

Wendell Berry, Climate Change, and Earth Breathing

The Rev. Dr. J. Carl Gregg

21 April 2013

Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Frederick, Maryland

frederickuu.org

Reflections on the Past Week

With an awareness that there are a wide variety of ages with us here in the sanctuary, I feel like it is important name here at the beginning of our service that a lot has happened since we last gathered in this sanctuary: from Monday's events in Boston that continued through the week to Wednesday's accident in West, Texas, to Saturday's earthquake in China. In the wake of these events, I would like to invite us to consider at least two things.

First, in our increasingly connected world in which events all over the world are beamed into our radio, televisions, smart phones, Facebook, and Twitter feeds, I invite you to be aware of the affect all that connectedness on yourself and your family. While I am a huge supporter of staying informed about world events, **watching traumatic events discussed and replayed over and over for days on end is itself traumatizing.** So take care of yourself, be sensitive to what you are exposing yourself to, especially repeatedly, and **be aware of what the youngest members of your family may be seeing or overhearing.**¹

Second, I want to invite us to reflect on how and why we gather together in community here in this sanctuary, especially in the wake of traumatic events. This past week, one song that repeatedly came to mind is what Quaker singer-songwriter David Lamotte says about why people come to his live concerts instead of listening to music alone at home. I think you'll see some strong similarities to why we gather here each week in religious community. Lamotte often ends his concerts with some of the following lyrics:

So here I stand.... What was it that I came to say? There was something about some hope and some dreams and some fear. Some ideas for a better way. If I really feel like I trust you, maybe we'll talk about the pain. Maybe you'll understand me. Maybe you won't walk away. You know I ain't no television. I'm

¹ For "Trauma Response Resources for Families and Congregations," visit <http://www.uua.org/safe/response/117164.shtml>.

watching you while you're watching me. I can tell when the [words or] the music reaches you. Something changes and I can see. And deep inside I feel: we're in this thing together. And we're touching something real. But It's so easy to get distracted when I'm working day in and day out. I get lost in all the numbers. I forget what it's all about. But couldn't we cross the boundaries? Can't we conquer the fear. Shouldn't we love each other? Isn't that why we're here? So I'm gonna hold you in the Light.²

This morning, as we continue to prepare our hearts and minds for worship, let us hold each other and this world in the light.

Sermon

For our spoken meditation, you heard Wendell Berry's poem "A Speech to the Garden Club of America."³ The author is the same Wendell Berry, whose poem "Manifesto: The Mad Farmer Liberation Front" served as our reading for Easter Sunday.⁴ Berry is the author of more than fifty books of poetry, fiction, and essays, and for more than forty years, he has lived and farmed with his wife, Tanya Berry, in Kentucky. Berry is also a well-known environmental activist, and he will be present to participate this summer at the annual Unitarian Universalist General Assembly, which this year will be in Louisville, Kentucky. Berry will be joining thousands of Unitarian Universalists from around the continent on Thursday, June 20 at a Public Witness event calling for greater Environmental Justice in this country. In particular the goal is to raise aware about the dangers and impact of practices like mountaintop removal mining and

² David Lamotte's quoted lyrics are from his song "[In the Light](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=K6MyYKecP-M)." You can listen to a live performance here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=K6MyYKecP-M>.

³ Wendell Berry, "[A Speech to the Garden Club of America](http://www.examiner.com/article/wendell-berry-s-speech-to-the-garden-club-of-america)," *The New Yorker* (September 28, 2009). The full poem is also currently posted at this site: <http://www.examiner.com/article/wendell-berry-s-speech-to-the-garden-club-of-america>.

⁴ "*Praise Ignorance*" — The Easter sermon featuring the other Berry poem, "Manifesto: The Mad Farmer Liberation Front" is available at <http://www.patheos.com/blogs/carlgregg/2013/04/practice-resurrection/>.

horizontal fracking.⁵ The UUA website's description of this event says, **"in order to change how we get our energy, we must first use the energy within all of us to make a change."**⁶

I chose Berry's poem to read on this Sunday before Earth Day because he helps name the tension that many of us wrestle with as we seek a better, more sustainable way forward regarding humanity's use of our planet's limited resources. As an accomplished environmental author, activist, and speaker, Berry is an understandable choice to be invited to speak to the Garden Club of America. But the same life's work that makes him eminently qualified to fly around the country promoting environmental justice also makes him aware that a jet-set lifestyle partially undercuts the very work of ecological sustainability he's trying to promote.

