

**Saying Yes! to Life**  
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**Reflections**

Have you ever wondered how you would handle yourself in the midst of an catastrophe? How you would face not just your own life in ruins, but our entire social structure and every safety net we rely upon? Would you be able to muster concern for your neighbors, or would you worry mostly about yourself and those closest to you? Would you share what little you have, or hoard it and search for more? Would you find the strength to step into action, or would you be paralyzed by loss and overwhelmed with indecision? Perhaps the most basic question, would you even admit that the world was falling down around your ears, or go about your business as usual, demanding that reality conform to your schedule and your wants?

It's not pleasant to have to think about such a scenario, but lately I've been spending more time imagining such a possibility. In addition to writing the service this week, I've also been preparing for a conference I'll be addressing on Thursday about the response of community organizations in the event of a pandemic like avian flu. It's been hard for me not to wonder how I would respond personally in such a crisis, and to hope that desperate times wouldn't cause me to betray my deepest values and loyalties.

We have good reason to wonder whether our social structures could withstand the demands of a disaster. In the hours and days that followed the destruction of the World Trade Center in New York and the more recent hurricanes on the Gulf Coast, we saw not only selflessness and heroism, but also shameless opportunism and exploitation. It's clear that our networks of support have been shaped by the demands of everyday life, and are not generally prepared to respond in the wake of an extraordinary disaster. It's clear as well that our attitudes and emotional reserves are also better-suited to ordinary times, and may be stretched to the breaking point when we find the rug pulled out from under us.

These are difficult considerations, but it's critical that we consider them. I want to invite you to make time on Tuesday evening to join us here in the Auditorium for an evening with author David Korten, whose book *The Great Turning* addresses just these concerns. Not just that we are running out of oil, not just that our resources of clean water are dwindling, not just that climate change is a real and present danger, not just that population density is making widespread disease a practical certainty, but that all of our resources and the economic structures that depend upon them, and the social structures

that depend upon that, are rapidly unraveling. Korten makes an extensive case that we can no longer close our eyes to the unsustainable dependencies and habits we've established, but perhaps more importantly he also offers a strong case for hope and for action. I'm not going to simply repackage the content of his book, because I really want you to consider coming to meet him on Tuesday evening. What I do want to offer this afternoon are the religious and spiritual concerns related to the fragility of the web of life and to our responsibility for the damage we do to this web.

Sharing messages like this from the pulpit is always a risky business for ministers because, although we believe that you don't *really* want blandly inoffensive worship and programming, I know that there's also a limit to how much of a beautiful fall weekend you want to spend squirming uncomfortably. Challenging our members is critical to what we're here to do, *and* I know that people will simply stop coming if being here makes us feel too bad about our lives. The theme of this service is that because there are so many interests in our world that encourage us to *avoid* accountability, I believe that it is a courageous act to defy those voices and shoulder our moral responsibility.

We are notable as a species for our ability to comprehend and plan for our long-term future, but we're also easily tempted into indulging our short-term impulses instead. One of the things we've learned (or re-learn) about humanity is how easily this delicate balance can be exploited during a state of crisis. When we are filled with fear and uncertainty, our long-term sustainability is all but forgotten in the midst of more immediate desires. Some conclude that this is simply evidence that humans need a parental authority to do our thinking for us, to decide what's in our best interest, and to do whatever's necessary to keep us from taking matters foolishly into our own hands. Living in the short-term is an addiction that is not easily broken, and feeding and perpetuating this addiction has become big business. A considerable portion of our economic structure is devoted to convincing us to choose without thinking, to disregard concern for the larger world or the next generation. But capitalism's growing cunning in pandering to our immediate hungers is not progress -- it's obscenity. How did we, beings with rational faculties and compassionate impulses, get ourselves so far off the mark?

I mentioned in a sermon three years ago on Manifest Destiny how influential it was for American culture to develop with the perception that we lived on empty land that was utterly ours for the taking. The United States and our worldview thrived on images of the open plains stretching out seemingly forever, and it was only a matter of time after we reached our boundaries that our habits would move us to look to other lands for their resources. Economist and philosopher Kenneth Boulding called this way of being a "cowboy economy," based in the assumption that we were surrounded by limitless

resources to plunder, and countless places to dump our waste. As romantic as the image of the open frontier is, in many ways we have used it badly. Boulding also said, "Anyone who believes exponential growth can go on forever in a finite world is either a madman or an economist." A more accurate image of our situation would be the spaceship, he continued, "without unlimited reservoirs of anything, either for extraction or for pollution".

Having spent my previous career life as a NASA contractor, I'm intrigued by the aptness and the implications of the Spaceship Earth model. Astronauts cannot ever take for granted their air supply, the cleanliness of their water, their food supplies, anything -- all of it is kept in balance by intentionality. Other reminders turned up in the New York Times this week. A tanker full of toxic sludge, containing petrochemicals, lye and other chemicals was turned away from other ports until it simply dumped it on the shore of the Ivory Coast's largest city, Abidjan. Residents found their skin blistered by the caustic mix and their nostrils burned from its fumes. According to the Times, the sludge came from a Greek-owned tanker flying a Panamanian flag and leased by the London branch of a Swiss trading corporation whose fiscal headquarters are in the Netherlands, so you get an idea of how unlikely it is that anyone will take responsibility for the tens of thousands who have sought medical care in the days that followed. In a similar situation, residents of Bhopal, India are still suffering after a 1984 industrial explosion at a Union Carbide pesticide factory, and people are still dying from the complications 22 years later at the rate of nearly one person *per day*. Mistakes made aboard Spaceship Earth are costly, and the repercussions have no other place to go.

