

Does It Really Matter? The Religious Imperative for Earth Stewardship 1/

A sermon by Carl M. Gallegos, Ph.D.
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As most of you know, I have been involved with environmental conservation work for many years, both as a professional forester and natural resources manager, as well as the Green Sanctuary movement within UUCR and the UUA. One of my most interesting experiences was when I was USAID/SNRO in Madagascar, and specifically when I was living in the capital city of Antananarivo with my family.

My professional focus was to help establish national parks and nature preserves in that country, but one conservation effort literally closer to home was my attempt to recycle plastic bags (specifically zip-lock bags). Allow me to put this in context. Zip-lock bags were a rarity in Madagascar, and our cook and house keeper constantly washed and re-used every single bag that we used. I competed quite diligently with our staff for these bags. One might say that I exhibited pathological frugality when it came to recycling zip-lock bags.

Certainly the world needs all the help it can get.

The weather is going haywire, with global climate change the most likely culprit. Freak storms, floods, wildfires, freezes, heat waves, and drought leave thousands homeless and hungry. Monstrous hurricanes and freak weather events are becoming more common. Hurricanes Katrina caused tremendous damage along the entire gulf coast from Florida to Texas that people are still struggling to repair. In fifty years there will no glaciers in Glacier National Park, and the fabled snows of Kilimanjaro are sadly a fable, not fact. Many wildlife biologists believe that polar bears are already doomed to extinction. Spring now arrives a full week earlier to the Northern Hemisphere than it did just twenty years ago.

A recent piece on National Public Radio reported that sea level rise in the eastern U.S. is already happening, and that barrier islands along the Virginia and Carolina coasts are being washed into the ocean. Closer to home, islands within the Chesapeake Bay are disappearing, and residents of Smith Island are having to move their homes and businesses because their septic systems no longer function due to rising water tables. People in the Chestertown area may yet have the waterfront property that so many people covet.

During Downrigging Weekend this year, Hedrick Smith, Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist, and host of 20 award-winning PBS prime-time specials, led a discussion at the Prince Theater that was based on his PBS film "Poisoned Waters: Chesapeake Bay to Puget Sound". Portions of this film that he discussed focused on the Chesapeake Bay, and these highlighted the fact that the shad, oyster and blue crab fisheries, amongst many others, have been nearly destroyed. This destruction has been caused by fertilizers being washed by rains and melting snows from farm fields, untreated sewerage from communities throughout the Chesapeake Bay watershed, and waste from increasing urbanization resulting from the population explosion that has occurred throughout the entire region. He also pointed out the huge dead zones that appear in the Chesapeake Bay during summer, which are the result of algal blooms caused by heavy loads of

nutrients being washed into the water (from fertilizers and sewerage) that cause eutrophication. (This is the uptake of oxygen by the algae, which deprives water-living organisms the oxygen they need to survive.) The complete film is available at PBS.org if people are interested in seeing it.

Of course, climate change is just one environmental hazard among many.

Throughout the world, poor and working people, and especially people of color, are pollution's first victims. Their air, water, soil, and shelter are more contaminated, they toil in more hazardous workplaces, and they are more vulnerable to environmental catastrophes. Invasive development threatens the health, religious traditions, and social fabric of indigenous peoples.

"We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality," wrote Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., "tied in a single garment of destiny." Every religious tradition teaches us to hold sacred the wonders of creation, yet wantonly we desecrate them. Every religious tradition cautions us to temper our cravings for sensation and material things, yet we pursue them addictively, vainly hoping to fill our spiritual emptiness. Every religious tradition forbids theft, yet every day we live unsustainably we steal from our children and our children's children.

Just as Unitarian Universalists of earlier eras worked for the abolition of slavery and for women's rights, prison and education reform, peace, and civil rights, I believe we have a religious responsibility to protect the environment. If we do not, I fear our children and their children, if they survive, will ask us incredulously how, knowing what we knew, we could have failed to act.

In the 1960s and 1970s, a popular groundswell forced tough new laws regulating air and water pollution. By the 1990s, however, it was apparent that the global environment was continuing to degrade. This time, citizens were told that each one of us had the power to save the earth by doing "fifty simple things" like recycling, buying organic produce, and taking public transportation.

Now, I believe in personal responsibility. I recycle, I buy organic produce, and I take public transportation whenever I go into Washington, D.C. As a consumer I try to choose less polluting products and services. If every person in the United States did all fifty simple things to save the earth, by golly, I think the earth would be well on its way to being saved. But we haven't, we don't, and it doesn't look like we're about to any time soon.

