

Truth Telling and Movement Building in the Climate Crisis

Sermon prepared by Cindy Davidson, Member, UUMFE Board of Directors, for Earth Day 2017
Ministerial Intern, CUUC White Plains (NY), Candidate for UU Ministry

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Let us begin this morning with a two-part pop quiz. Ready?

First, you're in Washington, DC. What's different about the weather this year compared to a decade ago? Still wondering? Well, the answer: on average, spring comes **26** days earlier than it did a decade ago.

Second, does this apply to other states? Yes, this is largely true across America.

With all the chaotic noise currently coming out of our nation's capital, I think **the** truly critical issue not getting the attention it deserves **right now** is our changing climate.

Humanity has come to exert biological and geological agency over Earth's environment in profound ways never before experienced. And, never before in the history of human life has the whole of the biosphere been an object of moral concern¹. By many ways, we are profoundly challenging species and habitats. Meanwhile, we are disproportionately impacting the disadvantaged, the elderly, the children, and endless generations to come. We live amidst a huge, complex problem that begs for moral conviction and fortitude in order to creatively engage a range of real solutions for all life, while our current leaders are in denial.

In this hour of call to awaken, we float in a sea of partial truths about climate change. What chance do we have of moving towards success or peace of mind, if we remain so? We need to not only see and hear the truth – we need to *tell* the truth.

Telling the truth about climate change means acknowledging that it is happening more quickly than previously forecast.

We cannot escape the gravity of our situation: increasing global land and ocean temperatures; sea level rise threatening half the global population who live in coastal areas; and freakish severe weather events beyond anyone's memory. We're facing a brewing catastrophe. We don't know exactly *how* it will all unfold or what will happen next. Species, including our own, will eventually go extinct, and humanity may someday be a failed experiment. We feel a sense of mystery, but as they say, "Nature bats last."

Telling the truth about climate change means admitting there will be increased suffering ahead.

With the growing frequency and intensity of extreme weather events and disasters comes increased food and water insecurities, desperate migrations, and, for humans, terrorism, warfare and genocide. Climate refuges are for real – now, among us, and coming to us. What about their movements and resettlements?

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Telling the truth about climate change means admitting it's about way more than our light bulbs, cars and dinner plates.

It means facing the truth about the contributing role of capitalism and neo-liberalism, and the foolhardy notion of a sustainable path of unlimited growth and expansion. It means waking up to our political and historical reality and seeing that we live in, as Parker Palmer describes, a “culture [that] goes back at least as far as 1776 when America proclaimed the “self-evident” truth that all people are created equal – then proceeded to disenfranchise women, commit genocide against native Americans, and build an economy on the back of enslaved human beings.”²

It means realizing that what took place at Standing Rock is not “just an environmental issue.” It's a reflection of the long-standing, continued violence against all of our indigenous peoples – in this case the Standing Rock Sioux tribe – including willful violations of their treaty protected lands and rights to religious freedom. It's one more in a long and ugly chain of events that white America has enacted with impunity against Native America. And all indications are there will be more to come.

All of which has led to movements in Native liberation circles, of mobilization of over 50% of the Native American population for the first time in our lifetimes. It has also led to our Unitarian Universalist clergy and activists, among others, responding to a call for solidarity and witness by showing up.

Telling the truth about climate change means acknowledging that its disproportionate impact is not just on far away small islands, but also on the most vulnerable and marginalized in our own cities and states.

In our own communities, the elderly, the young, the poor, the uninsured or under-insured will suffer the most from heat, cold or increased respiratory distress. The rise in coastal and inland flooding will most impact those with the least resources to flee, rebuild, or recoup losses.

Consider the Yup'ik Native American village of Newtok, Alaska. Situated where it is by conditions of American law, it is sinking “into the melting permafrost, as if it were white quicksand.”³ And where will these people, and other indigenous people living in threatened areas, go? How will they get there, and who will pay for it? Ask the Bureau of Indian Affairs.

Telling the truth about climate change means acknowledging and accepting that, with the unstoppable melting of the West Antarctic Ice Shelf⁴, sea level rise projections have increased dramatically, and now exceed the data that forms the basis underneath the Paris Climate Accord.

Meanwhile, our emissions reduction targets and other measures to prevent runaway climate change fall further and further behind evolving reality.

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Telling the truth about climate change means admitting we will need to do much better than the Paris agreement, and more quickly, to protect our coastal cities and the indigenous peoples in the Arctic and elsewhere.

It means getting on board with the urgency of making a rapid and just transition to sustainable communities, where energy is clean, safe, sustainable, accessible, and affordable for all.

Telling the truth about the Paris Climate Accord means acknowledging its weaknesses in process and final product, even as we applaud the positive.

