

“Brown Grace: Stirring Up New Possibilities for Climate Justice”

Sermon delivered by Rev. Joan Javier-Duval

Unitarian Church of Montpelier

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Reading

“[Remember](#)” by Joy Harjo¹

Sermon

This weekend marks the beginning of the Interfaith Power & Light “Faith Climate Action Week,” which is actually nine days focused on how we can take action to protect our climate. The theme this year is “Charged with faith: leading the way to a clean energy future.”² And, in our broader Unitarian Universalist community, we celebrate Climate Justice Month, which extends from World Water Day to Earth Day.

I know for some of you, the issue of climate change isn’t one that needs a designated week or month of focus. It’s the issue that keeps you up at night, that worries you most, and that motivates you to protest and advocate for change. And, I know that for others, myself included at times, thinking about and attempting to do something about climate change and global warming is overwhelming, and most of the time, it’s easier to live in a state of denial or at least not to pay too close attention because of the potential to feel overwhelmed by the magnitude of the problem.

I think for all of us it’s important to find the way that we feel most connected to this issue as we reflect on how we can protect the earth, our home, as our mission statement affirms.

¹ <https://www.poets.org/poetsorg/poem/remember-0?mbd=1>

² <http://www.faithclimateactionweek.org/>

One of the things that brings it home for me is a piece of my family history that I didn't know about until very recently.

My father grew up in the southernmost province on the island of Luzon in the Philippines. The province is called Batangas and borders the sea. At one time, this was a mostly rural, agricultural area, and my father's family owned land near the water. There was also a U.S. military base in this area, and in the 1950s, after the Philippines gained independence from the United States, this base was sold to the Shell petroleum company which opened up a major oil refinery to produce liquified petroleum gas. The refinery would end up taking up much more land than even the base covered. My great-grandfather was one person who sold some of his land - what was once rice fields - to Shell as part of this development. The refinery created a lot of jobs and many saw it as a boost for the local economy, at least at first. My grandfather, my father's father, got a job as a security officer at the refinery and other family members worked there as well. As time went on, the local community began to feel the health impacts of living so close to such a massive, industrial complex. The land became contaminated and people in the community began to suffer ill effects from the compromised air quality. Despite these environmental and health impacts, the refinery has remained in operation.

Now, when I first learned this family history, I was pretty surprised. It had never occurred to me how closely the global story of the growth of the fossil fuel industry and the devastating impacts of global warming could be intertwined with my personal story.

It's a part of my history that causes me to reflect on both the economic drivers behind our climate crisis and the full breadth of impacts of a growth-based economy on our environment and our health and well-being.

I think that probably each of us wouldn't have to dig too deeply to find these kinds of connections.

Our stories and our economic interests as a global, human community have been deeply tied to the fossil fuel industry and to a version of capitalism that is unsustainable for far too long.

And, we have come to learn over time just how destructive it has been to build our economic structures on our use of fossil fuels.

Oil that took hundreds of thousands of years to form has been, over just a couple of hundred years, extracted and burned at a perilous rate. Over many years, the emissions from coal-fired engines and power plants and from our gasoline and diesel-powered vehicles have dumped carbon into the atmosphere changing its make up and leading to temperature rises and destabilized weather patterns.

We now know that increases in global temperatures and the reverberating impacts of that rising, have been caused by us, humans, and our use of energy sources that end up releasing more carbon and greenhouse gases into the atmosphere than is sustainable.

Most of us by now know of the major signs of climate change - warmer global temperatures, melting ice caps, rising sea levels, and more extreme weather events. Much of this we have witnessed from afar.

The impacts of climate change in Vermont may be more subtle than in other places, but we are feeling them, too. You may have caught a recent episode on VPR's Outdoor Radio program.³ They were tracking moose up near Maidstone Lake in the Northeast Kingdom. Populations in both New Hampshire and Vermont have recently been on the decline. The main threat has been from winter ticks which are more abundant now in our shorter, milder winters. A moose can have anywhere from 10,000 to 100,000 ticks on their body leading to illness and death.

We have been feeling other impacts, too. In general, Vermont has seen total annual rainfall increase over the last fifty years. Storms, including those like Irene back in 2011, have increased in intensity. Our winters are getting warmer and shorter, and summer days are getting hotter.⁴ So much so that, by the end of this century, Vermont is projected to end up with a climate similar to Tennessee or Alabama's.

These signs point to our need even here to adapt to the rapidly changing environment due to climate change.

While we may have thought that the climate crisis was something we were trying to prevent, the reality is that it's already here.

³ <http://digital.vpr.net/post/outdoor-radio-tracking-moose-population-region>

⁴ <http://climatechange.vermont.gov/>

I believe that now more than ever we need to reclaim a relationship with the earth that can move us into hopeful action. Action that is not based solely on what we're afraid of losing but also on what we love.

