

October Theme:
DEATH
The Earth Is Our Mother:
Saving the Source of Life

Sunday, October 9, 2011, 11:00 a.m. – 12:15 p.m.

Reflection I

An Awakening

Rev. Nancy Palmer Jones

Listen:

When the Pollutians arrive in the Wump World in our Story for All Ages, they don't stop to ask, Who and what lives here? How do we fit in? They simply colonize it. They don't see the beauty of grassy meadows, crystal-clear lakes; they see property to use and transform. They don't think about what they *learned* from destroying their last planet; there will always be another planet, theirs for the taking. Limitless growth is the only law they know. Their tiny Pollutian brains haven't evolved to grasp their dependence on, and interconnectedness with, earth, air, water, plants, animals, sky, the source of their life and health.

Bill Peet wrote *The Wump World* forty years ago.¹ Have we grasped our interconnectedness yet? Have we awakened to what this means for how we live?

These religious questions—about our interconnectedness and how we are to live—lie at the heart of the environmental crisis. And—come with me, I'm going to take a sharp left turn here—they also lie at the heart of the OccupyAmerica movement, which began a few weeks ago on Wall Street and has spread to cities and towns across the United States, including around the corner from us here in San José.

What's OccupyAmerica about? Even without a single coherent message, its purpose is not mysterious: OccupyAmerica is a progressive outcry against inequity and greed. It's an uprising against "business as usual" where the law of limitless growth *for the few* is destroying livelihoods and neighborhoods for the many. Ultimately the law of limitless growth is destroying the planet itself for all.

One of our senior youth, and one of our freshman at San Jose State, have been spending nights in the tents at City Hall; look at the *Metro* this week for quotes from all of us. A young adult from the Palo Alto Unitarian Universalist church, is here, too, and will lead folks who want to go to the general assembly and the march that follow this service. I encourage you to

¹ Bill Peet, *The Wump World* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1970; reissued by Sandpiper, 1981).

go, if you can, with curiosity, with patience for an evolving process, and with a sense of connectedness.

What ties OccupyAmerica to our focus today on saving Mother Earth is the shared call for a new way of living. We stand at a juncture where we can see how the economic crisis is linked to the environmental crisis is linked to the immigration crisis is linked to the education crisis is linked to poverty and hunger and our own everyday level of anxiety.² This conjunction calls us to wake up and change our way of living.

So *why haven't we?* What keeps us from plugging in to that interconnectedness, and changing? We have to take a steep dive into the shadow side of our human nature, before we can surface again into hope.

Scientist and meditation teacher Jon Kabat-Zinn says that the Buddhists have it right about the “three toxins of greed, hatred, and illusion” forming the “foundation of all suffering.”³

Greed—“endlessly wanting more and more, so that no matter how much you have, it’s never enough.” Greed drives the egocentric exploitation of people and things for “my” personal gain, *as though* “my” well-being is more important than, is separate from, the well-being of all around me. Greed masks a terrifying spiritual emptiness.

Hatred—“finding somebody else to be the enemy or the cause of all ‘my’ problems and then directing anger and hatred at them.” Hatred drives scapegoating, justifies violence, and disempowers the hater. It pretends that we have no agency in our own problems. If it’s the rich people’s fault, or the immigrants’, or the corporations’, or any group’s other than “ours,” then what can *we* do? Hatred masks our fear and self-distrust.

And illusion or ignorance, which is “living in a misapprehension of reality and thinking it *is* the reality.” The illusion that one creature or event exists separately from all others drives us to engage in self-destructive distractions. It’s hard work staying unaware of the suffering we are causing other humans, other creatures, staying unaware of how this destruction places us in peril too—it takes a lot of sugar and TV. But we are scared of waking up to that deep interconnectedness because of the pain it will bring. Ignorance masks our fundamental isolation and pain, even as it causes more of them.

So ecologist Joanna Macy suggests that what really holds us back is our inability to deal with our own despair.⁴ Swamped by statistics about

² Adapted from Jon Kabat-Zinn, unedited interview with Krista Tippett for *On Being*; available at onbeing.org

³ Quotations from Jon Kabat-Zinn, unedited interview with Krista Tippett for *On Being*; available at onbeing.org.

climate change, battered by conflicting arguments, overwhelmed by the apparent mindless rush toward our own possible extinction, we feel both despair and a desperate desire to push that despair away. Despair is a “healthy and normal response,” a testimony to how connected we really are, Macy reminds us. Pushing it away tamps down our senses, kills our creativity, suffocates our love of life. “Despair work,” like grief work, invites us to face and feel our pain.

That’s why we’re here in community. To feel this pain together—to know that it is larger than any one of us, that we hold it together, and that we hold each other. We find healthy ways to express it, so we don’t get stuck. Facing our despair about the prospects for our planet can revive our ability to see and feel, awaken our resilience, help us to hope and to change.

Worship Associate Debra and I found a song that pierces right through our usual politeness and restraint, when it’s sung with passion, even anger. In the YouTube recording, a guitarist, badly out of tune, plays it grunge-style. This isn’t about a musical experience. It’s about getting in touch with something deeper, and putting it out there, together, into this sacred circle. It’s hymn # 174, “O Earth, You Are Surpassing Fair.” I invite you to listen as Dianne plays the melody through and shows us the style, then rise in body or in spirit, and sing or shout or whisper, even if it means breaking open your heart.

Reflection II

A Story:

Rev. Nancy Palmer Jones

The Universal Declaration of the Rights of Mother Earth

In the 1100-1200s, St. Francis of Assisi loves the earth so dearly that he sees the sun, moon, wind, water, fire, earth, death, and life as brothers and sisters all.

