

“Saving...Each Other”
for the Unitarian Society of Hartford
April 24, 2016
Rev. Heather Rion Starr, Co-Minister
Worship Associate: Julie Grace

“As people become aware of each other, their frame of reference about what’s happening, and what could happen, changes. They realize that all these problems are linked—but all these solutions may also be linked.”—Bob Massie

OPENING WORDS

Rev. Heather Rion Starr

Good morning. It is so good to be with you all. It is a gorgeous morning, the bursting out of spring in New England finally happening in a definitive way. We acknowledge Passover today, and Earth Day. We feel the turbulence of a very political weekend in our state in the midst of a presidential campaign and all the verbiage that that stirs up and hopefully, hopefully the engagement it also engenders. We witness together to the careening complexities of our world.

In the words of poet Marge Piercy,
“The work of the world is common as mud.
Botched, it smears the hands, crumbles to dust.
I want to be with people who submerge in the task,
Who go into the fields to harvest
 and work in a row and pass the bags along,
Who stand in the line and haul in their places
Who are not parlor generals and field deserters
 but move in a common rhythm
 when the food must come in or the fire be put out.
The pitcher cries for water to carry and *a person for work that is real.*”

Let us engage with the real, here in this sanctuary today.
Come, let us worship together.

READING

Mary Sherwin

Blessing When the World is Ending
by Jan Richardson

Look, the world
is always ending
somewhere.

Somewhere
the sun has come
crashing down.

Somewhere
it has gone
completely dark.

Somewhere
it has ended
with the gun
the knife
the fist.

Somewhere
it has ended
with the slammed door
the shattered hope.

Somewhere
it has ended
with the utter quiet
that follows the news
from the phone
the television
the hospital room.

Somewhere
it has ended
with a tenderness
that will break
your heart.

But, listen,
this blessing means
to be anything
but morose.
It has not come
to cause despair.

It is simply here
because there is nothing

a blessing
is better suited for
than an ending,
nothing that cries out more
for a blessing
than when a world
is falling apart.

This blessing
will not fix you
will not mend you
will not give you
false comfort;
it will not talk to you
about one door opening
when another one closes.

It will simply
sit itself beside you
among the shards
and gently turn your face
toward the direction
from which the light
will come,
gathering itself
about you
as the world begins
again.

TURNING INWARD

Desert Spring
by [Victoria E Safford](#)

They had no idea where they were going, when they left that night, in the dark, without lights, without shoes, without bread, their children smothered against them so they would make no noise.

They had no idea what they were getting into, following this Moses, this wild-eyed one who claimed visions and made promises but who after all could guarantee them nothing, except death if they were caught.

They had no idea, these slaves, what it could mean, this promise of land (their own country) and life abundant. Of freedom they knew nothing, except what they could taste by living in its opposite, slavery, and that taste became a hunger, and that hunger became insatiable till they were ravenous for freedom, and they went out then—but no one knows to this day whether they were led by Moses or by the outstretched arm and mighty hand of something else, of something eternal (as they would afterwards and always claim), or whether their own human, hungry will made them flee that night from Pharaoh.

They went into the wilderness. There they wandered forty years, which in those days was a lifetime. Forty was a good, old age, so many of them died before getting anywhere, and many were born in the desert and grew to adulthood knowing nothing but the journey—not slavery, not freedom, just the going. They whined and complained and muttered, and some mutinied, for they were a stiff-necked and rebellious people (you can read it for yourself); ungrateful people, even when manna rained down from heaven and quails were sent to feed them; unhappy people, longing, out loud even, for the familiar security of Egypt, of all places, where at least they knew what to expect, as awful as it was; impatient people, making cheap little idols and gods of metal to bargain with in secret when the traveling got hard or merely dull, and the days and years became monotonous.

In the springtime we remember: the promised land is not a destination—it is a way of going. The land beyond the Jordan, that country of freedom and dignity and laughter—you carry it inside you all the while. It is planted in your mind and heart already, before you ever start out, before it even occurs to you that in order to leave that life in Egypt, the intolerable bondage of that life, what you need to do is stand up and walk forward.

In the springtime we remember: the promised land is not a destination—it is a way of going. What you need to do is stand up and walk forward.

Vanishing Song Birds
by [Stephen M Shick](#)

I understand history as possibility...that could also stop being a possibility.
—Paulo Freire

The winds of extinction sing a mournful song
in the rustling grass,
where the bobwhite drums
and the meadowlark's melody is vanishing.

The winds of extinction sing a mournful song
in the dark forest shadows,
where the boreal chickadee's
voice is no longer heard
and the grosbeak
serenades a coming hush.

The winds of extinction sing a mournful song
over the troubled waters,
where the great scaup
quietly rests for the last time
and the harsh-voiced tern
skydives to death.

