

**ECOLOGICALLY THINKING:**  
**FOR THE EARTH FOREVER TURNING**

I have been thinking about songs and music a lot lately, so it wasn't really surprising to think of one of my favorite hymns, *For the Earth Forever Turning*, and to think further about the context in which it voices appreciation for our home the earth, the heavens, the seasons, sun and rain. It may not directly call us to ecological responsibility, but it certainly reminds us of the importance of a healthy earth. There are of course many songs about ecological concerns, but like the pictures of earth from space, this one particularly reminds me of our place in the universe. Without plants, oxygen and other stuff from earth, humans could not survive even in a low orbit let alone travel to distant planets. I am generally very much in favor of space exploration, but most of us will never leave earth's atmosphere or get further off the ground than commercial airliners fly. For me it is still a hopeful thing that humans may venture out into space, perhaps someday creating new homes on planets light years from here. Even if that may someday occur, we have a responsibility to preserve and protect the earth, our home and birthplace.

As we enjoy the series of storms that may help to break our drought in the west, there is a monster blizzard covering the eastern U.S. in the deepest snow in decades. Some might say this is just a normal periodic change in precipitation levels over which human activity has had little or no impact. But storm intensification, changing rain patterns, drought intensification and other evidences of climate change are overwhelmingly noted by climate scientists as well as anyone who pays serious attention to weather patterns. How much pollution the earth can absorb and how much more damage humans can do are uncertain.

It is clear that human industry and resulting pollution to air, water, and land over the last 3 centuries have created problems that will not just go away, especially in light of diminishing rainforests to absorb and filter CO2 and increasing human populations. I know that most if not all of us are concerned about the environment, but I think we need to talk about it more often than just around Earth Day.

Many of us drive Priuses, and Jan also has an all-Electric Smart Car. Most of us have high mpg vehicles or only drive bigger vehicles to haul the family. Some of us have or are getting solar panels and all of us are conscious of water use and pollution. Most if not all of us are concerned about the harm to animals, fish, and plants from industry, chemically supported and unsustainable farming, and the threat of the Tunnels project. We as a religious community are far more aware than most, of the ways that our sacred planet is being harmed. Even so, most of us feel discouraged and helpless to make real change happen.

With a whole planet to absorb the impact, it has been relatively easy to ignore or deny even the strongest storms and longest droughts as effects resulting from pollution and the overuse of resources. Even the best scientists do not know how much the Earth can absorb, but many think the Earth will be just fine once humans manage to wipe themselves out! So it isn't really a question of the earth surviving, but more a question of whether humankind will find a way to survive all the damage we have done to the planet. Within a century or two, forests might grow again where fields and cities have used the land. New species would evolve over time to adapt to whatever climate changes remain. As adaptable as we are, humans have stressed the environment far beyond what dinosaurs or any other species or class of animals has before. From a planetary perspective, we might just be expendable! And of course, until we learn to really live in harmony with the earth, it will not be such a great thing to export our mess to whatever other worlds we might reach!

When I was a child taking family trips, I remember lots more open spaces and undeveloped areas of land than one might see almost anywhere in the lower 48 these days. Each year, leaving the Chicago area by car it took longer to reach fields and farms and forests. Today businesses extend dozens of miles further in every direction, sometimes hundreds of miles, with no end to development in sight. For years climatologists have talked about tipping points, with some believing that we are already past several tipping points in global temperature, carbon fuel use, and pollution to air, oceans, and land. They have used many climate models for predicting problems that we are now seeing, in changing weather patterns, storm intensification, and deepening and expanding droughts. And of course, the risks of wars over land, resources, and religious or ideological differences add several wildcards to the mix. It is not just the tectonic plates of earth that move, but changing loyalties and beliefs can also cause major shockwaves around the earth.

Our tradition, Unitarian Universalism, has offered the greatest flexibility of any religious group in dealing creatively with religious and philosophical differences, and yet we remain just a small voice even in our own country. It doesn't help that we are allergic to proselytizing nor that we are prone to be influenced by various theological perspectives which would more nearly align us with certain mainstream liberal Christian groups which retain larger segments of the population. Though collaboration with such groups has often helped to accomplish localized goals, it may tend to lessen our unique willingness to listen to and accept an even broader range of perspectives without normalizing any.

