

## Respecting the Interdependent Web of Life

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6 November 2016

Good morning. I see climate change very much through the 7<sup>th</sup> Unitarian principle—interdependence. The notion and practical implications of interdependency have always been a part of my life. I was raised a strict Unitarian Buddhist Jew—at least that's what Dad said we should write down in the little one inch line of the profile documents you had still fill out when I was a kid.

For much of my youth, my family was part of the Unitarian fellowship in Ann Arbor, Michigan. Growing up in Ann Arbor—and within Erv Gaede's Unitarian family—in the late sixties and early seventies meant that our political, social, and spiritual lives were, well, a little left of center from the rest of pretty much everywhere else. When I came to San Miguel 10 years ago, I found part of that lost tribe, and have relished our fellowship and community.

Since I first drafted this talk in late September, a lot has been happening. Momentum is rising, but the risks and pending impact on lives and livelihoods is profound and difficult.

In her landmark book, *Silent Spring*, Rachel Carson asked: Man, however much he may like to pretend the contrary, is part of nature. Can he escape a pollution that is now so thoroughly distributed throughout our world?

Carson—a woman without scientific degrees—was a rare voice of reason in the late 1950s and early 1960s. She died just 18 months after the release of *Silent Spring*, succumbing to malignant breast cancer. She knew of her terminal diagnosis in the late summer of 1962 when the book was published. Rather than retreat, the finality of her condition gave her the bravery to sustain an unabashed advocacy for the findings of her analysis in the face of overwhelming hostility.

Her message: Unwarranted, pervasive, and wholesale use of toxic chemicals was just as much a death sentence for flora and fauna—and likely mankind—as cancer was to her. Her unparalleled courage to document and present the slaughter and risk associated with the ill-advised, profit-fueled use of toxic chemicals led to an environmental movement and changed policies throughout the United States.

So let us return to an amended version of her question asked more than half a century ago: Can WE escape a pollution that is now so thoroughly distributed throughout our world? How can we conclude otherwise than with a resounding NO.

But just as in 1962, it's not enough simply to say NO to a problem. In *Silent Spring*, Carson gave us a roadmap for action. In no small part for her voice and recommendations, I grew up thrilling with the arrival of robins each spring, chasing the quail in brush, and watching fish in the stream close to my house. Thank you, Rachel.

Since *Silent Spring*, the world has faced innumerable imperatives. Wars (proxy and direct; cold and hot), the threat of nuclear holocaust, genocides (note the plural), famines, riots, revolutions, dictatorships, depressions, poverty...and the list goes on and on.

And now, humankind finds itself confronting planetary boundaries and nonlinear tipping points. It's numbing to even speak these words—planetary boundaries...nonlinear tipping points. Many scientific and popular authors have cogently and plainly sounded alerts. And really, it's not like we have other planets to test out. This is all we have. We as individuals, communities, and nations must also face our Silent Spring with action. With urgency and agency, many are taking action, from individuals to nations, to global alliances. It's happening. It's happening now. And it's happening all over the world.

2015 was a seminal year for equitable development, sustainability, addressing climate change—also known by its more forceful term, climate disruption, as well as the mechanisms by which to fund requisite efforts. You might have missed some of it, as heaven knows the western media sure as heck doesn't cover it. Let me review the highlights, and then come back to attempt to answer the question I can already see forming in your minds:

So, Jen, what does this mean for me?

## **AGENDA 2030**

The United Nation's Agenda 2030 is comprised of a set of conventions. From least to, perhaps, best known, these are the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction, the Sustainable Development Goals, and the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change. Each of these conventions had their precursors in the earliest years of this millennium. In turn, they are the Hyogo Framework, the Millennium Development Goals, and the Kyoto Agreement.

Not all nations ascribed to these earlier frameworks and agreements, and not all that signed up actually honored them. We know that because climate disruption and inequalities are worse than ever. But before we start pointing fingers, please remember that the US fell short on or entirely rejected the earlier efforts. As we say in German, *Selberschuld* (which can be translated as: it's your own damn fault)

**Sendai Framework.** For me, in the context of climate change and interdependence, the most important reveal in the Sendai Framework, ratified on 18 March 2015 by UN members is in the 6<sup>th</sup> paragraph of the Preamble: More dedicated action needs to be focused on tackling underlying disaster risk drivers, such as the consequences of poverty and inequality, climate change and variability, unplanned and rapid urbanization, poor land management and compounding factors such as demographic change, weak institutional arrangements, non-risk-informed policies, lack of regulation and incentives for private disaster risk reduction investment, complex supply chains, limited availability of technology, unsustainable uses of natural resources, declining ecosystems, pandemics and epidemics. Moreover, it is necessary to continue strengthening good governance in disaster risk reduction strategies at the national, regional and global levels and improving preparedness and national coordination for disaster response, rehabilitation and reconstruction, and to use post-disaster recovery and reconstruction to Build Back Better.