In April 2010 32,000 people from around the world love the earth so dearly—and are so despairing about the failure of the 2009 United Nations Copenhagen climate summit—that they gather in Cuchabamba, Bolivia, for the World People’s Conference on Climate Change and the Rights of Mother Earth.⁵ On Mother Earth Day, April 22, they proclaim the Universal Declaration of the Rights of Mother Earth. It embodies an ancient indigenous idea and invites 21st-century humans to relate to the earth and all its living things in a radically new way. Unlike the Pollutians, we start by asking, Who and what lives here, and how do we fit in?

⁴ Joanna Macy, “Despair Work,” in *World as Lover, World as Self* (Berkeley: Parallax Press, 1991).

⁵ Evo Morales Ayma, et al., *The Rights of Nature: The Case for a Universal Declaration of the Rights of Mother Earth* (Ottawa: Council of Canadians, Fundacion Pachamama, Global Exchange, 2011).

“The Declaration,” environmental attorney Cormac Cullinan describes it, “recognizes that all natural entities which exist as part of Mother Earth, including plants, animals, rivers and ecosystems, ... have the inherent and inalienable right to exist and to play their role within the community of beings.” Plants, animals, rivers, ecosystems have inherent rights. Is this harder to swallow than saying that *corporations* are “persons” with inherent rights? Earth—which was here before we humans evolved and will be here, almost certainly, after we are gone—has rights that have existed all along. Most of us humans just haven’t recognized them, thinking that the earth’s resources were put here for human benefit alone. Isn’t that hubris? Greed?

But in truth we can’t separate out our well-being from the well-being of the “living communities within which we live”; those living communities are the source of everything we need for life. So, Cullinan goes on, “we cannot maintain human rights and the freedom to live well unless we respect and defend the Rights of Mother Earth.” It’s about waking up to our interconnectedness.

The Universal Declaration of the Rights of Mother Earth is not talking about more environmental regulation here—which overall hasn’t worked. Carbon emissions are higher than they have ever been, in the face of carbon “trading,” carbon “offsets,” and so on. And it’s not talking about a “green economy,” either, *if* it is based on the same economic model of growth.

It’s kind of terrifying, when you and I are feeling the pinch of the economic crisis, and may be out of work or losing our homes, to think that “growth” is not the answer.

It’s kind of terrifying to think that every legal, political, and economic decision henceforth would have to take into consideration the rights of earth and its living communities before we could build a highway or, say, lay a pipeline from Canada to the Gulf ... That’s going to mean a lot of sacrifice.

But what will we do for the people we love? Children born right now could live to the end of this century—what kind of world will we leave them? How will they live in it?

Mari Margil and Shannon Biggs from Global Exchange—Shannon will be here to talk with us about all this after worship on October 30—point out that right now, “all existing U.S. environmental law” is “anchored in the concept of Nature as property. But ... with enough will, unjust laws that deny rights can change. Slaves and women were once considered property, but through massive shifts in law and culture they moved from being right-less to being rights-bearing.” We evolved to recognize the rights that were there all along.

There are already places that have made this paradigm shift about the rights of nature: Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania—who woulda thunk it?—“became the first major city in the United States to recognize the legally enforceable Rights of Nature” by “a unanimous ... decision of the city council.” They stepped up to stop the water-contaminating gas drilling planned by a corporation, “armed with permits from the state’s ... ‘Department of Environmental Protection.’” Other communities in Pennsylvania, New Hampshire, Maine, Virginia, and Maryland have passed similar ordinances, with communities like Mt. Shasta in California close behind. The country of Ecuador rewrote its constitution in 2008 to recognize that [quote] “Nature or *Pachamama*, where life is reproduced and exists, has the right to exist, persist, maintain itself and regenerate its own vital cycles, structure, functions and its evolutionary processes.” Human activity must shape itself to maintain those rights—because that is in the interest of all.

You know, a paradigm shift is always difficult for our brains to embrace. Albert Einstein said, “The significant problems we face cannot be solved at the same level of thinking we were at when we created them.” But we are built for just such an evolution.

Latin American journalist Eduardo Galeano suggests that maybe God will hear the cry from Ecuador and come out with an eleventh commandment, “which he left out when he handed down instructions from Mount Sinai”; it would say, “Love Nature, which you are a part of.”

How lucky we Unitarian Universalists are. We already have this commandment, in our seventh principle, where we covenant to affirm and promote “respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part.” What at last does this call us to do?

Reflection III A Call to Hope and Action *Rev. Nancy Palmer Jones*

So much is in bud—we’re not ready to give up on this great experiment called “living on earth,” this great experiment called humanity, this great truth of the interconnectedness of all existence ...

We have been talking this month, when our theme is “Death,” about legacy—our own, and in this case, a legacy from the elders among us, who have brought this perspective to us. Here are a few things that we can do:

- Buy *The Rights of Nature*, just \$10 (and believe me, worship would have been much longer than it already is if I really had told you everything where I’ve written “quote, quote, quote” in this book).

- Join us on October 30 after worship for discussion with Shannon Biggs from Global Exchange; bring all your questions and your doubts and your passions and your care.
- Show up for the PACT action on Wednesday at 11:00 a.m. at Most Holy Trinity Church about divesting from big banks
- Show up for the Hunger Banquet here on December 3 with Rev. Lindi Ramsden talking about the right to water.
- Today, go to the general assembly and march with Occupy San José
- And pray—there are so many ways to pray or meditate—it's all about awakening to what is ...