

“Hot Enough for You?” Rev. Martha Hodges
Feb. 27 2011

This morning’s service marks our fourth annual observance of Evolution Weekend, a call for all faiths to challenge the presumption that science and religion are necessarily and essentially in conflict. To look at the list of participants is a bracing reminder that we religious liberals do not have a corner on this question. The contributors to this yearly project come from Jewish, Muslim and mainstream Christian faiths. We Unitarian Universalists may have once upon a time been lone voices of moderation in the conversation between science and religion. But no more. We all know that there are holdouts on the question of evolution. That many conservative Christians resist the scientific story of how we came to be.

But these days, more and more faiths are joining together around environmental issues, whatever their views on evolution. Many look to scripture to find the rationale for caring for the earth and living in a sustainable manner. According to the Bible, humankind was ordained by God to be good stewards of the earth in return for our god-given right to make use of its resources. To fail in this duty is to fail in the trust that God has placed in us as his special creatures. This view assumes a separation between humankind and the rest of Creation. Because we are endowed with special gifts, we must accept special responsibility.

Our UU theology tells us something a bit different. We are part of an interdependent web of life. We are not located at the center of this web. Therefore, we have no right, no authority, to exploit it. Our seventh principle, the principle that comes closest to a statement of religious belief, teaches us an attitude of humility.

What’s more, many of us understand Nature itself to be sacred. To be not merely evidence of God, but God itself. The wonders of the world move us to an experience of awe and gratitude. They comfort us; they reassure us that we are not the end-all of life on the planet, that our failings and successes are transitory. And by its majesty, its intricacy and mystery, its vastness and lack of dependence on us, the non-human natural world reminds us that we are not in charge. Nature, and natural law, will have its day. This we see in the growing degradation of the earth, its waters and air. We can abuse our privileges as tenants of the earth only so far; then we are called to account.

And so today we turn our reluctant gaze on the damage we have done and continue to do. Climate change... There is no greater danger facing us. It’s no mere hypothetical. Yes, we may blow each other to smithereens. But the damage we have done to the earth is real and present. And some of it is already beyond repair. Now, not everyone is able to see this, despite the consensus of scientists and the evidence all around us. I have some sympathy with this urge to deny the obvious. Fear... grief... guilt and remorse... anger... these are hard emotions. Emotions that it’s impossible to sustain for prolonged periods. We are made such that we need to turn from the truth. We glimpse it in excruciating moments of clarity, some of us more often than others.

And these moments of clarity bring with them another kind of pain: the realization that we need to change. To give up some privileges. To reconsider our arrogance. To surrender some comforts.

And they demand that we do something. Something big. Like working with other nations. Like challenging powerful lobbies. Like reconsidering some basic assumptions about what we are about as a country, and what our priorities should be.

Yes, we're willing to recycle, to drive smaller vehicles or take public transit, to install those funny-looking light bulbs and turn down the thermostat. We can do those things, and we must. But grassroots efforts alone, as important as they are, will not get the job done. The situation calls for systemic change. Change in our economic system, in how we make things, and how we make use of other countries and their resources.

The president has called for increased funding for developing alternative energy sources and technologies. At the same time, the ranking senator on the Environment and Public Works Committee states that global warming is a hoax.ⁱ The Center for American Progress reports a shockingly widespread belief among our representatives that the threat of global warming is exaggerated.ⁱⁱ The head of the House Energy and Commerce Committee has said outright that he does not believe that global warming is man-made.ⁱⁱⁱ The Congressman from Illinois, who also sits on the committee — as well as on the Subcommittee on Energy and Environment — has said that the government doesn't need to make a priority of regulating greenhouse-gas emissions, because as he put it late last year, "God said the earth would not be destroyed by a flood."^{iv}

Just last week, the House held hearings challenging the authority of the Environmental Protection Agency in support of a bill to decrease funding for that agency. The Energy and Power Subcommittee of the House Energy and Commerce Committee met to review the economic impact of pending limits on carbon dioxide and other heat-trapping gases. But, as reported by the New York Times, much of the discussion focused instead on whether climate science supports the agency's finding that greenhouse gases are a threat to health and the environment. Lisa Jackson, the EPA administrator being questioned during the hearing, recalled that the Supreme Court had ordered the EPA to determine whether carbon dioxide emissions endangered human health and welfare. She reminded the subcommittee that both the Bush administration and the Obama administration had concluded that they do. Now two members of the committee are seeking to overturn that court decision. This is the chilling statement that Ms. Jackson made in her testimony. "Chairman Upton's bill would, in its own words, repeal the scientific finding regarding greenhouse gas emissions. Politicians overruling scientists on a scientific question — that would become part of this committee's legacy."^v

I want to read that again, because it gets to the heart of something bigger than this one bill. Our representatives are seeking to "repeal the scientific finding regarding greenhouse gas emissions. Politicians overruling scientists on a scientific question — that would become part of this committee's legacy."

Our nation seems to have persuaded itself that facts can be repealed if they prove inconvenient. This is kooky talk. Politicians or religious leaders or school boards feel free to overrule scientists on scientific questions. Science is about facts, not opinions. This is a crucial distinction that our country seems to find it hard to grasp. Religion, yes... That's about opinions. But some people seem to have gotten the equation backwards. If it says it in the Bible, it must be fact. If it says it in the laboratory, it's opinion. What kind of Alice through the Looking Glass logic is this?

It's part of a reaction in this country against what is regarded as elitist and intellectual. It's a cynical appeal to people's sense of overwhelm when confronted with the complexities being daily uncovered by science. It's appealing to our lowest common denominator of ignorance and mistrust, the ugly side of American populism. And it's fed when we keep so many

of our children in ignorance, marking time in inadequate schools until they reach the age of dropping out.

What can we do? We can write our Congresspeople and demand that they fund research into alternative energy and jobs that support that. We can demand that they fund the EPA and other agencies that were established to curb our worst tendencies, our desire for gain at the cost of our future. We can object when our ignorance and fears are played upon by politicians. We can insist that our children – all our children – are literate in science and know the difference between a fact and an opinion.

We can keep our eyes open and refuse to look away from the reality of climate change. We can refuse to give up or give in to despair or denial. We can do our little bit: slow down on the freeway, plant a tree, put on a sweater.

We can defend against cynicism and passivity by working in community with others who remind us why we care. We can claim our own power by using our vote wisely. And when fear and grief threaten to silence us, to numb us into hopelessness, we can recall the beauty of the sacred web. We can refresh our souls, remembering to be grateful, to praise and to worship. To love the sacred that lies within us and all around us. The sacred mystery that binds science and faith, that interweaves fact and emotion, that love that encompasses and embraces this precious earth, known and unknown.

“Sun my sail and moon my rudder as I ply the starry sea,

Leaning over the edge in wonder, casting questions into the deep.

Drifting here with my ship’s companions, all we kindred pilgrim souls,

Making our way by the lights of the heavens, in our beautiful blue boat home.”^{vi}

ⁱ <http://www.globalclimatescam.com/2010/02/senate-environment-and-public-works-committee-releases-report-on-cru-climategate-controversy/>

ⁱⁱ <http://www.americanprogress.org/issues/2010/12/ta121610.html>

ⁱⁱⁱ http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2011/02/08/fred-upton-climate-change_n_820511.html

^{iv} <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-1328366/John-Shimkus-Global-warming-wont-destroy-planet-God-promised-Noah.html>

^v <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/02/10/science/earth/10emissions.html>

^{vi} Mayer, Peter. “Blue Boat Home” in *Singing the Journey*. Boston: UUA, 2005