The winds of extinction sing a mournful song
while we wait
to find our voices
to sing for their rebirth.

I genuinely wish I had a more uplifting message for you all today. But sometimes, what we do, especially I think in Unitarian Universalist congregations, sometimes what we do is uplifting through truth-telling. We lift ourselves up collectively out of the haze of the day-to-day and face the bigger picture, the realities of our world, however sobering they may be. And they are sobering.

I keep thinking that Earth Day is no longer something I think we should “celebrate.” It is something we should practice, honor, ritualize, it is now, at best, a global Day of Reckoning. Many of you are aware of the recent research widely published by a team of respected scientists that conveys that the impact of climate change on our planet by the year 2100 will likely be much worse than previously thought. Professor Thomas Stocker, part of the research team and faculty at the University of Bern, Switzerland, says: “The long-term view sends the chilling message of what the real risks and consequences are of the fossil fuel era. It will commit us to massive adaptation efforts so that for many, *dislocation and migration* become the only option.”¹

I keep thinking about Hurricane Katrina in 2005. Over 1200 people died in the hurricane and subsequent floods. Or maybe it’s more than that—“according to the National Hurricane Center, 1,836 fatalities can be attributed to the storm.”² I remember the images of the Superdome, all those people in the Superdome, mayhem, water pouring in. Over 9,000 people sheltered in the Superdome as Katrina came ashore on August 28, 2005. “Governor [Kathleen Blanco](#) called the Superdome shelter strategy an “experiment,” when asked if it could hold the storm or the flood.”³ All over the globe, now, we are experimenting with life, life of all forms. We have made our existence, and the existence of many other species as well, a grand experiment. What can we survive?

I keep thinking about the tsunami, and the meltdowns at the Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Power Plant, following the 2011 Tohoku earthquake. “It was the most powerful [earthquake ever recorded to have hit Japan](#), and the [fourth most powerful earthquake in the world](#) since modern record-keeping began in 1900.”⁴ Just recently I heard a story on the radio about a group of school kids with their teacher on the roof of their school, looking out at their neighborhood, their town, their homes, their

¹ <http://www.theguardian.com/environment/2016/feb/08/sea-level-rise-could-last-twice-as-long-as-human-history>

² https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hurricane_Katrina

³ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Effect_of_Hurricane_Katrina_on_the_Louisiana_Superdome

⁴ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2011_T%C5%8Dhoku_earthquake_and_tsunami

parents and families, their world, engulfed in water and toxins. All they could do was watch.

I keep thinking about the Syrian refugees. How rarely it's really talked about in discussion of The Refugee Crisis that climate change is at the root of this mass migration. The truth-telling is right there, though: "From 2006 to 2011, large swaths of Syria suffered an extreme drought that, according to climatologists, was exacerbated by climate change. The drought led to increased poverty and relocation to urban areas.⁵ "That drought, in addition to its mismanagement by the Assad regime, contributed to the displacement of two million [people] in Syria."⁶ "That internal displacement...contributed to the social unrest that precipitated the civil war. Which generated the refugee flows into Europe." And what happened in Syria, says [Francesco Femia](#), of the Washington, D.C.-based [Center for Climate and Security](#) is likely to play out elsewhere going forward."

In the book that the Green Sanctuary SubCouncil and I have been reading together, **I keep thinking** about the children in East Texas. The book is called *What We're Fighting For Now Is Each Other: Dispatches from The Front Lines of Climate Justice*, by Wen Stephenson, who is a former *Atlantic* editor, *Boston Globe* editor, and NPR Senior Producer. He basically quit all that work to face, head-on, climate change and those who are trying to do something to bring about climate justice—he set out to be a truth-teller about truth-tellers. And he tells about these children in small-town East Texas. "Overwhelmingly Latino, the community is surrounded by oil refineries and other heavily polluting industrial facilities—a chemical plant, a tire plant, a metal-crushing facility, a train yard, and a sewage treatment plant—and sits at the intersection of two major expressways. The people who live there...breathe some of the country's most toxic air. Researchers at the University of Texas School of Public Health...found that children living within two miles of [this area] have a 56 percent higher risk of acute lymphocytic leukemia than those living only ten miles away" (150-151). A 56 percent higher risk of leukemia.

