



Iowa IPL Earth Words Sermon Contest Honorable Mention

“Earth Day Sermon”

First Unitarian Church – Des Moines, IA

Calling the Directions

by Diann Neu

Rev. Mark Stringer: We begin today by calling the directions. Please stand. First we turn to the North.

Stephen Lauer:

Oh Great Spirit of the North,
We come to you and ask for the
Strength and power
To bear what is cold and harsh in life.
We come like the buffalo
Ready to receive the winds that
Truly can be overwhelming at times.
Whatever is cold and uncertain in our life,
We ask you to give us the strength to bear it
Do not let the winter blow us away.
Oh Spirit of Life and Spirit of the North,
We ask you for strength and warmth.

Linda Keairns:

Oh Great Spirit of the East,
We turn to you where the sun comes up,
From where the power of light and refreshment come.
Everything that is born comes up in this direction—
The birth of babies, the birth of puppies,
The birth of ideas, and the birth of friendship.
Let there be light.
Oh Spirit of the East,
Let the color of fresh rising in our life
Be glory to you.

Jon McAlister:

Oh Great Spirit of the South,

Spirit of all that is warm and gentle and refreshing,
We ask you to give us this spirit
Of growth, of fertility, of gentleness.
Caress us with a cool breeze when the days are hot.
Give us seeds that the flowers, trees, and fruits
Of the earth may grow.
Give us the warmth of good friendships.
Oh Spirit of the South,
Send the warmth and the growth of your blessings.

Eileen Lundberg:

Oh Great Spirit of the West,
Where the sun goes down each day to come up the next,
We turn to you in praise of sunsets
And in thanksgiving for changes.
You are the great colored sunset of the red west
Which illuminates us.
You are the powerful cycle which pulls us to transformation.
We ask for the blessings of the sunset.
Keep us open to life's changes.
Oh Spirit of the West,
When it is time for us to go into the earth,
Do not desert us, but receive us in the arms of our loved ones.

This is Our Earth

*a children's story by Laura Lee Benson
Read by Anson Tonelli*

This is our Earth to cherish and love
To clean and protect, to take care of
From the mountains so high with their rugged terrain
To the valleys below and the green grassy plain
From the tall wooded forests with their towering trees
To the fish, whales, and dolphins that live in the seas
From the deserts of sand where the tall cactus grow
To the cold Arctic north with its glaciers and snow
From the rain forests where the wild parrot calls
Near the swift flowing rivers and lush waterfalls
To the wide open prairies where elk can be found
And thousands of prairie dogs that live underground
From the shimmering lakes where flocks of geese swim
And the blue jay keeps watch from a lofty tree limb
To the farms in the country where cows graze on hay

And the parks in the cities where children play
So take a good look and I think you will find that this beautiful Earth is one of a kind.
Let's do our share to lend a hand to preserve all we have in this wonderful land.
This is our Earth to cherish and love to clean and protect from below and above.

Meditation Spoken Text

author unknown, read by Eileen Lundberg

Everything around us is alive and part of the earth's living body; animals and plants, of course, but also some things that may not ordinarily seem to be alive, such as rocks, mountains, streams, rivers, stars, and clouds.

Even though we are separate people, all of us are part of her, just as each of your fingers is a part of your hand. And the earth herself is part of the larger living body of the universe, just as your hand is part of your arm, and your arm is part of your body.

Each living being is important and sacred, the way each part of your body is important to you. When something is sacred we must take care of it and respect it. Human life is sacred to us, and so are the plants and the animals and all the elements that make life possible. If one thing is hurt, it hurts us all --- just as when you cut even the tip of your little finger, you feel the pain all over.

Let us share a moment of silence to meditate, reflect, or pray.

Green Sanctuary

By Jon Knapp McAlister

Good morning. My name is Jon McAlister, and I am a member of this church. I am also a member of the Energy and Justice for All social action committee. I come here today to celebrate the Earth and all its glory. I come to celebrate the ways in which our church has done so much to live in greater harmony with the Earth.

It is difficult to summarize all of the green efforts of our congregation. Many projects—some huge, some small—have been completed over the past few years. We give credit to the Green Team for all their work on the remodeling of the building, which, of course, would have amounted to nothing without the generosity of all the Room to Bloom supporters. Perhaps their greatest success is our geothermal system that heats and cools the new offices with minimal energy, making us a part of the 21st century green energy revolution.

We celebrate Kids For a Clean Environment, or Kids FACE, a Wednesday-night club for kids interested in taking care of the Earth. They collected hundreds of cans and bottles to raise money for church projects, got the church going with a compost system, arranged for the

church property to be certified as a Backyard Habitat from the National Wildlife Federation, and inspired children to get involved.

We celebrate the Journey for the Planet RE program which ran last year and will run again every third year. It showed elementary-aged children that they can become leaders in their families and at church in the campaign to reinvent our relationship with the Earth. They also learned that being creative and having fun is always an important part of the process.

