

Now Is the Cool of the Day

the Rev. Edmund Robinson

Unitarian Universalist Meeting House -- April 26, 2009

There are many ways to celebrate Earth Day: We can pick a clean-up project. We can demonstrate for or against a particular social policy which impacts the environment. We can educate ourselves on the scientific intricacies of fertilizer runoff. We can scare ourselves with projections of what rising sea waters will do to our beloved Cape Cod.

The problems are so immense; it is easy to succumb to fear, panic or hopelessness. But we are not the Sierra club or the Audubon society. We are a church and what I want to do in these few minutes this morning is to offer some thoughts about our religious connection to the earth. What religious ideas govern the way we think about the earth and our duties to it? Just in our service today we are using several metaphors. In our first hymn we sang that earth is given as a garden. In our second hymn, we sang that earth is our homeland. In the hymn we will sing in a few minutes, the earth is our blue boat home.

As Obi Wan-Kenobe said, metaphors be with you. The earth itself, of course, exists beyond all our metaphors, but it is mainly through such metaphors that our minds can grasp it. And more importantly, it is through these metaphors and images, created by our culture, philosophies and religions, that we all are motivated to act or not. If we need a basic change in the way we live, religion is going to be a part of it. Thus it is not just our religion that is at issue, it is also the religion of our neighbors.

Let me base these reflections on Jean Ritchie's song that the choir sang a few moments ago, which uses the garden metaphor: "My Lord said unto me, do you like my garden so fair, you can live in my garden if you keep the grasses green and I'll return in the cool of the day." The chorus goes,

"Now is the cool of the day. Now is the cool of the day. Oh the earth is a garden,
the garden of our lord and God walks in this garden in the cool of the day."

This is not just having a garden; this is being entrusted with the garden by the creator and then being held accountable for tending the garden when God walks there in the cool of the day. The message I read in this is that now we are being held to account for our stewardship of the earth.

Where did this stewardship come from? I want to consider Jean Ritchie's song against the backdrop of the source of her metaphors, the two creation stories in the book of Genesis, and I want to take a moment to unpack them because whatever our attitude towards them today, they form part of the deep structures of our culture. In the first story, God creates the world in six days and rests on the seventh. In the second, God creates man and woman and sets them down in the garden.

The stewardship idea really comes from the first creation story. In the first five days, God creates the light and darkness, day and night, separates the sky from the sea, separates the earth from the sea, lets plants grow on the earth, populates the sky with birds and the sea with fish, and at each point, sees that it is good. On the sixth and busiest day, God makes all the land creatures, both domestic and wild, and saw that it was good. The last thing God created was humans, and gave them dominion over everything else:

"27 So God created humankind in his image,
in the image of God he created them;
male and female he created them.

28 God blessed them, and God said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth." 29 God said, "See, I have given you every plant yielding seed that is upon the face of all the

earth, and every tree with seed in its fruit; you shall have them for food. 30 And to every beast of the earth, and to every bird of the air, and to everything that creeps on the earth, everything that has the breath of life, I have given every green plant for food." And it was so. 31 God saw everything that he had made, and indeed, it was very good. And there was evening and there was morning, the sixth day. [Genesis 1].

Though clearly God gives humanity dominion over the earth in this first creation story, there is no mention of a garden. Notice, also, three other things about this first creation story (1) the number of humans in the first creation is not specified, (2) it clearly includes male and female at the same time and (3) all of the creation is very good.

In the Garden of Eden story in Genesis 2, by contrast, God creates the single man out of the dust not only before woman, but before any animals or plants. Then he causes rain to fall and plants the garden.

"7 then the LORD God formed man from the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and the man became a living being. 8 And the LORD God planted a garden in Eden, in the east; and there he put the man whom he had formed. 9 Out of the ground the LORD God made to grow every tree that is pleasant to the sight and good for food, the tree of life also in the midst of the garden, and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil." [Genesis 2]

So God sets the man in the Garden and tells him that he can eat of all the fruits of the garden except for the fruit from one tree. Then God doesn't want the man to be alone, so he creates all the animals to be helpers for the man. But the man still was in want of a partner, so God caused a deep sleep to fall upon him and took a rib from him and fashioned it into a woman. And both man and woman were naked and were not ashamed.

Then the serpent convinces the woman to eat of the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, and the man eats too. Once they have eaten of the fruit, they realize that they are naked and they are ashamed. They sewed fig leaves together and made loincloths for themselves. It is at this point that God walks in the garden in the cool of the day. He discovers that the man and woman are trying to hide from him and that is because they are ashamed for being naked. Thus it is from the man's shame that God discovers that they have transgressed his command about eating the fruit, and God passes sentence on the snake, the man and the woman. Part of the sentence is expulsion from the garden.

The second account does not have God saying that the creation is good. Goodness may reside in the garden, but humans have been expelled from it by the end of the story and are condemned to hard labor in agriculture, pain in childbirth for the women, and death.