We've become accustomed to the convenience of disposable packaging and fast food, the comfort of year-round heating and air-conditioning, the cheap thrills of high-tech entertainment, and the flexibility and independence of automotive travel. As any recycler or organic shopper can tell you, it's almost always more expensive in time, money, or both to do the ecologically right thing. And because the chassis of capitalism is built on the engine of consumption, the most sophisticated propaganda machine in the history of the world, that is to say, advertising, works round-the-clock to persuade us to buy vast amounts of things we don't need.

But these are not insuperable obstacles. The insuperable obstacle to effective individual environmental action is this: its success depends upon millions of other individuals doing the same thing. We don't see them do it, but fortunately we have reason to think they will.

A basic psychological principle called social proof says we'll do things we think other people are doing. Why should I sacrifice time, money, convenience, and pleasure for a speculative environmental payoff that assumes the cooperation of millions of strangers? Even if a vast simplicity movement succeeded in reducing demand for nonrenewable resources, without other intervention the price of these resources would decline, further stimulating the appetite of those consumers still trapped in thrall of thingdom.

Personal responsibility is essential. But it is not sufficient. In and of itself, it fails to challenge the entrenched interests of corporations and the governmental agencies that pander to them. For this reason, business and government are both enthusiastic supporters of environmental voluntarism: the notion that if each of us just does our part, recycles a little more, pollutes a little less, we won't need to enact any more bothersome laws or regulations. It's a comforting thought, but not a realistic one.

Just as the individual acts of conscience of slaveholders who freed their own slaves would never alone have brought an end to slavery, our individual lifestyle and consumer choices will not alone solve our environmental problems. We need strong international treaties and tough state and federal laws that put all of us on the same playing field with the same rules. We need to pay a price for goods and services that reflects their actual cost to the environment, not merely that of production. This cannot be done without some form of regulation.

There's a huge gap between the environmental values of the public, confirmed in poll after poll, and the drill-and-burn policies of the past administration, a gap made vast by the powerlessness and isolation and alienation from the political process many Americans feel. However attached we may be to price, pleasure, and convenience, I believe that Americans would respond to an appeal to their patriotism, their decency, and their responsibility to future generations. Would our political leaders express about global climate change a tiny fraction of the outrage they display about terrorism, we could be well on our way to solving the problem.

How do we bridge the gap between what must be done and what is politically realistic? How can we give people a sense of hope and purpose and power to safeguard the future? How do we move from personal, local, and institutional efforts—vital as they are—to global transformation?

Something is being done to address the problem.

On October 24 of this year, the world commemorated the International Day of Climate Action, and people participated in more than 5,200 events in 181 countries around the world to call for a reduction of atmospheric carbon dioxide to 350 ppm. (More than 100 UU congregations participated in the International Day of Climate Action events that took place in Washington, D.C.) The planet currently has 390 ppm CO₂, and this number is rising by 2 ppm/year. Scientists are saying that 390 ppm is too much – that number is higher than any time seen in the recorded

history of our planet – and we're already beginning to see disastrous impacts on people and places all over the world

On December 7 – 18, 2009, the Danish Government will host the United Nations Climate Change Conference (COP15) in Copenhagen, to finalize a new climate change agreement. This time the U.S. will be a full participant, which was not the case during the past Administration. (The U.S. and Australia were the only nations that did not sign the first climate agreement [the Kyoto Protocol], but Australia elected a new Premier, Kevin Rudd, whose key campaign plank was to join the rest of the world in addressing climate change. Presently, the U.S. was/is the only nation which has not signed the accord. It remains a toss-up as to whether or not a new accord to take action to lower CO2 levels to 350 ppm will be signed because the U.S. Senate has not approved the U.S. position, and other nations are reluctant to go forward.

It is a fortunate coincidence that our current Administration is taking bold steps to address the environmental crisis that exists in our country.

Climate Change legislation – Sen. John Kerry rolled out a Senate climate change bill alongside Sen. Barbara Boxer, D-Calif., late last September. And now Sen. Lindsey Graham, R-SouthCar., stands ready to work with Kerry toward some version of legislation to combat global warming. The Senate draft sets a ceiling on greenhouse gas emissions beginning in three years, to be tightened annually. It also includes a cap-and-trade system that would require power plants and other industrial facilities to cut climate-changing pollution -- or pay a price. Though even Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid has expressed doubt that the Senate can address the issue at the same time it's engineering health care reform, Graham and Kerry said a bipartisan bill is possible before a major international climate change summit in Copenhagen in December.