One of our most exciting actions started to take shape last spring. Members of Energy and Justice for All called local environmental organizations to come to our church for a meeting. We wanted to discuss how Des Moines could participate in an international day of action on climate change. At first, we just hoped to get a few organizations. However, word spread, and we ended up working with more, including: the Vegetarian Community of Iowa, Iowa Interfaith Power and Light, Iowans for Oxfam, the Drake Environmental Action League, Iowa Global Warming, 1 Sky, Repower America, the University of Northern Iowa's Center for Environmental Education, the Polk County Conservation Board, and Physicians for Social Responsibility. We worked with members of two different local chapters of the Sierra Club along with their state office. We even had owners of two businesses that specialize in green products. By the time the day arrived, on October 24th, we had over 40 volunteers to put on what we called the Climate Carnival, where 200 people enjoyed a day of hands-on fun, delicious Earth-friendly food, games, movies, and our own Ricky the juggler. Of course we also had educational activities, interactive websites, serious political action, and belly dancers.

One of the most exciting things that we did that day was to create this banner that you see behind you. On it, there are 350 handprints, placed there by those who attended the Carnival. The number 350 represents the upper safe limit for carbon dioxide in the atmosphere, though we now sit at 390 parts per million. The inscription below the Earth, "Too big to fail," not only summarizes the problems that we face, but also suggests that the Earth, more than AIG, needs to be bailed out.

All of these good things show us that there is hope for the Earth. Looking ahead, we UUs can have an even bigger reason to be optimistic. Our committee has been studying a program from the Unitarian Universalist Association called Green Sanctuary. It's a way that our congregation can get recognition and certification for all of the good green things that we do. Green Sanctuary is much like the Welcoming Congregation designation that recognized our work to be inclusive of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgendered members and friends. If we earn a Green Sanctuary certificate, we will be recognized at the UUA General Assembly. Already, one out of every five congregations in the UUA, including the Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Ames, has either earned the certificate or has begun the process.

The process, should our congregation choose to pursue it, asks us to select and complete a series of projects in four different areas: worship and celebration, religious education, sustainable living, and environmental justice. You will hear more about each of these areas during today's service. However, I would first like to conclude with a short passage from the Green Sanctuary Manual:

Most of us are aware of the enormous environmental challenges our world faces today. Global climate change, resource depletion, pollution, and species extinction are just a few of the concerns that trouble us, both as individuals and as Unitarian Universalist congregations. We may feel overwhelmed by the enormity of these problems, which are so difficult to understand, let alone solve. Yet none of us is called to solve the world's problems on our own. We are called simply to do our part, through small steps carried out consistently, with faith in their power to make a difference.

The Green Sanctuary program offers a way to join our efforts, both symbolically and explicitly, with thousands of other Unitarian Universalists in congregations across the country. Green Sanctuary is designed to help congregations like ours develop and work toward a vision of a healthier, more sustainable future.

Green Sanctuary: Religious Education

By Linda Keairns, adapted from the Green Sanctuary Manual

Green Sanctuary participants also focus on the environmental components of their lifespan religious education programs.

Religious education for our children is designed to prepare them to live sustainably and with integrity. We want our children to understand that they are part of nature, not separate and outside of it.

Religious education for adults helps us understand the complexity of Earth's systems, how our lifestyles affect those systems, and how we can change to live more sustainably. It also provides an integrated context for learning from Earth's wisdom. Religious education calls upon us to draw sustenance from what author Wendell Berry calls the "peace of wild things." It asks us to truly know and appreciate the sacredness of all of life.

For both children and adults, these are goals of not only environmental education, but religious education. In addition to learning how and why to care for Earth, we explore how caring for Earth relates to our Unitarian Universalist faith.

Green Sanctuary: Sustainable Living

By Amy Luebbert

"When something is sacred we must take care of it and respect it." We heard these words earlier during our meditation reading... We gather today in celebration of the Earth - let us recognize its sacredness and take opportunities to care for it and respect it.

Living in a sustainable manner, either as individuals or as a congregation means making choices that lead to the least negative impact on the Earth. There are many opportunities in our lives to reduce our impact. Through the Green Sanctuary certification process we hope to pursue, both as a congregation and as individuals, opportunities to lessen our footprint on the Earth.

We all do things to lessen our footprint. Some of the ways that I embody sustainable living are:

- In my home I turn down the thermostat in the winter and up in the summer. I have also switched all of my light bulbs to compact fluorescent ones. This limits the energy from coal that I use. I walk to and from places when possible to save CO2 from being emitted into the atmosphere from driving my car.
- In general, I limit my consumerism and prefer to buy used items when I can. This limits the amount of materials and energy to produce new products and transport them around the globe.
- For me being vegan allows me to feel more respectful of the Earth's inhabitants. It is also healthy for me and the Earth. I feel good about eating lower on the food chain because fewer resources are used in the production of my food. I also try to support local farmers when possible.
- I recycle and reuse everything that I can, I try not to buy products if they are in a package that cannot be reused or recycled. I recognize that there is no "away" when I throw my trash away.

Sustainable living is a choice we can each make. May we use the strength from the North and South to help deal with the challenges our Earth faces and the growth that we can experience as we take steps to lessen our impact. May we take comfort in the East and West as we look at each choice as a new beginning and an opportunity for transformation.