**Sustainable Development Goals.** The 17 SDGs—permit me a few acronyms, please—build on the progress and impact of the 8 Millennium Development Goals issued in 2000. During the 15 years of the MDGs more than one billion people were lifted out of extreme poverty, among other significant, positive impacts. But there is so much left to do, and that’s where the SDGs play a role. These goals were created through a global dialogue and vetting process that took five years. Communities, civil society organizations, local and national leaders; youth, women, people with disabilities, seniors—the scope of humanity that contributed their voices to the creation of the SDGs was unprecedented. The SDGs were adopted by all UN members on 25 September 2015. Nearly half of the 17 goals focus on an aspect of climate change directly, and all are impacted by the quality of local and global governance.

**UN Framework for Convention on Climate Change.** Since the 1992 Rio Earth Summit, the world has sought to address the negative impact of human-driven climate change. The 1997 Kyoto Protocol was another attempt, but it was rejected by the US and China, the highest emitters of greenhouse gases. Late last year in Paris, the Conference of the Parties met for the 21<sup>st</sup> time and finally produced an agreement supported by high and low emitters, poor countries and rich. It was a long-fought for achievement. In April of this year, 175 nations signed the Agreement at UN headquarters in New York. Never in the history of humankind have so many nations committed to a common document on a single day. The Paris Accord commits nations and the world to hold global temperature increases to 2 degrees centigrade to avoid the worst of climate change.

The Paris Accord quickly met its required ratifications in early October when the nations of the EU collectively ratified the Agreement, crossing the threshold for at least 55 nations AND emitters accounting for at least 55% of global greenhouse gas emissions ratified the Agreement. Beyond all expectations, it went into force on Friday, the 4<sup>th</sup> of November. Just three weeks ago, global leaders committed to legally binding pathways to eliminate Hydrofluorocarbons, which had been introduced into industrial use in the 1980s as a way of fighting ozone depletion. Turns out that HFCs are a more potent greenhouse gas than carbon.

Some scientists and activists fear we are too late to meet that 2C goal. And no doubt, action is required from top to bottom and truly everything and everyone in between. Tomorrow, COP22 begins in Morocco where leaders and activists from around the world will meet to identify specific policies and practices to fulfill the promise of the Paris Accord.

If Agenda 2030 represents a global approach to address climate change and its contributing factors, let’s take a moment to look at how nations, states and even communities are addressing the matter through a model of development called green growth.

### **Green Growth**

Green Growth (sometimes called Green Economy) first came to global prominence in 2012 at the Rio +20 Conference as a model of development that emphasizes three, equally important pillars: 1) economic growth; 2) sustainable use of natural resources; and 3) equitable, inclusive participation. It isn’t enough to throw technology at the challenge, as more often than not, technology alienates labor. And labor is people.

Courage and innovation abound. I know. I had a front-row seat while in Seoul as one of three regional directors at the inter-governmental Global Green Growth Institute. My territory alone covered 18 time zones and accounted for more than 3 billion people. At GGGI, I worked directly with country teams in Latin America, as well as North, Central and South Asia. Our country partners were senior government officials, local authorities and regional commissions, each trying to develop and implement more sustainable, greener policies. They seek to improve the management of natural resources; develop and apply new systems of financial management that account for natural resource use; make rapidly growing cities more livable and cleaner; they seek to develop policies away from fossil fuels and towards renewables. Often the greatest level of innovation and courage come from countries considered least or less developed, in large part due to the absence of what's called "lock in" of vested interests (ie, follow the money).

My concern about green growth and the number of institutions designed to support and promote it has nothing to do with the model itself. I believe in it, deeply. My concern is who's at the table. Right now, governments, banks, and businesses are present and accounted for. Make no mistake; there are billions of dollars at stake even now, with that figure steadily rising. Far too few, however, are civil society, community leaders, and grassroots advocates. This is where the important task of education, engagement, and partnerships come into play. This is why the language of Agenda 2030—with all the promises to inclusion and participation—must be made manifest and not just languish on the printed page. In a nutshell, this is what climate justice and environmental activism are all about.

Having considered important trends and momentum at the global and national levels, let us conclude with a theological look at climate change, environmental action, and interdependence.

### **Pope Francis's 2015 Encyclical—*Laudato Si* (Praised Be)**

The subtitle of this papal encyclical is: On the Care of Our Common Home. This is a treatise of science, social commentary, and theological imperatives to consume less, educate oneself about climate change, and take personal (and even political) action. The bluntness of the encyclical shocked many within the Mother Church and beyond. He states: Climate change is a global problem with serious implications, environmental, social, economic, political, and for the distribution of goods; it represents one of the principal challenges facing humanity in our day. (25)

Echoing the complexities of Agenda 2030, Pope Francis notes: We are not faced with two separate crises, one environmental and the other social, but rather one complex crisis which is both social and environmental. Strategies for a solution demand an integrated approach to combating poverty, restoring dignity to the underprivileged, and at the same time protecting nature. (139)

In *Laudato Si*, Pope Francis reminds us that: There is a nobility in the duty to care for creation through little daily actions (211) Everything is related, and we human beings are united as brothers and sisters on a wonderful pilgrimage, woven together by the love God has for each of his creatures and which also unites us in fond affection with brother sun, sister moon, brother river and mother earth. (92)

Ok, but what does Pope Francis have to do with us UUs down here in Mexico?

