

**Sermon for Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Central Michigan  
September 27, 2020**

**Rev. Andrew Frantz, contract minister, with Laurie Rivera and Mary Alsager**

**Faithful Environmentalism**

Introduction

Our morning message today is going to be in three parts: I'm going to speak about faithful environmentalism, Laurie Rivera is going to speak about faithful environmentalism, and Mary Alsager is going to speak about it. The environment is one of the two social justice issues that this Fellowship has voted to focus on for this year, along with voting rights.

We're connecting our message today, especially Laurie and Mary, to General Assembly. General Assembly is the annual national gathering of Unitarian Universalists. Every summer, thousands of UU's gather—this year virtually, of course—for a week of worship services, business meetings, and workshops. Our Fellowship of about 60 members sent 12 people to General Assembly this year. That's more than many churches and fellowships three times our size, so we were well represented at GA. The 12 of us who attended checked in with each other throughout the week, and we met afterward to discuss what we saw and what we learned.

We decided to do a series of four services to share with the congregation the magic and the message of General Assembly: anti-racism we did last month; today we're talking about faithful environmentalism; and next month we're doing a service on indigenous rights; and one on voting rights. These were the four themes that we heard loud and clear at General Assembly.

Now I welcome Laurie Rivera to offer her reflection, followed by Mary Alsager.

Laurie Rivera

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Mary Alsager

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Thank you Mary, and thank you Laurie. It's a huge strength of our Fellowship to have lay leaders such as yourselves who are passionate, articulate, and committed. I'm going to add my own remarks to what you just said, Mary--about the scope of the problem of course, but also about hope and resolve for what we can do and what we must do.

### Practical and Spiritual

In my view, environmentalism is both practical and spiritual. We must do the things we can, as individuals and as groups, to protect and restore the natural environment. Religion helps us name and experience the spiritual connection to the environment.

I want to connect to what Kendra said this morning in the story that she shared—the story for all of us about the child and the grandmother doing their daily routine with the cloth bags and the recycling and buying local at the farmer's market. On the practical side, as individuals, we can make daily choices. We can walk or ride our bike instead of taking the car. We use our own water bottle instead of buying bottled water.

As individuals, we can sometimes take larger steps also. If we have the money, we can buy a more fuel-efficient car. If we have the money, we can insulate our homes to make them more energy efficient. But when we work together, we can have a greater impact. For instance, this Fellowship has 60 members and many more friends, so there are 60 or 100 people here that can do things together to have a larger impact. Larger institutions can have an even greater impact. I mentioned bottled water earlier. Some institutions make it a policy that they will not have bottled water at all, because bottle water is not good for the environment. The larger the groups, the larger the impact; and individuals as well as small groups are dwarfed in their impact compared to governments.

### Tom Rivett-Carnac

I want to share a story now that I heard in a TED talk I saw recently. This TED talk was shared with me by my step-mother Ann Cook-Frantz, who's an environmentalist and a member of the UU Fellowship of Oberlin in Ohio. The speaker of the TED talk is Tom Rivett-Carnac. I'm going to spoil part of his story, but it's still worth watching the TED talk in full, so I'll give you the link to it.<sup>1</sup> He talks about working for the United Nations. Talk about a big impact! They are working on the Paris climate accords. He is devoting his life to this work, his career. And he says that doing this work is super...boring. The meetings at the UN

are longer and more boring than anything he has experienced. One day he is in one of these meetings and he gets a hand-written note passed to him by someone who is working on this international agreement, the Paris climate accords. And he thinks, this is going to be an important note. Someone important just handed it to me, I bet this is going to have detailed instructions about international diplomacy, a strategic document for how to bring these nations together to address climate change.

And he opens the note, and it says, “PAINFUL ... but let’s approach with Love.”

This is my connection from the practical side of environmentalism to the spiritual side. The man who was giving the TED talk was a Buddhist monk for part of his life, so I guess that’s appropriate.

That little note about how to deal with climate change in the United Nations, “PAINFUL...but let’s approach with Love”—I want to address the PAINFUL part.

Painful: this is real. I dare say if you’re not angry, scared, and/or afraid about what humans are doing to the natural world you aren’t really paying attention. Like Mary just said, there are islands going underwater from global warming! But dwelling in the negative emotions doesn’t do much good.

