

SLOW VIOLENCE: *Ecological Sustainability*

Robert Keim, Chaplain, Unitarian Universalist Church In The Pines
July 7, 2016

Naturalist Diane Ackerman writes of the Yup'ik people of Newtok, Alaska. "Any day now the whole village and neighboring indigenous communities could begin sinking into the melting permafrost, as if it were white quicksand."¹ Their options? Well, U.S. and international laws define refugees as "fleeing violence, war or persecution;" federal disaster relief only grants money to repair infrastructure and damage in place, not to relieve personal suffering.² And the state? Well, in 1958 the Alaskan government mandated that to build a school (then a new state requirement); the Yup'ik had to choose a site at "the farthest point upriver that a Bureau of Indian Affairs barge could navigate."³

So, now the Yup'ik must find somewhere to move with only vague state assistance in building a new community. Otherwise, as Ackerman writes, they'll "join the realm of polar bears and narwhals in rich seams of Eskimo lore,"⁴ absorbed into towns and cities, economically disenfranchised, facing traumatic cultural and environmental adjustment.

And the last three winters have brought unseasonable warmth to Alaska, ice forming later and melting earlier. Fishing and hunting will be very lean again this year.

To me, Ackerman's words stirred up imagery from Dr. Rob Nixon's *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*:

"Slow violence – a violence that occurs gradually and out of sight, a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space, an attritional violence typically not viewed as violence at all. It shapes our inattention to calamities that are slow and long lasting, calamities that patiently dispense their devastation while remaining outside our flickering attention spans – and outside the purview of a spectacle-driven corporate media."⁵

You see, to me Climate Change is Slow Violence.

We are part of Earth, and Earth is part of us⁶, and this world is brightly lit, but we really do not see the looming future: communities shaped in "the human age," lurching down one of two paths, the first continuing to hurtle through divisive intersections, the other those caught in the middle – people, plants and animals "...who have done the least to contribute to our climate crisis, facing the most threatening consequences."⁷

So, tonight lie still and listen carefully; *slow violence* walks the night air. Waking to this and meeting it head on is Ecological Justice.

Yes it is complicated and challenging – Antarctic ice sheets melting, Siberian methane potholes forming, atmospheric CO² topping 403⁸ and more. What are we crashing towards?

To begin to truly understand the challenge, let's unpack *slow violence*.

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First, climate change outsources violence on vast scales – temporal and geographical. Shredding our planet’s life-sustaining envelope, it’s mitigated only through deep commitments – ethical, physical, political, and spiritual – to safeguarding life on Earth remote from us in both space *and* time. We’re called to actively value *all* life forms thirty, fifty, one hundred, even one thousand years from now.

Second, what does it mean to re-imagine humanity as a force powerful enough to transform Earth’s very strata? Asking this question reframes our understanding of human responsibility not only towards our own species, but the whole planet. Climate change is *a critical* indicator of our alarming, often reckless morphological power.

Third, this incubus has been haunting us for over two generations as most so-called leaders run the other way. Yes, to confront the sources of climate change is tantamount to profoundly confronting the foundations of modern economic models. But every day *slow violence* escalates a host of environmental crises already underway – species extinctions, environmentally endangered communities, collapsing fisheries, soil desertification, dying coral reefs, depleted groundwater, dead zones in the ocean, and on and on. *How might we find ways to reshape these facts, to begin reimagining and restoring this fragile planet?*

Fourth, it is customary to speak about problems with the environment and economic inequality as if they were abstract policy issues separate from one another. But sociologists and scientists widely accept that the negative environmental impacts will more likely fall on poorer neighborhoods and countries rather than wealthy ones. And current social modeling tools predict effects much more serious than previous estimates. So how is this conversation moved from “me” to “we?” When will we learn that we can remain truly free and still empower social solutions? *The truth lies in how we relate to one another and Earth – threads woven through our very grounding.*

Fifth, social stresses will sharpen as food prices rise and production falters – added challenges given existing widespread hunger on a hemorrhaging Earth – much of it due to either wars or systems of distribution. And current climate models are not encouraging.

