

"Can Eco-Spirituality Grow Eco-Justice?"

Confluence Lecture

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Annual Meeting and Conference

Presented by Rev. Meg Roberts and Rev. Brian Kiely

Opening Words: Prologue from Earth Charter

Meg:

From the Earth Charter (2000) ¹: "We stand at a critical moment in Earth's history, a time when humanity must choose its future. As the world becomes increasingly interdependent and fragile, the future at once holds great peril and great promise. To move forward we must recognize that in the midst of a magnificent diversity of culture and life forms we are one human family and one Earth Community with a common destiny. We must join together to bring forth a sustainable global society founded on respect for nature, universal human rights, economic justice, and a culture of peace. Towards this end, it is imperative that we, the peoples of Earth, declare our responsibility to one another, to the greater community of life, and to future generations."

The Problem

Brian:

Long ago in a place far, far away I studied social history at University. Instead of names and dates and perceiving history as a series of sequential events, a group of French historians had begun looking at long term trends, the kinds that cover centuries, not years. That exploration of history revealed many things, the first of which was that during the Middle Ages there was a significant warming trend...

so significant that England became a wine growing nation. This warming trend made for a European agrarian explosion that created much of the wealth that would make possible the building of the great cathedrals and the dawning of the Renaissance. Many who are concerned about global warming dismiss this event as anomalous, but it gives me pause.

I mention this only as background. A number of years ago when global warming first became a cause célèbre, I remembered that something like this had happened before. We humans have short memories. We tend to think that the way things are now is the way things always were, forgetting that the dictum 'change is inevitable' applies to the environment just as much as to any other part of life. Old growth forests weren't always old. Species come and go over time. In the past there have been changes of weather and climate that have not been caused by human agency.

So for a long time I was hesitant to jump on the global warming bandwagon. Well, today, I am at least following the bandwagon if still not riding on it. And one of the reasons was a nine minute YouTube clip *The Most Terrifying Video You'll Ever See* (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bDsIFspVzfl>) (If the link doesn't work go to www.youtube.com and type the title into the search engine...you are looking for a man in a blue t-shirt standing in front of a chart.)

The host of the clip is JohnQ5. He looks like a grad student somewhere parked in front of a whiteboard, but he is no wild-eyed radical. In fact he comes across as a very personable and reasonable young man almost hoping that someone will, "politely, please," show him another way. We can't show the clip today, but we commend it to you.

Global Climate Change	Take action	No action
False	1. Cost of billions of dollars, changing nature of economies, possible global recession	3. Happy Face: No extra expense, nothing bad happens, life goes on.
True	2. Cost of billions, change in economy but we survive in a different world. Happy face	4. Catastrophe: Economic Environmental Social collapse Health system collapses Political system collapses

JohnQ5 starts by building a four quadrant graph and presenting a simple idea. Global Climate Change is either true or false. We then have two choices about Global Climate Change, we can act or take no action. What are the ramifications of the four possible outcomes? Or as he says it, "What's the worst possible thing that could happen?"

1. Global Climate Change is False, and We Take Action: The financial cost of cleaning up our environment, switching away from heavily polluting industries and modes of transportation is enormous. Economies and individuals will suffer a lot of short and medium term financial pain. A global recession, even depression is likely before we get back on track. But our efforts will have had no significant effect on climate change. Whatever the climate is going to do or not do to us, will happen anyway.
2. Global Climate Change is True and We Take Action: The very significant and hurtful financial and social costs are the same as in option 1. BUT – big But - we are able to change the course of climate change and save life as we know it. We made the right decision and it has worked to save us.
3. Global Climate Change is False and We Take No Action: Everything stays pretty much as it is, and life goes on. Certainly this is the least disruptive

and least costly choice – maybe even the most desirable, but it does rely heavily on global climate change trends being insignificant.

4. Global Climate Change is True and We Take No Action: We face environmental catastrophe which is made worse because we have made no preparations. We don't even have the satisfaction of having fought the good fight. There is a fairly complete collapse of our economic, social, political and health structures and we are thrust into an inhospitable environment having to fend for ourselves. Much, if not most of the human race dies from starvation, disease or in resource wars.

JohnQ5 contends that our future lies roughly in one of the four boxes. Sure, he has painted extreme cases and he knows it. He urges us to expand this model ourselves and look at various scenarios. But if you accept his basic premise, the whole debate about the human factor in Global warming becomes moot and a distraction. Warming is happening. We don't really know why, or if it will continue, or how harmful it will be or if any effort on our part will change it. Still, we can't know for sure what will happen until it does. The only thing we control is the decision to act or to not act, and we must choose. He likens the decision to buying a lottery ticket. Each of us is buying one, even if we choose to ignore the whole debate.

When faced with uncertainty about our future, he believes that the only defensible choice is to take action, because taking no action has the worst possible outcome, and the only cost is money.

