

The Great Turning

A service and sermon delivered by Rev. Jim McKinley, Sunday, August 27, 2006, the Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Hendersonville.

Opening Words:

A Message from the Hopi Elders

We have been telling the people that this is the Eleventh Hour.
Now you must go back and tell the people that this is the Hour
And there are things to be considered:

Where are you living?
What are you doing?
What are your relationships?
Are you in right relation?
Where is your water?
Know your garden.

It is time to speak the truth
Create your community.
Be good to each other.
And do not look outside yourself for the leader.
This could be a good time!
There is a river flowing very fast.
It is so great and swift that there are those who will be afraid.
They will try to hold on to the shore. They will feel they are being torn apart and they
will suffer greatly.
Know the river has its destination.

The elders say we must let go of the shore, and push off and into the river,
Keep our eyes open, and our head above water.
See who is in there with you and Celebrate.
At this time in history, we are to take nothing personally.
Least of all ourselves.
For the moment we do, our spiritual growth and journey comes to a halt.

The time of the lone wolf is over, Gather yourselves!
Banish the word struggle from your attitude and your vocabulary.
All that you do now must be done in a sacred manner
And in celebration.

We are the ones we have been waiting for.

Sermon

Over the summer I have had the serendipitous good fortune to hear several speakers presenting a spirituality of action and community of people, beings, creativity and connection in hopeful, life affirming ways. Each of them started in the radical connections of the cosmic creation story and proceeded to hold up the meaning and efficacy of connected, inclusive communal actions for our lives. At the General Assembly of the UUA, I heard David Korten speak on his book, The Great Turning: from Empire to Earth Community and within the last month I heard Michael Dowd lead his workshop here. Just last week I attended a workshop with Matthew Fox known mostly for his Original Blessing and Creation Spirituality writings. I focus my remarks this morning with Korten's book: The Great Turning.

David Korten borrows the term Earth Community which is in the subtitle of his book from the Earth Charter which he says is "a "Declaration of Interdependence and Universal Responsibility" created through a multi-year collaborative process involving hundreds of organizations and thousands of individuals of diverse religious faiths, cultures, races, languages and nationalities." It is one of the products and signs of what he calls the global civil society. That loose organization of people form around the globe acting outside their governmental structures and businesses trying to reach across divides to work for the good of the world.

From the Earth Charter:
"We stand at a critical moment in Earth's history, a time when humanity must choose its future. As the world becomes increasingly interdependent and fragile, the future at once holds great peril and great promise. To move forward we must recognize that in the midst of a magnificent diversity of cultures and life forms we are one human family and one Earth community with a common destiny. We must join together to bring forth a sustainable global society founded on respect for nature, universal rights, economic justice, and a culture of peace. Towards this end, it is imperative that we, the peoples of the Earth, declare our responsibility to one another, to the greater community of life, and to future generations." –The Earth Charter (2000)

I began last year with a statement of what I saw as the center of Unitarian Universalism. In response to a report naming the descriptive characteristics of the inclusive world view of the people attracted to our congregations I kept asking why? What was the knowing to which we in our diversity were drawn? Borrowing from two writers I gave the center three parts. From Universalism and the notion that all are blessed and saved, comes the inclusive notion of the oneness of the human family; one origin, one nature, one destiny. We can now expand that circle of understanding to connect with life and the universe. From Unitarianism comes the exalted, one might say trusting, view of human possibilities. Historically, it was with Jesus not as savior but as exemplar. Now we accept many others and even ourselves as spiritual guides. And then using UUA president, Bill Sinkford's own words I noted that we are a radically incarnational faith. We are connected to all of life. We bring visions of what is good and god into being through our actions, by participating with and through the spirit of life. Inclusive,

Inspired and Engaged or Incarnational. We are a faith tradition for the Great Turning. We can see our actions through the lens of Earth Community and plot our direction with its compass.

Earth Community. Said simply, it embraces who we are, where we come from and it is what we should be doing. It is a big picture that makes sense, gives us context and can be made real in our everyday lives. We can envision it like the nested Russian dolls that Michael Dowd used in his talks, one inside the other: self, congregation, community, the world, all on this fragile earth in this connected, generous universe.

What is the Global Turning of Korten's title? It is a shift, a transition, in author, professor and Buddhist scholar, Joanna Macy's words, from an industrial-growth society which is based on "an impossible imperative – limitless increase in corporate profits" to a life-sustaining society with an economy more in harmony with life and earth and enduring for the future.

