

“If Not Now, When?”

Sermon by Rev. Joan Javier-Duval

Unitarian Church of Montpelier

September 15, 2019

Readings

1. selection from “Hieroglyphic Stairway” by Drew Dellinger

it’s 3:23 in the morning
and I’m awake
because my great great grandchildren
won’t let me sleep
my great great grandchildren
ask me in dreams
what did you do while the planet was plundered?
what did you do when the earth was unraveling?

surely you did something
when the seasons started failing?

as the mammals, reptiles, birds were all dying?

...

what did you do
once
you
knew?

2. selections from Joanna Macy

“This is a dark time, filled with suffering and uncertainty. Like living cells in a larger body, it is natural that we feel the trauma of our world. So don’t be afraid of the anguish you feel, or the anger or fear, because these responses arise from the depth of your caring and the truth of your interconnectedness with all beings.

We are capable of suffering with our world, and that is the true meaning of compassion...

Don't ever apologize for crying for the trees burning in the Amazon or over the waters polluted from mines in the Rockies. Don't apologize for the sorrow, grief, and rage you feel. It is a measure of your humanity and your maturity. It is a measure of your open heart, and as your heart breaks open there will be room for the world to heal. That is what is happening as we see people honestly confronting the sorrows of our time.

The biggest gift you can give is to be absolutely present, and when you're worrying about whether you're hopeful, or hopeless, or pessimistic, or optimistic, who cares? The main thing is that you're showing up, that you're here and that you're finding ever more capacity to love this world because it will not be healed without that. That is what is going to unleash our intelligence and our ingenuity and our solidarity for the healing of our world.”

Sermon

“The hope that my children can live healthy lives.”

“The coastline of Manhattan.”

“The sound of bees buzzing in the morning.”

“Next year's harvest.”

“Miami, my city.”

What do you love and hope to never lose to Climate Chaos?

These statements are responses to this question from people all over our country - from Milwaukee to Ohio to New York City and Miami. Individuals offered these responses as participants in the Climate Ribbon Project. The Climate Ribbon Project was started in 2014 at the People's Climate March in New York City as a way to ritualize and express both the grief that people feel for the losses caused by climate change and also the commitment to action motivated by the deep well of love at the heart of this grief.

There are a million ways I know I could answer this question.

What do I love and hope to never lose to climate chaos?

Monarch butterflies.

The cool weather and changing leaves that mark fall in New England.

Members of my own family who are especially vulnerable to heat stroke or live in wild fire areas and near coastlines.

Fresh, clean water whenever I want it.

What do YOU love and hope to never lose to climate chaos?

As Joanna Macy articulates so well, it is our capacity to love this world that will ultimately lead us to take action to heal the world.

Right now, there are many people in this community and all around the world who are connecting with this love to take action towards addressing the climate crisis.

One of these people of recent celebrity is Greta Thunberg, a 16 year-old climate activist from Sweden. In August of 2018, she decided that she needed to do something completely out of the box to draw more attention to the climate crisis and put pressure on her elected leaders to do something. So, she started to go on strike. She skipped school that day and positioned herself outside the Swedish Parliament. She handed out fliers with information about climate change to people passing by. Every Friday since then she has skipped school and put her energy into building awareness of our planetary crisis.

In the last several days, Greta has been here in the U.S. participating in public actions in the lead up to the United Nations Climate Change Summit where she will speak on September 23.

Just a couple weeks ago, Greta Thunberg arrived in the port of New York City aboard the Malizia II, a 60-foot carbon emission-free yacht equipped with solar panels and underwater turbines that produce electricity onboard. Greta was determined not to get on a fossil-fuel burning jet plane to journey to New York City. So instead, she boarded her boat along with her crew in Plymouth, England and sailed for two weeks across the Atlantic Ocean.

Greta has been one of the more recent voices sounding the alarm about the crisis we are facing. In her short time on the public stage, Greta has delivered a TedTalk, spoken before the UN Climate Change Convention, the World Economic Forum, the European Economic and Social Committee, and the European Parliament.