Well, that's his argument. I invite you to watch his video for yourself. This lecture will be up on the CUC website shortly complete with this graph. Study it for yourself and draw your own conclusion. My ticket says take action.

Meg:

So does mine, and I've been on the Global Climate Change bandwagon for at least the last 5 years. If we agree that we need to *take action*, whether we agree or not on the percentage of the climate change crisis caused by human actions, what should we as a faith-based movement be doing right now?

Brian and I believe that Unitarians have to be part of leading a shift in paradigms and a change in consciousness regarding the nature of the reality in which we exist.

To make that shift will require an intentional spiritual practice to support that transformation in consciousness and an intentional spiritual practice that informs our justice work.

Does Eco-Spirituality Grow Eco-JUSTICE? To answer that question, I will define what I mean by these terms.

Eco-spirituality

Our understanding of ecology arises from the natural sciences, from biology in particular. The roots of the concept of ecology comes from the Greek 'oikos' meaning house, and 'logos' meaning words or study of a certain area, in this case the home that shelters us---the earth. Ecology looks at the relationships between the living and non-living parts of that home, and how they interact and affect one another. I use the term 'eco-spirituality' to mean those intentional practices that awaken awareness of our connection to the eco-system. As our understanding of these connections grow so does our desire to act out of that understanding. These spiritual practices for me imply not only cultivating an awareness that we are connected, they also need to help us become more aware of how those connections show our interdependence with those other parts. Interdependence, as biologists remind us, is not something we seek. It is a description of what is. What I do affects that which surrounds me; although I may not want to be reminded of that as my jet does who knows what atmospheric harm from Calgary to Ottawa, I have to face that my actions have consequences. As one of our colleagues here in Ontario put it, I am talking about practicing '*eco*-spirituality' not '*ego*-spirituality'. The ego, the individual self, does not exist outside that eco-system. As well, the eco-system cannot exist without the forces that uphold life. Whether the coming together of the conditions necessary for life came out of the big bang and/or some divine force that is involved in the process of cosmic evolution, those forces are part of the inspiration that we can acknowledge in our spiritual practices. Those transformational forces can help effect change within ourselves and the world in which we live. As we expand our consciousness of the self as part of a larger whole (the eco-system), we can cultivate compassion for the other parts of that whole. A deeply felt compassion can inspire actions that help to sustain that whole.

Eco-justice

The other term is eco-justice. How do we approach the idea of justice so that it includes not only social or human-based equity but also includes equity for other beings that make up the eco-system? How can we humans live so there is equitable distribution of resources within that system, so that human beings do not consume the largest quantity and have our waste negatively impact the habitats of others (polluting the water, the air, the earth)? Eco-justice recognizes the rights of both non-human and human parts of the living community; we depend on one another for survival within the food chain and right now we are living as if the Newtonian mechanistic paradigm of the earth continues to put humans at the top of that chain, yet we know in practice, we are not. If we do not care for other parts of the web, we humans will face huge losses in our species, while the cockroaches will thrive. Our understanding of justice must now include the other elements of this ecological system.

What then is the relationship between the two concepts?

To consider the question posed in the lecture title, of course, we need to consider the relationship between eco-spirituality and eco-justice. A spiritual practice takes an intention, an idea, and through rational, emotional, and physical exploration of that intention, the intention becomes more deeply rooted in our understanding and

as a result, in our actions. Spiritual practice is transformational when it is undertaken with a clear intention, with regularity, and with a desire to deepen our relationship with life.² If our intention is on expanding our sense of self from 'ego' to 'eco'---from an individual human with needs to being part of an eco-system with needs---then those practices that use our minds, hearts, and bodies in making that transformation will be most effective. Those spiritual practices inform our understanding of what the eco-system needs. Those spiritual practices work to build our relationships within the eco-system. That understanding of the eco-system will then better inform what justice work will be most effective.

For those who know about liberation theology and Paolo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* work from 1970, he encouraged those who were oppressed to reflect on their actions within the larger story of their understanding of the universe (in this case within a Christian worldview). Jesus stood up for the poor and ostracized. How do their actions compare with his? Their reflections on this question then created a feedback loop leading to 'informed action.' Freire talked about the process of conscientization, that is, consciousness-raising through considering political and social conditions and finding ways to work against those elements oppressing you; as your consciousness is transformed, as you commit to an intentional praxis of action-reflection-action, you will be taking 'informed action.' In the example of the ecological crisis, it is not we humans who are oppressed, but we are trying to expand our understanding of the other elements of the earth system that are being oppressed by our human actions. How can we use our minds and hearts and hands to become more aware of their needs and find ways to become their voice to others?