Sixth, from what we’ve seen in global markets, some will revolt against the same things they have revolted against in the past: injustices in the system. And there are those who probably should – while others must work to make sure it is recognized that violence is not where true power lies. In 2015, Roman Catholic Pope Francis told a group of landless Latin American peasants: “Climate change, the loss of biodiversity and deforestation are already showing their devastating effects in the great cataclysm you are suffering.”⁹ Affected by periodic droughts punctuated by intense rainfall, more resilient pests and plant diseases – events tied to a **one** degree average temperature rise in regional coffee growing zones, trees bearing 15-17% less production (with potential losses of 45-60% by 2080) have put many of these people out of work and led to some of the parentless children crossing our border with Mexico¹⁰. Responses to such events often focus on more authoritarianism and threats against the poor, but those are only attempts to keep a lid on what’s already boiling over. The more

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humane answer would be to find ways to begin to turn down the heat. In the words of *Tampa Bay Times* editorialist Bill Maxwell: "To start, we must care about one another."¹¹

And lastly, *slow violence* is fundamentally a moral issue; the willingness to wreck the world for profit. This is evil beyond imagination. In response, as a Unitarian Universalist, I am called to a ferocious love for Earth, knowing that the alternative could be our children and grandchildren living in a world without wild music. Loving one another is committing to a sacred trust to protect and support one another faithfully and willfully throughout the future. I pray that this love be extended to all Earth every day of our lives.

In his book *Reclaiming Prophetic Witness*, theologian Paul Razor writes, "...religious liberals have been influential advocates for social reform at least since...the early nineteenth century."¹² Given the world we're facing, we must acknowledge Razor's language that we are called to be influential advocates, to step into the public square.

Grounding this idea, Jeffrey Lockwood of the University of Wyoming, in his article, *Less More, Please*, wrote: "Solutions to the world's environmental problems may not require more of us, but less. We may be required to ask deeper questions rather than to seek wider answers...but maybe there is more of one thing that could solve many problems – humility."¹³

Once we acknowledge our contrition, what might we do?

Well, we can begin by recognizing that what is required is a change of consciousness. As environmentalist Terry Tempest Williams writes, "I do not believe we can look for leadership beyond ourselves. I do not believe we can wait for someone or something to save us from our global predicaments and obligations...We are in need of a reflective activism born out of humility, not arrogance...with deep time spent in the consideration of others...becoming compassionate participants in the world."¹⁴

We must begin grounding ourselves in spiritual work, partnering with organizations outside our congregational walls. In each case, participants are encouraged to work towards envisioning a world "in which reverence, gratitude, and care for the living Earth are central to the lives of all people."¹⁵ Engaging in this work, we are motivated to speak truth to power for the entirety of the "interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part."¹⁶

Remembering that matters of the environment and social justice are bound together at the core of our being liberal religious, we do this work best when we shift our perspectives from a sense of despair, if that is where we may be, to a spirit of active hope. Remembering, as activist Barbara Ford writes, that "Active hope is a permaculture process," let us begin thinking globally and acting locally, making and keeping significant commitments in areas of reduced consumption, environmental justice and community resilience. We can begin doing this work by taking on broad, systemic changes such as

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moving away from extractive and polluting energy sources to ones cleaner and more renewable, improved housing and economic resources for the poor and environmental protection for the rest of the interdependent web.

As my personal guidance, I keep close in my mind our *2006 Statement of Conscience on The Threat of Global Warming/Climate Change*, which called us to "...join with others to halt practices that fuel global warming/climate change, to instigate sustainable alternatives, and to mitigate the impending effects of global warming with just and ethical responses."¹⁷ May this calling guide my work with public, legislative representatives at the local, county, state and federal levels, and interfaith partners across the spectrum. And may each of us work to further sustainable life for all beings for generations to come and engage power through such actions as direct support for causes, principled condemnation of unacceptable alternatives, and participation in activist legislative organizations as they address critical issues.

