

No Time But Now... There's No One But Us: An Earth Day Sermon

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I'm from the Midwest, and more often than not, conversations there start with the subject of the weather. And when I've been on the phone with relatives this winter, there has been a lot to talk about. It has been a hard winter.

When I spoke with my aunt Margaret in Wisconsin in February, she said that they had had almost twice the number of days where the temperature reached 10 below zero—and that was quite a while before winter was over. And trust me, 10 degrees below 0 is cold, very cold. All that talk about the Polar Vortex really has been true. Last week came news that a small lake way up north still had 20 inches of ice on it.

And here in the Northwest, we too have had our share of things to talk about as well. Things were especially dry most of the winter. Do you remember the fears of forest fires in Clackamas County in January? *Forest fires in the Northwest in January?* And then there was March, when there was so much rain that we broke records.

Something seems to be going on. More often than not these days when there is a weather event it seems to be some kind of record-setting weather event. Drought, precipitation, wind, you name it. It is hard to know just how all these pieces fit together. Scientists certainly seem to think it is somehow connected to global warming. They just aren't sure exactly how.

Back east, Richard Primack is a biologist at Boston University and this is his busy season. He and his colleagues survey the plants growing around Concord, Mass., recording the first day they send up flowers and leaves.

Compared to the last five springs, this one has been pretty slow thanks to an especially cold winter. But when he looks at the overall trend, he wouldn't call this a late spring. He knows that thanks to Henry David Thoreau. During the 1850s, the famous Transcendentalist Thoreau carefully recorded the arrival of spring at Walden Pond, one of Concord's most famous sites. Primack has combined Thoreau's data with his own and those of other naturalists to create a record of the seasons stretching across 160 years. And what he has found is that spring now arrives about three weeks sooner than in Thoreau's time. He says he sees the shift to an earlier spring as part of a grand, planet-wide march. Spring is coming a whole lot earlier.¹

So just how big a deal is spring coming three weeks earlier? That, of course, is just one change. If some things come earlier, other things will keep maturing longer. But what we know is that

¹ <http://www.nytimes.com/2014/04/24/science/springing-forward-and-its-consequences.html?ref=globalwarming>

everything is connected. When one thing happens earlier that means that other things that depend on it also need to happen earlier. One part of the eco system is dependent upon all the other parts.

When it comes to global warming, there are lots of statistics to draw our attention.

Scientists say that the earth's temperature has already increased eight tenths of a degree celsius. And most of the warnings are that when we get to the place of having warmed up two whole degrees—not all that far away from now, things are really going to be bad.

That's where we get the dramatic images of the ice in Greenland and Antarctica. They are melting away at a much faster pace than was earlier expected. And for years scientists have measured the amount of carbon dioxide from the top of Hawaii's Mauna Loa volcano and for the first time in recorded history they surpassed 400 parts per million for the entire month of April. Before the industrial period that number was below 280 parts per million. What this means is that things are heating up even faster than scientists predicted.²

Scientists widely agree that the main source of the problem is the amount of carbon dioxide that is being released into the atmosphere. That is happening because of how much fossil fuel like coal and oil we are burning. All that carbon means that heat gets trapped and can't get out as much as it used to. Think of the inside of your car when it is parked in the sun and the windows are rolled up. It doesn't take long for it to get very hot.

Those are just a couple statistics about global warming and they are pretty sobering—overwhelming, actually. All too often I notice in myself that feeling of being overwhelmed. And I also notice just behind that a sense of fear and dread. I don't quite know what to do. I'm not sure where to begin.

The writer Wendell Berry says that too often the recognition that the problems are big leads us to look for the big solution, the one that will solve the problem all at once. But that probably isn't the way it's going to work. The truth is that the problem is big... and it won't be solved easily. It has taken a long time for us to get to this place and the solutions will take a long time as well.

Wendell Berry himself has been thinking about all this for a long time. He turns 80 this year and he has written over 40 books. Berry lives on a farm in Kentucky that has been in his family for over 200 years and his work and his writing come out of the context of that farm.

Berry says that our first task is to pay attention to what the earth around us is saying. His words: "The answers will come not from walking up to your farm and saying "this is what I want and this is what I expect from you." You walk up and you say "what do you need?" And

²<http://www.climatecentral.org/news/april-will-be-first-month-with-co2-levels-above-400-ppm-17331>

you commit yourself to say “all right, I’m not going to do any extensive damage here until I know what it is that you are asking of me.”³

He says this is something that can’t be hurried and that the situation we are now in will take a lot of patience. And he notes that to be patient in an emergency is a terrible trial.

Patience is not a quality that we see a lot in our culture. We want things to be quick and easy. But the reality with global warming is that we perhaps can’t even imagine all the ways that life will be different and what it will mean for all of our lives. We need to respond and we need to adapt.

But our response needs to begin with the recognition that we are part of a large and complex and wonderful creation, the same creation that has given us life. And with that realization comes the awareness of responsibility we have to sustain the creation for generations to come. Or as our own Unitarian Universalist 7th principle would call us “to respect the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part.”

The web is also a recognition of how we are all in this together. It asks more of us who are privileged to have so much and who take more than others. With that privilege comes responsibility.

Now we do need to pay attention to those statistics. The longer we wait the more difficult finding solutions will be. But I also believe that we can quickly find ourselves responding from a place of fear. And fear has a way of constricting, of making us freeze and not knowing what to do. The way we step back from that place of fear is the first look move out of that place of interdependence.