Korten borrowed the term from Joanna Macy to name the turn from what he calls the Empire model for organizing human affairs that has largely held sway for the last 5000 years of human history to the Earth Community model. The turn from a dominator hierarchy model to one that is modeled more on an understanding of cooperative relationships and a recognized connection to and from the Earth and the organizing principles of life. Korten presents what he calls the history of Empire or the dominator model from city state to nation state, to multinational corporation. He argues that rising oil prices, global warming and increasing national debt create a situation that threatens the continuation of empire as an organizing system. It certainly is not sustainable in its present form. This he says may be the beginning of the Great Unraveling. Korten then makes the case for a possible change to a more participatory, localized, connected organizational understanding that serves life rather than money and may or may not hold things together.

Korten emphasizes that "the capacity to anticipate and choose our future is a defining characteristic of being human."

"The defining choice," he says, "is between [these]two contrasting models for organizing human affairs. Give them the generic names Empire and Earth Community. Empire, which features organization by domination and which has been a defining feature of the most powerful and influential human societies for some five thousand years, appropriates much of the productive surplus of society to maintain a system of dominator power and elite competition. Racism, sexism, and classism are endemic features of Empire. Earth Community which features organization by partnership, unleashes the human potential for creative cooperation and allocates the productive surplus of society to the work of growing the generative potential of the whole."

Korten goes on to say that these are two competing narratives that are not just out there in the world around us but are alive in each of us as well as in the decisions and choices we all make. "Empire and Earth Community flow from sharply contrasting world-views. The narrative of Empire, which emphasizes the demonstrated human capacity for hatred, exclusion, competition, domination, and violence in the pursuit of

domination, assumes humans are incapable of responsible self-direction and that social order must be imposed by coercive means. The narrative of Earth Community, which emphasizes the demonstrated human capacity for caring, compassion, cooperation, partnership, and community in the service of life, assumes a capacity for responsible self-direction and self-organization and thereby the possibility of creating radically democratic organizations and societies. These narratives represent two sides of a psychic tension that resides within each of us. One focuses on that which divides us and leads to fear and often violent competition. The other focuses on that which unites us and leads to trust and cooperation.”

He emphasizes that the idea of a Great Turning is a choice for us to make. While there are signs around us that we are waking up to the need for and the advantages of a more connected, life-sustaining way of being, The Great Turning, he says, “is not a prophesy; it is a possibility.” It is something that we can make happen. Joanna Macy says that we are creating more than a possibility, we are participating in “ a present, ongoing, multifarious phenomenon.” It is something that is happening. It may or may not have a positive outcome but there is a phenomenon that is calling out our courage and creativity.

Naming this phenomenon, the Great Turning may sound too grand and optimistic for some. It is not really optimistic or pessimistic. It does put or place our actions that may seem so isolated and small, in to larger vision and connected context. Earth Community, Life-sustaining society. It honors what we are doing and reminds us that there is more going on that is larger than ourselves both in need and effect. Our actions become more than hesitant questions, they become positive contributions.

Joanna Macy sees the Great Turning as both compass and lens. A compass points direction and a lens effects how we see what we do. Looking through the new prescription lens of the Great Turning we may begin to see life-sustaining groups and moments around us and we may even recognize and honor our part in them.

For example, I see the Great Turning in this fall’s issue of UU World magazine that just arrived. There is an article by Frances Moore Lappe of Diet for a Small Planet fame entitled “Hungry for Democracy”. She calls what we have now as our government’s form of democracy, Thin Democracy. She says that with its concentration of power it can’t “create healthy societies because it denies human complexity – our need for community, for basic fairness, and for efficacy in contributing to something grander than our own survival.” But, she says that in the “nick of time, a new frame for democracy is emerging. I call it Living Democracy. It’s not something done for us or to us; it is something we ourselves do. [Among its characteristics] are inclusion, fairness, and mutual accountability. Very practically, it means removing the power of money from decision making and infusing the power of citizens’ voices throughout public life.”

