

*Healing the Gulf*

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Thomas Jefferson Memorial Church, Unitarian-Universalist  
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Good morning. I appreciate another opportunity to let out my inner preacher. I think it's a genetic trait. Although my father's kin were genteel Los Angelinos, my mother's father was a Nazarene preacher in small prairie churches during the early 1900s—her mother bore eight children through the Dust Bowl and the Depression, two of whom died. My mother remembered walking to school barefoot sometimes to save wear to her shoes, and putting them on when she got there. She remembered their backyard gardens and chickens, and her mother's endless, grinding labor. A memory she found particularly painful was that in one little town, a farmer would bring their family buckets of skim milk. For her this was shaming, as in those days, skim milk was thrown to the hogs.

In their poverty, that side of my family struggled, but they also lived closer to the earth than I ever have. I think it's safe to say that for most of us here today who grow any food, whether gardening is a few plants or a passion, at the least—for us—it is a choice. Another choice is to become more “locavore”—eating more locally-raised foods. These choices help us sidestep some of the cruelty of factory farming and the habit of eating pesticide-laced produce that has been trucked across the continent packaged in petroleum-based plastics that will fill up landfills and drift through oceans for hundreds of years.

We get it. And we're changing as fast as we can. Aren't we?

You don't want to ask, by the way, whether I practice what I preach. The answer is No. Or, so inconsistently that I wonder daily if in the moral universe, it even counts. I drive an oil-guzzling vehicle because those are the wheels I have. I'm an ovo-lacto-convenient-o vegetarian, but I pretend the leather in my shoes is too far down there to see. I still am recycling multiple plastics -- because I accept them in the first place. (It turns out that with the exception of one chain, which sells them to a manufacturer of plastic timber, the bags you take back to most grocery stores are baled and shipped overseas, where they're often burned for fuel, spewing their toxins into the air...over there.)

My subsistence in this green city does not depend on raising my own food or weaving my sandals from reeds. Or on paying attention to where my food comes from, how it gets to me, or what it's packaged in. But these things are on my mind much more these days. They're probably on all our minds, as one of many ways in which we are awakening to the imperative of earth. Awakening now is NOT too late, and our religious movement is all over it today, but it sure has taken a while.

Our Unitarian Universalist Seventh Principle affirms: *Respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part.* If you're a relatively new UU, you may not be aware that the Seventh Principle was only added to our testaments in the 1980s. We had fine principles before then, but not one made reference to the earth. The planet on which

we and all other species depend for food, for energy, for inspiration, and for our existence. The principle that, one might say, either trumps or makes all others possible. In other words, we can be kind, tolerant and liberal until the cows come home, but if we have no sustainable habitat or agriculture, our descendants will be too busy fighting wars over resources to worry about the fine points of love and justice.

Lately, however, we've had a more immediate reminder. The gushing deepwater well, bleeding oil into the Gulf of Mexico, has riveted us all with horror. If not horror, then grief. If not grief, then anger. If not anger, then fear. If not fear, then guilt. More likely, all of them.

Now the well is capped and our fingers are crossed. It's not over, of course. Fouled wetlands, the human economic and health impacts and the horrible deaths of the voiceless, like the bird whose image you hold, will continue for a very long time. And as long as we keep drilling, more leaks and spills will happen. The biggest question that the Gulf oil spill brings to mind after *How could we let this happen?* is, *Has it changed us?*

A few years ago, I thought about the notion that although guilt and fear are ineffective motivators for behavioral change, love is different. Opening our hearts to intentionally love the earth, not as an abstraction, but as a living body, can inspire us to consider the planet in our daily choices. Love is what makes these changes possible.

The ghastly experience of watching millions of gallons of poisonous crude pumping into the Gulf's waters has been like watching a loved one's artery bleed. Whether what we love is shrimp, or coastal culture, or the diversity of life in those extraordinary ecosystems, it has hurt to see how our addiction to oil has harmed this region and this nation, and has shattered the lives of thousands. Right now, the closest consequence of our ravaging energy use is not just somewhere far away where soldiers and innocents keep dying—it's oozing at our doorsills.

