

We Are the Earth
by
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Presented at
First Church of Christ Unitarian
Lancaster, Massachusetts
April 22, 2007

INTRODUCTION

I was watching a program on public television this past week about Gifford Pinchot, the first chief of the US Forest Service under Teddy Roosevelt and later the governor of Pennsylvania. Through Pinchot's leadership, as head of the forest service, many of the wild lands in the US were set aside as national forests. I was impressed by the numerous scenes of wilderness from across the country in that television program. What struck me was the beauty and abundance of this continent that we live on.

I thought of the patriotic song "American the Beautiful" that praises the abundance of this continent:

Oh beautiful, for spacious skies,
For amber waves of grain,
For purple mountain majesties
Above the fruited plain!

Amid this abundance and great beauty, we usually are unaware of the natural processes of our planet that go into creating and sustaining the air, the climate, the water, and soil that make this North American continent so beautiful. All of those great processes just go on automatically beneath our awareness—like the beating of our hearts—without us having to notice—unless of course, our heart skips a beat. And that is happening now with our planet—global warming, over population, over-consumption, the advancing of deserts, the destruction of forest and grassland ecosystems, and the depletion of life in the oceans are the Earth's heart skipping a beat—big time.

A Patriotic Song for Earth Healing

We sing that patriotic song and feel proud of this country, as we should, but it is easy to forget that one of the most important components of the success of our American democracy on this continent, making us the most powerful country on Earth, is the abundance of the land itself. It is good, however, to remember that. When our forebears came to New England, they found abundant forests and game—making living here possible and eventually comfortable and successful. Because of that success bought from this abundant land, we enjoy this historic town with its river running through it. And then sometimes when driving along Prospect Hill Road by Fruitlands in Harvard, I stop and look at those purple mountains majesty with Mount Watchussets, Mount Watalic, and Mount Manadnock in the distance—like so many other views, in so many other places on this continent. [Fruitlands is where Bronson Alcott's and his family tried an experiment in self-reliant, simple living

in the mid-19th century as a way of deepening the spiritual life. Thoreau wrote an essay about a walk to Mount Watchussetts. Mount Watalic is on the state line between Massachusetts and New Hampshire, and Mount Manadnock is a prominent mountain in Southern New Hampshire.]

When my wife Claudia and I visit my parents on their farm in Kansas, a place also with a river running through it, there are places where the river bank cuts into the topsoil, revealing a topsoil layer, five feet thick, black and rich from hundreds of thousand of years of grasslands making soil. It's why with roughly half the rainfall that we get in New England that humus of the Plains States holds the soil moisture so those amber waves of grain can grow.

So much of who we are depends on the air, water, and land of this continent. To my notion of things, we should feel just as patriotic for the air, land, and water as we do for our form of government and its history. Generations of American have risen to the threat that other governments have put to our country and given or risked their lives to preserve this country. Yet there is a threat to this country now that is far greater than any despot. This threat that could mean much of the abundant rich land that grows those amber waves of grain could dry up. Many of our abundant forests, still threatened by acid rain and now we realize by changing climate due to global warming, may disappear or be altered significantly. It seems to me that everyone should be at least as patriotic to this North American continent and the Earth, that it is a part of, as we are towards this country and to be willing to make some changes, even sacrifices, to address the threat.

“The Earth Creature”–Us

In the Bible, in Genesis, the first human is called “Adam” and when no specific name is given, our Bibles refer to the first human with the word “man” but the actual word in Hebrew translated as “man” is *ha'adam*—which literally means “the earth creature.” So when I read from the creation story from the second chapter of Genesis, I am going to use the literal translation “earth creature,” instead of the word “man.” We get a different sense that way

when no plant of the field was yet in the earth and no herb of the field had yet sprung up—for the Lord God had not caused it to rain upon the earth, and there was no one to till the ground; but a stream would rise from the earth, and water the whole face of the ground—

then the Lord God formed “the earth creature” from the dust of the ground, and breathed into “the earth creature’s” nostrils the breath of life; and the “the earth creature” became a living being. And the Lord God planted a garden in Eden, in the east; and there God put the “the earth creature” whom God had formed. Out of the ground the Lord God made to grow every tree that is pleasant to the sight and good for food, . . .

The Lord God took the “the earth creature” and put “the earth creature” in the garden of Eden to till it and keep it. . . .

Then the Lord God said, ‘It is not good that “the earth creature” should be alone; I will

make “the earth creature” a helper as [a] partner.’ So out of the ground the Lord God formed every animal of the field and every bird of the air, and brought them to “the earth creature” to see what “the earth creature” would call them; and whatever the “the earth creature” called each living creature, that was its name. The “the earth creature” gave names to all cattle, and to the birds of the air, and to every animal of the field

This ancient creation story is strikingly wise. Humans are formed out of the dust— *aw far*’—in Hebrew meaning “dry earth.” But Genesis tell us before humans were formed there was water, and then “the earth creature” was brought to life by air—God’s breath. So water, soil and air formed the conditions necessary for human life. And the ability of the Earth to provide water, soil and air are threatened today.