We must work to support and help guide positive planning for our energy environment, moving away from destructive resources such as mountaintop coal extraction, tar sands oil, natural gas and nuclear energy, engaging significant strengthening of solar, wind, water and geothermal resources, which have the power to deliver needed energy without the egregious pollution damage left by more conventional tools. As with well-managed and supported organic farming where we have the ability to feed more people than many are willing to admit, use of natural energy resources could provide far more support than most people are inclined to accept.

At the same time, we can further practical changes in our communities by working to influence policy and planning for the future, particularly efforts to protect and strengthen laws safeguarding air, water and soil. In this work, our most responsible action is building alliances and coalitions with diverse stakeholders to help create conditions of possibility that appropriately fit situational requirements. Mindful of these challenges, we can discover in ourselves, in faith, racial and in ethnic communities, the strength and courage to resist and begin dismantling structural elements, practices and vested interests perpetuating damages to our world. Bit by bit, relationship by relationship, we can work to put in place the building blocks of a new future, and start transforming our communities into more just and sustainable environments.

When all our challenges seem to call us to more effort than we feel we have time for or can imagine, I remember words spoken to me by Charlie Clements who, as a Quaker, served as Director of the Unitarian Universalist Service Committee, our social justice organization. Asked what sustained him in a world filled with human rights nightmares, Charlie offered a paraphrasing from the Talmud: "Do not be daunted by the enormity of the world's grief. Love mercy now. Walk humbly now. Do justly now. You are not obligated to complete the work, but neither are you free to abandon it."¹⁸

We can survive what Diane Ackerman would call "understanding our rude evolutionary infancy,"¹⁹ growing into responsible, caring adults without losing innocence, playfulness, or a sense of wonder. But first we must recognize that we are a very young species, blessed and cursed by our prowess. Truly empowering this understanding requires we see with the widest vision, recognizing that every

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human step forward is rooted in the ground beneath our feet – that we and Earth are one, that this is our home, and that to continue to destroy this world digs our very own grave. Rather than filling our days with *slow violence*, plundering and stomping about Earth, in the words of Terry Tempest Williams, “May we act on behalf of the restoration of justice for all species, not just our own. And may our collective acts of disobedience be civil, spirited and beautiful.”²⁰

Sustaining our future requires that we recognize that we are called to begin to re-establish our natural place, working together to restore and hand forward a living, breathing planet – a fuller, more diverse, more complete home amongst the stars. This is our Earthly work; as Unitarian Universalists, this is holy work.

It **is** who we are called to be.

Amen and blessed be.

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Footnotes

1. Diane Ackerman, *The Human Age*, W.W. Norton & Company, 2014, p. 48
2. Ibid, p. 48
3. Bureau of Indian Affairs, *Alaskan Educational Affairs Program*, 1958, p. 53
4. Ackerman, p. 48
5. Rob Nixon, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*, Harvard University Press, 2011, p. 2
6. www.ecopagan.com
7. Nixon, p. 7
8. www.co2now.org
9. *The Guardian*, December 27, 2014
10. http://www.ucsusa.org/global_warming/science_and_impacts/impacts/impacts-of-climate-on-coffee.html#.VUESACFVhBc
11. *Tampa Bay Times*, April 16, 2013
12. Paul Rasor, *Reclaiming Prophetic Witness*, Skinner House, 2012, p. xvii
13. Jeffrey Lockwood, "Less More, Please", www.uuworld.org, February 9, 2015
14. Terry Tempest Williams, "Climate Change: What is Required of Us?," from *Moral Ground*, Kathleen Dean Moore & Michael P. Nelson, eds., p. 432
15. http://uuministryforearth.org/about_uumfe
16. <http://www.uua.org/beliefs/what-we-believe/principles/7th>
17. <http://www.uua.org/statements/threat-global-warmingclimate-change>
18. Micah 6:8 (paraphrased)
19. Ackerman, p. 308
20. Terry Tempest Williams, *ibid*, p. 433.