

Mother Earth Day©
A sermon offered by Rev. Kathleen C. Rolenz
Sunday, May 14, 2017
Fox Valley UU Fellowship, Appleton, WI

Although April 22nd was the official date for Earth Day this year, I thought we might bring together two cultural celebrations that have each become a part of many UU congregations' liturgical calendars each year, Earth Day and Mother's Day. There are some obvious intersections between the two, and we've already been singing about them. Both the first and the third verse of our opening chant frames this morning's task. We sang: "The earth is our mother, we must take care of her..." and "The earth is our Mother, she will take care of us." So on this Mother Earth Day, we're going to look at the ways in which we are called to mother the earth and the ways in which the earth mothers us.

But before I go any further, I want to acknowledge that both days, Earth Day and Mother's Day, are not without their emotional baggage. There is a tendency to want to romanticize and idealize both mothers and nature. Hallmark Hall of Fame shows and cards notwithstanding, mothering and Mother's Day can be emotionally complex. As Rev. Leah's prayer expressed so powerfully, there are many ways in which we mother, have been or have not been mothered. And, we love nature when it's loving us – when the weather is perfect, the snow is white and the air is fresh. But when nature unleashes the tornado, the tsunami, the hurricane, the earthquake, the mudslide and the lightning strike on us, or on

communities we love, the devastation is horrific and real.

If there is one spiritual challenge that both Mother's Day and Earth Day invite us to take up, it is to consider how important our self-centeredness is to the living of our lives. For most of us, not all admittedly, but most of us, the quality of our lives would be vastly different without the self-sacrifice of the mothers who gave us life and care. We take motherhood for granted, but everyone who has been a parent or has had parents doesn't have to think too hard to recognize the tremendous commitment and generosity of self that is involved.

Self-centered parents that neglect a child's emotional life and physical needs can distort and scar a child for life. Let's look at what this understanding means as we consider whether Mother Earth is our parent, or whether it's actually the reverse, that we are the parents that can shape the ongoing life of this being, the earth that we have been given. So, instead of thinking of earth as our mother, let's consider her as a child. Let's call her Gaia.

By any objective standard, the state of our child Gaia, the earth, is not healthy. All the vital signs are alarming. The earth is running a fever – the last decade was the hottest on record.

Then we look at the signs of life that Gaia exhibits: 90% of big ocean fish are gone since 1950; 50% of the Great Barrier Coral Reef is gone since 1985. Current ocean plankton decline rates of 1% per year means they will be 50% gone in 70 years. Yet we are asking this child of ours to work harder while not feeling well at all. Seasons are changing. It's like our child Gaia got a dose of hormones by mistake. There are plenty of places on line where you can read about the worst possible long-term consequences of the deteriorating health of our child Gaia by the end of this century - food chains disrupted, more frequent wild fires, heat waves, and rising sea levels could make many cities unlivable. And these are the things we can see above ground; what's even more dangerous is what we don't see, what we don't anticipate or predict. Just as when we turn over a rock there are hundreds, maybe thousands, of tiny insects scurrying beneath the surface, there are probably even more deadly interconnections we aren't aware of right now.

You would think that a responsible member of our human family would recognize these signs of deteriorating health in a family member, a child or a mother, and realize that life can't go on as usual while therapy and healing begins. You would think that, but human self-centeredness is a powerful driver in our world. Our economic security, our convenience, our usual order of things, is not only hard to change, but for many people, calls for a ferocious defense. Take the leaders of our current federal administration for example.

If we stick to my metaphor of Earth as our child Gaia, we have leaders who are essentially telling this sick child, "Buck up! It's not so bad! Stop whining! Clean your room! Do your chores! And then make me dinner!"

The catalogue of devastations that have occurred within our current administration's first 100 days are the equivalent of this kind of imperious action by a self-centered parent. To read the entire catalogue of offenses against the Earth would take our entire hour – so let me highlight just a few that have happened most recently, all of them found in an article from the National Geographic Magazine, published on May 10, 2017. We go backwards in time because that's the direction these executive orders are taking us:

April 28 – Our 45th President signs an executive order that orders a review of Obama-era bans on offshore oil and gas drilling in parts of the Arctic, Pacific and Atlantic Oceans. This order also halts the designation of expansion of National Marine Sanctuaries; instead they are to be examined for their energy or mineral resource potential.

March 28 – The President signs an executive order that rescinds the EPA's Clean Power Plan designed to reduce carbon dioxide emissions from new and existing power plants.

March 27 – Oil begins flowing into the pipeline laid underneath North Dakota's Lake Oahe, the same pipeline that runs near the Standing Rock Sioux Reservation.

March 9 – EPA Director Scott Pruitt downplays carbon emissions as the central role

in driving Earth's changing climate – a position at odds with scientific consensus.

With a stroke of a pen, political work and a social consensus that had been carefully and systematically built over the last eight years was blown away like the white dandelions puffs we soon will be seeing. Policies and procedures that many of us took as signs that we could interrupt what seems like the inevitable march towards global deterioration of our environment are now eliminated or in jeopardy.

The Seventh Principle of Unitarian Universalism reminds us that we covenant to affirm and promote the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part. That image of the interdependent web has caught our imagination because it speaks to a powerful truth found in both human nature and in our ecological world. We are inextricably connected to each other and to the earth, which provides for us the umbilical cord of life. What happens to the earth happens to us. There is no separate self from the human community that surrounds us, there is no separate American life without the health of the rest of the world, and there is no separate human community apart from the health of the Earth.

