

"Religious Witness for the Earth"  
A Sermon by Intern Minister Elizabeth Marsh  
Unitarian Universalist Church of Rockville  
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On this 40<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of Earth Day, let us pause for a moment to reflect on the context in which it was created. In 1962, Rachel Carson published her influential bestseller, *Silent Spring*. Congress passed the Wilderness Act in the mid 1960s.

In December 1968, the crew of Apollo 8 returned from their journey around the moon with the first images of our planet from outer space. One iconic photo, "Earthrise," has given shivers of awe to the countless people who have seen it. In the photo, Earth is partially shaded, like a half moon we'd see in our sky, and hangs blue and white against the stark blackness of space. It is just rising over the moon's sun-lit horizon.

The photo has been called "the most influential environmental photograph ever taken." Later, Carl Sagan wrote, "Look at that dot. That's here. That's home. On it, everyone you love, everyone you know, everyone you ever heard of, every human being who ever was."

This new perspective of Earth, seen isolated in a vast vacuum of the Universe, surely influenced the people who began organizing the first Earth Day. Wisconsin Senator Gaylord Nelson was calling for a nation-wide environmental teach-in day, which was modeled after the Vietnam War teach-ins of the time. This first environmental teach-in took place on April 22, 1970. It involved 20 million people across the country, and quickly spread across the globe.

Many of you may remember the first Earth Day—did any of you participate in those early observations of it? What gratitude we all have for the founders of Earth Day, so that people my age could be raised in a world that has always celebrated it.

My generation only knows a world that contains Earth Day. We grew up with Earth Day activities in our elementary school classrooms, and with our municipalities supply recycling bins right alongside trash bins.

It has also become an important part of the church year for many Unitarian Universalist and other religious congregations. We mark it every year in our services, and it becomes not just a holiday but a holy day. We can easily make the connection between environmental concerns and religious values...and together, in our religious communities, we long for a way to respond that will transform ourselves and our world.

We experience a devastated planet not just with our eyes and our minds, but in our hearts. We need religious community to help us respond with our minds and our hearts to the plight and the wonders of the environmental movement. We long to make a difference, yet how often do we feel confused and overwhelmed about how to do that?

So much feels out of our hands because it is—at least, if we imagine ourselves solving global warming by ourselves in a year. To focus on impossible tasks—the urgent accomplished immediately—is a sure way to get stuck in despair.

Another way to approach environmental justice is to think smaller, to allow ourselves to be affected more intimately by our world. Our way to respond to our world can be through the practice of religious witness.

In our meditation, Rebecca Parker wrote of the need for religious witness—to speak honestly and not avoid seeing what must be seen of sorrow and outrage, or tenderness, and wonder. This is what the environmental movement has been all along—a way to witness to both the tragedy and the beauty that is possible.

In the reading this morning, Kurt Vonnegut wrote that the purpose of life is to be the eyes and ears and conscience of the Creator of the Universe. Who knew that Reverend Parker and Mr. Vonnegut would have such a rich dialogue on what it means to speak up on behalf of the voiceless planet Earth?

You may also have heard of *The Lorax*, the beloved book by Dr. Seuss that describes the clear cutting of the Truffula Trees. The main story-teller of this book is called the Once-ler, and he comes upon a great grove of these colorful, silky-topped trees, hillsides of gallivanting animals, and ponds full of smiling, humming fish. The Once-ler discovers that the silky tops of the Truffula Trees can be knitted into things that everyone wants, and at great financial profit, too.

When the Once-ler cuts down his first Truffula Tree, out of the trunk pops the Lorax, a shortish, oldish, and mossy sort of a man, who speaks with a voice that is sharpish and bossy. "Mister!" exclaims the little man, "I am the Lorax and I speak for the trees. I speak for the trees, for the trees have no tongues."

The book goes on to describe the Lorax's insistence that the Once-ler stop cutting down all the Truffula trees, but to no avail. Soon all the Truffula Trees are gone, and the Once-ler realizes too late that his greed has destroyed a beautiful land. The whole story is a moving tribute to the inherent preciousness of our landscape. Out of the whole book, however, it is what the Lorax first says to the Once-ler that moves me the most: "I am the Lorax," he says. "I speak for the trees."

What a tender gesture—to defend beings that cannot speak for themselves. The Lorax is bearing witness to the greedy Once-ler, on behalf of the voiceless, powerless trees. The Lorax is saying, “I see what you're doing. Your actions will not go unnoticed because I am here to notice them.”

And that is the essence of religious witness. To use the power that we have to speak on behalf of those who have none. To be a presence that says, “Your actions will not go unnoticed.”

