

Sermon: “Earth Day: Cherishing Gaia”
Rev. Martha Hodges April 25, 2010

I don't need to tell you the kind of trouble we're in. I don't need to tell you how our species has violated the earth, wrecking changes in the delicate balance of its ecology that cannot be undone; or how urgent the need is to organize across international boundaries to stop ourselves from doing more damage before it's too late.

What I can talk to you about today is the imperative to not give in to despair. What I can do is encourage all of us to do what we can, for there is much we can do. But when confronted with the enormity and complexity of the situation, it's hard not to throw up our hands. It's hard not to give up. What I find in my own life, however, is that refusing to give up is a kind of spiritual practice. Every day, despite frustration and discouragement, despite feeling helplessness; despite wanting to look the other way, we can summon hope. Hope demands courage, because it requires us to hold ourselves accountable, and requires us to take action. It calls us to reject the temptation of passivity, the comfort of cynicism, the lure of saying, 'It's too late. What can I do? It's out of my hands.'

A lot of it is out of our hands. But today we're focusing on actions that we can take in the area of ethical eating. Food... that most intimate connection with the earth as mother, nurturer and giver of life. Eating... that celebration of the senses; the pleasure of a full belly, the rituals we build around its preparation and enjoyment. Food that reminds us that we depend on the earth and on each other to live... Food, with its seemingly magical properties to strengthen us and give us health and life itself. No wonder the enjoyment of food is important to religions around the world. It links us quite literally to the source of life. We partake of the earth itself when we eat.

And yet food is an issue loaded with guilt and anxiety for many of us. What to eat, and how much are questions all too familiar in our western world, with our eating disorders, junk food and obesity issues. We know, and try not to think about the vast numbers of people around the world that are hungry. We know about and try to avoid the additives, the preservatives and pesticides that pollute our food. We know about the costs to our environment caused by industrial farming; global climate change, polluted ground water and deforestation, the elimination of biodiversity and increased incidence of illness and birth defects. We know about the cruel conditions in which the animals we consume live and die, and about the unhealthy and dangerous working conditions of many of the people who produce our food.

Eating – this most natural, delightful and spiritually meaningful activity – has become for us a subject of pain, worry and guilt. It's time we did something to restore it to its proper place in our lives as the source of community, the source of pleasure, health and life.

Each year at the general assembly of our Unitarian Universalist congregations, we vote on what is called a congregational study action issue – an issue on which to educate ourselves and reflect, and take concrete actions over a period of four years. In 2008, our

GA voted to choose ethical eating as a study action issue. This congregation is a little late coming to the party, but not too late. Adopting the UUA study action issues is one approach to channeling this congregation's desire to work together for social and environmental justice. Last year, we established carbon circles, groups that studied the issue of global warming and worked together to reduce our individual carbon footprints. When I found that ethical eating was recommended as the focus of our UU earth day celebrations, I jumped at the opportunity to follow up on those efforts.

To support the current Congregational Study/Action Issue on "[Ethical Eating: Food and Environmental Justice](#)," the UU Ministry for Earth, the UUA Washington Office for Advocacy, and the Ethical Eating Core Team have launched the [40/40/40 Campaign](#) to help congregations take steps toward a more just and sustainable relationship to the environment. This campaign observes the fortieth anniversary of earth day by challenging congregations such as this one to rally forty percent of their members to commit to forty days of more mindful and environmentally friendly food choices. Doable actions like giving up fast food for forty days, or shopping at farmers' markets, educating ourselves on the issues, volunteering at a food pantry, or eating more meals as a family.

Now, I have to confess that I am the last one to serve as a role model for eating ethically. As you may know by now, my favorite deadly sins are sloth and gluttony. Put those together and you find yourself at McDonald's a lot more often than you should be. At the same time, as someone who loves food and is actually a pretty decent cook, I fantasize about going the home-made and organic route and have actually been vegetarian for periods of my life, with varying success. But I – even I – am fired up about this 40/40/40 proposition. I'm committing to giving up fast food for forty days – a big change in my lifestyle and one that's long overdue. I'm going to start trying to buy locally produced foods and eat more grains and vegetables and less meat. I'm also committing to saying a silent grace before meals. I'll do these things for forty days, at least until June 3, and then let you know how it's gone. How fortuitous that eating that is good for us is also good for the planet! If I can do it, you can too!