Dr. Aruna Gnanadason is an ecofeminist theologian from India. As an ecofeminist, Gnanadason sees a connection between the liberation of creation, women, and the poor. This is a basic approach to her work and thinking. She coined the term "brown grace" to describe redemption through our connection to the earth and the learning we can do from, what she calls, "traditions of prudent care" as illustrated by indigenous peoples. In her own country, these practices included protecting forest land where the ancestors are thought to live, preserving sacred groves and particular sacred trees, and limiting the number of a given plant species that might be harvested from the natural environment.⁵ These traditions of prudent care are based on a very different understanding of human relationship to the earth and to the divine than many mainstream notions. God, or the Divine, is seen not as separate but as working with us to transform the earth with grace. At the same time, we are deeply connected to the earth itself. The earth, human beings, and the divine are all interwoven. It is this deeply interwoven love that is the source of grace.

Feeling this love requires that we remember. As Joy Harjo instructs us in her poem, remember that we are earth.

I think if we can learn to act from this place of brown, earthly grace we can end our destructive relationship to the planet and find spiritual healing and restore our wholeness.

The theme of "Faith Climate Action Week" this year invites us to consider reflect on how we relate to the planet in particular through our use of energy. What would it mean to shift from a dependence on fossil fuels to an embrace of clean, renewable energy? What might emerge in this transformation?

When we ask ourselves where our energy comes from to power our vehicles, our homes, our schools, this is not just a practical question. It is also an ethical question which makes it a sacred question.

⁵ Kapya J. Kaoma, ed. Creation Care in Christian Mission. p. 219. (Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2015)

When we are more mindful of our energy use and using renewable energy sources, we also renew our relationship with the earth and the greater natural world. We remember the sun and the wind, the water, the plants, and the trees.

We invite into our lives the grace that comes from a deeper connection to the earth and the active choice to live more sustainably.

This shift and transformation is emerging in local communities in the United States and around the world as everyday people have been taking a lead in embracing the emergence of a clean energy future.

In fact, when the president announced last year that he would pull the United States out of the Paris Climate Agreement, it was local communities that said “We’re still in.” States, municipalities, and towns affirmed their commitment to this international agreement.

Even before that local communities, like Montpelier, had begun to make their own commitments to reducing their use of fossil fuels and transitioning towards both a reduction in energy usage and emissions and the use of renewable energy to meet our needs.

A number of years back the Montpelier Energy Advisory Committee, including UCM members Barb Conrey and Dan Jones, worked with the City to set a goal of having Montpelier become the first state capital to produce or offset all of its energy needs from renewable sources by 2030. Since then, Montpelier has become a national leader, tackling project after project to reduce energy use and move from fossil fuels to renewable energy.

One example is Montpelier’s wastewater treatment plant which has cut oil use in half since 2010.⁶ And, in 2014, the district heat system came fully online, heating 20 buildings with over 411,000 square feet of space in downtown Montpelier with locally sourced wood chips, instead of fossil fuel.

And, there are examples from all around the country and globe. One that I recently heard of is in Houston, Texas, where an organization called Plant It Forward Farms assists refugees in starting their own urban farm businesses. Each farmer is trained in

⁶ https://www.tpomag.com/editorial/2016/05/howd_they_do_it_montpelier_team_slashes_plant_energy_use

organic farming methods and to sell their produce locally. These businesses provide jobs for relocated refugees and also reduce carbon emissions through a locally-based food system.

These examples show that, although addressing our current climate crisis is a huge endeavor, there are practical steps we can take right in our local community that make a difference.

And, bringing it really local, right here, with our beloved church building, we have an opportunity to live our values from the inside out examining our role as a congregation in contributing to the climate crisis and choosing another path forward.

This past year a Net Zero Study Group formed which has worked with our Property Committee to develop a comprehensive plan that would make the Unitarian Church of Montpelier what we believe would be Vermont's first 100% renewably heated and powered church. The Net Zero proposal calls for replacing our oil boilers and furnaces with a wood heat system, which would burn locally sourced wood pellets. This would cut our carbon emissions in half and bring our fossil fuel use for heating down to zero. The proposal also calls for generating 100% of our electricity from the sun, by putting solar panels on our roof that would generate 20 kilowatts of clean electricity.

There will be more shared about this proposal in the coming days and weeks. I find it truly exciting and inspiring that there are bold and practical measures that we can take to fulfill that part of our 2020 Vision Statement that says, "As the climate crisis continues, we are recognized in Central Vermont as a source of moral and ethical guidance." And, if we are to take seriously our mission to protect the earth our home, I believe we must do everything possible to play an active role in transitioning away from fossil fuels and to embrace our use of energy resources that are renewable and sustainable for our planet.

As Earth Day approaches, I hope that you will remember. That you will remember that we are earth. That you will remember the plants, trees, animal life who all have their tribes, families and histories. And that you will remember that you are all people and all people are you.

May we love all of life and act as protectors and stewards of this precious earth and one another with that love in our hearts.