Eco-spirituality and eco-justice support one another by compensating where the other area is weak. Eco-spiritual practice can become too inward focused; it does not take the understanding we arrive at and put it to good use in the world. If we just have the eco-justice work, we run the danger of becoming exhausted and dispirited when we encounter too much resistance; we burn-out and fall away. As many of you have likely experienced, the daily news about climate change can be depressing, over-whelming. We need spiritual practices that provide us with the hope to continue, and the clarity of vision to know that we are doing the right thing. Eco-spirituality sustains us and builds us when practiced on a regular basis. Eco-justice work also can help with this, because as we act, we gain strength from knowing we are making a difference, we are doing the right thing. From that we can draw solace. Justice work of any kind is life affirming. It moves us beyond our own egos and into a care for others. Eco-spirituality then, sustains us as we do the work of eco-justice. Eco-justice feeds and nurtures that eco-spiritual spark.

Personal accounts

Brian:

When Meg and I first devised this topic...okay when Meg suggested it and I agreed, I realized that I was in a bit of a fix. 'Eco-justice and eco-spirituality'. Hmm. Both

terms pose a problem for me. When it comes to questions of justice, I am not as far left as many Unitarians...including Meg. Sometimes I lack conviction, because I am beset with an ability - almost a curse - of being able to see the merit in another person's argument. For example, I was upset at the loss of 500 ducks in Syncrude's Alberta tar sands earlier this month. I certainly think there should have been and must be better safeguards and cleaner ways of doing business, but I am also aware of just how many of Alberta's 3 million people depend directly and indirectly on those projects. I can't quite jump on the protest line demanding their closure.

Similarly, I don't think of myself as the most deeply spiritual guy. Yes, I like to drink in the beauties of nature...as long as the sun isn't too hot or the wind too cold and the bugs aren't biting. I don't pray except when I am asked to say grace at someplace where they know I'm a minister, but don't really know me. I most often find a sense of inner peace and harmony not in silence or chanting, but when I am multi-tasking and banging pots and sweating in a hot kitchen feeding a passle of people. I think of that as spiritual work.

But I do pay attention to things going on around me, have a pretty good ability to grasp what is politically feasible and what isn't, and I do revise my views to reconcile with solid evidence. My recent trip to Kenya did more to open my eyes about eco-justice and eco-spirituality than any other single experience.

I was there in my role as president of the International Council of Unitarians and Universalists and got to know a number of people from Kenya, Nigeria, Uganda, Congo and Burundi. Many were farmers, none were wealthy. At the end of the conference I spent a day at rural 'estate' outside Nairobi with Kevin and Divinah and their children. That day my family and theirs entered into a micro-loan arrangement to create a sewing business.

Kevin and Divinah live in two mud brick rooms off a narrow alley with their three children. They often shelter a few AIDS orphans as well. In Africa AIDS orphans are as common as cats and dogs. Because of overwhelming need on so many levels, identity and spirituality are inseparable from the social justice work of African Unitarians. Ask a Kenyan about her church and she will tell you about their community projects, not their worship or their meeting space.

Kevin and Divinah have no running water, no toilet, no cooking area, no heat and few economic prospects. And they are far from being the poorest people we met. They have to scramble to find food and clothing and it's not getting easier. I am sure you have all seen that the prices of staples like rice and wheat have risen dramatically in developing countries, between 75 and 120 per cent. In small part this is because of our attempts to create greener bio-fuels. Ain't that ironic?

Theirs is a story repeated in many places in the world, and yet we look with horror as developing world forests are clear cut for fuel, when mangroves are cut down removing vital protection from tropical storms, or when plains and seas are hunted and fished to dangerous levels for food. When I finally met people struggling with basic needs I realized that we have no right to judge their environmental

consciousness. I, who live in a modest home that costs more than they will make in a lifetime, who have two cars at my disposal and electronic toys that probably suck more energy in a resting state than their families consume in a year, I have no right to judge.

And funnily enough, *I feel trapped by my social environment*. How do you lessen your environmental footprint when citizens are unwilling to sacrifice enough for good public transportation? How do you do that when you pretty much have to shop in big box stores that are far from home? How do you do that when children expect designer clothes, iPods and various after school activities? How do you lessen your footprint *when no one else is doing it*? We don't. That's the simple truth. Sure, we recycle and maybe install better furnaces and use energy efficient appliances when we can, but those are small things. Important things. But small things.

I believe, deep in my heart, that a reckoning is coming, a catastrophic reckoning as John Q5 suggested. We cannot sustain the lifestyle we have in the developed world. Why? It is unjust for us to have so much while the rest of the world does not. Yet economic power is shifting to China and the rest of Asia. The west is in decline. Things will change and it is unreasonable to expect that the people who have done without for so long will not follow our consumerist lead. They want more, and their need and ours will add to an already overstressed planet.

A reckoning is coming. I am unconvinced that a world can exist with everyone at our level of prosperity. We will have to give up a lot of the things that drive our economy and that will cause suffering.