Presumably responding to the accolades of whomever introduced him before he was to deliver a speech to The Garden Club of America, Berry begins his poem,

Thank you. I'm glad to know we're friends, of course;
There are so many outcomes that are worse.
But I must add I'm sorry for getting here
By a sustained explosion through the air,
Burning the world in fact to rise much higher
Than we should go....
We speak of it
As "fuel" while we burn it in our fit
Of temporary progress, digging up
An antique dark-held luster to corrupt

⁵ *fracking* — For recent *New York Times* articles, see:

- "Taking a Harder Look at Fracking and Health," available at <http://green.blogs.nytimes.com/2013/01/21/taking-a-harder-look-at-fracking-and-health/>
- "The Facts on Fracking," <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/03/14/opinion/global/the-facts-on-fracking.html?pagewanted=all>.
- "Revisiting the Facts on Fracking," <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/04/10/opinion/global/revisiting-the-facts-on-fracking.html?pagewanted=all>.
- "Life After Oil and Gas," <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/03/24/sunday-review/life-after-oil-and-gas.html?src=xps&pagewanted=all>.

⁶ "Public Witness at General Assembly," available at <http://www.uua.org/ga/justice/12746.shtml>.

The present light with smokes and smudges, poison....

Burning the world to live in it is wrong....

To add some data to Berry's prophetic musings, **"A single return flight between New York and London produces 1.2 tons of greenhouse gases per passenger, the equivalent of a year's allowable emissions if emissions were rationed fairly" among all 7 billion people on this planet.**⁷

To explore this point further, I want to quote one perplexing line from that Berry poem that we read on Easter. Berry writes, "Praise ignorance, for what man has not encountered he has not destroyed." That can be a hard line for Unitarian Universalists to hear. We typically decry ignorance as the source of many of the world's ills. And there are, indeed, many times when we are right to challenge the uninformed, including the times we ourselves lack critical information. But I think Berry means for that line to be controversial and to give us pause. My reading is that he is calling humans to be more humble — to not just assume that *more* human involvement in a situation and area is necessarily better. I think it is also a line born from the frustration of repeatedly witnessing the devastation humans have wrought in so many corners of our planet. I invite you to wrestle with the complex truth embedded in that line: "Praise ignorance, for what man has not encountered he has not destroyed."

As one recent example of human-caused ecological destruction, the [pictures](#) coming out of last month's Exxon oil spill in Arkansas have been heartbreaking and disturbing as thousands of barrels of heavy Canadian crude led to evacuations of 22 homes.⁸ I can't help having flashbacks to 2010's Deepwater Horizon, BP oil spill, which of course was many magnitudes worse.

⁷ "A single return flight" — Sallie McFague, [A New Climate for Theology: God, the World, and Global Warming](#), 18 — summarizing George Monbiot, [Heat: How to Stop the Planet from Burning](#) (2006), 22.

⁸ "Arkansas Oil Spill: Exxon Shuts Pegasus Pipeline After Rupture," available at http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/03/31/arkansas-oil-spill-2013-exxon_n_2986754.html#slide=2097846. http://topics.nytimes.com/top/reference/timestopics/subjects/o/oil_spills/index.html.

For me, this recent spill is one more reason to stop the proposed Keystone XL pipeline, which would run from Alberta, Canada through the U.S. to refineries in the Gulf of Mexico. The pipeline is an opportunity for the U.S. to show global leadership toward slowing Climate Change.⁹ As commentators have noted, “Saying no to the pipeline will not stop Canada from developing the tar sands, but it will force the construction of new pipelines through Canada itself. And that will require Canadians to play a larger role in deciding whether a massive expansion of tar sands development is prudent.”¹⁰ But the latest I’ve heard from President Obama is that he doesn’t think that blocking the pipeline — with its promises of jobs and lower fuel costs — is politically viable with our country’s depressed economy, although it’s debatable how many jobs or lowered fuel costs would actually result from the pipeline.¹¹

And given the political cowardice and disfunction demonstrated this past week in the Senate’s failure to pass even the most modest and widely supported of measures to prevent gun violence — even in the wake of shootings at Newtown Elementary (and the more than 3,500 deaths in the U.S. from gun violence since Newtown¹²) — I can understand President Obama’s

⁹ For more on Climate science, see “Climate Change” from the National Research Council, available at http://nas-sites.org/americasclimatechoices/files/2012/06/19014_cvtx_R1.pdf. For a one-page summary, see “**How to Win Any Climate Change Argument A flow chart for debating with denialists,**” available at http://www.slate.com/articles/health_and_science/climate_desk/2013/03/climate_change_flow_chart_how_to_win_any_global_warming_argument.html.

¹⁰ “*Saying no to the pipeline will not stop Canada*” — “When to Say No,” available at <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/03/11/opinion/when-to-say-no-to-the-keystone-xl.html?smid=pl-share>. For more, see Bill McKibben, “Is the Keystone XL Pipeline the 'Stonewall' of the Climate Movement?” available at http://www.huffingtonpost.com/bill-mckibben/democrats-keystone-xl_b_3034671.html.

