

Justice, Equity and Compassion in the Mountains

We are gathered here this evening because we love our earth. I suspect there is something in the soul of the earth that is touching the souls of all of us here, and is calling us together; so I would like to begin my remarks tonight with a meditation by Susan Podebradsky, called "The Song of the Soul of the Earth." [from the 2003 UU Meditation Manual: How We Are Called.]

The Song of the Soul of the Earth

A true story sings the song of the soul of the earth,
And we feel it, deep in our bodies, and deep in our souls,
Because the Song of the Soul of the Earth is our song, too.

[breathe with me]

If you ride your breath and quiet your mind,
You will hear the heartbeat of the Earth.
You will feel the ebb and flow of the tides in the push and pull of
the blood beneath your skin.

The air you breathe out joins the breezes that circle the Earth.
And when you breathe in, the air in China stirs ever so slightly.

Where do we begin?

Where do we end?

When we take in the things around us, what we leave behind
changes everything.

A mindful moment sings the Song of the Soul of the Earth
And we feel it deep in our bodies, and deep in our souls,
Because the Song of the Soul of the Earth is our song, too.

This meditation reminds us that a true story, and a mindful moment, sing the song of the soul of the earth. So, I ask you – when are you mindful? What is your true story? Your song? And I would remind you that your true story is part of the earth's soul song, a forever song as filled with joy and wonder and laughter as it is with mourning and crying, and deep, aching grief.

Think of your true story as a quilt, and imagine that all our quilts join together to blanket and comfort the earth with the songs of our soul.

Tonight, I would like to share some of the pieces of my quilt, snippets of my story with you; for it is in sharing our stories, and in building relationships, that we will find hope and courage and love for what we must do for one another and for this planet, our home.

This is a truth I hold: I truly love mountains! I love the mountains in all seasons – in spring with their special, tender greenness and the happy sound of melting streams; in summer with their deep green and flowery finery; in autumn with their crisp evenings, crackling bonfires, gloriously colored leaves; in winter with the clarity of their trees etched against blue skies and snowy whiteness. In all seasons, they nurture my soul. I have been privileged to grow up roaming mountains and hills from the time I could walk. It may sound strange, but spending a lot of time in the mountains, loving them gives me the certain feeling that they love me, too. I want my grandchildren and their children and their children's children -- all our children -- to love and be loved by the mountains.

I also grieve the mountains. It hurts to see them blown up. It hurts to hear the lie that blowing them up is the only way to meet our country's energy needs, especially when tons of coal are being sold to China for making steel. It hurts when free-flowing streams are buried. The destruction of clean water is a whole other story, for another time. I believe the mountains and the streams know that many of us grieve their passing because we are interconnected. We are all part of the same web of life.

Yet, I live with the paradox of love and grief. Because I love the mountains, I work to save them. And I know I also benefit from the injustice of their destruction; for I consume electricity that comes from the coal that is deep inside the mountains. I enjoy the comfort and convenience of turning on a light, of using my computer – of normal living. The hard truth is that my everyday life is underlaid with the grief of destruction.

I believe it does not have to be this way. I can remember when we did not remove mountains to get coal, and I don't believe for a nano-second that coal companies would go out of business if mountain removal stopped immediately. You may notice I'm saying mountain removal – because it's not just the tops that are removed. They're really turning our mountains into molehills. Our state song is "The West Virginia Hills." Mountain removal mining will soon have us singing "The West Virginia Flats." Unfortunately, the voracious ravaging of our mountains might better be called mountain range removal.

The grief I have is not from only the loss of the mountains. It's from the loss of streams and the increase in flooding. It's from the loss of trees and plants. Of creatures great and small. I have watched a mother bear with two cubs, whose mountain home was blown up, search for food. I stood at a safe distance, thinking, "I could understand it if that mama bear wanted to come up and swat me, as a representative member of the human race who destroyed her home and habitat."

Grief also comes from the corporate greed that thinks creation is here for the taking -- that there is no need to put a price tag on the destruction of creation, or even something as mundane as our roads. Big coal trucks wear out our roads. And now, in addition to dealing with coal extraction, we're also dealing with the corporate glee that gas can be extracted from underneath the Marcellus shale, using a water and chemical mix to reach it. Gas companies are seeing dollar bills under every rock. Yet, the gas companies protested that it would be too expensive for them to have to maintain the roads necessary for their extracting equipment. But too expensive for whom? And who knows how fracking for gas will affect water quality – some hydrologists fear it could affect the water quality of the whole eastern United States. The little bit of good news here is that for the time being New York State has banned fracking.

The common necessities of life for us humans – unpolluted water for drinking, unpolluted air for breathing, unpolluted land for

raising food don't have a price tag. Is that supposed to make them expendable? It seems that even we humans and our needs are expendable, too. In West Virginia, we have an entire town, Prenter, where brown water comes from the faucets, thanks to the reverberations from mountain blasting that ruined the wells. The water is absolutely unusable – people can't drink it, can't cook with it and can't wash with it.

We have a history of cutting corners on safety which has led to many mining deaths. Statistics kept since 1863 of those who died in mines in West Virginia, now total 21, 149 lives lost. This does not include those who died from side-effects associated with mining, like black lung disease. On my worst days I think the out-of-state corporations want us all to just go away so they can blow everything to smithereens with no accountability to anyone or any agency or to the earth, and take, take, take until the coal is gone. It's like they think they can make themselves richer than God.