I keep thinking about how I wrote a version of this same kind of sermon, years ago in Bend, Oregon, after reading and being similarly floored by Bill McKibben's 2010 book, *Eaarth*. It is a transformative, incredibly sobering, and yet also redeeming read; I commend it to you. After reading his book I looked around where I was living and working in Central Oregon and I saw some things that still strike me: I saw that I lived

⁵ according to a recent report...cited by [Scientific American](#)

⁶ says [Francesco Femia](#), of the Washington, D.C.-based [Center for Climate and Security](#)

⁷ <http://time.com/4024210/climate-change-migrants/>

in a place that could not produce its own food year-round; the short growing season is less than 90 days in the high desert of Central Oregon. I saw how dependent we were on trucking. I saw how dependent we were on gasoline. Would it ever be conceivable that people's daily lives and routines would be transformed in a place that is so car-dependent? Would people ever bike by my home that was on a busy street sort of like Trout Brook Drive or Albany Avenue, here—would people ever bike by in the same density that they now drive? I tried to imagine it. I was also struck that the community I was living in and serving was representative of much of the United States in that we are enormous consumers of the planet's resources and yet, by happenstance really, we are removed from the most severe impact of climate change. We are not Bangladesh, "one of the most vulnerable countries to Natural Disasters in the world—80% of the country is floodplain."⁸ And yet we live in an ever-increasingly-interconnected world. Will we stand by and watch while Bangladesh is flooded? Over 162 million people live there. The median age of those people is 26 years old.⁹

I keep thinking about the people of the cities most anticipated to be impacted: Another study, [released in February](#), warned that New York, London, Rio de Janeiro and Shanghai will be among the cities most at risk [to severe] flooding by 2100.¹⁰ You know, Earth Day, April 22, is my birthday, so it's a particularly interesting day to observe, for me. Earth Day was started in 1970, five years before I was born. In my lifetime, I am watching it change. **I keep thinking**, as I said before, that Earth Day is no longer something I think we *can* "celebrate," it is evolving to become a global day of reckoning. In my lifetime now I have heard the language change from "we need to think about seven generations from now" to "New York, London, Rio de Janeiro and Shanghai will be among the cities most at risk [to severe] flooding by 2100¹¹," 84 years from now. Meanwhile there are developments in healthcare available for some that mean that some children born today could well live to be 120 years old. So what does all this mean for *our* vision of the future, of how soon the future is, of what was once far off becoming so soon that it's already in the past?

I keep thinking about the powerful presentation of the Movement Generation group to Unitarian Universalist ministers gathered at Asilomar in February of 2015—we learned that the impact of fossil fuel use is not fully felt for decades, that what we are witnessing right now on our planet is climate change based on fossil fuel use only up to 1970. The planet, the oceans, the ice caps, the atmosphere, it takes time for those complex

⁸ <http://www.ncdo.nl/artikel/climate-change-its-impacts-bangladesh>

⁹ <http://www.worldometers.info/world-population/bangladesh-population/>

¹⁰ <https://www.theguardian.com/science/2016/mar/22/sea-level-rise-james-hansen-climate-change-scientist>

¹¹ <https://www.theguardian.com/science/2016/mar/22/sea-level-rise-james-hansen-climate-change-scientist>

ecosystems to respond. So if we are seeing the impact of only up to 1970 now, what will the impact of our exponentially increased fossil fuel use up to 2010 look like? 2015?

...I keep thinking about all this, and then I go to work. As you know I now serve two congregations, each of you with beautiful, extraordinary, underutilized spaces, spiritual homes. Each of you with incredibly meaningful, New England stories of resilience. What will be our next chapters? This congregation, in the City of Hartford, is uniquely poised to address climate change locally in advance of it impacting our larger community. There is still time to look around, right here, and build more resilient connections with one another. What might it mean for this community, as a congregation, to be a grassroots hub for revisualization? To imagine ourselves in *advance* of catastrophe as a place where we practice being prepared to show up for one another? To create pathways for building resilience, connection, and healing? To be a haven for one another? To fight for each other? To save each other? 2100 is just not so far off, folks. What will we see and be called to respond to between now and then? Between now and 2030, this congregation's 200th anniversary? What is our reason for being, our call to relevance, that is different than it was in 1830?

I keep thinking about ways we can cultivate healing. One of these ways is being outside, getting our hands in the dirt, and creating more healing places for our spirit. Walking labyrinths has been a meaningful practice for me since I first walked one at my first General Assembly, our national Unitarian Universalist conference, in Cleveland, Ohio in 2001: "I stood outside the labyrinth and tried to trace with my eyes the path into the center, and out again, and I couldn't do it; the path wove in and out and my eyes couldn't keep all the curves in order. This was for me the pivotal sensation of the labyrinth: trust. Letting go of a need to draw the "way in" myself, and trusting that the path would lead me in, in whatever way was the right way. As I walked in I took in the peacefulness of the other couple of people who were walking; a few times I brushed shoulders or elbows with someone walking in the opposite direction. The silence was intimate. A young teenager—a tween—came in and skipped joyfully through the labyrinth, and that made me glad. In the center I sat and noticed my breath, and my calm. And then I walked out again, concentrating bodily on anticipating sharing my calm and love with those I would soon encounter. I stood again at the entrance, now the exit, and said a prayer of gratitude. I recognized grace in this movement and this activity, grace that I had not expected. I had suspended my need to *know* what was going to happen, which is so hard to let go of, and the purple painted lines had carried me. In my stance, in my gaze, in my thoughts, in my breath, I

felt new breadth.” We need more of *that*, more of those kinds of soul-expanding and spirit-deepening, collective experiences.