Finally, a reckoning is coming because we are exhausting the environment. I am not a full convert to the global climate change prophets of doom. There have been severe climate shifts in the past. We may be aiding the next one, but I doubt we are the sole cause...but that's irrelevant. The change is coming whether we willingly make sacrifices or not. I doubt we will...at least not enough of them. We, and I definitely include my electronics-loving, car-driving, carnivorous self, will not be able to make the sacrifices willingly. We're addicted to what we've got. And we can't expect our politicians to legislate sacrifice. It would be political suicide. I believe that something very bad is going to happen, perhaps in our lifetimes, perhaps farther away. I have faith that some fraction of humanity will survive it, but it won't be pretty.

For me then, any understanding of eco-spirituality can be tinged with sadness and even despair. I can be swept up in the vision of geese returning to this land, and then get lost in wondering if they will find a safe place to hatch a new generation. I can look at my three and four year old daughters playing at the family farm and wonder if it is they or their children or grandchildren who will have to survive the collapse. Meg said that eco-spirituality leads us to hope, but that the hope can be extinguished if the eco-justice does not put intention into action. Right now, I am plagued by a lack of faith in our human will to advance the cause of eco-justice. How many millions of people will die this year because of human greed, venality

and callousness? How many will starve to death? Die in warfare? Die from industry's by-products and lack of concern?

I am not normally a pessimistic person, and I am not giving in. But this merging of eco-justice and eco-spirituality is a struggle for me.

Meg:

Like Brian, I also worry about the future. I don't know if enough privileged human beings in the developed world will make the necessary changes in our individual lives and force our governments and businesses to do likewise. But we have to try: because we know it is the right thing to do. Because we will sleep better when we know we are doing all we can. Because we will be able to face our grandchildren, our grandnieces and nephews and be able to say: I did all I could for the earth you will live on.

The 20th century political theorist, Antonio Gramsci, wrote, "I'm a pessimist because of intelligence, but an optimist because of will."³ I can understand Brian's pessimism of the intellect. So here's my optimism of the will. It is my optimism that eco-spirituality can grow eco-justice. This belief arises from my own experiences. I am a person committed to living a conscious life. This consciousness has been developed by many of the sources we refer to as Unitarians. When I was 17, I was blessed by an experience on a mountain-top outside Calgary. Under the wind-swept vast blue sky, warmed by the sun, lying on the earth, I asked the universe about the purpose of my life. I had a profound experience of the connectedness of all which exists within the universe. It was not an idea but an embodied understanding. That sense of mystical union, expressed by various religious writers, inspired me to want to learn about the reality of living on this earth. This understanding of our earthly interdependence inspired me to want to learn, to love people and care for them. When I speak of this love, I mean to have a desire for the best for that person, to offer care and compassion and whatever assistance I can; to recognize that we are each on our own path of learning about reality. This understanding of interdependence also made me vitally aware of the need for justice and peace. I knew that I wanted to aim to be part of the solution, not part of the problem.

Since I've been in Calgary, working with the multi-faith group Faith and the Common Good on ecological responsibility in faith communities, my commitment has expanded to the earth community. I have come to believe that if we do not attend to the ecological crisis now, we will not have the resources to attend to other issues of justice. If we can secure the earth system's health, it will then allow us to continue justice work in other areas. That is why eco-justice has become my focus for justice work. Of course, we also know that the earth's health is inextricably linked to issues of global poverty and peace, economic justice and human rights. Seeing the connections between these issues will help us find better long-term solutions for all these areas.

But I have found myself running up against a wall, the one Brian referred to: my personal willingness to make changes in my lifestyle. If I continue to see myself as

a separate being seeking my own happiness, I will never find the inner resources to make the necessary lifestyle changes and advocate for others to make them as well. I knew I needed to find a way to change my understanding of reality, to work to shift my consciousness. For me, that meant turning to my spiritual practices. They help me align my understanding of reality with my rational, emotional, and physical response to the world I am a part of. Through spiritual practices, such as Buddhist mindfulness meditation, I am starting to experience more often how inextricably linked I am within the web of existence. Through loving-kindness meditation, including other beings in my meditations, I begin to develop relationships with other beings, so that I care about their wellness. Through these spiritual practices, I am creating a stronger sense of relatedness with other parts of our ecological home. An example: our Calgary congregation is in a two-year partnership with the Bow Riverkeeper (the organization that tries to be the eyes and ears and voice for the well-being of that river). Last spring 60 of us took a raft-ride down the Bow and learned more about the river and the species that rely upon it, as well as those human actions that impinging on its health. This rational information and physical experience informs my relationship with that river. Every time I cross a bridge in my city now, I feel a deeper connection to that river. It is both the mental and heart connection that inspires me then to action to help reduce water consumption, and consider a fairer distribution for all those who use that river as a resource.

