

We All Live Downstream

Rev. Scott W. Alexander
Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Vero Beach
Sunday, October 10, 2010

Surely there is not a person in this room who was not both shocked and saddened when (on April 20th of this year) the **Deepwater Horizon Oil Production Platform** exploded and burned in the Gulf of Mexico (40 miles off the coast of Louisiana in the Gulf of Mexico)...tragically killing eleven workers, injuring 17 others, and causing the largest oil spill (and greatest environmental disaster) in the history of the United States. If you were like me, at first (based on the initial, inaccurate media coverage), you may have assumed that this was just one more terrible industrial accident that, while significant and tragic, would have little impact on your own personal life. But then -- as the days past, and it slowly became clear that (despite BP's unwise and underhanded efforts to keep the full truth from the public) the damaged well was spewing millions upon millions of gallons of toxic heavy crude into the fragile waters of the gulf -- fouling countless wetlands and beaches, killing untold numbers of birds and sea creatures, closing vital fishing grounds, and crippling economic activity in the gulf region and beyond. It slowly dawned on the nation that this terrible spill (preventable as it now appears to have been...but that's ANOTHER story!) this terrible spill was going to directly affect millions of Americans near and far.

And soon, oceanographic scientists were warning us that (even here on the pristine East coast of Florida...even though the Deepwater Horizon site was many hundreds of miles away... clear on the other side of the Florida peninsula) the gulf current might well bring destructive oil slicks right here to the beautiful beaches (intricate habitats and rich fishing grounds) of OUR wonderful natural environment on the Treasure Coast. Suddenly, a problem that seemed so far away from us (**"pity the poor folks on the Gulf Coast"**) threatened to arrive at our doorsteps, and profoundly affect our lives, our communities and our treasured natural habitats.

Now...luckily, in the months since the accident, it has become clear that we here on the Treasure Coast blessedly dodged this ecological bullet...no ugly globs of oil (or sinister, poisonous slicks) washed up on our shores, and it appears that the effects of the spill on wildlife and water quality here will be -- if they are even scientifically measurable. But what the Deepwater explosion awakened us all to (in a stark way I pray we will not soon forget) is **the profound fragility, interdependence and preciousness of our natural environment**...and how truly small (and vulnerable) our planet earth is.

We All Live Downstream

Rev. Scott W. Alexander
Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Vero Beach
Sunday, October 10, 2010

Humanity as a whole first began to grasp the this fundamental and critical reality of planet earth in December, 1968, when the crew of Apollo 8 sent back those first amazing pictures of earth from outer space, looking -- as one of the astronauts put it -- like **“a blue and white marble floating amid the vast backdrop of space.”**

It was only after we were able to view planet earth from outer space -- only able to see our celestial home from this stunning and revealing perspective -- that humanity began to psychically (and emotionally) grasp how finite and circumscribed the living system we call earth really is. Viewed from outer space, our planet finally looked to human eyes like the essentially closed and finite environmental system it really is.

It was back in the 1960s when visionary thinker and NASA research scientist James Lovelock first articulated his controversial theory called the **“Gaia Hypothesis”** (named after the ancient Greek Goddess Gaia), which suggested that our earth and its surrounding atmosphere is a self-regulating, holistic, organic, living system. Lovelock defined Gaia earth as **“a complex entity involving the Earth’s biosphere, atmosphere, oceans, and soil; the totality constituting a feedback or cybernetic system which seeks an optimal physical and environment for life on this planet.”** While the Gaia Hypothesis is still controversial, Lovelock was among the first to suggest to humanity that (if we are to survive down the millennia) we must begin treating our planet earth as a LIVING THING...AS one fragile, finite, limited, and endangered entity.