I am disturbed that our Governor, who is running for the US Senate, is so much in cahoots with corporate coal that he has asked our State Environmental Protection Agency to file suit against the federal EPA because the federal EPA is enforcing the Clean Water Act and not granting mountain removal permits at the drop of a hat, as did the previous federal administration. The federal EPA actually heard our voices of concern and outrage and agreed that we West Virginians were not being protected.

I hope that one day the people who run the corporations and the politicians who help them wake up and realize they are earthlings like the rest of us. I hope that one day they can hear the song of the soul of the earth and finally "get it" that we are all connected and are supposed to be living in harmony with earth and not in dominion over her.

But until then? While I'm waiting for their ears to get unplugged and their souls to find some music? Well, there are these ideals for living known as Justice, Equity and Compassion, good things to practice in the mountains and anywhere else you can. The words

“Justice, equity and compassion” are found in the second of the seven guiding principles of Unitarian Universalism. Our faith calls us to affirm and promote justice, equity and compassion in human relations. Right now I have to admit that I’m having a hard time having compassion for our governor’s decision to sue the federal EPA. I think he’s doing it out of fear of losing the Senate race. I can find a little compassion for the DEP head who likely fears he would lose his job if he didn’t agree to help bring suit.

Actually, the practice of justice, equity and compassion in and for the mountains and among mountaineers is difficult because huge amounts of fear get in the way. Miners fear for their jobs, and fear they won’t have the means to support their families if their jobs go. They also fear for their safety while mining. Older miners, now retired, fear for their homes and communities. While the mountains may look OK on the outside, the older miners know that inside, some mountains are weak. They are honeycombed where coal was removed, and too much of that space now contains noxious mine waste. The elders fear what will happen if a formerly-mined mountain collapses. Residents in and around coal mining communities fear for their health. We’re even afraid to visit our loved ones who are buried in the cemeteries that have been declared off limits by coal companies; and some of the cemeteries have been blown to smithereens as part of Mountaintop Removal Mining. Last year, we tried to get a bill passed in the WV legislature to protect family cemeteries and allow families to visit their dead. Maybe we’ll get it this year’s session. We will persist, out of respect for those who have died, and out of compassion for their families and friends; and because it is just to do so.

With so much fear, there is a lot of anger, too. And confusion. As a tree-hugging environmentalist, I have been confronted by miners who think I’m out to take their jobs away. They believe it when the coal company tells them that saving mountains means no work for them. Then they get confused when we tree-huggers support the miner’s calls for safety at work. Part of the song of our soul is that we want justice – for the environment and for miners. We all celebrated the unprecedented rescue of the Chilean miners.

However, I agreed with one of the Chilean miners who raised the justice question when he said he was glad to be out but angry that the company allowed him to be in an unsafe mine. Justice for miners is a world-wide concern.

I like the theological definition of justice as “love in action.” In closing, I want to tell you about a friend who works hard at that kind of justice and who is bringing justice, equity and compassion to her town. She helped Mel and me be here today by being the guest speaker at our UU Church in Charleston. Her name is Lorelei, and she lives in Whitesville, near where the Upper Big Branch mine explosion killed 29 miners last year. By a fluke of scheduling, several members of her family were not in the mine that day.

She lives by Coal River Mountain, which is slated to be blown up for its coal, so she helped put together a study that proved wind mills could be installed on Coal River Mountain that would provide more power than the coal and would provide ongoing jobs of installation and maintenance of the windmills. She went to DC to lobby for wind power and to save her home. However, the permits for mining and the installations for Mountain Removal Mining are in place, so she lives with the threat of explosions.

She has shared with me how the awareness of all the problems associated with living in a mining town, of living through the Upper Big Branch explosion, of the tensions and angst in the community were getting overwhelming. She said it was hard to look people in the eye and see no hope. She was losing the song of her soul. But she never stopped listening for it. Of course, she won't say she did it singlehandedly, but her vision, shared with others, has led to the creation of a space for common ground, a community center where all people – miners, family members, environmental activists, business owners – can express their fears and concerns and be heard. Where people can tell their stories, and share their skills. There's someone teaching banjo lessons to anyone who wants them; there's the group that got together and involved almost the whole community in making old-fashioned, stirred-all-day-in-the-iron-pot apple butter – sales of which help keep the center going. It

may sound like small potatoes, but who knows what will evolve for the good when people see each other as people, drop their barriers, and begin to create together?

This is the agreement Lorelei and her cohorts crafted for their center:

“We here, within these walls, strive to make our community a better place to live, without prejudices, political involvement or motives, religious preferences, or other group affiliations or involvements. We agree this space should be neutral ground where everyone from all walks of life can come together for the betterment of the community. We can work together, as a group to bring unity and revitalize the communities on Coal River. Everyone has something to contribute. Everyone has a voice.”

And to that I say Amen! We do all have a voice and something to contribute to the good of our earth.

After tonight, when you go home, as you think about your role in environmental issues, in bringing awareness of the need to save mountains, to reduce carbon to no more than 350ppm – all these intertwined eco-justice issues, take time to listen to what is inside of you. Remember that when you feel overwhelmed at staring injustice and destruction in the face, to practice justice, equity, and compassion on yourself. Be faithful to your true story and to the song that sings within your soul. And you will find that song echoing in the souls of the people around you and in the soul of the earth. Thank you.