Dr. Steven Chu, Secretary of the US **Department of Energy** announced its plans to develop a smart, strong and secure electrical grid, which will create new jobs and help deliver reliable power more effectively with less impact on the environment to customers across the nation. As part of the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act, the U.S. government has outlined plans to distribute more than \$3.3 billion in smart grid technology development grants and an additional \$615 million for smart grid storage, monitoring and technology viability. On October 27, 2009, the Obama administration has announced 100 grants to smart grid projects across the U.S. (25 big projects, 75 smaller ones). In total, about \$3.4 billion dollars will be allocated, and when combined with funds from utility customers, this should add up to an investment of about \$8 billion into grid modernization. (Baltimore Gas and Electric won one of these federal grants for \$200 million.) "We have a very antiquated system that we need to upgrade," said Carol Browner, energy coordinator for the Obama administration.

Al Gore's new book "Our Choice" was released on November 3 of this year. A review of this book stated: "*Our Choice* is Al Gore at his best and his worst. It is authoritative, exhaustive, reasoned, erudite, and logical, a textbook like march through solar and wind power, geothermal energy, biofuels, carbon sequestration, nuclear energy, the potential for forests to soak up carbon dioxide, energy efficiency, and the regulatory tangle that impedes the development of a super-efficient, continent wide system of transmission lines. It is no '50 things you can do' primer. To the contrary. Although Gore hopes lay people will exert political pressure for what he calls 'large

solutions”, *Our Choice* reflects the experience of someone who knows that it is lawmakers and business people who can implement the ‘laws and policies we really need, including the global climate treaty’.”

The naysayers point out: “Yes some people feel a spiritual kinship to being stewards of creation, but in this debate (as in many others) mammon trumps God. Human beings change their behavior only when danger is imminent or when money is at stake. For many Americans, global warming remains personally remote. Which means that commerce – or to keep the liberals happy, let’s call it commerce with a conscience – is our best hope.”

Closer to home, the Interfaith Power and Light group is an interdenominational movement that has been created to address environmental issues in the D.C. area and throughout the U.S. Similar to the movement to end slavery, the women’s suffrage movement, civil rights movement, etc., it is believed that people of faith should unite to facilitate permanent change. Our own UU Ministry for the Earth initiative (which is an outgrowth of the Green Sanctuary initiative) is promoting that other congregations become acknowledged as green sanctuaries, and they provide resources and enable all UU churches to address environmental issues. Many of you probably read the recent article in the KCN, where it is noted that as a result of the Administration having declared the Chesapeake Bay a national treasure, \$ 72 million has been made available to MD to upgrade water and sewerage systems, as well as \$ 50 million for improving control of urban, suburban and agricultural runoff throughout the Chesapeake Bay watershed. There is a catch, however, because states within the watershed have until 2010 to show concrete advancement in enforcement of the regulations. But if the states don’t step up, the EPA has been charged with the authority to take control of these issues and enforce these regulations at the State level.

Within UUCR, the Green Sanctuary Committee puts out weekly tips with simple suggestions for us to do our part. The GSC has also promoted becoming “locovores” and consuming local produce (e.g., Colchester Farm and Lockbriar Farm, as well as the Chestertown Farmers Market.) Chestertown has also started the “Chestertown Goes Green” program, and other communities in Maryland are doing the same thing (“Main Streets – From Gray to Green” program sponsored by the Chesapeake Bay Foundation). And most of you undoubtedly know about my efforts with the Washington College Center for Environment and Society to develop Community Forest Master Plans for Chestertown, Betterton, Rock Hall and Millington.

My question to UUCR is, does all this really matter? We all espouse the 7th Principle which advocates “Respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part”, but does it really matter? Does it really matter that UUCR is recognized by the UUA as a Green Sanctuary church? Do we as members of this church really do concrete things to address the environmental issues of the Eastern Shore of MD? Of the U.S.? Or are we satisfied with letting our Green Sanctuary Committee address these issues for us, and we can continue living our lives as we have in the past?

I leave you with these closing words from Al Gore.

“Not too many years from now, a new generation will look back at us in this hour of choosing and ask one of two questions. Either they will ask, ‘What were you thinking? Didn’t you see the

entire North Polar ice cap melting before your eyes? Did you not care?
Or they will ask instead, ‘How did you find the moral courage to rise up and solve a crisis that so many said was impossible to solve?’