Another spiritual practice I began last summer is going out my front door each morning and greeting the day. I greet all my relations---living and non-living. It is a small way that I use to foster a mind-set for my day. This winter I began contemplative singing with Carolyn McDade's 'Singers of the Sacred Web.' Within that circle of singers, I foster my delight in relating to other aspects of that web of existence. Carolyn's new songs use words from the Earth Charter. They inspired me to create eco-worship experiences where people are invited to take time out of their stressed, hurried existence and enter into a different sense of time and be reminded of the interconnections we have as beings of this earth. These are intended to provide counter-cultural experiences to combat what Brian described as feeling trapped by our social environment. In yesterday's evening worship, I tried to offer that to people arriving from their travels here for our annual conference, to set the tone for our gathering. No one person can get out of that societal trap of over-consumption, addictive behaviours within frenetic schedules. We need to support one another to provide another alternative. We can spring each other from the trap, if we develop the will to do so.

As I become more educated about what is happening in the ecological crisis, I also can become a better advocate for ecological justice. The eco-spirituality practices that I am developing help me not to give up hope, help me find loving-kindness for others and for myself to sustain me in the shift that is necessary. Part of this work is addressing the despair Brian mentioned. Whether it is the singing of our laments, that help us process the sadness, or the practice of gratitude that Buddhist Joanna Macy recommends, we each can find ways to acknowledge the

grief and with one another, hold hope that we can do something to make a difference.

Eco-spirituality and eco-justice are symbiotic... they grow from one another. An individual can start at either and grow into an understanding of the other.

The path we are presently on holds great peril. We can't go on living this way. We have to change----either because we are afraid for what might be coming, or we are driven to do something better. Fear can spur us on to action for the wrong reasons, but the desire for eco-justice (through eco-spirituality) calls us to look for a more positive and constructive way of thinking and being in the world. We can transform the path we are on so that it also holds great promise.

A Solution

Brian:

Let us offer a possible solution built on this symbiosis of eco-spirituality and eco-justice. We start with the need for a shift in our paradigm for the earth. Since the scientific revolution, the west has acted out of a paradigm in which the whole earth is seen as a complex machine. Humans believed they could control that machine, using its 'products' for their own benefit. Through science, we began to understand the workings of the universe. Science could produce technology. Technology could make nature work for us. Many incredible things resulted: the sanitation revolution, advances in health care, agricultural improvements, improvements in housing standards for many. The downside of this worldview is that it depicted us as detached from the rest of the earth. We became Masters of our Domain (or our Empire, as David Korten describes it in his book, *The Great Turning: From Empire to Earth Community*.)

We humans need to recognize that we are part of the earth community, not masters of an Empire. How we choose to act must be based on this shift in our understanding. There is a bigger community than just humans. If our paradigm becomes about an earth community that is interrelated and interdependent, then we can build relationships in new, just and harmonious ways.

To shift from that Empire paradigm will require nothing less than a change in how we perceive the world, not just as a conceptual framework but in how we relate to the earth. Now, this is a mammoth task. We have to reconsider every fundamental preconception we have ever been taught about who we are and what our place is in the world.

As part of a progressive religious movement, Unitarians seek an understanding of reality through consulting various sources, including the wisdom traditions of the world religions as well as our knowledge of science. What do these sources say that would support an earth community paradigm? In various aboriginal religious traditions, interconnectedness is affirmed; we see it expressed, for example, as prayers end with the words "All my relations." Many of these cultures recognize our

relations as including not only other humans, birds, and animals, but also the rocks, trees and all the earth. This is a very different conception of relationship from that of a mechanistic world view.

In Buddhism, the image of the Jewel Web of Indra is of an infinite web. This image represents the interconnection and indeed interdependence of all parts of the web. But it is also a symbol for the *causal* relationships within that web. What happens in one part of the web affects the other parts.

From the source of science, there are various examples of interdependence. A fascinating example developed during the 1960s. James Lovelock, a British chemist specializing in the atmospheric sciences, developed the Gaia hypothesis, which proposes that living and non-living parts of the earth form a complex interacting system that can be thought of as a single organism. Named after the Greek goddess Gaia, who drew the earth forth from chaos, the hypothesis postulates that the biosphere has a regulatory effect on the Earth's environment that acts to sustain life. This hypothesis has gained many followers since that time, offering a deeper understanding from science that what we do affects other parts of this earth system. The research of the last 40 years lent enough credence to Lovelock's ideas that many feel we can't wait any longer. We must act. Lovelock now warns us that the earth system will adjust to keep that homeostasis. His most recent work adds urgency. Lovelock explains that if the level of CO₂ (carbon-dioxide) reaches 400-500 ppm (parts per million) in the atmosphere, that is a threshold that we will not be able to recover from for a very, very long time. The warming of the earth's atmosphere which results will affect Gaia so severely that human beings will be hard pressed to survive. Lovelock points out that The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change notes we are now at 380 ppm, so if we go up even 2 parts per year, we will be over that no-going-back threshold sometime between 2030 – 2070.⁴ Some of us will be around to find out if this theory is true.