¹¹ “Obama Tells Donors of Tough Politics of Environment,” available at <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/04/05/us/politics/obama-donors-keystone-pipeline.html?ref=keystonepipeline>.

¹² “How Many People Have Been Killed by Guns Since Newtown?,” available at http://www.slate.com/articles/news_and_politics/crime/2012/12/gun_death_tally_every_american_gun_death_since_newtown_sandy_hook_shooting.html.

reticence to take action on the much more politically controversial pipeline.¹³ At the same time, it was only three month ago that President Obama spoke these words in his Second Inaugural Address:

We, the people, still believe that our obligations as Americans are not just to ourselves, but to all posterity. We will respond to the threat of climate change, knowing that the failure to do so would betray our children and future generations. Some may still deny the overwhelming judgment of science, but none can avoid the devastating impact of raging fires, and crippling drought, and more powerful storms. The path towards sustainable energy sources will be long and sometimes difficult. But America cannot resist this transition; we must lead it. We cannot cede to other nations the technology that will power new jobs and new industries – we must claim its promise. That’s how we will maintain our economic vitality and our national treasure – our forests and waterways; our croplands and snowcapped peaks. That is how we will preserve our planet....¹⁴

Those are nice words, but what happened to actual “Change we can believe in?!” I do not understand why so many elected officials — even the ones like President Obama who will presumably never again run for re-election — lack the courage of their convictions.

¹³ Gabby Giffords has written,

Senators say they fear the N.R.A. and the gun lobby. But I think that fear must be nothing compared to the fear the first graders in Sandy Hook Elementary School felt as their lives ended in a hail of bullets. The fear that those children who survived the massacre must feel every time they remember their teachers stacking them into closets and bathrooms, whispering that they loved them, so that love would be the last thing the students heard if the gunman found them. On Wednesday, a minority of senators gave into fear and blocked common-sense legislation.

Read the rest at http://www.nytimes.com/2013/04/18/opinion/a-senate-in-the-gun-lobbys-grip.html?smid=fb-share&_r=0. For more details on the various votes, see “How almost all the gun amendments failed,” available at <http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/post-politics/wp/2013/04/17/what-happened-with-gun-amendments-today-everything-failed/>.

¹⁴ “Obama’s Second Inaugural Speech,” available at <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/01/21/us/politics/obamas-second-inaugural-speech.html?pagewanted=all>.

In 1936, Winston Churchill said the following about the events that would eventually culminate in World War II: **“The era of procrastination, of half measures, of soothing and baffling expedients, of delays, is coming to its close. In its place we are entering a period of consequences.”** Al Gore quoted these fateful words from Churchill in his 2006 book *An Inconvenient Truth*.¹⁵ We find ourselves now seven years later, and far too many of our fellow citizens and elected leaders continues to bury their heads in the sand. But Churchill and Gore are right that we can procrastinate and prevaricate, but Climate Change is already here, and we are in a “period of consequences.” For this reason, activist Bill McKibben titled his 2011 book *Eaarth* with two a’s (E-a-a-r-t-h) to signal that even if we started making massive changes globally today, irrevocable changes have already been made to our planet. We can now choose to slow the changes or exacerbate them further.

So on this week when we just don’t need any more bad news, how can we best honor and celebrate Earth Day — or *Eaarth* Day? Wendell Berry’s poem offers these words:

Let us enlighten, then, our earthly burdens
By going back to school, this time in gardens
That burn no hotter than the summer day....

[unlike that “sustained explosion through the air” of his flight]

The garden delves no deeper than its roots
And lifts no higher than its leaves and fruits.

Instead of traveling too far, too fast, and too much (which I have done plenty of myself), Berry invites us to root, invest, and grow locally in the soil of the place we find ourselves.

One of the ways we are doing that here is UUCF is through our commitment to being what the Unitarian Universalist Association called “a certified Green Sanctuary.”¹⁶ We earned this accreditation in 2011 thanks to the dedicated work of members of this congregation. And **our Green Sanctuary designation means that we are committed to at least 12 projects annually** (many of which are ongoing from year-to-year) that help us take concrete steps as

¹⁵ Al Gore, *An Inconvenient Truth*, 100-101.

¹⁶ More information about the Unitarian Universalist Association’s Green Sanctuary Program is available at <http://www.uua.org/environment/sanctuary/>.

individuals and as a congregation toward sustainability and responsible stewardship of our immediate environment. These 12 projects are spread across four areas: Worship, Religious Education, Environmental Justice, and Sustainable Living. Our commitment here today to an annual Earth Day-themed service is one of those 12 projects. And I hope that many of you will be able to stay after the service for our luncheon and then for the 45 minute Congregational Conversation on Climate Change that will begin here in the sanctuary at 12:45 p.m. At that time, I'll will also be sharing more about the present and future of our Green Sanctuary commitments.