It asks us to look at our own lives and in the decisions we make—about what we eat, what we consume, the priorities to make. It asks us to be aware of what we do with our money and how it is invested.

And it asks us to be good citizens, to make our voices heard in the political process. But we live in a time when the political system is broken because of the financial and corporate interests that want to maintain the status quo. And often those folks are the ones profiting from the continued use of fossil fuels. That is a big problem. And the longer we wait the more difficult—and more expensive—solutions will be.

But we are, first of all, called to bear witness to what is happening with the earth. It comes in recognizing how what happens to the earth happens to all of us. It is from that place of bearing witness that we move to make change.

³ <http://billmoyers.com/episode/encore-wendell-berry-poet-prophet/>

Wendell Berry says that we really don't have a right to ask whether we're going to succeed or not. The only question we have a right to ask is what's the right thing to do? What does this earth require of us if we want to continue to live on it?

This week as I've been thinking about global warming one of the other big stories in the news in our state has been the hearing on same sex marriage in federal court. Our own Lisa Chickadonz and Chris Tanner are plaintiffs in that case. And at first they have felt like very different. And of course in many ways they are.

And yet in another way I think they are very much connected. Perhaps one of the reasons there has been such a remarkable evolution in gay and lesbian rights is that we've gone from being some abstract concept—those people—to ordinary folks who just want more or less what everyone else wants. The freedom to commit publically to the person you love.

As more and more of us have come out, as we went from being those people to brothers and sisters and sons and daughters and colleagues and fellow congregants... as all that has happened barriers have come down remarkably fast. With the recognition that there is more we have in common than what separates us, remarkable change has come in our culture.

As we are able to see the struggle of others as our own struggle—as we are able to see our own freedom being interconnected with the freedom of everyone else—how we see how our lives are interconnected—change may be possible where we didn't see it as possible before.

It was like that in the civil rights movement. Yes, African Americans were fighting for their own rights but they were actually fighting for the whole country. That as those on the margins are welcome at the table then we are all find ourselves at the table too. What touch one really does touch us all.

And perhaps as we mark another earth day that too is our starting place. Perhaps we start from that basic place of recognizing our interdependence.

Those statics go from abstractions to things that greatly affect our lives and the lives of our neighbors and all the creatures of the earth. We are all part of the whole. We are all part of this amazing creation.

A couple weeks ago my partner announces to me at 10 pm that we should take a walk. There was something he wanted to show me. "But it's 10 o'clock at night, I say, won't it be dark?" Come, you have to experience this.

The night before he had ridden his bike through Oaks Bottom Park in Southeast Portland and had been overwhelmed by the frogs announcing their presence there.

So on this dark night we park the car and make our way down the path that runs through the bottom. In the distance is the sound of the frogs. Flashlights in hand, we continue down the hill until we are surrounded by wetlands and by now the sound of the frogs is so loud that we can barely hear each other speak. We stand there for a time, with the occasional bicyclist going

past, the volume of frogs increasing to mark this passage through their territory. We stand there, in awe, amid this cacophony.

Perhaps the starting place in life begins in that place of awe, that place of reverence. Sometimes maybe we need to be pulled out of our slumber to see things we hadn't seen before. That, at least, is where the spiritual part begins—a recognition that our own life is totally dependent on all of the rest of life. And from there comes the choices we make every day of our lives. The food we eat and where it comes from, the choices we make about what we consume, or don't consume. The choices we make about how we invest our resources. All of that needs to flow out of that realization of our interdependence.

And from that spiritual place needs to flow the political and the practical. It is important that we find a way to make our voices heard in the process.

You can stop by the Ministry for Earth fair in our Buchan social hour. They can point you in the direction of action. That is also a place to learn and grow with others on this path.

Henry David Thoreau who made all those notes as he studied and reflected on Walden Pond all those years ago said: "If one advances confidently in the direction of his dreams and endeavors to live the life which he had imagined, he will meet with a success unexpected in common hours."

His contemporary, Ralph Waldo Emerson, says it a little more boldly: "When a resolute young fellow steps up to the great bully, the world, and takes him boldly by the beard, he is often surprised to find it comes off in his hand, and that it was only tied on to scare away the timid adventurers."⁴

We live in times that ask much of us, friends. This is not a time to be timid. One philosopher has called this a hinge point in history—the choices we make now will have far reaching implications for a long, long time.

Words of theologian Starhawk:

*Earth mother, star mother,
may all remember we are cells in your body and dance together.
And as you are patient with our struggles to learn.
so shall we be patient with ourselves and each other.
We are radiant light and sacred dark—the balance.*

Within you we are born, we grow, live and die. Within us you dance forever.

Let us not forget, good people, that we are all in this dance together. Let us hold on tight. And let us all be sustained on the journey. So be it. Amen.

⁴ Bill McKibben, "Oil and Honey: The Education of an Unlikely Activist," Time Books, 2013, pp 87.

Prayer: Spirit of life, help us to be ever mindful of the blessings of our lives, most of all the blessings of this good, blue-green boat we call home. Help us to be faithful stewards of all creation. Help us to see our lives connected through and through with mystery, with wonder, with hope. In this time of spring, in this time of new life, renew in us our commitment to work for justice that life might be sustained from generation to generation. Amen.

Benediction: May you find yourselves planted in fertile soil, good people. Walk gently, love fiercely, and in all your days give thanks. Amen.