We must choose which of these two questions we want to answer, and we must give our answer now – not in words but in actions.”

“The choice is awesome and potentially eternal. It is in the hands of the present generation: a decision we cannot escape, and a choice to be mourned or celebrated through all the generations that follow.”

1/ Based on a sermon by Rev. Fred Small, “Wake Now My Senses: The Religious Imperative for Earth Stewardship”; First Religious Society in Carlisle, PA; Sept. 22, 2002.

[The island nation of Maldives has already lost several lower lying islands, and citizens of that country are actively applying for a transfer of citizenship to countries that border the Indian Ocean because the entire country is being washed into the Indian Ocean.]

I'm just old enough to remember the early civil rights movement, when massive nonviolent demonstrations led directly to passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and Voting Rights Act of 1965 and changed forever the political and moral landscape of the United States.

I remember news photos of black and white clergy, ministers and rabbis and nuns and seminary students, arms linked, dignified and implacable, marching and praying and singing in Selma and Montgomery and Nashville and Washington, DC. Even as a child I understood how these images seized the conscience of the nation. The whole movement was fired with religion, incubated in the southern black churches, propagated through the churches and synagogues of the North, infused with religious idealism and passion and song and story. If religious people could be enrolled in defense of the environment, if our participation were constant and courageous and visible, the environmental movement would gain a moral authority and strategic strength that could tip the balance of power.

250 million years ago, at the end of the Permian period, for reasons no one knows, ninety percent of the earth's species became extinct. Since then, there have been five more periods of massive extinction, including the present one. Each time, nature has somehow rebounded in astonishing abundance, diversity, and beauty. No doubt it will again.

Whether the human species will be part of the picture is uncertain. Perhaps the mantle of intelligence, creativity, and productivity will be passed to another species that will be kinder, wiser, more farsighted than our own. In the long run, the earth will be just fine, and when it's time, too, finally passes, surely other worlds will carry on the great adventure of consciousness.

But we cannot stand by as the human race destroys itself, its habitat, and countless other species. To stem our slide toward extinction, the easy and comfortable measures are no longer adequate. Fifty simple things are not enough. It's time to do the harder thing, the longer reach, the greater sacrifice to defend the earth and the sweet imperiled experiment called humanity.

Amen.

THE THANKSGIVING PRAYER

Haudenosaunee

These words of thanksgiving come to us from the Native people known as the Haudenosaunee (also Iroquois or Six Nations-Mohawk, Oneida, Cayuga, Onondaga, Seneca and Tuscarora) of upstate New York and Canada. The Thanksgiving Address has ancient roots, dating back over a thousand years to the formation of the Great Law of Peace by a man called the Peacemaker, and perhaps before that. Today these words are still spoken at the opening and closing of all ceremonial and governmental gatherings held by the Six Nations. A speaker is chosen to give the Thanksgiving Greetings on behalf of the people. They choose their own words, for we are all unique and have our own style, but the general form is traditional. It follows an order in which we can relate to all of the Creation. The Address is based on the belief that the world cannot be taken for granted, that a spiritual communication of thankfulness and acknowledgement of all living things must be given to align the minds and hearts of the people with Nature. This forms a guiding principle of culture. We believe that all people at one time in their history had similar words to acknowledge the works of the Creator. With this in mind, we offer these words in a written form as a way to re-acquaint ourselves with this shared vision. Our version of the Thanksgiving Address has been modified for a young, general audience- -it has been shortened and many specific references to the culture of the Six Nations have been generalized. We hope this will enhance the accessibility of the words for readers around the world. It was Jake Swamp's original vision that this Address would go out to the children of the world, "so that later in life, when they go out and meet one another, they will find that they are all coming from the same place." This booklet is printed in the Mohawk and English languages. Other editions are available in Mohawk, German, Japanese, Portuguese, Spanish, Swedish, Bisayan and French; and future editions are planned in Hawaiian, Chinese.... . You are invited - -encouraged - - to share in these words, that our concentrated attention might help us rediscover our balance, respect, and oneness with Nature.

Now our minds are one.

John Stokes

The Tracking Project

The People

Today we have gathered and we see that the cycles of life continue. We have been given the duty to live in balance and harmony with each other and all living things. So now, we bring our minds together as one as we give greetings and thanks to each other as People.

Now our minds are one.

The Earth Mother

We are thankful. to our Mother, the Earth, for she gives us all that we need for life. She supports our feet as we walk about upon her. It gives us joy that she continues to care for us as she has from the beginning of time. To our Mother, we send greetings and thanks.