There is a whole field of psychology called environmental psychology which tries to figure out how to get people to face the truth about climate change without overwhelming them and without making them feel depressed. Depression isn’t helpful; helplessness doesn’t solve anything. So how can we give the truth about climate change and how disastrous it is, while also giving you hope and inspiring you to take action, and affirming that other people are doing it?

The conclusion of the TED talk that I mentioned is that what’s needed is stubborn optimism and sustained action that we take together. Together we can share joy, and together we diffuse the depression and the overwhelming-ness of this issue.

PAINFUL ... but let’s approach with love.

Love is how we do it: with love for one another, for all living beings, for all the children of the world. That is the message of the people working at the UN.

David Orr

The other voice that I want to bring into my message this morning is the voice of David Orr. He is a professor of environmental studies at Oberlin College. And his argument is that the climate crisis is primarily one of the mind. It is with our minds that we need to figure out how to fix this problem, for the sake of humanity, and thus he argues that colleges and universities are a primary place to do this. But in the quote I'm about to read, you'll see that he takes a very spiritual approach to the problem, even as an educator. Here's what he says:

*What can educators do to foster real intelligence? We can attempt to teach the things that one might imagine the earth would teach us: silence, humility, holiness, connectedness, courtesy, beauty, celebration, giving, restoration, obligation and wildness.<sup>2</sup>*

For all of us who educators, at any level, this is your curriculum. To teach silence, humility, holiness, connectedness, courtesy, beauty, celebration, giving, restoration, obligation and wildness. David Orr's book is called "Hope is an Imperative." He says that we need hope in the face of environmental degradation. Which is why this place matters.

### Hope and action from religion

Hope is what we get from a religious community, from a spiritual practice, perhaps from this service. The songs we sing and the prayers we pray and the messages we hear may give you hope.

And we are of course not the only religion in the world to have a focus on the environment – far from it! I'm thinking of the Pagan religion with its emphasis on the cycle of the year and the seasons. I'm thinking of the Japanese Shinto religion, which understands that religious spirits are in the trees and in the waterfall: that sacredness is tied to natural space. Many religions have a focus on nature and the environment.

And then there is Unitarian Universalism. Our 7<sup>th</sup> principle states that we are part of an interconnected web of all life. Therefore environmentalism is a UU religious value. We are called by our faith to act. We are called to act because of our connection to all of the living creatures, to Mother Earth / Gaia herself.

Connection, in other words is why we must act. It is also how we act.

We are connected to one another in this small but mighty Fellowship, and to the thousands of UU's at General Assembly who share this religious tradition. Doing environmental activism together help us to do it better and stronger and reduces the negative emotional impact of the work.

We must do all of the above, all of the practical things to protect and restore the environment that I mentioned earlier. The things we can do as individuals, the things we can do as institutions—including this Fellowship, and also other institutions that you're part of. We must vote for pro-environment candidates, and hold elected officials accountable.

In this Fellowship, we see that we are already doing this. We voted to make the environment and voting our two priorities for this year. We have regular activities, including webinars like the one coming up on Tuesday that Karen Turnbull is leading and that she announced earlier today. That is a great example, because going to this webinar with Karen and other UU's makes you feel better, and more connected – in concern and in action.

### Conclusion and prayer

The way forward in the daunting environmental crisis is through stubborn optimism and sustained action.

May this fellowship and this faith, with its belief in the sacred connection of all living things, sustain you. May you know that you are not alone in your commitment to environmental action, but surrounded by others who share the same commitment. May this community strengthen you with hope when the facts of the environmental crisis are overwhelming; and may you be inspired by the words spoken here, by the songs sung here, by the prayers prayed here, and by the example of your fellow human beings devoted to the cause of protecting and restoring the sacred earth.

May it be so.

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<sup>1</sup> “How to Shift Your Mindset and Choose Your Future,” Tom Rivett-Carnac.

[https://www.ted.com/talks/tom\\_rivett\\_carnac\\_how\\_to\\_shift\\_your\\_mindset\\_and\\_choose\\_your\\_future?language=en](https://www.ted.com/talks/tom_rivett_carnac_how_to_shift_your_mindset_and_choose_your_future?language=en)

<sup>2</sup> David Orr. Retrieved at [https://www.azquotes.com/author/22309-David\\_W\\_Orr](https://www.azquotes.com/author/22309-David_W_Orr)