Even as a small religious movement, we find it difficult to actually agree on social justice programs or goals. Yielding our individual commitments to our own favorite programs in order to join together in one or two larger projects is often difficult, yet together we might accomplish more helpful change! So where do we go from here?

With the water issues around the delta and the drought of the last several years in mind, we are well situated to think about the environmental issues related to water use and abuse. Whether the tunnels get built or not, water will continue to be a major issue for the west for the foreseeable future. And of course, it is not just humans who are affected by changes in water flows and the amount of water in lakes and reservoirs. Fish and aquatic animals depend upon water and don't have the option of digging ever deeper wells into the aquifer. Salmon runs are affected each year by the amount of water in rivers and streams when they return to spawn. Bear and birds and people who eat Salmon are also affected. Most varieties of fish, turtles, and other aquatic animals in the rivers and lakes feeding and comprising the delta are affected by the changing flows and temperatures and amounts of debris and sediment of and in the water.

Even though it may be satisfying to volunteer with groups taking care of different preserves and wetland areas, our greatest impact may be in advocacy for better water, wetland and community development policies and practices. Banding together with other UUs and like-minded folks generally may allow us to have a bigger voice and impact on what happens. The UU Legislative Ministry of California may afford us opportunities to make a difference on many areas of concern. We are expecting to host a UULM workshop on April 9<sup>th</sup> which can help us all to become more involved. We are also being encouraged to take on leadership in the area of environmental concerns through PACT. These both seem good opportunities to engage with issues we generally care about.

The Earth will most likely keep turning with or without us for millions if not billions of years to come, until our Sun burns out. If people survive, they will likely venture to new planetary homes long before the Sun burns out. Hopefully people will remember the challenges we faced here on Earth and continue working to live in harmony with their environment!

Though the oil wars and religious differences are significant footnotes on our time historically, it will be the solutions to environmental concerns that will likely be more important in the history of humanity. A related matter is the question of whether we can change our current pattern of the acquisition of wealth. As long as short-term bottom line gain is the highest goal, it will be hard to balance the abuse of resources and the increase of pollution. It will take longer-term thinking and a more egalitarian world to truly move away from the current incentives to use and abuse resources rather than planning for whatever is left after the industrial process. Conservation, reuse, and recycling are great ideas, but they mean little when global conglomerates can ignore their application. The concentration of wealth in the hands of just 1% also works against the goal of a sustainable environment. If everyone had a bigger stake in all parts of the world, then everyone might feel more responsibility for a healthy world! But that kind of equality might be beyond the changes that we can reasonably hope for, at least in the foreseeable future!

In the time we have, we can call for fair taxation on the wealthy, reasonable protections for communities, and prosecution of environmental polluters. When we hear of situations such as what happened in Flint, Michigan, we should be outraged. We all have an obligation to do what we can to insure that children and the poor do not unduly suffer, especially for such failed policies as tax cuts for the wealthy and corporations.

The health of our world lies in the hands of each of us. None of us alone can make the world healthy, but only all together can we hope to really make things better. What we accomplish in the next few years may affect the health of the world for generations to come. This is not a new challenge. We have known at least since 1970 of the potential harm that continued industrial growth and pollution might wreak on the environment, any many knew even before that time. Environmental science has come a long way in that time, and computer modeling techniques have dramatically increased the reliability of predictions.

But science and facts alone will not keep the earth turning healthily. It will also take the heart commitments, the spiritual practices of treating the Earth like a family member. We must take care of our mother earth for all beings to thrive. We must take care of the trees and the forests, and the rivers and streams, the lakes and oceans and the atmosphere. We must respect the needs of all the other beings of Earth and remember that we are all connected in the whole Earth community as well as the universe.

We should have done more sooner. People and other living beings around the earth will continue to suffer harm from the pollution that has already filled the environment. But the things that we do now will make a difference for the future, and the future rests in our hands. Together we can shape a healthier world for those beings who will come after us, whatever they may be!

Shalom, Salam, Blessed Be, Namaste, and Amen!