The Deepwater Horizon explosion (and its many environmental and economic repercussions which spiraled out for thousands of miles... indeed all around the globe) should serve to remind all of us that our Planet Earth (this fragile blue/green ecosystem we call home) is in fact basically a zero sum game, a living, interconnected, vulnerable system with **finite amounts** of sustaining earth, water and air...and lacking (TOTALLY LACKING!) the ability to easily heal and regenerate itself from ever-increasing human folly, pollution, and waste. Now the relatively good news about the Deepwater Horizon explosion is that it looks as though, over time, this quadrant of our earth will slowly be able to recover from **some-if-not-most** of the toxins and destruction released by this terrible oil leak in the Gulf of Mexico -- and other “local” ecological disasters brought on by human activity. But in these early years of the 21st

We All Live Downstream

Rev. Scott W. Alexander
Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Vero Beach
Sunday, October 10, 2010

Century, none of us can afford to pretend or believe (against all evidence) that our planet home is **NOT** in trouble...we must all face the fact that humanity (all of us together, in every corner of the globe) WILL BE REQUIRED (in the years ahead) to **rapidly and significantly change** the way we live on this blessed, spinning orb of earth that is our home. The undeniable truth of our generation – dear friends – is that we (as the dominant species on this earth) **are** in trouble, and that we **must change** the way we live on this planet, and change it radically and soon if we are to survive with a shared life worth having.

A few months ago -- before I moved from the DC area down here to the beautiful Treasure Coast -- I was riding my bike one day along the upper reaches of the Potomac River, one of America's most beautiful and wild rivers, when I came upon a car (with a couple of brightly-colored Kayaks strapped to the roof) with a bumper sticker which simply read, "**We All Live Downstream.**" I have chosen this blunt bumper sticker slogan as my sermon title this morning, because for me – this simple heart-felt declaration that "**We All Live Downstream**" summarizes **THE NEW GLOBAL CONSCIOUSNESS** (OF ECOLOGICAL CONNECTEDNESS) HUMANITY MUST TAKE TO HEART AND MIND IF WE ARE TO SURVIVE ON THIS PLANET. On this shrinking planet of ours, we **DO** all live downstream (in both a literal and figurative sense) when it comes to our planet's natural environment. While it was perhaps at one time possible (way back before both the world's population and industrial development exploded) while it was perhaps at one time possible for human beings to ignore the consequences of the way we (both individually and collectively) treated the earth (and its air and interconnected environments and waters), none of us in the 21st century (not even in the remotest corner of this globe) **can permit ourselves the illusion** of imagining that we can live carelessly and irresponsibly upon the finite eco-system that is our earth and **not** have the consequences of that behavior come back to directly haunt and affect us.

The first time I became aware of how incredibly rapidly our finite planet earth was shrinking (environmentally- speaking) was some thirty years ago in 1980 when I was able to meet my old AFS brother from Montevideo, Uruguay -- who spent a year with me and my family in Wisconsin in 1965, when we were both seniors in High School. Gustavo had come to New York City on business, and so I took the train in from my home in New Jersey and we had lunch together in Mid-town Manhattan.

We All Live Downstream

Rev. Scott W. Alexander
Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Vero Beach
Sunday, October 10, 2010

We chatted excitedly about the past, about his wonderful seaside home in Montevideo, his two growing children, and his successful electronics business. Then, at some point in our conversation, I asked him about the weather in Montevideo at that time of year (it was late Fall in New York, which meant it was early Summer in Uruguay)...a sudden sadness came over Gustavo's face, and he said, **"Well...the weather used to be wonderful at this time of the year in Montevideo, but since they have been cutting down the rain forests in Brazil, it has become intolerably hot and humid."**

I was shocked. While I had (through newspaper articles and other news reports) been aware of the alarming rate at which the deep and lush primordial rain forests of Brazil had been being destroyed (by farmers, cattle ranchers and squatters trying to scratch out a living in that impoverished country) and had read the environmentalists alarms that a diverse and invaluable natural resource was being irretrievably laid to waste and would be unlikely to be able to regenerate itself, I was a disturbing revelation to me (way back in 1980, remember!) that climactic conditions MANY HUNDREDS OF MILES AWAY could be noticeably affect life in Montevideo. I remember preaching a sermon that autumn articulating **the same conviction** I am articulating this morning three decades later -- that **a new ecological consciousness** (and the responsible behavior change that must come with it) must become **one of humanity's foremost ethical imperatives**.