Now why do I go into this in such detail? Because these two stories contain so much of the mythology in which we are all embedded, whether or not we accord them any literal truth, and this mythology underlies our thinking. From Genesis 1 we get the idea of dominion - we are a special creation and the purpose of our creation is to have dominion over everything else on earth. That idea of dominion has led some Christians to a belief that they can do anything they want with the earth. It leads some to a rejection of the theory of evolution. It leads to the idea of humans as apart from the natural world.

Genesis 2 also affirms the idea of humans as a special creation, but we also get by way of St. Paul and John Calvin, original sin, the idea that humankind is inherently depraved. The guilt of the whole race for Adam eating that apple is only atoned, in St. Paul's theory, by the sacrificial death of Christ on the cross, and even then only for those who believe.¹ In Calvin's

¹Romans 5

formulation, even Christ's atonement is not enough for most of us; our original sin predestines us to misery in this life and eternal torment in the next.

It was against this Calvinist gloom that our theological ancestors rebelled, the Unitarians insisting that humanity was neither inherently good nor inherently bad, and the Universalists insisting that God was too loving to condemn any to hell.

I have noted before that orthodox Christianity measures down while Universalism measures up. Orthodoxy says look how far we have fallen from the Garden of Eden, while Universalism has always said look how far we have risen from the days when our ancestors lived in trees.

What I'm trying to say is that I want to embrace an ethic of environmental stewardship and responsibility, but not with overtones of Calvinist original sin. These overtones are all too present in our general thinking on the environment. They are even present in Jean Ritchie's song.

Granted, at the psychological level, guilt is always there; I can feel guilty about anything, and particularly anything environmental. I buy these prepared foods in plastic containers at the grocery store, then go down to the town solid waste facility and discover that they are no longer taking them for recycling because the market has collapsed. Pangs of guilt well up as I throw that plastic container in the trash. I see my parishioners and neighbors driving spiffy hybrid cars, and I know that I'm only getting 26 miles per gallon and pangs build up on my carbon footprint. If you think hard enough about the interconnectedness of everything, you can feel guilty each time you flush the toilet.

But guilt is spiritually destructive and counterproductive. I remember a sermon I heard in college from William Sloane Coffin, who is still my model of a great minister. Coffin cited a scene from play by Arthur Miller called *Incident at Vichy* in which a Jewish psychiatrist named Leduc forces Prince von Berg to recognize his complicity with the Nazism he claimed to deplore. He makes him see how von Berg "went along" with the evil. But the moment is charged with drama for there are more Jews about to be shipped out to concentration camps, and as von Berg starts to withdraw, Leduc says, "it's not your guilt I want, it's your responsibility."²

That's a huge distinction. Guilt is destructive, responsibility is constructive. Guilt is negative, responsibility is positive. Guilt is paralyzing, responsibility can be empowering.

The idea of stewardship involves responsibility. Jesus has several parables about stewardship – the wise and foolish virgins, the master who gives his servants ten talents each. We talk here about our pledge campaign as a stewardship, for we are taking responsibility for the financial well-being of the church. A steward is someone who is entrusted with property or something else important. The steward's duty is to look after the property faithfully and to be able to give an accounting to the owner, when the owner returns. In the cool of the day.

Now is the cool of the day. The idea behind Jean Ritchie's song is that humans were given stewardship of the earth and we are now being held to account for it. It need not induce guilt, but it invites us to responsibility.

That responsibility need not be grounded on a myth of a separate creation, of the specialness of the human or of divinely granted dominion. Rather, the responsibility flows from the two facts that (1) much of the degradation of the environment is from human activity and (2) of all the species on the planet, only humans have the technological ability to do

²I am grateful that Coffin cited the same dramatic dialogue in a later sermon at Riverside Church February 24, 1980, which enables me to cite it. The Collected Sermons of William Sloane Coffin: The Riverside Years By William Sloane Coffin Contributor Martin E. Marty Published by Westminster John Knox Press, 2008 pp. 302-03.

something about the environment.

In tort law, the *laws of civil wrongs, the courts have done a lot of thinking about responsibility*. For example if you are walking on the dock beside the bay and there is someone in the water just below you who you know is drowning and there is a life ring right on the dock beside you, the general rule is that you have no duty to throw the life ring to the drowning person. But there is a big exception: if you have done anything to cause the person to be in the water drowning, you have a duty to throw the ring or take other means to rescue her.

Our duty to rescue the environment stems from the fact that our lifestyle is despoiling it. Our responsibility as stewards is to minimize the destructive impact of our own actions and to correct them where we can.

Now this is only a small part of the picture. There are many other religions perspectives on humanity's relations to the earth which I can't go into now. Since this is a UU church, I'm not going to tell you which one you ought to adopt. These ideas are important, but the particular religious idea which may motivate you is not as important as the fact that you get motivated. Each of us had certain areas within our power to affect. We as a church have certain things we do which we can choose to do differently. For example, Buildings and Grounds is considering replacing the boiler. They are already looking at getting a greener boiler in the sense of one that is more efficient; I asked them to consider whether a geothermal heat system might make sense here.

Jean Richie's song says we can live in the garden if we keep the grasses green. But we now know that keeping the grasses green with fertilizer exacts a cost in nitrate runoff into our ponds and the ocean. At the Religion and Science meeting Wednesday, Barbara Waters made the connection for us. Is our green lawn worth the fish it may be killing in the sea?

