

First Unitarian Universalist Society of Albany, New York  
**Countering Despair Over the Planet's Future**  
 Rev. Samuel A. Trumbore November 14, 2010

## Call to Celebration

We begin this morning with these challenging words from Eckart Tolle:

When faced with a radical crisis, when the old way of being in the world, of interacting with each other and with the realm of nature doesn't work anymore, when survival is threatened by seemingly insurmountable problems, an individual human – or a species – will either die or become extinct or rise above their limitations with an evolutionary leap. This is the state of humanity now, and this is its challenge.

Sobered by the state of the world and willing to consider actions that will make a positive difference, let us consider this morning how to answer Mary Oliver's powerful question:

"Tell me, what is it that you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?"

## Readings

From *Doom Sonnets for After the vEmpire*<sup>1</sup> by Richard Morell.

Doom Sonnet #1

Is it too late? What sort of time do we  
 have? Implosions of finance and weather  
 coalesce around us all. Some won't see  
 this Titanic we the blind sail, dither  
 themselves into a most-contented doom.  
 To breathe acceptance into disaster?  
 Could this be folly, as these crises loom,  
 sprout up and overtake this one faster,  
 that one slower? But what choice do we have?  
 The source from which all our answers emerge--  
 It may not seem like much. The merest salve,  
 as tsunamis nature and artifice converge.  
 I remember. We're in this together.  
 Even as all 'round us loses tether.

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<sup>1</sup> vEmpire is a play on "The Empire of Vampires"

### Doom Sonnet #41

One more secret fantasy I have? Life  
 On this earth spontaneously changes.  
 Humanity cleans up its act. All strife  
 dissipates to manageable ranges  
 of conflicts and tiffs easy to settle,  
 and the economy extractive ceases  
 its rapacity to plunder. A small  
 task like saving seeds, canning eases  
 forward and claims a handsome place up front  
 and neighbors emerge from isolation  
 tendered so assiduously, confront  
 their awkward trips from alienation  
 to meet and greet the cute stranger next door  
 and start up a friendship long yearned for.

### Doom Sonnet #53 (Petrarchan style)

What sort of world do we wish will emerge?  
 And what are you willing to sacrifice  
 so your yearned for dream might materialize?  
 These are the strong questions which must needs urge  
 us each one inventory ourselves, purge  
 from our environments unneeded ties  
 shackling us, these planted percepts unwise  
 for our continued existence. Disgorge  
 such vEmpire thoughts! Get down to tasks at hand!  
 Do you know your neighbors' names, much less trust  
 them? What skills has your heart desired to learn?  
 To grow your food, have access to rich land?  
 These are the essential foci, the true must  
 haves to stoke inner flames, keep them a-burn

### Sermon

To respond to today's many environmental crises, disasters and catastrophes in progress, we desperately need a positive, inclusive vision of a possible future. Without that vision, we can easily sink into hopelessness and despair.

I know just thinking about humanity's future on this planet in the next 100 years can easily drive me toward a place of despair. As the world population marches, baby by baby, toward the seven billion mark, mother earth groans under the weight of our demands. Cutting down her forests, eroding her top soil, overfishing her oceans, draining her aquifers, piercing her with drilling rigs, ripping up and leveling her mountains in search of minerals and fossil fuels, we are depleting her ability to support us. Then when we are done with whatever we've taken, we give it back to her as mountains of trash, poisonous sewage and toxic fumes.

Is this any way to treat our mother who gave us life and sustains us with every breath? Her patience with us is wearing thin.

Well, the party may be coming to an end, the bill for our profligate consumption is coming due, and the bank account is not looking so good. The inheritance of 100's of millions of years of stored sunlight on this planet we've been squandering at an astonishing rate, are fossil fuels, in particular, oil reserves. Yes, we are at, or beyond peak oil and we are drunkenly driving toward an energy cliff.

Some really unpleasant facts from John Michael Greer's book, *The Long Decent*:

- The world's oil reserves are finite.
- We've already used close to half the total recoverable oil on the planet.
- Every year since 1964, we've pumped more oil than we've discovered.
- Production at most producing oil fields is declining.
- New fields and alternative sources such as tar sands are barely filling the gap.
- The situation is more likely to get worse than better in coming decades.

That's just the first planetary emergency coming our way. The second emergency is the effect of burning all that fossil fuel: a steady increase of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere.

Wikipedia says the concentration is currently at 390 parts per million and rising at a rate of around 2 ppm a year. It has been doing that for the last sixty years since they started measuring it in Hawaii.

Now, that doesn't sound like a lot, 390 parts per million, but the effects are significant. What those effects are likely to be is not known for sure. Scientists looking back in the historical record don't find much evidence of it that high in the last 20 million years, definitely not in the last 800 thousand years. What we are seeing is a sea level rise, the melting of the Arctic ice sheets and glaciers around the world, increasing ocean temperatures and the PH. All that extra carbon dioxide is dissolving in the oceans, acidifying the water. That rising PH value is likely to have catastrophic effects for sea life.