I think the story Anson read earlier said it best – "This is our Earth to cherish and love, to clean and protect. This Earth is one of a kind – let's do our share to lend a hand to preserve all we have in this wonderful land."

Green Sanctuary: Environmental Justice

by Stephen Lauer

When I think about environmental justice, I often find myself contemplating space. I'm not talking about the space of astronauts and rocket ships. I'm thinking of a different kind of space: the vacant lot down the street, the free day on my calendar, the remaining slots in my mostly empty contact book. I'm imagining the emptiness of loss, the thrill of opportunity, and the quiet comfort of sufficiency.

Space is all of these, and environmental justice is as much about building relationships with space that are compassionate and respectful as it is about conservation and stewardship. Environmental justice is a way of seeing that I engage in when I'm planting a community garden, advocating for a living wage, and supporting the Drake LGBT community when Fred

Phelps rolls into town. Environmental justice for me is also about quiet time, a night out with friends, and an afternoon walk with my family. To borrow the words of fellow Unitarian Universalist Joanna Macy, environmental justice is "waking up, as from a millennia-long sleep, to a whole new relationship to our world, to ourselves and each other". If that's environmental justice, what are we waiting for?

Green Sanctuary: Worship and Celebration

Rev. Mark Stringer

Why do we need to pursue a green sanctuary designation? Isn't our commitment already in place? After all, we continue to use green cleaning products, our use of a geo-thermal system in our new building addition has seen our energy usage and costs dramatically decrease, and this year, with some gentle prompting from the congregation, we have finally shifted to the use of 100% recycled paper for our in-house printing. We have done a lot and continue to pursue more green-friendly approaches to our congregational life. But there is a lot more we could do, especially if we saw it as an all-church commitment to which we all want to hold ourselves accountable, not just a project for a few devoted members.

I've learned that in the first few years of the green sanctuary program, in the early 90s, some of my colleagues in ministry were not excited about it. They saw it as another opportunity for over-zealous church folks to be the pushy green police, to lord their felt-superiority over their fellow church members, alienating the church community in the process. Nobody wants that. But let's face it. Gentle prompting and modeling of how we can be more earth-friendly in our church and in our lives can be good for everyone.

Albert Einstein said that "Problems cannot be solved at the same level of awareness that created them". We need ways to shift our awareness, to realize that there other ways of looking at the world and our actions in it. And that's why, in the Green Sanctuary program, projects related to worship and celebration can be so important. Worship and celebration in our UU tradition are all about shifting awareness: acknowledging that which holds worth in our lives, and increasing our reverence and awe for life. Reminding ourselves of our responsibilities to each other and to ourselves. Taking in our collective lives as co-inhabitants of our planet with growing appreciation and understanding.

Every year of my ministry, we have set aside one weekend a year in April to honor the Earth, and we have certainly woven other elements of earth-centered spirituality throughout the other services as well. For example, many of our hymns, readings, and meditations invoke green ideas and understandings. But beyond our typical liturgy, some of my most memorable experiences of connection with the earth during our services have been when some of you have shared your perspectives:

- Darcie Vandegrift challenging us to reconsider the purchase of water in plastic bottles.
- Jon McAlister, speaking about his "plastic penance" approach, the commitment he has made to search out plastic items to recycle every time he has to throw out something

plastic.

- Kathie Dawley's reminder that in the not so distant past, people practiced green living not because they were holier than thou, but because it was the economical and sensible thing to do.
- And I'm aware every time we have gone outside at the conclusion of a service, as we will today, I think to myself that we should be doing this more often.

Pursuing a "green sanctuary" designation will encourage us to nudge our worship life even more toward an increasing awareness that could lead us to make changes in our lives more in keeping with who we really want to be.

Not so long ago, your board of trustees of the church engaged in an exercise in which they had to name the stakeholders of our church, those to whom they are accountable in their work of overseeing the vision and mission of our congregation. They determined that they are first responsible to the members and their families, the friends and church community and the staff. In the next level of stakeholders, they listed several groups, including visitors, the neighborhood, and our district and national associations. But perhaps the most important stakeholder named that day for the purposes of today's service, and for the green sanctuary ideal was the church eco-system, the interconnected community that includes all life on our property, and in our immediate surroundings.

How many church boards in town would make the church eco-system a stakeholder? Green principles are such an important part of our individual spiritual understandings and priorities. They are an integral part of our UU religious tradition, from Thoreau at Walden Pond and his fellow transcendentalists to the seventh principle that, as members of the UUA we covenant to affirm and promote: "Respect for the interdependent web of existence of which we are all a part". And they are an important component of why so many of us are here in the first place. That's why I affirm and celebrate this effort to lead us into a greater, congregation-wide commitment to our pursuit of a green sanctuary designation.

Before we conclude this portion of the service by singing what is becoming one of our most treasured UU hymns of appreciation for the earth and our lives on it, I share with you the words of UU minister Max Knapp, who wrote

*Often I have felt that I must praise my world
for what my eyes have seen these many years,
And what my heart has loved.
And often I have tried to start my lines:
"Dear earth," I say
and then I pause
to look once more.
Soon I am bemused
And far away in wonder
So I never get beyond "Dear Earth"*