

Earth Service Talk – Beth Milham

Before we talk about what we at Channing can do for the earth, I'd like to talk a little about why we, as UUs, might choose to do anything. Let me warn you that I'm about to give you a vastly oversimplified and unapologetic history of the relationship between earth and religion.

The earth and its inhabitants of all species might be expected to have a supreme place of importance in the world's religions, but just a cursory look doesn't confirm that assumption. Early religions, or what we might deem "primitive" religions seem to have been very much earth and nature centered, but as religions became more sophisticated, they distanced themselves from the physical world, and the world has suffered for it.

In Christianity, "pagan" became not a descriptive term for a faith that revered nature, but the ultimate insult and put-down. The Judeo-Christian tradition declared man the creator's supreme accomplishment, after which He needed a full day's rest. Then God gave man dominion over the earth and all its creatures. This may have been His second mistake. Either that, or man, in his arrogance, just assumed that this was God's intention, and took over. Man came to assume that the earth and all its creatures were there for his convenience and use. He was the superior being and his needs came first. If there was anything left over for the rest of creation, that was OK. As a corollary, religion developed a center somewhere other than here, and the goal of religion became to escape from earth, to the ultimate destination—Heaven. This attitude further demoted the importance of earth, and the need for man to care for it.

In recent years, many faiths have started coming to terms with the consequences of earth neglect, and are taking more seriously man's role as its steward. Man is still the boss, but he is seeing more clearly the responsibilities of that stewardship, as well as the privileges. Many evangelical churches have made an especially sincere commitment to caring for God's creation. Even so, a huge change in mindset is required, and it remains to be seen whether modern religious people, especially in this country, are truly ready to make that change quickly enough to make a difference.

UUs came later than many other Judeo-Christian denominations to a true appreciation of our place in nature. True, we've always revered nature, but it's often been in a romantic, puffy clouds, flowery fields and grazing cows sort of way. It wasn't until the 70s that the Seventh Principle was added, but I believe, and I'm proud, that they got it right the first time, offering us an excellent spiritual basis for action. First, the word "respect" connotes proper deference to something larger and more important than ourselves. The words "interdependent web" give an accurate view of ecology, in which everything is connected to everything else in amazingly complex ways, so that the potential for unintended consequences is endless and seemingly unpredictable. We pull a thread here,

and several things miles away can start to unravel. “Existence” is a nebulous word that is all-inclusive and implies borders way beyond our imagination. And most important, “of which we are a part” shows us just where we belong—not in the center, and not at the top, but just another being in a wondrously complex scheme.

By virtue of seeing ourselves at the top for so long, we have developed tremendous powers to do good and harm, and we’ve used them carelessly, even when we thought we were doing good. We feel as though we’re in control until a natural disaster or a devastating illness puts us in our place for a while, but as we heal and rebuild, we forget those setbacks. Therefore, we now must become very intentional in our efforts to fix some of what we’ve done.

UUs are fortunate to have not only the Seventh Principle, but also a UU-faith-based and very practical resource to frame our efforts. It’s the Green Sanctuary program. This program is designed to effect change on all levels of a congregation’s life: its physical property, its policies, practices and activities, the lives of its congregants, their families, and the communities, states, nations and world that they live in. It focuses on four areas: worship and celebration, religious education, environmental justice and sustainable living. After doing a thorough, guided audit to determine our starting point, we are asked to frame an action plan based on those areas. At that point, we can apply for candidate status as a Green Sanctuary, and we then work to fulfill the plan over the course of one to two years. Our Board of Governors has already endorsed this process, and a committee has formed to guide our efforts. We chose to call ourselves the Green Congregation Committee, to give an indication of the scope of our charge. The program requires this committee to be permanent, and the mechanism for accomplishing that status will grow from our strategic planning process.

This certification program offers as its reward just “a piece of paper”—recognition that we’ve taken a hard look at ourselves, designed a plan of action, and followed through on it, and are committed to continuing to maintain and expand that plan. Certification is subject to periodic renewal, as is our commitment to renewal of the earth through our efforts to change.

In our church, we’ve already done a lot over the past couple of years, and so have most of us as individuals and families. Our consciousness is being raised daily. But we’re probably still picking the “low-hanging fruit” that Bill McKibben refers to in our reading. It’s time to drag out the ladders.

It’s easy to rationalize our current course of action, and thus do little or nothing to change. We’re tempted to wait for technology to come to our rescue. Hasn’t it always done so before? But that cavalry may not ride up over the hill in time. We know in our hearts what we need to do. We just need the will to do it. And that’s no small thing.

As UUs, we come from highly diverse religious backgrounds. We each have a unique perception of the source of creation and our relationship to that source, but we share a beloved community—our church. If we believe that the source loves all of its creation, including us, then we must show deference and respect to it by honoring and caring for all its creation. This is a daunting task, but as we dwell in community, we can help one another to fulfill it. There is no greater contribution that we can make to the future. Indeed, it may be the only way to try to ensure that there is a future.