In Canadian Unitarianism and Universalism, we are in a prime position to blend the findings of science and wisdom traditions. They no doubt influenced the creation of our seventh principle: "We covenant to affirm and promote respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part." Okay, we 'get' this intellectually, but is it really the paradigm out of which we live our lives? What forms of spiritual practice and justice work can lead us to embody this principle? And are these forms going to provide the kind of urgent response we seem to need right now?

In considering these questions, let's look at our Unitarian history to see if we have ever experienced any kind of paradigm shift in the past.

Well, over our 170 years the meanings of 'freedom' and 'person' have changed. We have always professed an affinity for freedom of belief and equality of persons. Yet, time and time again, our appreciation of those terms has been tested by societal changes. 19th and even a good part of 20th century Canada didn't easily include women or minorities in leadership roles. And as close as I can tell, we didn't even have Gay, bi, lesbian or transgender people in Canada until the mid-60's. (Okay, that's a joke. We had them, but we didn't admit it.)

In the 1960's something changed. For whatever reason, people began to rise up and claim their personal power. We stopped allowing others to decide for us. Consciousness-raising groups were formed as people at first started to educate themselves and one another, and then began to organize and act. There was no teacher, no expert. The answers had to be uncovered and internalized, not merely heard and accepted.

The bonds of friendship, shared oppression, solidarity and sometimes the religious background became the glue in the emerging communities, and the inspiration for action. In the American civil rights movement, gospel singing linked history with action and gave heart and solace to marchers. The peace movement was energized by slogans and both folk and rock music and the freer life-affirming expression of sexuality. A little later, the feminists drew their strength from group circles and deep sharing. Gay, and later GBLT people found their power by transforming the anger generated by abuses against them into the energy to advocate for changes in laws.

Our Unitarian and Universalist early and sustained involvement in feminism and other human rights movements were examples of paradigm shifts at work. The Unitarians of an earlier age would likely have been shocked by our actions, but then our understanding of what it means to be human was shifting. We slowly realized that this intellectual love of freedom and equality demanded a broader interpretation. 'Human' had to include every way that one could be truly human. Equal rights meant learning to accept instead of just tolerate. It meant opening our definition of human to include gender, race, sexual orientation, and later age, ability and so many others. It meant, in the end acceptance of the inherent worth and dignity of everyone. It meant mirroring that acceptance in our behaviour; it meant institutionalizing that acceptance in our laws. Now, *that's* a paradigm shift!

Our faith has been changed as a result. Just ask a veteran minister about the incredible positive impact of the increasing numbers of women in our ministry. Look at the impact on our rainbow by the now easy acceptance of GBLT persons at all levels of our leadership. It is but a small leap to argue that the 1984 inclusion of the "interdependent web of all existence" in our current Principles was a prescient part of that shift. We are again expanding the definition of 'everyone'.

Meg:

In our movement, we are coming to see that there is no meaningful physical sense of an objective or separate self. We have been coming into the conscious awareness of the interdependent web. These are no longer just nice words. We are beginning to live them into new meaning.

So the paradigm is already shifting

Brian:

So the paradigm is already shifting. If the sources provide us with the justification for this shift, how can we reframe our theology so that the shift can be supported

and even accelerated? Theology is the articulation of something already in the air. It's about naming (not codifying or structuring) so that we can continue the conversation. Just as Freire wrote about the need for a story against which we compare our actions, Bill Phipps last year at the CUC keynote address called us to be active in changing the story we reference, from one that is hierarchical and patriarchal to one that is earth-centred and inclusive. Through the women's movement and post-modernism, we shifted away from a view that one hierarchical and authoritarian truth was reality and desirable. Now we embrace a plurality of views and voices. We recognized that *power over* was not as effective in the long run as *power with*; persuasive power is the new reality. So as we consider how we speak about this shift in paradigm, the words and images we choose become even more significant in the stories we weave as a movement.

Meg:

Even though as Unitarians we will each have our own individual stories, just as Brian and I told ours today, as a movement, we can consciously create stories that affirm our common principles and inspire us to action. We must use our democratic process and persuasive power to find common language from which to act. As a religious movement, part of our paradigm is expressed in words, in theological words. The art of theologizing is the art of developing a common religious language designed not to restrict conversation but rather to enable it and keep it going on. Theology is not an endpoint, but a way station in the evolution of thought and shared understanding. Whether you are atheist, agnostic, theist, or seeker, the common ground we stand on together as a movement gives us a common paradigm out of which to act in the world.

