



# UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST

CONGREGATION OF FREDERICK  
Spirituality · Community · Justice

## “Dispatches from the Front Lines of Climate Justice”

The Rev. Dr. J. Carl Gregg

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A few years ago, a park ranger was leading an environmental awareness tour for a group that I was a part of that included a visit to the county landfill. The part of her talk I remember most vividly was that, “We are deceiving ourselves whenever we think we are throwing something *away* in the trash. **There is no ‘away.’**” As our UU Seventh Principle says, we are all part of the “interdependent web of all existence.” We can try to throw something away from us into the trash can, but there are impacts on the environment from landfills and all the other ways we dispose of our waste. We are always already part of the interconnected ecosystems of this planet.

A related dynamic has caused Maryland to have the “nation's highest rate of death from air pollution.” In this case, it's less us polluting our own skies (although that's part of it) and more pollution drifting over from neighboring states. There is no “away”; we're all in this together. As Dr. King said, “**We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly.**”

Here in the early twenty-first century, the greatest threat that affects us all directly is global climate change. Setting aside all the arguments that frustratingly confuse weather and climate, Kerry Emanuel, a climate scientist at MIT, has a standard retort to cynics who say that we shouldn't overreact without 100 percent certainty: “**Uncertainty doesn't translate into ‘no worries, mate.’**” A more accurate understanding of the uncertainty surrounding climate science is that along with the possibility that the impact of climate change will be slightly less, and more

delayed than anticipated, is the *equal probability* that, “the impacts will be *more severe*, and arrive *much faster*, than predicted” (Stephenson xii).

The evidence for climate change is all around us. As Wen Stephenson has detailed in his new book from Beacon Press, What We're Fighting for Now Is Each Other: Dispatches from the Front Lines of Climate Justice:

**This is really happening. The Arctic and the glaciers are melting. The oceans are rising and acidifying. The corals are bleaching, the great forests dying and burning. The storms and floods, the droughts and heat waves are intensifying. The farms and savannas are parched and drying.** Nations are disappearing. People are dying. Mass extinction is unfolding.... And the fossil-fuel industry—which holds the fate of humanity in its carbon reserves—is doubling down, economically and politically, on this destruction. (ix)

We know what needs to be done, but in most cases lack the political will. In a sense, the way forward is as simple as lesson one from the first week of “Economics 101”: the power of incentives and disincentives. We need to tax carbon emissions, creating *disincentives* for anyone seeking to add more CO<sub>2</sub> to the atmosphere, and we need to subsidize clean energy efforts, creating *incentives* for the shift to a sustainable, green economy (45).

We must reject the lie that the only “bottom line” is profit. This myth of profit alone as the bottom line denies the externalities of how financial profit impacts people and planet. We must demand a true, transparent accounting of a **Triple Bottom Line that balances “people, planet, and profit.”** Profit motive is real, and should remain a part of the calculus, but we are long past the point of being able to afford to ignore the impact of people and planet (91).

The most frequently cited threshold is that we must avoid increasing global warming by more than 2 °C, but **without drastic changes, we are cultivating “a global temperature rise of four or five or even six degrees Celsius (11.8 °F) within this century.”** As my wife and I consider whether we will have children, those possibilities are terrifying. Our UU 6th Principle seeks “The goal of world community with peace, liberty, and justice for all,” but experts predict that, “even a rise of four degrees Celsius (7.2 °F) would bring consequences ‘incompatible with an organized global community’” due to megadroughts, water scarcity, extreme weather events,

and more (x-xi).

Allow me to lay two sets of statistics on the table. First, already, four years ago in summer 2012, the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration showed that **“approximately 80 percent of Arctic sea ice, measured by volume, was gone.... Scientists estimate that we could have an ice-free Arctic summer as soon as 2020 or 2030.”** An open ocean absorbs much more heat than reflective sheets of ice, which will further exacerbate climate change (xi).

Second, here’s another estimate from four years ago:

- 568 gigatons = the amount of CO2 scientists agree we can still pump into the atmosphere and hope to remain below the two-degree threshold.
- 2,795 gigatons = the amount of CO2 contained in the world’s proven fossil-fuel reserves, which the fossil-fuel industry shows every intention of extracting and burning.

In other words, the **then-known reserves were five times larger than a sane carbon budget would allow. We have to find a way to leave 80 percent of accessible fossil fuels in the ground, forever, while making an all-out effort to shift to clean energy, in the next three to four decades** (28-29).

But that’s not the direction we’ve moving in. Instead, the top 200 publicly traded fossil-fuel companies spent \$674 billion “in 2012 alone on exploration and development of new reserves” (56).

The coming impact of Climate Change is also far more complicated than saying, “It might not be so bad for Maryland to have the weather patterns South Carolina has been accustomed to” — which would, in turn, mean that South Carolina will become incredibly hot. The concern is much more our food supply. In the words of one climate activist, **“You can’t just move Iowa to Siberia...there isn’t any topsoil in the tundra”** (57).

In our collective demand for short-term profit, we’ve lost perspective. **Earth’s biosphere took 3.8 billion years to evolve, and our species is wreaking havoc on a scale that may only be repairable in geologic time** (Wilson 211). For those of you who were here on Easter, allow me to re-read one stanza from that Sunday’s Spoken Meditation from Wendell Berry’s poem,

Manifesto: The Mad Farmer Liberation Front:

**Invest in the millennium. Plant sequoias.**

Say that your main crop is the forest  
that you did not plant,  
that you will not live to harvest.

Say that the leaves are harvested  
when they have rotted into the mold.

Call that profit. Prophecy such returns.

**Put your faith in the two inches of humus  
that will build under the trees  
every thousand years.**

That's the sort of paradigm shift we need.