The Ability to Name—Blessing and Curse

God gave the earth creature the responsibility to till and care for the Garden, and God then made animals as partners for “the Earth creature.” Next God brought the animals to “Earth creature” to name. This naming is a unique human capacity among all living creatures. The power of humanity to till the garden and tend it arises from the human intellect—our human capacity to name and figure out how things work. You can’t till the garden without understanding how a seeds grow into a plants, how to place the seed in the ground, how to provide the right nutrients and water, how to tend it, harvest, it store it—all that is the human capacity to name and figure out things.

This ability to name and figure out too has given “the earth creature,” us humans, the capacity to do great damage to the Earth. This naming capacity has not given us wisdom however and has given humans a peculiar twist of consciousness—what Einstein called an optical delusion—that the world somehow revolves around our own self-interests and that we are separate egos and that what is us ends at our skin ,and we are somehow removed from the Earth itself and all its other creatures.

Our intellect has given us the marvels of the Industrial Revolution. This sermon was written on one of those marvels—a laptop computer where I sat in my study hooked by a wireless link to computers around the world. Most of you came here in your automobiles—another marvel, (or is it a curse) of the Industrial Revolution. Of course the Industrial Revolution would not have been possible as we know it without the abundance of the Earth’s fossil fuels. Now our use of those fuels has created a great threat to our planet in global warming.

Do you remember that piece in the Walt Disney film *Fantasia* about the Sorcerers Apprentice? That segment of the film is about the foolish apprentice who uses the sorcerer’s magic to do his chores of carrying water to fill a vat. But lacking skill and wisdom, the apprentice is unable to stop what he started and the sorcerer’s secret cavern begins to flood.

This is a story about the power of the intellect without wisdom. The need to balance our intellect with wisdom is what astronaut Edgar Mitchell wrote so eloquently about in the reading for today: “Only when [human beings] see [our] fundamental unity [he wrote] with the processes of nature and the functioning of the universe—as I so vividly saw it from the Apollo spacecraft—will the old ways

of thinking and behaving disappear. Only when humanity moves from an ego-centered self-image to a new image of universal humanity will the perennial problems that plague us be susceptible of resolution. Humanity must rise . . . from the personal to the transpersonal, from self-consciousness to cosmic consciousness.”

We Find Metanoia Here

And that is where places like this church come in. Here we are committed to seeing things differently. We are committed to move from “the personal to the transpersonal, from self-consciousness to cosmic consciousness.” Why else do you come here on Sunday morning but to worship an unseen, transpersonal presence we have named God? Why else do you reach out to give a hand to another and say I care about the other person in so many ways other than to move from the self-focus to other-focus? Why else do we seek to educate our children and ourselves to a larger faith perspective that recognizes the wisdom in all the worlds religions than in fact to expand our wisdom?

Here yes, here in First Church, we find a movement towards that fundamental shift in consciousness that is needed to move humanity from destruction to reconstruction, from despair to delight.

You know this church and churches like it are so much needed in the world today. Here science is not viewed as some invention of evil intent that conflicts with a literal interpretation of the Bible. Here science is viewed as an essential component of a full spiritual view of the world. Yet here too we are concerned that the intellectual products of our minds become blessings to humanity and not curses. Here we are guided by the wisdom of Christianity but we are not exclusivist Christians who believe the only path to salvation of the human condition is through a certain set of beliefs about Jesus. Here we find wisdom in many places, many religions, and many cultures—a wisdom large enough for the problems we face..

Here we know that we are part of the grand unfolding of life, part of Earth itself. Here we believe that salvation does not come from a hope that we will be transported some day into Heaven, but that salvation comes for the God’s calling to tend the Garden with the fullest capacities God gave humanity—his earth creature—those capacities of the human intellect to name and figure things out along with the wisdom to have a transformative vision. Here we being to act to transform what needs to change so a better world can begin to unfold.

CONCLUSION

Oh yes we need a new transformative vision; yes and even a new kind of patriotism. A vision and patriotism that recognizes that we are one with the Earth who birthed us and all the abundant life on this jewel of a planet.

Revel in this miracle, my dear friends. Know the beauty and abundance about you. Know, in your hearts, we are the earth, that we were put here as the earth creature to tend the garden and to marvel at the beauty about us everywhere, including the beauty in our neighbors eyes and the beauty in each and every person’s so precious heart—in a world without end. Amen.