not earlier.

Although we are not and never have been ‘Creationists’, a term relating to the crudest forms of pseudo-science and fundamentalism, we are very much concerned with the Creation, meaning the Earth and all that lives here, and, indeed, the Cosmos in which it is set. Although we believe that science is the best way to discover how nature works, we also believe that nature has a spiritual dimension. That is to say, there is something in *us* that responds spiritually to the natural world, and that this, in turn, reveals our connectedness with all Creation and tells us that we are part of a greater Unity.

In knowing this, and in allowing it to guide our actions, we may rediscover a wisdom which our troubled planet sorely needs – and which we need if we are to find spiritual wholeness. As the great American scientist, naturalist and conservationist, Rachel Carson, put it many years ago:

“I believe that natural beauty has a necessary place in the spiritual development of any individual or society.”

A failure to relate to nature with the respect – and the sense of wonder – that are due, not only impairs our own spiritual lives, it also spells disaster. Rachel Carson, back in 1954, was deeply concerned about the consequences for a civilization that was becoming increasingly alienated from nature. In that same speech she said:

“I believe that whenever we substitute something man-made and artificial for a natural feature of the earth, we have retarded some part of man's spiritual growth.”

But she didn't end there. She warned against, “...this substitution of man-made ugliness, this trend toward a perilously artificial world.” She appealed instead for a restored appreciation of the natural world and for a healthier relationship with it. She told her audience in Columbus, Ohio:

“The more clearly we can focus our attention on the wonders and realities of the universe, the less taste we shall have for destruction.”

Over the fifty-six years since Carson gave that speech, the modern conservation movement has grown considerably, but so too has, “humanity's taste...for destruction.” Whether deliberately, or as ‘collateral damage’ – to use that military euphemism – the last six decades have seen the unparalleled destruction of ever more natural wonders and places of beauty. Vast tracts of many rich natural habitats have been destroyed or damaged beyond repair. More and more species of animals and plants have been and are being driven to, and over, the brink of extinction. Our seas

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are being fished out and their wonders ravaged by over-exploitation and pollution. They are in danger of being choked by the vast tide of virtually indestructible plastic that we produce and then dump into the sea without thought for the consequences. There are islands in the Pacific where every tide adds to a mountain of plastic on the beaches. On both land and in the sea, birds and other marine wildlife are being killed by the plastic rubbish in which they get entangled or which they eat by mistake. And yet, although we are responsible, all this is against our own interests too. Rachel Carson again, this time writing in 1948:

“...we will become ever more dependent upon the ocean as we destroy the land.”

All of which brings us back to our dependence on the internal combustion engine, not to mention the many, many other aspects of our “artificial” modern world that are dependent on oil – oil which has for quite some time now been extracted as much from the sea-bed as from dry land. The mounting environmental cost of the oil industry has been all too evident in all too many ways as our junkie-like addiction to oil has grown. And now, in the Gulf of Mexico and on its adjacent coastlines, we are witnessing perhaps the greatest single environmental disaster to have been caused by that dangerously unhealthy relationship.

Rachel Carson’s primary scientific interest was the sea and the shoreline where it meets the land. And it is these environments, with their complex ecological relationships, that will bear – and are already bearing – the brunt of this disaster. And this is not to mention the human cost, both in the original explosion that destroyed the oil rig, ‘Deepwater Horizon’, and in the dire economic consequences all along the Gulf coast.

Just to consider the impact on bird life, at the height of the breeding season, the scale of the disaster could become incalculable. Many wonderful species, some of them endangered anyway, are vulnerable – if not already affected. If you have ever seen a pelican or a gannet plunging into the sea to catch fish, or seen a frigatebird patrolling the ocean in search of food, you will realise what a vast oil slick means for them. And then there are the many birds of beach and shoreline, coastal marsh and wetland: all are in the path of this ever-growing oil slick. Even the many small birds that need resting places and feeding stations on their long migrations across the Gulf of Mexico are at risk. And now, of course, with birds gathered in their coastal nesting grounds and feeding in the sea, they are more susceptible than at any other time of the year. Other marine life too is at grave risk, including several kinds of turtle and many species of economically and ecologically important fish and shellfish.

Mike Daulton of the National Audubon Society, one of America’s premier conservation organisations, has written of this disaster that it reminds “the nation of the risks involved with our addiction to oil.” He continues: “This spill would give anyone pause regarding the pursuit of risky drilling in environmentally sensitive coastal areas.” In the long term, he says, we must shift from this “addiction to the promise of clean, renewable energy.”

Nature, of course is remarkably resilient. In the long term – often the *very* long term – she can recover from much of the damage we do. But in the meantime, not only is some of the damage permanent – extinct species are gone for ever – it also puts our own material, economic and spiritual welfare at risk. We *need* a world that is rich in resources, a world that can sustain our ever-increasing numbers with food and water, a world that will feed the human spirit with beauty, wonder and diversity. We need a world that will be as hospitable to future generations as it has been to us. And the creative conservation of this world is our moral and religious duty.

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It has been said for many centuries by wise and holy people that we are the stewards of the Earth and not its owners. But we still need to say it, to remind ourselves and others of it, because the message still isn't getting through to enough of us! The disaster in the Gulf of Mexico is proof enough of that, if proof were needed. Whether it is for God or for future generations that we are stewards of this planet doesn't really matter very much – it amounts to the same thing anyway. We meet the Divine in Nature, and we meet the Divine in that aspect of Nature that is our children and our grandchildren to the umpteenth generation.

So what should we do? While as individuals we can all find ways to lessen our own negative impact on the Earth's interdependent web, and while we can demand of government and industry that they do the same, we can also rekindle in ourselves and our society an awareness, a guiding sense, of Creation's sacredness - and of our artificial civilization's fragility. Were this to suffuse our society then we would start to think differently and find more truly ingenious and creative solutions to the problems that, for the most part, we have created.

As a community of the Spirit, this rekindling should, I believe, be a major aspect of our work and worship – for the Earth's sake and for the sake of generations yet to come.