Here at the Unitarian Society of Hartford, a determined group of well over 20 people has persevered in getting solar panels put up after multiple efforts. This system will soon supply 100% of the Meeting House's electricity needs. The Green Sanctuary team has also applied for recognition under the new statewide Green Houses of Worship program sponsored by the Interreligious EcoJustice Network, *and* is preparing to apply for USH *reaccreditation* under the Unitarian Universalist Association's Green Sanctuary program—you can see more about the breadth of vision of that program through the grid on the back of your Order of Service. Our Green Sanctuary SubCouncil is also working on relaunching the Neighborhood Networks carpooling system. This and many more efforts always benefit from more energy and engagement, so if you are interested in helping out in any way, please speak with Green Sanctuary SubCouncil Co-Chairs, Jeff Howard and Mary Sherwin, who are each gave a Reading this morning and are doing so much behind-the-scenes.

We also have the opportunity this summer to turn our plot in the Watkinson Community Garden into a plant-based labyrinth. With the help of our neighbor, landscaper, and labyrinth designer, Cynthia Dodd, we are working on a labyrinth for our garden plot that we can then each have a part in tending and savoring. After the service and some fellowship time today, join me if you'd like in walking down to the Garden and pondering this healing, collective project.

...I keep thinking...and that is what so many of us keep doing, and it can be so paralyzing, all this thinking and thinking. Waiting and hoping that someone, some group, some entity, some leader, some collective is going to rise up and address the problem in a way that is truly transformative, revolutionary. We can paralyze ourselves, waiting for a leader, waiting for an obvious solution. Some one reminded me of the Margaret Mead quote yesterday: “Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world; indeed, it's the only thing that ever has.” And this change is going to come about one person at a time, one household at a time, one family at a time, deciding to make a change, deciding to move into the wilderness together.

Personally I don't think, anymore, that there is going to be a dramatic shift in collective thinking; I think it's going to be slow and painful and reactionary, because that's how we often are, as human beings. But we will do it together, we will slip in and out of life while doing it, and there will

be a gradual shift in human behavior from thriving to surviving, a shift that is already underway for so many. This is difficult to acknowledge. We witness to it together, here. We can still choose how we are going to be and who we are going to be with, on this wilderness journey towards 2100.

In those simple, profound words of Marge Piercy:

“I want to be with people who submerge in the task,
Who go into the fields to harvest
and work in a row and pass the bags along,
Who stand in the line and haul in their places
Who are not parlor generals and field deserters
but move in a common rhythm
when the food must come in or the fire be put out.
The work of the world is common as mud.
Botched, it smears the hands, crumbles to dust.
The pitcher cries for water to carry
and a person for work that is real.”

This is our work: to witness to what is happening in our time: the destruction that began before us, that has continued because of us, and that we can slow but we can not stop. This is our work: to be present to one another’s pain, to not look away, and to find ways large and small to try to turn the ship towards great kindness, greater consideration for all living things. This is our work: to not give up though we may become incredibly discouraged, to keep showing up, to bend the arc towards justice.

May it be so, Blessed Be, and Amen.

MUSICAL INTERLUDE

Pi-Hsun Shih

*CLOSING HYMN #163

“For the Earth Forever Turning”

*CHALICE EXTINGUISHING

*We extinguish this flame but not the light of truth,
The warmth of community, or the fire of commitment.
These we carry in our hearts until we are together again.*

*BENEDICTION

As you are comfortable, please reach out and find the hand or shoulder of those near you. In the words of Stephen Shick's haunting poem: "The winds of extinction sing a mournful song while we wait to find our voices to sing for [all of life's] rebirth."

May this be a place where we find our voices again, a place where we nourish our spirits again for the sometimes-grueling work of carrying on. We are all on a journey now, a journey of collective searching for joy, for the possibility of healing, for the possibility of transforming our ways of being in this world for the good of all life. Turn to your neighbor in a moment and create or deepen a connection. We need one another, we will need one another more than we can even anticipate, now. Weave strong webs with each other. And when you go from this place today, go with determination in your heart to savor the beauty of the world while doing everything you can to bring about the greater healing we all so desperately need. Go in peace, sharing love, creating justice.