

Earth Day 2021
Rev. Carol Allman-Morton
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UUMSB

When I was in junior high school we were given an assignment to read a “how-to book,” and then make a presentation to the class to teach others how to do the thing we learned. It was a good assignment because it required translating something we read into something that we could share with others, to teach. We could choose any book, and because I was the kid that I was, I picked the book *How to Make the World a Better Place*. It was probably right around the time that it was published in the late 80s, or early 90s. It talked about recycling, and organic food, and all sorts of stuff that was at the top of mind for the environmental movement at that time. I haven’t looked at it since, so I can’t speak to the book’s relevance to present environmental or climate justice crises, but as Arlo says, that’s not what I came here to tell you about today. When I was giving that presentation, clearly my teacher had told another teacher about what was coming up--that hippie kid went wild on my assignment--and that other teacher stood out in the hallway to listen to my presentation. At first, I thought I was in trouble because I had pushed on what the assignment was supposed to be, but I realized that they were just curious about what I was going to say. They cared what a kid thought about how to make the world a better place. Looking back, that moment was a seed for my call to ministry. Reflection on values and ultimacy, talking with people from different generations about their experience, and reading and learning about something and sharing it with others are all part of ministry *and* that school assignment, so thank you to the teacher whose name I do not remember, that listened from the hall.

Earth Day is this week. There are a million ways to get involved in climate justice, to witness to the dangers of climate change, to name how those who are most vulnerable will pay the highest price, and to work for changes in policy and behavior that might change our future. All of that is real and awful, sad and scary, and I encourage you to talk with the people who can help you get involved, change your own impact on the world, and be accountable to one another and the whole web of creation. Today, I want to talk about how we hold this work and approach it in a spiritual context. Climate justice work is hard, in part, because it asks us to hold complicated ideas--to look at the consequences down the road of today’s choices, to see the impact of climate change on communities over time, and to understand our complicated ecosystem. In white and capitalist cultures especially, we often move from crisis to crisis and don’t take time to reflect in community, or look at the long-range impacts of our actions. Our Unitarian Universalist faith can help us to think about the “why,” why do we need to do better? Why are we accountable to one another?

In a talk this week at Amherst, scholar and activist, Dr. Angela Davis was asked a question about the intersectionality of racial justice and climate justice. This is a paraphrase, but she said something like, if we win--if we create a more just world--we need a world to live in. A simple and profound why. And why do we work for justice? There are many answers, but one is what Theodore Parker shared years ago, that there is a force in the universe that calls us toward justice. If we are inexorably connected in the web of life, then we are responsible to one another, and therefore, must live into ways of relating that best support all people, and our earth.

I have shared the Carl Sagan reading we heard earlier, before, because it has spoken so deeply to me:

...Our planet is a lonely speck in a great enveloping cosmic dark. In our obscurity, in all this vastness there is no hint that help will come from elsewhere to save us from ourselves, it is up to us... For me it underscores our responsibility, our profound responsibility, to deal more kindly with one another and to preserve and cherish that pale blue dot, the only home we have ever known.

The way I hear Carl Sagan's why, is that we need to take care of one another, because we are all we have. We are responsible for one another and our home.

Some folks, in the face of considering our dependence on each other, and the limitations of our resources have come to a different conclusion--that therefore, it is everyone for themselves, believing that if resources are limited, we need to hold on tight to what we have. We have another "why" in the face of that belief. When we hold on to things tightly if resources are limited, do things get better or worse for everyone? We can see in our society right now that they get worse. Having a small number of unaccountable people with power leads to terrible decisions, and no matter how many private space programs the mega-rich work on, they are not going to terraform some new planet in this lifetime. This is what we have. If those in power around the world let the planet burn in an effort to hold on to their power and wealth, they too will burn. It will take longer for them to feel it, but we all lose together. We all lose clean water, and coastlines, food supplies, and safety. So there is a sort of pragmatic "why do we need to do better" for those who are in power, and can make big decisions, that if they want a consumer base to keep buying their stuff, those consumers need a safe planet on which to live. We are all we have. We are responsible for one another and our home. And we all are called to hold those in power accountable for their actions and inaction.

Thomas Starr King was a Universalist and Unitarian preacher first in Boston, and then in San Francisco in the mid-1800s. Our UU seminary in San Francisco is named for him, as well as some congregations, and other spots special to UUs around the country. King was vital to Lincoln's political campaign in California, and in raising funds to care for injured soldiers during the Civil War. A preacher and speaker for both Universalists and Unitarians, he famously joked, "The one [Universalist] thinks God is too good to damn them forever, the other [Unitarian] thinks they are too good to be damned forever."¹ King was passionate about the power of the natural world to inspire us, as we heard in our reading earlier. His "why" in that reading is that if we see and pay attention to the wonder that is the natural world, then we will be inspired to spiritual connection.

"if we could fairly perceive, through our outward senses, one or two features of the constant order and glory of nature, our materialistic dullness would be broken, surprise and joy would be awakened, we should feel that we live amid the play of Infinite thought; and the devout spirit would be stimulated so potently that our hearts would naturally mount in praise and prayer."

I hear it. We live in a beautiful place, and I am filled with wonder and often surprised into praise and prayer. A couple of years ago, I was walking up a small mountain near my house and there were a number of rufous-sided towhees singing in the bushes, "drink-your-teeeee." My grandmother taught me that song when I was young, and I never forgot it, because I found it so fun. That day, I looked out at the ridge of mountains across the river valley, listened to birdsong and felt so grateful. Paying attention to these moments of connection to our earth, to wild spaces, to critters, is one way to engage with vital spiritual ideals like wonder, gratitude,

¹ Learn more about Thomas Starr King - <https://uudb.org/articles/thomasstarrking.html>

forgiveness, compassion, and so much more that support us in our seeking, and help us remember our connection to all that is.

Our small choices absolutely matter in caring for the interdependent web. I heard on an episode of *This Old House* just yesterday that the greater Boston area uses as much water now as it did over 100 years ago, despite huge population growth and more towns sharing that water, because of changes in water conservation. And is it also true that it is regulation and enforcement of industries at the national and international level that will be what is required to save our home. There are lots of ways to be engaged, but here is my challenge to you: Ground whatever you do in a spiritual why. Why do we honor the interdependent web? Why do we look to the source of “Direct experience of that transcending mystery and wonder, affirmed in all cultures, which moves us to a renewal of the spirit and an openness to the forces which create and uphold life”? Why do you? If we hold that answer in our hearts, when facing the challenges and emotions of the day to day, or worry about the environment, or violence, or injustice, we can know in our bones why it matters that we keep working, who we are fighting for in the face of injustice, and the power that there is in all of us, all of us who are inexorably interconnected with all that is, seeking actions that will serve us all. A lot of our work for climate justice is complicated and the answers aren’t always clear, and so sometimes it is vital that we pause to listen, or look, or feel our connection to the earth--to wonder. So that perhaps, “our hearts would naturally mount in praise and prayer.”

So may it be.

Amen.