Now our minds are one.

The Waters

We give thanks to all the Waters of the world for quenching our thirst and providing us with strength. Water is life. We know its power in many forms -- waterfalls and rain, mists and streams, rivers and oceans. With one mind, we send greetings and thanks to the spirit of Water.

Now our minds are one.

The Fish

We turn our minds to all the Fish life in the water. They were instructed to cleanse and purify the water. They also give themselves to us as food. We are grateful that we can still find pure water. So, we turn now to the Fish and send our greetings and thanks.

Now our minds are one:

The Plants

Now we turn toward the vast fields of Plant life. As far as the eye can see, the Plants grow, working many wonders. They sustain many life forms. With our minds gathered together, we give thanks and look forward to seeing Plant life for many generations to come. .

Now our minds are one.

The Food Plants

With one mind, we turn to honor and thank all the Food Plants we harvest from the garden. Since the beginning of time, the grains, vegetables, beans, and berries have helped the people survive. Many other living things draw strength from them too. We gather all the Food Plants together as one and send them a greeting and thanks.

Now our minds are one.

The Medicine Herbs

Now we turn to all the Medicine Herbs of the world. From the beginning, they were instructed to take away sickness. They are always waiting and ready to heal us. We are happy there are still among us those special few who remember how to use these plants for healing. With one mind, we send greetings and thanks to the Medicines and to the keepers of the Medicines.

Now our minds are one.

The Animals

We gather our minds together to send greetings and thanks to all the Animal life in the world. They have many things to teach us as people. We see them near our homes and in the deep forests. We are glad they are still here and we hope that it will always be so.

Now our minds are one.

The Trees

We now turn our thoughts to the Trees. The Earth has many families of Trees who have their own instructions and uses. Some provide us with shelter and shade, others with fruit, beauty, and other useful things. Many peoples of the world use a Tree as a symbol of peace and strength. With one mind, we greet and thank the Tree life.

Now our minds are one.

The Birds

We put our minds together as one and thank all the Birds who move and fly about over our heads. The Creator gave them beautiful songs. Each day they remind us to enjoy and appreciate life. The Eagle was chosen to be their leader. To all the Birds -- from the smallest to the largest we send our joyful greetings and thanks.

Now our minds are one.

The Four Winds

We are all thankful to the powers we know as the Four Winds. We hear their voices in the moving air as they refresh us and purify the air we breathe. They help to bring the change of seasons. From the four directions they come, bringing us messages and giving us strength. With one mind, we send our greetings and thanks to the Four Winds.

Now our minds are one.

The Thunderers

Now we turn to the west where our Grandfathers, the Thunder Beings, live. With lightning and thundering voices, they bring with them the water that renews life. We bring our minds together as one to send greetings and thanks to our Grandfathers, the Thunderers.

Now our minds are one.

The Sun

We now send greetings and thanks to our eldest Brother, the Sun. Each day without fail he travels the sky from east to west, bringing the light of a new day. He is the source of all the fires of life. With one mind, we send greetings and thanks to our Brother, the Sun.

Now our minds are one.

Grandmother Moon

We put our minds together and give thanks to our oldest Grandmother,

the Moon, who lights the nighttime sky. She is the leader of women all over the world, and she governs the movement of the ocean tides. By her changing face we measure time, and it is the Moon who watches over the arrival of children here on earth. With one mind, we send greetings and thanks to our Grandmother, the Moon.

Now our minds are one.

The Stars

We give thanks to the Stars who are spread across the sky like jewelry. We see them in the night, helping the Moon to light the darkness and bringing dew to the gardens and growing things. When we travel at night, they guide us home. With our minds gathered together as one, we send greetings and thanks to all the Stars.

Now our minds are one.

The Enlightened Teachers

We gather our minds to greet and thank the enlightened Teachers who have come to help throughout the ages. When we forget how to live in harmony, they remind us of the way we were instructed to live as people. With one mind, we send greetings and thanks to these caring Teachers.

Now our minds are one.

The Creator

Now we turn our thoughts to the Creator, or Great Spirit, and send greetings and thanks for all the gifts of Creation. Everything we need to live a good life is here on this Mother Earth. For all the love that is still around us, we gather our minds together as one and send our choicest words of greetings and thanks to the Creator.

Now our minds are one.

Closing Words

We have now arrived at the place where we end our words. Of all the things we have named, it was not our intention to leave anything out. If something was forgotten, we leave it to each individual to send such greetings and thanks in their own way.

And now our minds are one.

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