There's a lot more to be said about that whole poem and the importance in general of Berry's writing, which is conservative in the best sense of that word, but for now I would like to lift up only one more line: "**Praise ignorance, for what man has not encountered he has not destroyed.**" In the mid-1990s, one of my mentors had that quote on permanent scroll as his screen-saver: "*Praise ignorance, for what man has not encountered he has not destroyed.*" Back then, that sentiment felt extreme, but I'm increasingly convinced it was prescient. Much more than now, the 1980s and the 1990s were the time when we should have been taking action to prevent climate change:

**Today, the climate crisis has long since passed the point of prevention.**

**Climate catastrophe, on some scale, is winging toward us: the missiles have left the silos, the bombs have left the bays.** Cities, indeed, entire countries, will be lost. Millions will needlessly suffer and die.... The task now...is to prevent the entire carbon arsenal, or even any sizable fraction of it, from being launched—and to salvage what we can of a livable planet. (134-5)

We must try for ourselves and for future generations.

And it is at this turning point that I am particularly grateful for the worldview encouraged by Unitarian Universalism and other progressive religious traditions. As I say each Sunday, "We

seek to draw wisdom from all the world's religions *balanced with* the insights of modern science." We are free thinkers able to fully confront the implications of Darwinism that, **"We are not a little lower than the angels, but merely a little higher than the apes" and deeply interconnected with the ecosystems of this one Earth.**

To consider what it might mean to develop a response to climate change in light of such insights, E.O. Wilson (1929 -), the two-time Pulitzer Prize winning professor emeritus at Harvard has published a new book titled Half-Earth in which he makes the case for what is needed if we are to tame the hubris of our species: **"only by committing half of the planet's surface to nature can we hope to save the immensity of life-forms that compose it"** (3). That vision sounds like Wendell Berry: "Praise ignorance, for what man has not encountered he has not destroyed." Or as our UU ancestor Henry David Thoreau said in his essay "Walking": **"In wildness is the preservation of the world."**

However, world-historical decisions such as carving out sections that would total half the world's surface (including oceans as well as land) would require the buy-in of the world's leaders. But we will be needed to join the grassroots movement to build the political will to make change. Bill McKibben's website [350.org](http://350.org) is one among many ways of getting involved with the movements for climate justice.

More locally, our own UU Legislative Ministry of Maryland helped advocate for the recent reauthorization of the **The Greenhouse Gas Emissions Reduction Act**, which otherwise would've expired this year: "The bill sets a goal of a 25% reduction of greenhouse gases below 2006 levels by 2020. It also includes an expanded goal of a 40% reduction by 2030." More is needed, but it is a start.

Even closer to home, I am grateful to UUCF member Ann Andrex for organizing our Friendly Forum discussion this morning on the topic of "Community Solar." If you are interested in learning more about this way of moving toward clean, renewable energy without needing to install solar panels on your room, all are invited to join the conversation at 10:30 a.m. in Room 113. (Also, at 1:00 p.m., our Animal Rights Ministry Team is hosting a Vegan Potluck and Film Screening of PlantPure Nature, about the effects of what we eat on our health and the planet.)

Similarly, I'm grateful for the ongoing efforts of UUCF member Karen Russell and many

others who have been part of the **Transitions workshops** she has been leading. The Transition Movement begins from the starting point that fossil fuels are a limited resources that will eventually be depleted and that climate change is coming. Therefore, we should explore the ways we can transition to a more sustainable world in as equitable and socially connected a way as possible. They write, **“Our vision is that every community in the United States has engaged its collective creativity to unleash an extraordinary and historic transition to a future beyond fossil fuels; a future that is more vibrant, abundant and resilient; one that is ultimately preferable to the present.”** All are also welcome to join the ongoing work in the workshops that Karen continues to lead.

So, as we reflect on how we feel called—both individually and collectively—to be part of the global movement for climate justice, I would like to invite us to continue that discernment as we practice an annual UU ritual known as Flower Communion. The beauty of spring is a powerful reminder of how vital our environmental justice work is for sustaining the beautiful diversity of life on this planet.

The practice of Flower Communion also reminds us of the importance and risk in working for justice. The Flower Communion ritual originates with a Unitarian congregation that was

established in Prague in 1921. Under the leadership of its minister, Norbert Capek, it grew into the largest Unitarian congregation in the world with a membership in 1932 of [more than 3,000]. In 1941, Capek was arrested by the Nazis on charges of treason; a year later he was executed at the Dachau concentration camp in Germany.

The continuation of Flower Communion in the wake of Capek’s martyrdom for standing up against fascism affirms the heart of the original ritual that

as no two flowers are alike, so too no two people are alike, yet each has a contribution to make. [And that is precisely the beauty of celebrating diversity.] Together the different flowers form a beautiful bouquet. Our common bouquet would not be the same without the unique addition of each individual flower, and thus it is with the Beloved Community of this congregation: it would be lessened

if any one of us were absent.

In a few moments, we will sing together our Flower Communion hymn #305, “*De Colores*.” As we sing, you may remain seated. But once we start singing, I invite you to begin coming forward row-by-row — starting at the front and moving toward the back. Don’t be shy. There’s a lot of you, so once the singing starts, go ahead and start coming forward.)

Each individual is invited to take a flower that is different from the one you brought. Select a flower that particularly appeals to you. And as you take your chosen flower, note its particular shape and beauty. (If you didn’t bring a flower, feel free to come forward and take a flower anyway. Some folks brought a bouquet so we would have extra.)

We’ll continue singing “*De Colores*” until everyone has come forward, including the Spanish verse, which we will sing as the equivalent of “verse 4.”

So on this Sunday before Earth Day, I invite you, as we practice Flower Communion, to continue discerning what part you individually or we collectively are called to play in ensuring the continued blooming of abundant, diverse life on this planet.