Since then, of course, an ever-rising crescendo of increasingly dire and urgent environmental warnings have been coming from environmentalists and other earth scientists from every corner of the globe. Humanity everywhere, of course, has to be concerned about the increasing pollution of Earth's air and water, and the destruction of so many local natural habitats that is occurring as a result of global population growth. But even more threatening than these regional phenomena (of course) is **the overarching reality of global warming**...the warming of the entire planet's atmosphere -- caused primarily by humanity's utter addiction to and dependence on fossil fuels. This **dangerously accelerating environmental reality** is no longer seriously doubted (except for a few ideological -- and I might add nearly idiotic -- conservatives like Rush Limbaugh, George Will and Cal Thomas, who are **still somehow deluding themselves** -- God knows how because the evidence is absolutely overwhelming -- that we are **not** in any real

We All Live Downstream

Rev. Scott W. Alexander
 Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Vero Beach
 Sunday, October 10, 2010

ecological danger). No one (I will dare to bluntly say this morning) no one with a serious brain in their head can doubt the fact that our earth is noticeably and dangerously warming. The only thing we don't know at this juncture is precisely **how fast and logarithmically** this warming (and related ecological upheavals) will occur...and **how soon and how drastically** it will affect climate, crops, weather, and our quality of life here on earth. Surely, surely **no one** (NO ONE!) in this room now doubts the troubling fact that our earth -- and everything (INCLUDING US!) that lives upon it -- are at considerable peril UNLESS HUMANITY ALL AROUND THE GLOBE QUICKLY AND COLLECTIVELY BECOMES MORE CIRCUMSPECT AND RESPONSIBLE WHEN IT COMES TO OUR USE OF AND INTERACTIONS WITH THE NATURAL ENVIRONMENTS AND ECOLOGIES IN WHICH WE ARE INTRACTABLY IMBEDDED.

Leading environmental writer Bill McKibben is already convinced that in many ways it is too late...not for humanity to save itself -- he (as am I) is still essentially sanguine about the possibility that humanity (as the dominant species giving shape to our world) will find the ways to restructure its activities (and consumption needs) that will allow for life on this planet to continue with a reasonable quality of life for all -- but it is too late (he says) for us to save **the stable and beautiful earth** that has sustained us for thousands of years. In his new book **Eaarth**, he writes...

The time has already passed for urgency, if we are to save ourselves and our planet we must create an environmental (and lifestyle) revolution. We must regularly remind ourselves that we (and the rest of humanity) must change the way we live on this earth, and change it fast! I take it on faith (and many knowledgeable environmental people with whom I interact reassure me this is so) I take it on faith that (despite the widespread -- and in some cases irreversible -- global environmental damage that has already occurred) THERE IS SUFFICIENT TIME AND EMERGING ENVIRONMENTAL UNDERSTANDINGS AND SUSTAINABLE TECHNOLOGIES for humanity to change its ways, and adopt new lifestyles and consumption habits that will permit us to both live well and protect the fragile ecosystems of Earth for future generations. But what will be required is a new and insistent CONSCIOUSNESS and a new COMMITMENT on all our parts...and on the parts of all the governments and corporations and agencies that are responsible to shape our shared human future on this planet.

We All Live Downstream

Rev. Scott W. Alexander

Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Vero Beach

Sunday, October 10, 2010

AMEN BILL MCKIBBEN! We human beings (again...who as the dominant species on this earth for many centuries now have foolishly gotten quite used to doing pretty much as we please with it) now have a great and urgent moral responsibility to change – radically change -- both our understanding of and our relationship with our planet home. Earth (which once seemed so vast and plentiful to early global explorers like Columbus) has now for all time revealed itself to be nothing other than what it is...a rather small and insignificant planet in this galaxy, a spinning little blue/green orb with very finite resources and incredibly fragile eco-systems. As our seventh Unitarian Universalist principle affirms, this planet is one, sacred, **“interdependent web”** of interconnected living things...which we (as responsible citizens of earth) must immediately learn to protect, nurture and sustain.

Of all our ethical responsibilities in life – and there are many of them, across all the spheres of our living – this ethical responsibility (to take care of our earth and live carefully and sustainably upon it) is perhaps the most pressing duty which humanity now faces. There are (to be sure) so many painful and persistent moral issues facing humanity on every continent in our time – the persistence of warfare and terrorism, the prevalence of political tyranny and oppression, the specter of poverty, homelessness and hunger, the scourge of racism, religious hatreds and genocide, the acceptance of violence and sexual abuse (especially against women and children), the horror of communicable diseases and other preventable degradations of body and spirit – to name just a few. But if humanity, all together, cannot learn (and learn quickly!) how to act in RATIONAL GLOBAL COOPERATION to protect and preserve our earth's fragile eco-system, then all our other efforts to solve the rest of humanity's painful problems will not (in the end) matter a twit. If we do not – as a species – quickly find the wisdom and restraint to begin living in a cautious and sustainable way on our earth, none of the rest of how we live with one another on earth may be of any consequence.