Looking through our new lens, we may both notice and take heart in that which might not have held our attention before. Seen through these new glasses, here in this congregation, Paul and Simone Shoemaker’s Harvest Festival becomes social action . The congregational picnic in October becomes not just good, fresh and freshly grown

food and friends and family and fun but part of an intentional turning to Earth Community. The Covenant Groups that are meeting this Monday become an acknowledgement and commitment to the power of our own experience. The Adult Enrichment programs are not just moments of information but groups of thought and allocations of time toward partnership relations. A UU presence at a Gay Pride march all the way in Durham on Sept. 30 takes on new meaning, importance and perhaps even urgency. (Although in all of these actions we must remember that we can't work for sustainability if we aren't living sustainably, pacing ourselves for the long haul. We are living the vision.)

We see Our Keeping On group in a different light as we meet to find new creative ways of aging and mentoring and using the experience of lives lived to build Earth Community. We appreciate the Rain Garden that filters runoff from the parking lot with native plants. We see that its design and planting were visionary and we see its care and upkeep as outreach.

And the work for and with our children rises in importance whether we are parents or not. Our children's well being is the measure of our world. They are the reasons we are. Teachers, we thank you.

Who else can you name? What program do you see differently? More clearly? Everything we do here to keep this voluntary association that is UUFH alive and vital is a part of our contribution to this vision of the world.

As we move to two services in two weeks, remember that what we are doing is getting bigger where we are in order to help an inclusive, fair, participatory, connected, life-sustaining vision of community and life and love, live. We are part of this Great Turning. Sharing and promoting our membership becomes a responsibility, a direct contribution to a just, egalitarian, connected vision.

Here at and in UUFH, we are living for, working for and believing in Earth Community. And as we begin to envision new building possibilities we will think not just of how it looks but of how it functions in relation to its surroundings. How sustainable is it? What will it model? And as we live in and settle in here, we replace old light bulbs with energy efficient ones and adjust the thermostats. At home we do the same.

The other half of what Macy calls the conceptual frame of the Great Turning is the compass. By pointing the direction of a path, a compass helps us notice how and when and how much our cultural, economic and political actions diverge from our mutual belonging to the web of life. As "compass pointing to the possible", the conceptual frame of the Great Turning helps us live through disappointments and helps us reorient and focus from the distractions to which we are constantly exposed. Macy says that "The Great Turning, as a compass pointing to the possible, helps me live with radical uncertainty. It also causes me to believe that, whether we succeed or not, the risks we take on behalf of life will bring forth dimensions of human intelligence and solidarity beyond any we have known."

One of the distractions from our commitments to love and justice and life is the simple fact that they sound good, but are not easy commitments to make and keep. It is not easy to stay the course particularly with so many forms of entertainment, so much global news, so much emphasis on economic pressure and so many seemingly dramatic

choices available. Relationships, partnerships, community are not neat. They can get messy. They might even involve committees. And they are not generally valued.

But the message of Faith and religion says that your effort is worth your while, our effort is worth our while. The transcendence and meaning you seek is to be found in love, compassion, connection and caring. It is to be found not outside of life, but in living for life – even in the face of death. In a column I wrote for the paper this summer I quoted Rabbi Hillel who said that the [religious message] is essentially “love your neighbor as yourself. All the rest is commentary.” And now through the advances of science, we know that all life is our not only our neighbor, but is our self too. This is the challenge we are taking on – nothing less than to redefine what it means to live and to live well.

It is a religious challenge. Standing up to empire and excess both personal and institutional has always been the role of authentic spirituality and religion.

I would like to close by revisiting the message from the Hopi Elders of the Opening Words. The message seems so simple. It is said so well and the words ring so true, because they are. But what they advise, is not easy. Community is not easy. It is not conflict free. It is not always fun. Take the four sentences in the middle of the message: “It is time to speak your truth. Create your community. Be good to each other. And do not look outside yourself for the leader.” Now imagine all those actions in people in a room together at one time. It’s enough to make you elave the room (or not put the group on your calendar) and go home and turn on the TV or play a computer game. But you can do it. You can stay the course. You can build the community and the world you seek.

Farther down in the Message are perhaps the most important, practical lines for each of us to hear. “At this time in history, we are to take nothing personally, least of all ourselves. For the moment we do, our spiritual growth and journey comes to a halt.”

Personally, I have to repeat those words over and over as I try to know and live and love the life-sustaining journey of earth Community. As I keep looking at the compass to bring myself back to my part in the Great Turning. Those are the words that create the chance for me to hear, take in, and re-member in myself the Hopi Elder’s concluding lines, “We are the ones we have been waiting for.”