In all of her talks, she states so clearly the reality that too many of us have denied or buried or avoided despite the brightly flashing emergency signals that have been going off with more

frequency and more intensity...the continual record-breaking temperatures, the wild fires ravaging forests and communities, the melting glaciers, the hurricanes of growing power and torrential rainfall displacing hundreds of thousands of our human siblings.

Speaking to World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland in January of this year, Greta gave this power talk:¹

“Our house is on fire, I am here to say our house is on fire. According to the [Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change] we are less than 12 years away from not being able to undo our mistakes.

In that time, unprecedented changes in all aspects of society [need] to have taken place including a reduction of our CO2 emissions by at least 50%...

At places like Davos, people like to tell success stories, but their financial success has come with an unthinkable price tag. And on climate change, we have to acknowledge that we have failed. All political movements in their present form have done so. And the media has failed to create broad public awareness. But Homo sapiens have not yet failed.

Yes we are failing but there is still time to turn everything around. We can still fix this. We still have everything in our own hands. But unless we recognize the overall failures of our current systems, we most probably don't stand a chance.

We are facing a disaster of unspoken [suffering] for enormous amounts of people and now is not the time for speaking politely...Now is the time to speak clearly. Solving the climate crisis is the greatest and most complex challenge that Homo sapiens have ever faced.

The main solution however is so simple that even a small child can understand it. We have to stop the emissions of greenhouse gases. And either we do that or we don't. You say nothing in life is black or white, but that is a lie, a very dangerous lie. Either we prevent a 1.5 degree warming or we don't. Either we avoid setting off that irreversible chain reaction beyond the human control, or we don't. Either we choose to go on as a civilization or we don't. That is as black or white as it gets.

¹ https://www.fridaysforfuture.org/greta-speeches#greta_speech_jan25_2019

There are no gray areas when it comes to survival. Now we all have a choice. We can create transformational action that will safeguard the future living conditions for humankind, or we can continue with our business as usual and fail. That is up to you and me.

We are at a time in history where everyone with any insight of the climate crisis that threatens our civilization – and the entire biosphere – must speak out in clear language, no matter how uncomfortable and unprofitable that may be.

We must change almost everything in our current societies. The bigger your carbon footprint, the bigger your moral duty. The bigger your platform, the bigger your responsibility.

Adults keep saying: ‘We owe it to the young people to give them hope.’ But I don’t want your hope. I don’t want you to be hopeful. I want you to panic. I want you to feel the fear I feel every day. And then I want you to act.

I want you to act as you would in a crisis. I want you to act as if our house is on fire. Because it is.”

Were you paying attention before? Because surely Greta’s words will make you sit right up in your seat.

Greta’s message is so powerful because of her unwavering dedication to the truth of the situation we are facing. She does not mince words.

Greta Thunberg now joins a community of activists and climate scientists who have been sounding the alarm for decades calling us to get our heads out of the sand and change course.

The most recent United Nations Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change report that she refers to make it clear that we are at a crucial inflection point in our trajectory.

The report makes projections that are emotionally and spiritually challenging to put it mildly.

It states that we have already reached a global temperature rise of 1 degree Celsius over pre-Industrial levels. With current emissions levels staying where they are, we are on track for increases of 3 to 4 degrees celsius. The IPCC report stresses that a 1.5 degree rise would still mean immense changes but could maintain a habitable planet. To get on that track, we need to

reduce our global carbon emissions by 45% by the year 2030 and get our net emissions down to zero by the year 2050.²

A forecast like that is something that I can hardly wrap my mind around, but it does make a few things clear...

One...at this point, there is no avoiding climate change. Climate change is here. We are living it every day. Our burning of fossil fuels and greenhouse gas emissions have already led to global warming and significant impacts upon our planet's climate systems. These imbalances and weather crises have a disproportionate effect on the world's most vulnerable populations and those who have done the least to contribute to the problem.

We are already observing these trends locally here in Vermont and across New England as was described so thoroughly by weather forecaster Roger Hill in his presentation this past May right here in this sanctuary.