For now, it is significant to note that the UUA's Green Sanctuary program was originally known as the "Seventh Principle Project" in reference to the [Seventh Principle](#) of Unitarian Universalism: "Respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part." Interdependence recognizes that the decisions we make about the environment — from fuel efficiency levels on our cars to regulation of mountaintop removal and fracking, to permitting the Keystone XL pipeline — those decision not only affect us but also the rest of humans, animal, and plants on this one planet. Likewise, the rise of industrialization in countries like India and China — and the concurrent rise in carbon emissions from those nations — affects us here in the U.S. As Dr. King said, we live together in "a great 'world house' . . . [and] because we can never again live apart, must learn somehow to live with each other.... **We must learn to live together [or we will] perish together as fools.**"¹⁷

Earlier I quoted from the UUA's website about the Environmental Justice Public Witness event this summer in which Wendell Berry will participate. The description of the event says that, "in order to change how we get our energy, we must first use the energy within all of us to make a change." And part of that necessary change is becoming increasingly aware of that "interdependent web of which we are all a part."

From Boston to West, Texas, we've been reminded this past week of just how vulnerable and precious our lives are. We can't always control what happens around us, but we can learn to have more influence over *our response* to people and events. And one way to do that is to remind

¹⁷ "The World House" is a chapter of Martin Luther King, Jr.'s 1967 book [Where Do We Go From Here: Chaos or Community](#).

ourselves that we are more than isolated individuals bumping into one another; we are each part of the interdependent web of all existence.

To experiment with the truth of that reality, this morning I would like to invite us to increase our awareness of the interdependent web. Specifically, on this Sunday before Earth Day, I would like to invite us to experiment with a practice called “Earth Breathing,” which I learned from the Tibetan Buddhist teacher Dr. Reginald Ray. Reggie earned a Ph.D. from the University of Chicago in 1973, and is in the lineage of Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche. Reggie has been studying and teaching at the intersection of Tibetan Buddhism and Western culture for more than forty years.¹⁸

The goal of this Earth Breathing practice is to help us become more aware both of our own bodies as well as the interdependent connection between our bodies and this one planet on which we find ourselves. Reggie teaches that the more *embodied* we are, and the more awareness we have of our *connectedness* to all things — and the greater our sense of wholeness, wellness, and openness.

To the extent you are comfortable doing so, I invite you to assume a seated meditation posture, which generally means putting both feet flat on the floor, sitting up straight with your shoulders down — relaxed, but alert. Rest your hands comfortably on your thighs. If you are comfortable doing so, I invite you to close your eyes. Bring your chin in slightly. Let your tongue relax in your mouth or touch the upper palate lightly. And take a deep breath: in through your nose . . . and out. In . . . and out.

Continue to allow your breath to slow and deepen. Notice also how your chair is supporting you, grounding you. If you feel any tightness in your interior core — your stomach or abdominal muscles, allow those to relax. Allow yourself to be aware of the fullness of this present moment and of your embodied nature:

In some Buddhist teachings, the Earth represents peace and equanimity. Equanimity is an aspect of Enlightenment, and refers to mental calmness, composure, and evenness of temper, especially in a difficult situation.

¹⁸ For more about Reggie Ray, see <http://www.dharmaocean.org/default/index.cfm/vision/reginald-a-ray/>.

Perhaps you have experienced the Earth as a Buddha of Equanimity when if walking in nature you have found yourself becoming more grounded, poised, and serene. The goal of Earth Breathing is to bring conscious intention to what you may have experienced already unintentionally through simply spending time in nature: bringing the grounded energy of the Earth into your body.

With your eyes closed — relaxed but alert — I invite you to put your attention a foot or two underneath you. Visualize that your attention is down in the Earth, in the foundation of this building. Continue to breath normally, and keep your attention below us in the Earth. And on the in-breath, bring the energy of the Earth up into your body.

Some of you may understand this practice more metaphorically. Others of you may experience this practice as quite literal. Both ways are fine.

Keeping your attention below you in the Earth, feel the massiveness of the Earth beneath you, and breath in that vastness — up into your heart, up into your whole torso. Feel the peace of the Earth and breathe in that peace, letting it permeate your body.¹⁹

In a few moments, there will be about a minute of silence, after which I will ring the bell. During the silence, on each in-breath, extend your attention another foot deeper in the Earth. As you do so, notice what the Earth energy feels like.

For Further Study

- See the analysis of Climate Change and of realistic responses at <http://www.menkescientific.com/johnspage.html#NonAstro>.

¹⁹ This Earth Breathing meditation is an adapted and highly abbreviated version of a much longer audio meditation from Reggie Ray that is available for \$2 at <http://www.amazon.com/gp/product/B007IJKAGU>. And that meditation is itself excerpted from Reginald Ray's 4-CD program *Meditating with the Body*.