The more you look at these environmental insults, the worse it gets. To have any impact on slowing or reversing the increase of carbon dioxide, we need to stop burning and releasing that really old carbon or figure out a way to keep it out of the atmosphere through effective sequestration. The problem is our whole way of life is built on the use of fossil fuels. This goes beyond driving cars and trucks and ships and planes. We use fossil fuels at every stage of farming. Our clothes, our houses, our roads, appliances, computers, books, everything we touch needs energy to make it and to move it into our hands. Everything in our society is tied to the price and availability of oil. And if the oil spigot gets turned off, everything stops and begins falling apart.

You don't even need to have a grade school education to figure out that with more and more people wanting to use more and more fossil fuels, the supply is going to get smaller and harder to recover. That demand is likely to far exceed what is available. And when that happens, there is going to be trouble. Whatever does happen, we'll be living in a world with far less energy resources than we currently use today.

This is really hard for us to wrap our minds around. Since the beginning of the industrial revolution, we've been enjoying a steady growth in our standard of living as we've exploited the earth's fossil energy reserves. Greer points out that the Enlightenment myth of unlimited progress proved far more emotionally appealing than the narratives of Christianity it replaced. He writes:

It's one thing to expect people to anchor their hopes for a better world in the unknowable territory on the far side of death and trust completely in the evidence of things not seen; it's quite another to encourage them to re-imagine the world they know in the light of technological and social changes going on right in front of them, trace the trajectory of those changes right on out to the stars, and embrace the changes themselves as vehicles of redemption and proofs of the imminence of a better world.

In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, our own Unitarian minister, James Freeman Clarke, is famous for proclaiming the core five points of our faith, as:

1. The Fatherhood of God
2. The Brotherhood of Man
3. The Leadership of Jesus
4. Salvation by Character and
5. The Progress of Mankind, onward and upward forever.

There may possibly be, I hope, moral progress, and even spiritual progress, but I don't think, at this moment, it will be material progress.

Confronting the possibility of a lower material standard of living being part of our future elicits some pretty negative reactions. The first reaction might be physiological, such as clammy palms, nausea or mild palpitations, followed by a sense of bewilderment and unreality. Next might come an irrational grasping at unfeasible solutions. Then the fear will settle in, followed by outbreaks of nihilism and survivalism. Denial is a powerful line of defense, kind of like sticking your head in the sand or covering your ears and singing a cheerful song to yourself. Some shred of hope that appears on the news might cause a pendulum swing to exuberant optimism. But for the smart aleck arm chair philosopher, common in this congregation I might add, there might just be a resigned, "I told you so" response.

All these are emotional defensive responses that don't get us energized to deal with the problems facing humanity. And we must act quickly to figure out how to deal with these planetary crises because of our lack of resiliency.

The definition of resiliency is:

the capacity of a system to absorb disturbance and reorganize while undergoing change, so as to still retain essentially the same function, structure,[and] identity... (The Transition Handbook, p. 54)

One of the effects of small shops on Main Street being driven out of business by big box retailers and those businesses decreasing their inventories using highly profitable just-in-time globalized supply lines is to decrease our local resiliency. This became crystal clear during the United Kingdom truck driver's dispute of 2000.

Shortly before the dispute was resolved, Sir Peter Davis, [who was managing this crisis]...sent a letter to Prime Minister Tony Blair saying that food shortages would appear in "days rather than weeks." ... [During the strike] It became clear that we no longer have any resilience left to fall back on, and are, in reality, three days away from hunger at any moment, evoking the old saying that "Civilization is only three meals deep." We have become completely reliant on the utterly unreliable, and we have no Plan B. (The Transition Handbook, p. 54)

And, I might add, what happens here when the gas stations have no fuel, the grocery stores have no food and the heating oil tank is empty in January? People will likely behave badly. Social unrest is soon to follow. And the response by authorities is likely to be brutal as they keep order.

Is this the future we want for America? I hope not!

So what can we do now to head off the crises that declining energy resources are likely to create?

I think the first thing we must do is look for allies who recognize the problems I've discussed this morning. On the Peak Oil front, there are many who are soberly looking at the problem and working on solutions. They fall into two camps. Those who want to further exploit our fossil fuel reserves, such as those who'd like to convert coal and shale into gasoline and natural gas further exacerbating global climate change, and those who are looking for renewable energy solutions.