It's an emergency, this fouling, whether the well is finally capped or not. Of course it's an emergency! And we all know what to do. There are actions and choices, and consuming less and witnessing more, and all sorts of ways we can change our own lives and demand urgent change in the world. All of us can find our voices, as individuals, as citizens, and as a community, and raise them. There's a moment, you might call it Peak Grief, when you just decide to do it. It's like turning on a light switch. Or...turning it off. If you need a place to start, ask anyone on the Green Sanctuary or Environmental Action Committee. In fact, please stop by our tables after the service—we've got things you can sign.

But what happens if we forget it's an emergency? What happens when the current crisis drifts off our television screens?

There are so many questions, but underneath them all, there's really only one: What explains the real source of the gulf disaster – the gulf in awareness between the ways we live our lives and run our nation and the destruction that is done to sustain them?

A twist on Sojourner Truth's apocryphal line helps me think about that. "And aren't I an animal, too?" We forget we are animals. We are an extraordinary species, and we are only a species. We can be as special as we want, and in many ways we are, but in other ways we are just desperately stressed animals, turning our backs on or attacking each other, isolating ourselves from the rest of nature and the wider human community, and because we forget our natural interdependence, fouling our own nests.

We're approaching "peak oil", which is the term for when oil production begins to decline because it's going to run out, with long-term potentially apocalyptic economic and global results. Experts argue over whether that Peak Oil moment is ten years from now, or more. But nobody has to win that debate to convince us that our use of fossil fuels is finite and that carrying on just as we have, just because we're able to, just doesn't make any sense.

Fossils are things that represent life as it used to be, remember? The thing I want to deny, because it means interrupting my pleasant dreams, is that the production of fossil fuel is as harmful to life *right now* as its absence will be to civilization if it runs out before we've put renewable energy in its place.

I have thought repeatedly in the last 97 days since the Deepwater Horizon began to spew, about words I learned as a little girl. They made a tremendous impact on me, in the sense that they described sacrifice in an elemental way I could understand. "This is my body, which was broken for you." The notion of this beautiful planet being broken for us...by us...has haunted me for a very long time.

Sometimes, connecting to where you are on the earth helps you connect to the rest of the place. Where we are sitting is in the center of the state of Virginia. Our city, like so many others, gets its electricity from Mountaintop Removal Mining, a hideously destructive method of coal production that involves literally blowing the tops off beautiful Appalachian ridges to get at the coal seams beneath them. Over 500 mountains in Virginia, West Virginia and Kentucky have been destroyed so far. Five of these sites are now feeding the Bremo Bluff power plant in Fluvanna that sends electricity to Charlottesville. There are skirmishes over permits, which are sometimes suspended by the EPA, and then new ones are granted. Moratoriums happen, then the coal corporations and our appetites demand more, and the blasts go off again.

Mountains that have existed for millennia, and mountaintops that have been loved by Appalachian people for all the generations in memory, are literally blasted to bits. The booms shake houses nearby, the air fills with dust, and the streams that lead into our watersheds are choked with toxic runoff, which lingers in the soil and water and continues its dark damage to the ecosystem long after the machines have moved on. Kind of like crude oil creeping over the wetlands.

But I like air conditioning. And it feels so cheerful to turn on lights.

This mountaintop removal that runs the air conditioning and the lights in this city--and this sanctuary—has been going on for 20 years. These mountains have no voice. Nor do many people in coalfield regions, whose communities have been dependent on mining's relentless profiteering, for so long.

The oil disaster we are witnessing is acute and very visible, thanks to the media. Like a massive infarction, it stopped us all in our tracks with seizing pain. We see it, and we feel it with the same kind of anguish as when we watched New Orleans drown. The other night, though, a resident of that city's Musicians' Village said on PBS to Tavis Smiley, "Katrina did teach us this—we're not as naïve as we once were. When something really bad happens, we're on our own."

Are we? Are they? Maybe that's where, in practice, our First Principle could merge with our Seventh. Respect for every human's worth and dignity demands that we care about people; respect for the interdependent web of life demands that we care about the earth not just where *we* are, but where *they* live, too.

The citizens of coalfield communities have been too much on their own for too long, but we don't see mountaintops exploding on TV every day. And most of us probably know more about the devastation to the Gulf right now than we do about our neighbors in Virginia and other coal-producing states.