Often lost below the surface of the reporting on our current environmental crisis is the recognition that those who are affected the most by environmental degradation are people and communities of color and most notably, women of color. So when we lift up Mother Earth, using female symbolism to

speak of all that's hopeful and right with the planet, we are rightly acknowledging that in this world, women's health, women's needs and women's rights are at the bottom of the social hierarchy of self-centeredness and that the sickness of the planet is first and frequently manifested in women's lives.

We see this most acutely in developing countries, where it's well documented that women are at higher risk of harm and even death from climate change. Natural disasters – which are expected to become more severe as the world heats up – are more likely to kill women than men, and this disparity is largest where women's socioeconomic status is lowest.¹ Durban, one of the largest cities in South Africa, is grappling with one of the worst droughts of its history. "Since weather affects everyone, the idea that women are more susceptible to the effects of climate change, particularly in developing countries, may strike some as puzzling. But women are more likely to collect water, food and firewood and to cook meals and therefore feel the brunt of extreme weather, disappearing water resources and soil degradation.

"Furthermore, research has shown that when resources are scarce, women often give food to their husbands and sons while denying themselves and their daughters."

You don't have to go to South Africa or Nepal, Haiti or Thailand to see how climate change affects the lives of women and of communities of color. Because many of the

¹ <https://news.vice.com/article/how-climate-change-impacts-women-the-most>

households affected by the Flint, Michigan Water Crisis were headed by women, it was the women, many of whom were women of color, who blew the whistle on the water crisis. They realized that the water their children were bathing and brushing their teeth in smelled, looked and tasted wrong. It was the women who said, "You are poisoning us and this has to stop." And it was nine year old Amariyanna (Mari) Copeny, also known as Little Miss Flint, whose online activism helped persuade President Obama to visit Flint, MI, to address the city's water crisis. Environmental racism is now part of our larger conversation about the environment. No longer is the image of Mother Earth like this one of a white woman with long flowy gowns and silken blonde hair...she's closer to Beyoncé as shown here at the 2017 Grammy Awards. Or better yet, Gaia now looks like this – like the Women of Standing Rock – standing strong together.

In light of these facts, these devastations, these possible impending calamities, what are we to do? I must confess that while writing and thinking about this sermon, I was tempted to fall into despair.

The statistics are overwhelming. The insults and degradations seem to be endless, from the possible extinction of bumblebees and plants and animals, to changing weather patterns, to rising seas, to calving icebergs, to the image of the polar bear clinging to that one last piece of ice. What do we do? What can we do? Where can we find hope, when hope is hard to find?

When the world threatens to plunge me into despair, I always remember the river of

my childhood. It was a Sunday morning of June of 1969 and I remember reading a small article in my hometown paper that said: "Cuyahoga River catches fire." I was a child then and my brain could not figure out how a river could catch fire. "Isn't a river full of water?" I asked my mother. Of course now we know that the river was so polluted by decades of industrial waste that an oil slick could catch fire on top of river water. In my home state, it was the powerful image of a burning river that pushed forward environmental activism in a new way. It was that calamity that issued in the modern day environmental movement.

It's tempting to want to fall into environmental despondency, and yet we can take some comfort in realizing how our consciousness about the interdependent web continues to change. Many of us have switched to a plant-based diet, or one that greatly reduces our dependence on animal protein. In fact, all the treats that will be served after the service today are vegan, thanks to the group, Discovering Our Values Through Ethical Eating.

Our own congregation has taken seriously the commitment towards becoming a Green Sanctuary, which requires an intensive audit of the environmental practices of members of this Fellowship and the Fellowship itself as an institution. We bike to work, we drive low-emission cars, we recycle and we re-use – not to claim some moral superiority over one another, but because our consciousness has changed and we know that everything we do has a lasting impact on the planet. And

because, as small as these efforts may seem, they have a collective impact on the common good. We are becoming more awake to the ways in which the treatment of women and people of color and the planet are all interconnected. The way a society treats women, the way it denies or denigrates the lives of people of color, will reflect the ways in which we will take care of the earth.

I can't conclude this sermon by holding up some other lights of hope that give me inspiration in the same way that my healthy Cuyahoga River does. There are some places on our planet which have seen – against all odds – turnaround stories. Rwanda was able to re-introduce black rhinos to their natural parks and protect them against poaching for self-centered human purposes; species presumed lost have been rediscovered; in 2016 the wind and solar industries reported a blockbuster year; carbon emissions were flat for the third straight year; Iceland is figuring out how to store carbon dioxide rather than allowing it to escape into the atmosphere; the food industry is embracing healthier, more nutritious products.

One of the last things my husband Wayne and I did last summer before leaving Cleveland was to go down to Lake Erie and dip our toes in the lake to say goodbye. We lived just three blocks from the Lake, and we walked there often. Lake Erie was another body of water that within my lifetime was so polluted with oil and agricultural and industrial runoff that no one dared to go near it, much less, swim in it. On that day last

summer, the lake was sparkling and children were playing in the water. I wanted to hold that day in my mind forever – as if the beach and the lake were a beautiful blue marble that I could hold between my fingers. So now I bring that moment to you, to combine with all the moments and memories in your mind, of the places that have nourished you – places you have shared with those you love – places that have held you – like a mother – that have sustained you through times of loss and offered you times of joy.

Hold that memory close for a moment before I close with these words from our morning's reading by Alice Walker, who asks us: *"What will we need? A hundred years at least to plan: (five hundred will be handed us gladly when the planet is scared enough) in which circles of women meet, organize ourselves, and, allied with men brave enough to stand with women, nurture our planet to a degree of health. And without apology — (impossible to make a bigger mess than has been made already) — devote ourselves, heedless of opposition, to tirelessly serving and resuscitating Our Mother ship and with gratitude for Her care of us worshipfully commit to rehabilitating it."*²

May our words and our deeds make it so.

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² Democratic Womanism, by Alice Walker.