The faith community's influence in lifting up the need to protect indigenous and other vulnerable populations was unprecedented in the history of UN negotiations. This work of the faith community *will* and *must* continue. As the COP22 Interfaith Statement says: "We *must* commit to *new* ways of living that honor the dynamic relationships between all forms of life, to deepen awareness and the spiritual dimension of our lives. We appeal to *all* people living today to draw on courage, hope, wisdom and spiritual reflection to enable our young and future generations to inherit a more caring and sustainable world. *This* is the time to step forward and act as trustees to Mother Earth. Together, by supporting each other's progress we can go further and faster."⁵ Given political realities around the world, that's a lot to ask.

Nine Unitarian Universalists were among the delegates attending COP22 in Morocco November 7th-18th. Their presence was vital to amplify the less powerful voices when things were under scrutiny. Their work included the unsustainable and inequitable system of carbon offsets that commoditize and privatize forests and weaken the rights of forest-dependent communities, peasants and indigenous peoples; the lack of legally enforceable protection of human rights or the rights of Indigenous Peoples and women; and the limitations for reparations by the Global North to the Global South for the loss and damages already sustained due to climate change.

Telling the truth about the Paris Climate Accord means recognizing that balancing the debt of the Global North with the energy poverty and vulnerabilities of the Global South is surely challenging and messy work.

For instance, a recent agreement was reached in Kigali, Rwanda using three tracks to phase out the use of heat-trapping hydro-fluoro-carbons, used in air conditioners and refrigerators. And in India, where the temperature often exceeds 100 degrees, and heat days will rise, "The mortality effects are 25 times greater than in the US,"⁶ due to a widespread lack of air conditioning (only 5% of households have it). Under the agreement, India will have less stringent limits in order to bring readily available and affordable AC units to its people. This illustrates part of the concept of energy justice.

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Telling the truth about climate change and the environmental movement means acknowledging our own shortcomings and our laggardness, as a society, on taking timely action.

Author Gary Ferguson writes in Orion magazine about the failings of the white environmental movement of the '60's and '70's to adequately address climate change. He attributes this overwhelmingly to "centuries of hierarchical, binary thinking" and the movement's privileged exclusivity. Speaking of baby boomers on the cusp of "elderhood," he writes of the need "to recalibrate, move through grief and build fresh relationships with the qualities of community (or ecology), mystery and beauty".⁷

Older generations must take responsibility for the especially heavy burden climate change places on our young people and future generations. Even more, we must do everything we can to take actions that help alleviate that burden.

When we tell the truth about our shortcomings, we can come back into covenant with our earthly community and commit to doing better.

If Unitarian Universalism is to be relevant to this rapidly evolving world, our congregations need to be engaged in the work of building sustainable and resilient communities grounded in a planetary ethic. As Unitarian Universalists, and as universe beings, we must remain faithful to our principles and interdependent web as we help build more grounded communities.

We can speak powerful truths as we think globally and acting locally, we the gentle, angry people with or without our school-bus yellow tee-shirts. We can speak the language of *power with*

- by responding compassionately and forming alliances in our communities;
- by working on state and local mitigation and adaption planning and politics;
- and by ensuring that local and state disaster preparedness plans keep the inherent worth and dignity of all people (and other beings) in the forefront, guarding the rights of the most vulnerable.

Telling the truth about climate change means facing and sharing our heart-felt grief.

When we accept these and other realities – the science, the political and economic systems, the partial and false solutions, our shortcomings – we encounter grief.

We grieve the loss of our how we have understood our place in the world as we have known it, we imagine the losses for our children's children, and we feel a threatened sense of security.

We grieve the loss of livelihoods, habitat, health or wellbeing, even lives, of those on the frontlines of climate change.

Joanna Macy⁸, the Buddhist Eco philosopher, tells us that we must honor our grief. We must not gloss over it and "move on" quickly. When we experience our grief fully, then we can begin again in gratitude for the gift of life itself.

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Telling our truths about climate change frees us to move forward with larger imagination.

Gary Ferguson writes, “The fight to save our planet goes hand in hand with the effort to stop the oppression of people on the basis of race, class, and gender. Serve one, and you serve them all. ... Claim a truly ecological imagination, one that recognizes that every culture – and every group within a culture – has its own vast storehouse of essential knowledge.”⁹

As we plan and take actions, we must continually ask ourselves and each other, “Whose voice or presence is missing? What piece are we leaving out?”

We will need to take what Joanna Macy calls holding actions – ones meant to hold back or slow down the environmental damage being done in order to protect or restore our natural systems to slow down climate change. And, we’ll need to adopt earth-friendly life sustaining systems and practices. These will include things like organizing boycotts, rallies, and other acts of public witness – as well as personal things such as consuming less, investing in energy efficiencies and renewable, supporting local and organic farming, and so forth.