Interdependence is a core theological theme of the Unitarian Universalist. We avow this each Sunday when we recite together: We respect the interdependent web of life. In his book, *Theology Ablaze*, our recent visiting minister, Tom Owen-Towle, reminds us that: We humans share the chemistry of all the nonhumans among which we live. It is inescapable. Climate change and environmental justice is personal to each and every one of us.

The UUA is a pioneer in climate justice. Our UUA's Statement of Conscience took up a strong and action-oriented position on climate change in 2006—well before many had even acknowledged the validity of anthropogenic disruption. It states:

We as Unitarian Universalists are called to join with others to halt practices that fuel global warming and climate change, to instigate sustainable alternatives, and to mitigate the impending effects of global warming and climate change with just and ethical responses. As a people of faith, we commit to a renewed reverence for life and respect for the interdependent web of all existence.

At a practical level, the UUA Statement of Conscience identifies a number of practices to generate more sustainable living. Individually and as a congregation, we might start with a carbon footprint assessment to determine how our own level of consumption contributes to global warming. There are a number of footprint calculators online, including at the Global Footprint Network website.

Once you have a better picture – objective and empirical – as to your own consumer patterns, consider one or more of the personal practices identified by the UUA. Just a few of these include:

- Pledge to reduce our use of energy and carbon emissions by at least 20 percent by 2020 or sooner and into the future;
- Choose the most energy-efficient transportation means that meet our needs and abilities;
- Reuse, recycle, and reduce waste;
- Eat and serve energy-efficient food that is locally produced and low on the food chain;
- Use financial resources to encourage corporate social responsibility with reference to climate change;
- Commit to continue to learn about the science, impact, and mitigation of global warming/climate change and communicate this knowledge by teaching about and discussing the actions to address, climate change.

UUA members should also challenge those of us in this Fellowship's leadership to review and account for our communal position and practices that have climate implications. The UUA identifies a number of congregational actions, among these are:

- Treat environmentally responsible practices as a spiritual discipline;
- Use congregational financial resources to positively address the global warming/climate change crisis; and
- Build a broader base for environmentally mindful policies and practices through congregational alliances within Unitarian Universalism, through interfaith channels, and with secular entities.

You can read much more on the UUA website which provides further detail, action, and advocacy related to climate and environmental justice.

The world just marked the first anniversary of Agenda 2030. The Paris Accord is in force. HFC elimination is now a legally defined policy. And there is so much more going on.

2016 is the hottest year on record; as was 2015 before it. Climate change is real. It is here. There are people across the globe working to mitigate its worst effects and adapt to new environmental realities, including world's leaders, national authorities, community leaders, and citizens who take the streets, social media, and airwaves to fight worst practices. We didn't arrive at this point in a year, or even 10. It took decades of behavior to get us this far. And people, we were warned along the way. Lots and lots of warnings. But collectively, we chose to hear little or less. We were too enamored by the Bigger Better Faster More lifestyle we in the West imagined ourselves entitled to. And, again, make no mistake, we successfully exported that sense of entitlement to every corner of this Blue Planet.

Now, with urgency and agency, we must rein in our consumption and take action whenever we might. One by one; family by family; fellowship by fellowship; community by community. We must engage the enlightened leaders who are working on implementing policies and plans that will take us out from the shadow and onto an equitable, sustainable, inclusive path of global growth. Where we have to—as witnessed so bravely in North Dakota for months now—resistance to corporate greed and rape will still be necessary. But with each path and at every crossroads, we must take stock and learn lessons.

And never, even for the briefest of moments, can we ever say—It's Too Late. That would be the greatest disrespect to the interdependent web of life. I continue my commitment through my work in environmental governance and climate justice.

I hope that you, too, find your way in to ensure that globally we all thrive for many generations to come. Thank you.

### **Suggested Reading**

*Silent Spring* by Rachel Carson

*Hot, Flat and Crowded* by Thomas L Friedman

*This Changes Everything: Capitalism vs. The Climate* by Naomi Klein

*The Millennium Development Goals 2015 Report* by United Nations

*Laudato Si*, Climate Change Encyclical by Pope Francis

Sendai Framework

Sustainable Development Goals

UNFCCC Paris Agreement

### **Organizations/Websites:**

World Resources Institute

Rocky Mountain Institute

Global Footprint Network

Green Growth Knowledge Platform

Unitarian-Universalist Association—Social Justice link