On the climate change front, we can find allies all over the world. A little over a year ago, Bill McGibben's initiative to get the carbon dioxide level of 350 parts per million in our brains as a goal brought people from around the world together. McGibben wrote:

We set our sights on a huge day of global action in October 2009, with actions everywhere from the highest mountains to underwater on the Great Barrier Reef. There were flotillas of canoes and lines of bikes; people in great human chains along beaches; hundreds of churches pealing their bells 350 times. It was, said CNN, "the most widespread day of political action in the planet's history." no one needed to leave his city or town; no one needed to march on Washington or Paris or Cairo. People simply showed their heart and soul and creativity where they were and then used this new tool, the Internet, to become larger than the sum of the parts. (from *Eaarth*)

As helpful as a number like 350 can be, the movement to respond to this planetary crisis can't be ends focused. We just don't know what achievable ends might be at this point. What we do know is the direction we need to go to lower our energy consumption and put less stress on the planet. Pointing ourselves in that direction and away from increasing consumption is critical at this moment to even consider turning the carbon dioxide corner.

To get things moving, the most critical step Rob Hopkins, author of *The Transition Handbook*, advocates is learning how to navigate the process of change. Key to that process of change is an attractive, positive vision. He writes:

What might environmental campaigning look like if it strove to generate [a] sense of elation, rather than the guilt, anger and horror that most campaigning invokes? What might it look like if it strove to inspire, enthuse, and focus on possibilities rather than probabilities? We don't know yet for sure, but the Transition movement is an attempt to design abundant pathways down from the oil peak, to generate new stories about what might be waiting for us at the end of our descent, and to put resilience-building back at the heart of any plans we make for the future. (page 15)

Focusing on all the negative aspects of declining energy resources is necessary to get our attention to the problem but doesn't motivate change, rather it tends to do the opposite, stimulating fear, isolation and hoarding. Bringing our attention to a shared sustainable future with an abundance of the human values we cherish helps us let go of unsustainable materialistic craving and consider joining with others in the transition to a sustainable future.

It is universally recognized that people resist change. What fewer of us understand is how to effectively navigate change in a way that energizes people rather than depletes them. Drawing from the visionary work of Carlos DiClemente on addiction and change, Hopkins integrates into his work the critical element of a positive vision. People just won't slog through the unpleasantness of letting go of their stuff without a more attractive vision of something they want to move toward. And cultivating a resilience that offers a buffer against the insecurities of a turbulent energy future turns out to be very attractive positive vision.

We are entering a tumultuous time of transition as we start sliding down the other side of the Peak Oil curve. Community resilience will cushion the bumpiness of the descent. Hopkins, has been working with communities like Kinsale in Ireland and Totnes in England to help them build their resilience. It would probably take an hour to describe the wonderfully creative and visionary work Hopkins has done in these communities and many others to stimulate them to look beyond oil dependence and imagine what a better life without oil might be like. They are in the process of creating a self sufficient resilience to weather the difficulties energy insecurity will surely engender. And right here in Albany, since June, the Capital District Transition Network is bringing that vision here. Sandy Steubing and Richard Morell are two of our newer members who are already involved.

Hopkins vision came partly from seeing for himself the Hunza Valley in northern Pakistan. The area had been cut off from the outside world until a road was built to it in the late '70's. These people had evolved a thriving, resilient, sustainable culture completely independent of fossil fuels. Living within the limits of what the land around them could provide, they serve as a living example of the kind of sustainable future we could create together.

Probably the most important element of resilience is the quality of community itself. Each one of us by ourselves can do little to defend ourselves against the travails of what the future may hold for us. But together, organized to share resources and information, we create a web of connection that protects us and sustains us. Probably the most important thing anyone can do to ensure their security is to embed themselves in a wide and deep community.

Today, you are fortunate to sit right in the middle of one of those communities. Whatever troubles and tremors shake the larger community, this smaller community will strive to hold

us together and protect each other against the troubles that come our way.

Sharon Astyk, in her book *Depletion and Abundance* (who will be speaking at the Albany Public Library, Tuesday night at 7:00pm) talks about religious communities as the model for building relocalization groups. Our inclusiveness, immediate human service, and crisis preparedness make us an ideal model for preparing for the troubles ahead.

We need not wait for those troubles to appreciate the value of the community we already have and build on it to ensure the well-being of those in this community and those in our neighborhood as we face the uncertain future ahead. I hope our congregation will join and help lead the transition to a sustainable future for this area. May that effort be a model for the rest of the world for how to do it humanely and non-violently. So may it be.

Benediction

I close with words from *Confronting Collapse* by Michael C. Ruppert:

I've said for years that we are faced with a choice that can no longer be postponed or evaded.

Evolve or perish.

Adapt or die.

That is the universe in which all species live. Those are the rules that govern all life. We are not that special. We are not exempt. Our evolution must be one of consciousness. (page 215)

May this congregation facilitate that evolution of consciousness for the benefit of all beings.

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