The decapitated mountains are hidden behind the whole, pretty ones that line the interstate. Southwestern Virginia, West Virginia and Kentucky are still very beautiful to drive through. The massive MTR sites are off the main roads. Thirty minutes from Charleston, a few of us from this church stood on top of Kayford Mountain a few weeks ago with a small man named Larry Gibson, who took us up a path to an opening at the edge of his woods. There, we could look out at mountaintop removal.

"Removal". What a euphemistic word. Kind of like "cleansing" or "relocation", don't you think?

It was devastating to witness. What once were mountaintops, reaching as far as you could see into the distance, just ... decapitated. Gone. Whacked off as though some giant chefs' cleavers were slicing off the tops of rows of boiled eggs. It's almost that efficient, too. There were only two bulldozers busy below us. One of the marvels of mountaintop removal is that technology has advanced so far that the coal companies now need only nine men and a lot of explosive to blast off one mountaintop. Before, nearly seventy would have been employed under the surface to take the equivalent amount of coal. So, the jobs have dwindled anyway, while coal production is at a record high and more profitable than ever—for the companies. The mine eating the mountains around Larry is named Empire Mine—so said the small sign at the bottom of an access road.

Larry doesn't want to live in this empire we have built. He has held on, refusing to sell his acres, while all around him Appalachian mountaintops are destroyed. The blasts shake the ground and open sudden deep fissures into the earth. We had to step carefully around

a few of those. It's not an easy position, to be so nearly alone in defying King Coal. He has a gun in every room of his cabin, and his bedroom door is so heavy it closes on a track. He's testified before Congress and has spent years trekking small groups of visitors up to the top of his own small mountain to view the destroyed ones around him. Maybe he's used to it by now, but he didn't sound that way, talking to us while the rain pelted down. And there's one thing for sure that Larry will never get used to.

Where it once was tucked on a gentle knoll surrounded by tall forested ridges, his family's cemetery now pokes up alone like a thumb through a hole in a glove—its sides chopped straight down, missing gravestones and debris blown into the streams below. The ridges that once embraced it with that old promise of eternal rest—are just gone. Flat topped. Buzz cut.

Larry's heart is broken. And the mountains will never grow back. Blasted mountaintops cannot be healed. The coal companies have promised to "reclaim the land" they have mined for such "clean" coal. What does that look like? Well, they've planted a fast-growing, non-native species of grass. Where we looked out onto the slashed landscape, there are scattered saplings (locusts will fill it up fast) and a thin layer of green over the surface. Kind of like gangrene.

I can come up with metaphors, but I'm theologically simple, philosophy is like so much math to me, and I have nothing much more than this to offer. Some images, some word pictures, for the grief I believe most of us feel. Although unlike a few years back, by now I'm starting to think maybe guilt should be one of our motivators, too. Whatever it takes! Maybe there's a cleansing guilt, the right kind, that moves one to try to make amends.

Maybe that's what makes people into activists. What a word. We're all active. We're leading active lives, we have active minds and active imaginations. But still, the question is: are we spiritually active enough to figure out how to love the earth enough to defend it?

Expressing powerful feelings is a start, but it's not enough to save us when the web of life is this torn. When we have let ourselves and our culture spin and race and spew so far away from the time when the food we ate and most things we needed came from places we knew and sources that made some sense, and when we recognized without struggle, in our deepest animal selves, the vital interdependence we have with our earth.

So how do we begin to heal?

I believe, right yet—we don't. First we acknowledge these wounds, and let the grief break us open. We've got to walk with this hurt for a while. We can't heal ourselves or broken faraway places by avoiding the pain of reckoning and change. We'll be feeling it still until we commit as individuals and communities to restoring our earth. Wise people say that means taking the science very seriously and doing it *now*, taking our leaders to task and leading them in the ways they've got to go, taking out our wallets for causes we care about, taking stock of how we live, and if need be, taking our feet to the streets.

That's when hope creeps back in. When we listen to our hearts and to our deeper, wiser instincts and stand for principle.

We can stand together as a religious community, too, and we can make our collective voice just as loud as we want it to be. We can decide to make sure that in our individual and community action, the Seventh Principle won't always be in seventh place.

In the meantime, let's sing "Paradise" for each other, and for Larry. Our paradise could be Kentucky, or Kayford Mountain, or the Gulf of Mexico, or China, or Africa, or Charlottesville. It's our paradise. It's our planet.

We are all part of the grieving, all part of the healing, and we all live here together.