Listening to the truth about climate silence, we’ll need to consider what experts have to say.

For instance, researchers at George Mason University and Yale University tell us the most important thing any person can do is to “talk more about climate change and its solutions with everyone you know a lot more than you are doing now.”¹⁰

Given that our media is generally silent on climate, they say it is important for us to end the “spiral of silence” in which “even people who care about the issue, shy away from discussing it because they so infrequently hear other people talking about it – reinforcing the spiral.” Their study showed that “only one in five Americans hear people they know talk about global warming at least once a month, and that seven in ten Americans rarely or never discuss global warming with family and friends.”

We know from other movements that having more conversations about uncomfortable subjects and keeping focused on the immorality of inaction are successful tactics to bring about change. So, please talk!

Breaking climate silence means talking and telling the truth about climate change.

Talk about the science, or maybe just about what you have observed. Talk about solutions being proposed or about how the situation exacerbates existing vulnerabilities – and does so impacting the most disadvantaged amongst us.

Talk with friends about what you are learning in newspaper columns, blogs, journals, books and movies. Notice what is not being talked about in your circles and communities

Talk about what happened at Standing Rock and at COP22. And after visiting the UU Young Adults for Climate Justice Facebook page, talk about what you saw there.

Talk about your fears and grief. Then, talk about what gives you hope. Talk about what you are doing to respond. Talk about who is missing at the table and how you might connect and work together.

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We need to begin engaging one another in collective hope, imagining possibilities and artfully crafting a new future story. As writer and environmental activist Bill McKibben tells us, the most important thing any person can do is to *not* stand alone, but to *join* with others in the climate movement.

Movement transcends individualism. Individual actions *do* contribute to both the climate change problem and solutions, but they will *never* be a substitute for participating in the larger climate movement.

And so in closing, I urge you to:

- Engage yourselves in the larger justice movements out there – in whatever area speaks to your heart. They’re all interconnected, as Buddhism’s Thich Nhat Hahn alludes to when he writes, “Take one thing and do it very deeply and carefully, and you will be doing will be doing everything at the same time.”¹¹
- Live in right relationship with our natural kin, both upstream and downstream. Consider the impacts of your lifestyle choices every day. It matters what we believe and it matters what we do.
- Revere and take comfort, pleasure and joy in nature. Perhaps this is where you encounter the Divine. Support organizations and activists who work to restore and preserve our Earth home.
- Turn towards one another and together do the best with what you know at the time. Rise to the challenge of working productively with those different from you, especially from different faiths.

Remember: we are those people who can help make the world a better place, *if* we tell and will live our truths.

May it be so, Amen.

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ENDNOTES:

¹ Class notes: Michael S. Hogue, *Cosmos and Ethos: Religious Naturalism and the Climate Crisis*, Meadville Lombard Theological School, Spring 2015

² Palmer, Parker. "Losing Our Illusions," *On Being* with Krista Tippett.
<http://www.onbeing.org/blog/parker-palmer-losing-our-illusions/8996>, accessed 10/21/16

³ Ackerman, Diane. *The Human Age*, W.W. Norton & Company, 2014. p 48.

⁴ See: <http://voices.nationalgeographic.com/2016/11/03/unstoppable-destabilization-of-west-antarctic-ice-sheet-threshold-may-have-been-crossed/>

⁵ COP22 Interfaith Climate Statement, 10 November 2016, signed by eminent Buddhist, Christian, Hindu, Jains, Quakers, Muslim, Sikh, Unitarian Universalists, as well as Indigenous and Spiritual leaders.

⁶ Greenstone, Michael. "India's Air-Conditioning and Climate Change Quandary," *New York Times*. 10/26/16 http://www.nytimes.com/2016/10/27/upshot/indias-air-conditioning-and-climate-change-quandary.html?_r=0, accessed 10/27/16

⁷ Ferguson, Gary. "A Deeper Boom: Where the most privileged generation got things right (and wrong)." *Orion*, July/August & September/October 2016, pp 14- 19.

⁸ See Macy, Joanna and Johnstone, Chris. *Active Hope: How to Face the Mess We're in Without Going Crazy*. New World Library, 2012.

⁹ Ferguson, Gary. pp 14-19.

¹⁰ Romm, Joe. "End climate silence: The most important thing you can do to fight global warming." <https://thinkprogress.org/end-climate-silence-cbe439a31a8e#.9k5t658ql>, accessed 10/3/16

¹¹ Hanh, Thich Nhat. *The World We Have: A Buddhist Approach to Peace and Ecology*. Parallax Press, 2008, p 69.