Our Principles Re-thought

Brian:

We earlier claimed the seventh principle as a precursor to a paradigm shift. We believe one part of the solution may lie in the Principles as a whole. It is worth remembering that the creation of our Principles was motivated by those 1960's and 70's UU women who felt excluded by the sexist language of earlier documents. But instead of just fixing language, the UUA sought a grassroots revisioning of our Principles. When a draft finally came to a General Assembly floor in 1984, the seventh Principle read rather blandly: "respect for Earth and interdependence of its living systems." A minister named Paul L'Herrou gets credit with amending this to "respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part."⁵

The draft was an arm's length view of the environmental issue. L'Herrou's amendment was not only more poetic, it removed any pretence of an intellectual barrier between humans and their environment. We cannot stand outside that principle or the web. The fact that L'Herrou's amendment was unanimously adopted shows how he uncovered a collective truth. It was a turning point in the shift.

The web of all existence: We are not just talking about materiality, we are also talking about existence, about continuity and being itself. And as we move deeper into this environmental threat, our continuity is in question. We are the ones on the block. Whether L'Herrou intended this or not, he gave voice to language well suited to our crisis today.

Edward Frost in *With Purpose and Principle*⁶ observed, "This inspired language, with the first principle to affirm and promote 'the inherent worth and dignity of every person,' truly framed the principles as a whole." That was true, *then*.

Maybe, just maybe the paradigm shift will require us to change the picture in that frame. Perhaps the new reality demands we hang that frame around the seventh principle, not the first. In light of new concerns, Unitarians and Unitarian Universalists may want to rethink the preceding six Principles and reinterpret them in terms of the seventh. Rev. Linda Weaver Horton got us thinking that way by suggesting changing the first principle to affirming the, 'inherent worth and dignity of all *beings*' instead of just *persons*.

In fact the more Meg and I pondered this, the more we thought, "Why not try it and see where it leads?" We did this as an exercise, and we'd like to share it with you.

Brian: This reorganized statement of Principles would begin:

We affirm and promote:

§ respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part.

§ The inherent worth and dignity of every *being*

Meg: First Nations people say we will use and absorb all other kinds of beings, plants, animal bacteria, in order to live. That will continue. But the question today is how much must and can we use for our survival? Perhaps we must articulate limits to the amount we might be allowed to use. This leads to a re-evaluation of our next principle.

Brian:

§ Justice equity and compassion in *all* relations

Meg:

When we speak of justice, equity and compassion, we have to consider what's fair to other life forms and to the ecological system as a whole.

Brian:

§ Acceptance of one another and encouragement to spiritual growth in our congregations

Meg:

'Acceptance of one another' would include non-humans and 'encouragement to spiritual growth in our congregations' would mean not just accepting human diversity but promoting better grasp of the needs of and for bio-diversity. Spiritual growth would include educating ourselves in the science and the re-storying of our earth history and its present state, placing humans not as pinnacle but as part. This would include in all stages of our lifespan learning (in programming for children, youth and adults).

Brian:

§ A free and responsible search for truth and meaning

Meg:

Most people read the *free* as the most important word. Perhaps in this new paradigm, *responsible* is becoming the more important. Freedom means we have choices. Responsibility means we have an obligation to seek wiser and less harmful choices. The search for truth will be incomplete without a more thorough understanding of the living system, Gaia. The meaning we seek will not come from above, but from below, from the ground below as we redefine our purpose in terms of our connection to the earth and relation to all things and beings on it.

Brian:

§ The right of conscience and the use of the democratic process in our congregations and in society at large

Meg:

The children's version interprets this principle that everyone should have a vote about the things that concern him or her. How do we give the earth a vote or a voice in those things? How do we prick our conscience without using guilt, but with a call to a higher and expanded sense of self? Our congregations are also given a responsibility as institutions to share this consciousness. And that then calls us to call others to account as we tend to our own homes and our religious houses.

Brian:

§ The goal of world community with peace, liberty and justice for all

Meg:

Perhaps we now have to expand beyond the human family in our understanding of the word *all*. How do we give standing possibly in law to the non-human living systems?

That's the theology. Those could be our commonly held principles.

As Unitarians, our principles express our worldview, our understanding of the paradigm in which we exist. As we said at the beginning: we believe that

Unitarians have to be part of leading a shift in paradigms and a change in consciousness regarding the nature of the reality in which we exist. This shift in the paradigms and change in consciousness will arise out of our theological understanding of the universe (arising from both scientific findings and wisdom traditions). This theological understanding must be supported through both our spiritual practices and our justice work, if the changes are to become rooted in our lives. We can learn from the paradigm shifts we have made in the past. As we are doing these practices and this work, we can partner with allies to advocate for change in our country and in our global community. We believe that ecologically rooted spiritual practices can change how we relate to other parts of the web. This change can shift how we react toward those other parts. In thought and indeed we are not separate but part of a greater whole.

We have provided one stream of the confluence: the theology that underlies the paradigm in which we live and breathe and have our being. What kind of eco-spiritual practices will arise to help us make this shift? What eco-justice initiatives will Unitarians undertake for us to act out of the web of our existence?