I have some ideas about what we can do as a congregation, as well. We already contribute to Loaves and Fishes and the South Sacramento Interfaith Partnership food pantry. Why, I wonder, are we not serving Fair Trade coffee at our social hours? Fair Trade products ensure that producers are paid a fair price, workers are treated fairly, and the environment is not harmed. Many UU congregations and other faith communities buy their coffee and tea from fair trade cooperatives. I've looked into how to make this change and it seems completely doable. Hearing no objection, I will place an order and we'll see how it goes.

I'd also like to offer our building as a drop off point for a CSA, a Community Supported Agriculture endeavor. Over the last 20 years, CSAs have become a popular way for consumers to buy local, seasonal food directly from a farmer. A farmer offers a certain number of "shares" to the public. Typically the share consists of a box of vegetables, but other farm products may be included. Interested consumers purchase a

share or subscription and in return receive a box of seasonal produce each week throughout the growing season.

This arrangement is advantageous for both the farmer and the consumer. Local farmers have committed customers and customers get to buy extra-fresh, locally grown food, reducing the environmental costs of transporting food long distances – fruits and vegetables that are necessarily selected for their shelf-life rather than their flavor.

I propose that UUCC members pool their resources to buy shares in one of the many CSAs in the area, making produce available for pick up here at the church. We need one or more people to organize this effort. Maybe that person is you. Let me know during coffee hour!

We don't have land to make a community garden here at UUCC, but some of us may have land and no time or ability to garden, while others of us may have gardening skills and love to garden, but have no place to do it. We should put these people together. If you fit into either of these categories, speak to me about it.

These are religious matters. As UUs, we covenant to affirm and promote the interdependent web of life. We understand that, as humans, we are not at the center of this web, with the right to exploit it at our will. We understand that what we do has consequences that are felt throughout this web of existence -- that we are linked to other people and to the non-human world in a network of mutual dependency. We believe that these connections sustain life and give it value – that they are sacred. We believe that human beings, animals and plants have inherent value and deserve to be treated with care and respect. We believe in the wisdom of the earth and turn to it again and again for solace and delight. It is our calling to care for it as the source of life -- not only our own lives, but the lives of all beings. We accept that we hold the power to heal or to harm the sacred web of existence, and that our choices matter. May we embrace our power and use it lovingly and wisely.

Inside your order of service you will find a list of actions you may want to consider taking for the next forty days. I invite you to take a few minutes to look it over and see if any of them call to you. Maybe one or two are changes you've been thinking about making for awhile. Think of this as an opportunity to experiment in changing the way you relate to food, an experiment taken in the good company of others who share your desire to act lovingly toward the Earth and living things.

I invite you to check off one or more things you're excited about trying. This can be entirely private if you choose. No one is going to check up on you. On the other hand, if you'd like to put your name on the form and hand it to an usher or leave it by the door, I can put you in touch with others who are trying to change in the same ways you are so that you can reach out to each other for mutual encouragement. Our goal today is to have 40 of us, or forty percent of our members – that's about 36 of us – or forty percent of those here today – that's about 24 of us – participating in this effort. That includes

children. If you have children, I encourage you to talk with them about what they may want to do to participate.

At the end of forty days, let's get together and share a potluck meal consisting of earth-friendly foods, local and/or organic or vegetarian foods. We'll watch a video together and talk about where we would like to go from here as a congregation. My hope is that a group will emerge from this effort who will lead us over the next several months in continuing the education and actions suggested by the sponsors of this Congregational Study Action Issue.

The ushers will now pass among you to collect any forms you care to share. Whether or not you choose to share your resolutions, if you're going to try this forty-day experiment, please take one of the stickers the ushers are passing out and put it on your nametag as a reminder to yourself and all of us that this is a commitment worth making. A commitment worthy of our mother earth.

Please join me in this statement of affirmation printed in your order of service.

*We join with the earth and with each other,
To bring new life to the land, to recreate the human community,
to provide justice and peace, to remember our children,
to remember who we are...
We join together as many and diverse expressions of one loving mystery, for the healing
of the Earth and the renewal of all Life.*

(Pat Cane)