One way I would like to see us reducing our carbon footprint would be to reduce our use of cars. In a typical church meeting or event, there are almost as many cars outside as there are people inside. We have been batting around some ideas for a transportation system for those members and friends who no longer drive, but whether or not such a system is practical, we can car pool, if we can get organized enough to make a few phone calls to our nearby parishioners before setting out for the Meeting House.

When I went to lobby on Beacon Hill a couple of weeks ago, we were asked to lobby on global warming by supporting an increase in the gas tax to fund better public transportation. That proved a hard sell for our P'town representative Sarah Peake, because there is massive opposition to a gas tax increase in this district. Why? Because public transit is very marginal here, and the auto is central. I am keenly aware of how central autos are in our lifestyle here, but I would like to look to a future in which mass transit was available. I know from my years in Boston that when good mass transit is available, people use it and it has all kinds of social benefits.

Those are some of my ideas, but the specifics of how you discharge your responsibility is up to you. Now is the cool of the day. How will you account for your stewardship of the earth?

Amen.

Reading:

SMOKEY THE BEAR SUTRA by Gary Snyder

Once in the Jurassic about 150 million years ago, the Great Sun Buddha in this corner of the Infinite Void gave a discourse to all the assembled elements and energies: to the standing beings, the walking beings, the flying beings, and the sitting beings--even the grasses, to the number of thirteen billion, each one born from a seed, assembled there: a Discourse concerning Enlightenment on the planet Earth.

"In some future time, there will be a continent called America. It will have great centers of power called such as Pyramid Lake, Walden Pond, Mt. Rainier, Big Sur, Everglades, and so forth; and powerful nerves and channels such as Columbia River, Mississippi River, and Grand Canyon. The human race in that era will get into troubles all over its head, and practically wreck everything in spite of its own strong intelligent Buddha-nature."

"The twisting strata of the great mountains and the pulsing of volcanoes are my love burning deep in the earth. My obstinate compassion is schist and basalt and granite, to be mountains, to bring down the rain. In that future American Era I shall enter a new form; to cure the world of loveless knowledge that seeks with blind hunger: and mindless rage eating food that will not fill it."

And he showed himself in his true form of

SMOKEY THE BEAR

A handsome smokey-colored brown bear standing on his hind legs, showing that he is aroused and watchful.

Bearing in his right paw the Shovel that digs to the truth beneath appearances; cuts the roots of useless attachments, and flings damp sand on the fires of greed and war;

His left paw in the mudra of Comradely Display--indicating that all creatures have the full right to live to their limits and that of deer, rabbits, chipmunks, snakes, dandelions, and lizards all grow in the realm of the Dharma;

Wearing the blue work overalls symbolic of slaves and laborers, the countless men oppressed by a civilization that claims to save but often destroys;

Wearing the broad-brimmed hat of the west, symbolic of the forces that guard the wilderness, which is the Natural State of the Dharma and the true path of man on Earth:

all true paths lead through mountains--

With a halo of smoke and flame behind, the forest fires of the kali-yuga, fires caused by the stupidity of those who think things can be gained and lost whereas in truth all is contained vast and free in the Blue Sky and Green Earth of One Mind;

Round-bellied to show his kind nature and that the great earth has food enough for everyone who loves her and trusts her;

Trampling underfoot wasteful freeways and needless suburbs, smashing the worms of capitalism and totalitarianism;

Indicating the task: his followers, becoming free of cars, houses, canned foods, universities, and shoes, master the Three Mysteries of their own Body, Speech, and Mind; and fearlessly chop down the rotten trees and prune out the sick limbs of this country America and then burn the leftover trash.

Wrathful but calm. Austere but Comic. Smokey the Bear will illuminate those who would help him; but for those who would hinder or slander him...

HE WILL PUT THEM OUT.

Thus his great Mantra:

Namah samanta vajranam chanda maharoshana Sphataya hum traka ham mam

"I DEDICATE MYSELF TO THE UNIVERSAL DIAMOND BE THIS RAGING FURY BE DESTROYED"

And he will protect those who love the woods and rivers, Gods and animals, hobos and madmen, prisoners and sick people, musicians, playful women, and hopeful children:

And if anyone is threatened by advertising, air pollution, television, or the police, they should chant SMOKEY THE BEAR'S WAR SPELL:

DROWN THEIR BUTTS
CRUSH THEIR BUTTS
DROWN THEIR BUTTS
CRUSH THEIR BUTTS

And SMOKEY THE BEAR will surely appear to put the enemy out with his vajra-shovel.

Now those who recite this Sutra and then try to put it in practice will accumulate merit as countless as the sands of Arizona and Nevada.

Will help save the planet Earth from total oil slick.

Will enter the age of harmony of man and nature.

Will win the tender love and caresses of men, women, and beasts.

Will always have ripened blackberries to eat and a sunny spot under a pine tree to sit at.

AND IN THE END WILL WIN HIGHEST PERFECT ENLIGHTENMENT

...thus we have heard...

<http://www.sacred-texts.com/bud/bear.htm>