This will not be easy for us, of course. It will not be easy for us human persons **INDIVIDUALLY** -- as we will (sooner than later) be obliged to make **real personal lifestyle changes** – reducing the size of our homes, shifting the types of cars we drive, and changing the overall patterns of our consumption of earthly resources, even adjusting what we harvest from the earth and how and what we eat)...

We All Live Downstream

Rev. Scott W. Alexander
Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Vero Beach
Sunday, October 10, 2010

AND it will not be easy for us for us **COLLECTIVELY** -- as political citizens of earth who will need to insist that our governments, corporations and international agencies adopt the public and global policies and restraints that will protect our earth and all its interconnected eco-systems. Right now in America – in this election cycle – there are many candidates who are telling us we cannot afford “cap and trade” and other “green” policies that will help us protect our earth. In the days and years ahead, we (along with the rest of humanity) will need radically reduce our “carbon footprints”...we will radically need to downsize our lives, to live with less, to restrain our consumptive activity and freedom, and to pay more for energy and food – in other words (as the dominant species) to live more **modestly, respectfully** and **wisely** upon the earth.

Let me put this another way. In the challenging ecological days and years ahead, we Americans (who by-in-large lead such prosperous, comfortable, unfettered and consumer-driven lives) will need to instill in our minds and hearts and hands an **ETHIC OF RELINQUISHMENT**

*[The phrase “**Ethic of Relinquishment**” is projected up on the walls for the congregation to see]*

An “**ETHIC OF RELINQUISHMENT**” which will help us to understand (and act on) the **absolute necessity** of our voluntarily **giving up** many of the **extravagances and excesses in our living to which we have grown accustomed...**in order that life on earth can be sustained. This ethic will call us (with a profound urgency in these vulnerable times), to a day-to-day commitment to live simpler, greener, more modest and sustainable lives as citizens of the earth.

Now...this talk of ethical relinquishment (of purposefully living smaller and lighter and more responsibly upon the earth) may seem like a TALL (if not an impossible) EXISTENTIAL ORDER...for (as you all know) relinquishment (and voluntary simplicity) is always hard for comfort-seeking creatures such as ourselves...again just listen to all the politicians who are confidently telling us we need not make these sacrifices and changes. But **the good news**, dear friends -- and it is with this affirmation that I will end this morning – the good news is that **we are RATIONAL HUMAN BEINGS...**we are **free agents on this earth who are capable of exhibiting both the INTELLIGENCE and ETHICAL INSTINCT** to do what is necessary -- which as I have said will mean A LOT OF CONSUMPTIVE RESTRAINT (and

We All Live Downstream

Rev. Scott W. Alexander
Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Vero Beach
Sunday, October 10, 2010

adjusted lifestyles) -- to bring ourselves into RIGHT RELATIONSHIP with our earth and all her many living things. This Sunday, may we remind one another of the VITAL ROLE **we each MUST play** in the days and years ahead...no one of us must imagine that we can avoid this ethical imperative. Together as wise and responsible HUMAN BEINGS we **can** do this, dear friends...together we can do our part to save both our world and ourselves.

But again, let me state the obvious...let there be no illusions or denial here...as I have already observed...none of this will be easy for us. We have a great deal of work to do with and for our earth...and many will be the voices resisting this call to change...and furthermore (as I have already observed) many of the **substantive lifestyle changes** that will be required of us (and the rest of humanity) will not always be welcome, easy or popular. But as Unitarian Universalists, committed (as we have been for decades) to protecting and treasuring "**the interdependent web of which we are a part**" we must now be ready to do are part in this **global revisioning** and **personal restructuring** which must happen. Let us speak up (and act up, by the personal choices we make) in our communities and neighborhoods for the changes we know will be required to save our earth. There is not a moment to waste, dear friends, and there is no one else to do this work...simply no one else...no one else.

Amen.