Frankly, it is hard to keep up with the pace of change due to climate disruption. While we sleep and make breakfast and get the kids to school and take our writing classes and visit sick friends, the earth's natural systems are moving farther and farther out of balance.

And yet, 11 years brings the challenge into crystal clear focus. There is nothing like a deadline to sharpen the mind!

Take a deep breath with me, and I want you to notice how you are responding internally in this moment. How does this reality land with you? What are you feeling?

Do you feel a pit of despair deep in your gut?

Is there some itch you feel in your legs wanting to literally run away?

Do you feel numb because you know all this and have been banging your head against a wall for years trying to get others to wake up to the truth?

Is your heart racing because your "fight or flight" brain is telling you - time to fight and take action now?

However, you are responding in this moment, know that it is okay. Give yourself permission to be where you are and how you are, right now.

² <https://www.coolearth.org/2018/10/ipcc-report-2/>

Because, the truth is, we all need to be in this together, and we each need to start from where we are.

We all need to be feeling the fierce urgency of this moment.

11 years to avoid catastrophic planetary changes.

The reality is that we all have to shift into a mode of adaptation unlike anything we have experienced - collectively as a human species or individually in our own lifetimes.

Many of the changes needed are on a large scale requiring major policy changes and shifts in our economic systems - at the global, national, and local levels.

But, this is not just a scientific or political or economic problem. This is a cultural challenge and a spiritual challenge.

The challenge is to be part of this collective awakening. To find it within ourselves to be part of this transformation, to wade into the murky waters of uncertainty, grief, and discomfort. To get out of our individualistic modes of living and to find one another again — to join hands with those around us in moving forward courageously together.

Maybe it's because young people don't have years of inaction and denial to lament that they are better able to take action now. I don't know, but I am grateful to them for their leadership because it is our children and youth locally and around the world who are showing us what it looks like to face this difficult reality and continue forward.

They have been on the front lines of stopping business as usual to tell all of us - "Hey, our house is on fire. What are you doing about it?"

Youth and students all over the world are calling on us to participate in the Global Climate Strike. This coming Friday, September 20, hundreds of thousands of people will stop "business as usual" and, instead of showing up at school or at work, will show up in public ways to call on all of us - and especially our elected officials - to awaken to this emergency and to commit ourselves to doing things differently.

This strike, for me, isn't just another protest. It is an invitation to shift out of my norm and my comfort zone and to cross a threshold into a new way of living and being. A new way that accepts the frightening reality and grounds down into the love and resolve to create the kind of world I actually want to live in and that I want future generations to live in. Crossing this threshold asks me to be okay with disruption and commotion and unchartered and untested ways of doing things. It asks me to move ahead with courageous uncertainty finding strength along the way from fellow travelers on this path and finding leadership in unexpected places.

I hope that you will also see this moment and this movement as an invitation.

Right here in Montpelier, youth will lead a march from Montpelier High school starting at 9AM. I plan to show up and I invite you to join me. You can meet me here at church at 8:30AM. Later that day, beginning at noon, the UCM Climate Action Team will host an afternoon long event in solidarity with the strike especially focused on following the lead of our children and youth in the community.

This upcoming day and week of action is just one step in this unprecedented journey we are taking with one another. And, on that journey we must continue to remind ourselves of the heart of the matter - why it is for each of us that we, that you, will choose to live differently to meet our collective challenge.

I invite you now to find a ribbon at the end of your pew and to reflect on this question, "What do you love and hope to never lose to climate chaos?"

If you know how you would respond, you can write that on one end of your ribbon. On the other end, you can write your name and where you live. You may need some time to think about this question and deeply reflect on it. That's okay.

We have a station set up in the Vestry where you can finish writing your ribbon and add it to our ribbon tree. The ribbons will journey to the Climate Strike march on Friday.

And now, you can have a few moments to reflect or write down your response to this question, "What do you love and hope to never lose to climate chaos?"

Let us respond, "We are with you."