This is what people have done for decades when they link hands outside of nuclear power facilities, or like some committed Quakers I know in California and Oregon, who stand in front of old growth trees to prevent them from being logged. Eventually my Quaker friends got arrested for their actions, but they got the chance to speak with their presence, “We see what you are doing and you will not get away with it unnoticed.”

We can also bear witness to actions that restore life, because we must also speak on behalf of the voiceless when we want to name and celebrate the compassion shown toward them.

Last July, I traveled to rural Wisconsin and met Sister Mary David, Sister Joanne, and Sister Lynne, three women of the Benedictine order, at Holy Wisdom Monastery outside of Madison. The three women have worked with others to restore nearly 200 acres of native tall grass prairie, as their own way of speaking on behalf of the voiceless plants and animals who once made their home in that land.

The sisters originally purchased some acreage of farmland—it grew corn, a staple crop in the Midwest. Over the last fifty years, the women in that religious community have steadily lived their religiously-based environmental values. They purchased more land as they could. They worked with paid staff and volunteers to gather and sow native prairie seeds in the plots formerly used for corn.

Their land also contained an ancient glacial kettle lake, which the sisters had dredged and rehabilitated. In addition, they re-established a grove of native oak trees that had long been cut down and plowed under.

The acres of restored prairie are still surrounded by other corn fields, as well as a golf course, but the sisters' religious witness to the earth is a strong one. On the global scale of things, their actions are a tiny drop in a huge bucket. Yet, the sisters could not refuse to do, as Helen Keller said, the one thing they could do.

And their commitment to restore the prairie land certainly makes a difference to the redwing blackbirds, the wild turkeys, the owls, and the countless

insects and prairie plants who once again make that land their home.

How do we know that our actions actually make a difference?

A few years ago, Unitarian Universalist minister Alan Taylor preached a sermon about his intention to witness against torture with hundreds of others in Fort Benning, Georgia. This was outside the former School of the Americas, which is a combat training school for Latin American soldiers.

In a sermon just prior to visiting Fort Benning, Reverend Taylor reflected, "Do I think this witnessing will change the course of history? No. Do I think the United States government will take notice? Likely not. Is this a vain action that will simply result in loss of a bit of my time and money? Perhaps.

And yet I feel compelled to do something, with the hope that acting in solidarity with others will contribute to the turning of the tide against those who believe that torture is justified."

Reverend Taylor asks questions we all ask at one time or another. Will my actions make a lasting difference? We want our efforts will matter on a large scale. But to ask if my action will change the course of history is a slightly trick question, because of course it will.

Most likely not on a grand scale, but something *will* be different because we act. We never go anywhere without affecting our surroundings. A more focused question to ask is, "What difference will it make to this particular piece of land?" Or, "What difference will it make for my children to see me speak up about this?" We could also ask, "How will this change me into a more compassionate person?"

Maybe you've heard this story--it's often passed around on email as an inspirational message. The story is based on the essay, "The Star Thrower," which was written by one of my favorite writers, Loren Eiseley. It goes like this:

One day a man was walking along the shore. As he looked down the beach, he saw a human figure moving like a dancer. As he got closer, he saw that it was a young man and the young man wasn't dancing, but instead he was reaching down to the sand, picking up something and very gently throwing it into the ocean.

As he got closer, the first man called out, "Good morning! What are you doing?" The young man paused, looked up and replied, "Throwing starfish into the ocean."

"I guess I should have asked, Why are you throwing starfish into the ocean?"  
"The sun is up and the tide is going out. And if I don't throw them in they'll die."

"But young man, don't you realize that there are miles and miles of beach and starfish all along it. You can't possibly make a difference!"

The young man listened politely. Then bent down, picked up another starfish and threw it into the sea, past the breaking waves. He said, "It made a difference for that one!"

To bring our awareness to the individual spruce or the stand of oaks along our regular walking route, to recall the difference it makes to that one starfish, or that community of Eastern Bluebirds and Baltimore Checkerspot butterflies that call our garden their home... to remember our kinship with particular earth dwellers helps to give our efforts tangible purpose.

When we create a relationship with the plants and animals who share our neighborhoods, we resist the sense of despair that can come when we imagine the global scale of environmental needs.

So even though it might feel corny at first, get to know the birds or squirrels in your yard. Say hello to the trees on your route to work or school.

We are all called to be the eyes, the ears, and the conscience of Creation. Who will speak for the trees? I hope we all will, if only because we love them too fiercely to let them go unnoticed.

Blessed be, and Amen.