One of the most critical messages of life on Spaceship Earth is that we're not going to be let off the hook for our choices, and any life-giving response is going to have to acknowledge this reality. I'm reminded of a dramatic device that was often used in ancient Greek plays called *deus ex machina* -- that is, "the god in the machine". When heroes would find themselves trapped in an intractable conflict, in which it seemed that no escape was possible, a chair decked with flowers would be lowered onto the stage from overhead, and they would be whisked to safety. Audiences then were accustomed to the *deus ex machina*, and it was understood that the gods had intervened to save the day. Today, the term is usually used when a story's conflict is resolved in an unbelievable way. The point is that there isn't going to be any magical rescue from the despoilation we have wreaked upon our planet -- we are the ones who will remedy it. No one is going to magically resolve the problems of hunger or lack of drinkable water or breathable air -- we are the ones who will do it.

This is one of the reasons I'm most grateful to the Jewish roots of our tradition. While it is not in the message of Christianity to abdicate our sense of responsibility to a savior, that is a consequence that I believe has come unintentionally out of Christianity's influence. Judaism's more explicit emphasis on personal responsibility in this life, on the other hand, creates a culture of accountability that I find quite appealing. Having just come through the Jewish holidays of Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, we might take this opportunity to think more seriously about the possibility of repentance for the short-sighted practices that have led us into an unsustainable life. Unitarian Universalists have distanced ourselves from the concept of sin, partly, I think, because we have misunderstood the role of religious community as a place where we come to feel good about ourselves. However, being comfortable isn't always good! As upsetting as it might be to hear that the building was on fire, how much worse would be not hearing it? Again, the work of religious community is a delicate balance of being made to feel good about our lives, and hearing what we genuinely need to hear.

Our culture seems to have reached a low point in being able to say, "I'm sorry; I made a mistake." The Pope's recent use of a centuries-old passage to single out elements of Islam as "evil and inhuman" was graceless enough, but his version of an apology was perhaps worse. The evasive statement "I'm sorry Muslims were offended" was clearly an attempt to soothe his critics without really apologizing at all. And in the even more recent scandal over former congressman Mark Foley's sexually-explicit e-mails to minors, the tack was to redirect attention by noting that Foley had himself been sexually abused by a priest when he was a teen. The current practice of making "false apologies" implies to me that we as a culture are losing touch with the virtue of acknowledging when we are responsible for a problem.

I want to recognize from my own experience as well how hard it is to hold ourselves accountable. In 2002, when UU ministers gathered in Birmingham, Alabama for our Convocation, one colleague delivered a blistering address against the destructive presence that the United States had occupied with respect to the rest of the world. It was no surprise at all to him, he said, that the attacks on the New York World Trade Center had happened -- considering the greed and callousness we had shown the rest of the world, it had only been a matter of time before someone retaliated. It was painful to be dressed-down for the ways in which we've cultivated the world's hostility toward us, and perhaps hurt more as something we're unaccustomed to hearing out loud in this country, because someone will inevitably counter that we're saying that the 2600 who died deserved it. Part of me recognized the truth in what he was saying, but it wasn't easy, and I imagine that it was harder still for my New York colleagues, who had actually had

to live through it. Probably for them there was no explanation in which the attacks could make sense. What I wish now that my colleague had said to us is, “Are we really not able to tell the difference between demanding that our country take responsibility for its behavior and saying that the attacks were a reasonable response? Are we really not able to tell the difference?”

I think of similar questions that I think we should be asking ourselves about the growing crisis that our choices have helped to precipitate. Korten urges us, for example, to turn our relationships worldwide from ones of domination to collaboration. We want to blame our dismal reputation in the world today on the current administration, but how have *we* failed to confront our own leadership, how have we failed to demand that they follow a more moral and constructive path, failed to examine our own role in the need for more cheap oil and more cheap labor? Are we really not able to tell the difference between fulfilling our role as citizens and letting our government simply do what lines their own pockets? Are we really not able to tell the difference?

How have we failed to ask difficult questions about the why nations turn first to violent solutions? Have we allowed ourselves to be shouted down when we challenge this habit, or even shouted others down for probing our role in the flourishing of desperate conflict? Are we really not able to tell the difference between a legitimate international presence and fueling warfare for our own profit? Are we really not able to tell the difference?

How have we remained silent and complicit as our economic structures worsen the already-outrageous inequalities all around us? How have we ignored or even resisted legitimate criticism of the assumption that financial gain is the best measure of progress? Do we honestly believe that human development is truly served best by allowing corporations unchecked access to exploited labor, exploited resources, and exploited political influence? Are we really not able to tell the difference between holding corporations accountable and being “anti-business”? Are we really not able to tell the difference?

Korten urges us to turn the core of our lives from material extravagance to spiritual fulfillment. How have we refused to look at our own spending patterns and our own behaviors for whether they contribute to a sustainable future for our world? Have we avoided looking too closely at our lives for fear that the answers will upset our affluent and comfortable fishbowl? Are we really not able to tell the difference between living in a meaningful way and the lives we have now? Are we really not able?

My colleague the Rev. Marilyn Sewell concludes, “this is not a dream worthy of our lives.” These questions are painful, but they needn’t be if we become part of the

transformation. Wouldn't you want to be part of this turning of our world toward a life sustainable, even if it meant that you too would have to be transformed? The message that David Korten wants you to understand, and that I want you to understand, is that it's possible for us to invest our lives in being the solution, rather than the problem. Rather than our congregation being a place that insulates us from being uncomfortable, religious community is a place where we come to be uncomfortable about things that matter, and seek together a new way of moving forward. Again, I hope that you will come to hear Korten on Tuesday night, because his message is not one of despair, but overwhelmingly one of hope. As we gaze about us, taking in all of the beauty and wonder that fills this world and now hangs in the balance, remember the last nine words of his book: we are the ones we have been waiting for.