Expanding the Circle of Knowledge: Our Colleagues' Ideas

Brian:

As we were planning this lecture, we turned to some of our colleagues at winter retreats and asked them to wrestle with questions of definition and resolution. Their words had a significant impact on what we have said so far, but they also voiced some good ideas for how we as members of religious communities can take action.

“Individuals have to both sacrifice and spend. There are things they have to do without and some things they have to pay for. We have to get to the head space to do that, and that’s where eco-spirituality comes into play.”

Meg:

“And if this examination leads to a new consciousness, finding positive ways to share our new choices in the congregation in positive and non-threatening ways could be avenue of change. Getting congregation members to share their successes in a service or newsletter column could be helpful.”

Within our congregations, colleagues had several approaches to addressing how to support this paradigm shift through programs and worship:

Several mentioned the Green Sanctuary process of the Unitarian Universalist Association. This is a program where congregation go through a rigorous self-audit and then undertake projects and education events throughout the church. Its goal is to provide opportunities for reflection and action as individuals, as a congregation, building bridges with others from the larger community, to reduce our ecological footprints as we advocate for such reductions in businesses and

governments. The congregations of Sarnia/Port Huron, Hamilton, and Montreal have become Green Sanctuary congregations, and The Unitarian Church of Calgary has just received its accreditation, while the Unitarian Church of Edmonton has just voted to start the many projects required to gain that title.

Brian:

Two colleagues suggested that the environmental crisis can be helped by challenging class issues:

“The way the economy uses resources and deals with waste is usually a burden on the lower classes.”

Meg:

“Sharing vehicles or taking public transit is kind of a taboo for people of the middle class. The car is sign of having made it. Going lower down on the food chain requires breaking down social barriers. That’s a different issue. To address this we need to speak to class issues.”

Brian:

As part of the solution, colleagues suggested ways to become more mindful of our place in the web through the structure of worship:

One suggested paying greater attention to the cycle of the year: “Make Earth Day a part of the annual liturgy. Keep an eye on the stars and incorporate seasonal songs and chants into regular worship.”

Meg:

“We could gather resources on what we have done about various nature festivals, Earth Day, the Jewish Festival of the Trees, children’s presentations and pantomimes. It would be very helpful to put together a resource package.”

Brian:

“I try to integrate body, mind and spirit into worship. The best way is to be in nature or to bring in nature focused art, poetry etc. into worship and meetings so that we aren’t apart from nature.”

Meg:

These are congregational ideas. What about the Canadian Unitarian Council’s role in this? There is of course the theme of this annual meeting: “The Web of Life in Our Hands / La Toile de la Vie Entre Nos Mains.” At this CUC ACM, of the 22 workshop offerings about social and environmental justice, 10 are about eco-justice. At this CUC Annual Meeting, the Environment monitoring group is bringing for our consideration a proposal to update the CUC’s 1999 Environmental Policy, and to adopt in principle as a framework for guidance the Unitarian Universalist Association’s “Threat of Global Warming/Climate Change Statement of Conscience”

from 2006.⁷ Both of these denominational resolutions provide very useful suggestions, and we recommend them to you for reading and action. The monitoring group will be surveying our Canadian congregations and sending out information so that we may become involved in the study over the next two years that will lead to a renewed resolution. The CUC has in the past worked with the congregations they represent as well as created partnerships with others in civil society to advocate for change----more than ever we will need the CUC to bring needed leadership to this issue now. We hope that as part of their work, they will include the parts of the solution we have proposed. As Rev. Dr. Phillip Hewett is quoted in the 1999 Statement of the CUC's Environmental Policy, "What we need is what at their best the religions of the world have always provided in the past – the spiritual underpinnings for effective action." Whatever we do, if we can make the necessary shift in human consciousness, then the actions we propose will be most effective for the common destiny of our one Earth Community.

Conclusion

Brian:

The streams of thought you have witnessed today are our initial offerings, ways of the future. No one of us has all the good ideas. No one person can create the solution or make the changes alone we have to do it together. That is the way of the future. That's what we tried to embody here today. We look forward to the streams of your ideas and practices confluenting with ours.

Endnotes

¹ Quoted in David C. Korten's *The Great Turning: From Empire to Earth Community*, Bloomfield, CT: Kumarian Press and San Francisco, CA: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, 2006, p.2.

² Scott Alexander, editor of *Everyday Spiritual Practice: Simple Pathways for Enriching Your Life*, Boston: Skinner House Books, 1999.

³ From *Letter from Prison, Dec. 19, 1929*, quote found at http://en.wikiquote.org/wiki/Antonio_Gramsci.

⁴ James Lovelock, *Warnings about Gaia* (DVD), Schumacher College, Great Britain.

⁵ Frost, Edward A. (editor) "With Purpose and Principle" (UUA, 1998) p. 21.

⁶ Ibid. p. 106.

⁷ Both of these documents can be found through links at:
http://www.cuc.ca/social_responsibility/environment/index.htm.