

Have to Have a Habitat

A sermon by Jackie Clement

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This morning's service comes with a guarantee, a rare commodity in Unitarian Universalist religion. Over the next two days, as you sit in meetings or watch TV, at the gym or in the garden, inside your head you will be hearing, "habitat, habitat, have to have a habitat." It is one of those songs that sticks like a burr to your mental socks.

And so it should because it is not only easily sing-able but also true. We not only need a habitat, but it seems to me that we all connect with different types of habitats. My mother is mountain person, finds nothing more beautiful than the landscape of soaring peaks. I'm a lake habitat person myself. To me, home is being that the edge of still water. The ocean is a good backup, but it's really lakes that I connect with. I've known people for whom a landscape with no apparent water means home. Lesli Marmon Silko writes:

The bare vastness of the Hopi landscape emphasizes the visual impact of every plant, every rock, every arroyo. Nothing is overlooked or taken for granted. Each ant, each lizard, each lark is imbued with great value simply because the creature is there, simply because the creature is alive in a place where any life at all is precious.

I love this way of looking at a dessert habitat, but still it is not my habitat, nor is it the spiritual home of river people I've known who need the flow of water or prairie people who feel at home in wide open spaces. I've known city people, too, people who need the energy and activity and feel of concrete beneath their feet. This church is a habitat of sorts, the habitat within which we live some portion of our spiritual lives, a habitat from which we go forth to take that into the world.

We're lucky to have all the habitats we have, the ones that are home to not only different plants and different animals but different people, too. The problem is we are in danger of losing many of our habitats. We may not feel that loss directly or immediately. We may not be deeply connected to a particular habitat that is endangered. For instance, it may not ring alarm bells that China's air pollution is rising dramatically as they adopt a more consumption driven model of life. We may just think they ought to stop doing that. It's so very far away, after all. But the thing is that all habitats, all ecosystems, are connected. If a butterfly flaps its wings in China and a hurricane happens in Texas, then what of toxins spewing into the air?

Rachel Carson, grandmother of the environmental movement, put it this way:

For each of us, as for the robin in Michigan or the salmon in Miramichi, this is a problem... of interrelationships, of interdependence. We poison the caddis flies in a stream and the salmon runs dwindle and die. We poison the gnats in a lake and the poison travels from link to link of the food chain and soon the birds of the lake margins become its victims. We spray our elms and

the following springs are silent of robin song, not because we sprayed the robins directly but because the poison traveled, step by step, through the now familiar elm leaf—earthworm—robin cycle. These are matters of record, observable, part of the visible world around us. They reflect the web of life—or death—that scientists know as ecology.

We are not only experiencing the ripple effect within and between ecosystems, we are also in danger of losing several of the things all habitats share – like breathable air. Carbon pollution is causing catastrophic changes in our oceans, forests, flora and fauna, and weather patterns. That air pollution is also a major threat to human health as has been documented in the areas of asthma, cardiovascular disease, and more recently autism.

More than 131 million Americans— over 40 percent of the nation's population— live in areas with bad air. Air Pollution has been tied to the development of asthma in a number of studies. Roughly 30 percent of childhood asthma is due to environmental exposures, costing the nation \$2 billion per year. Studies also suggest that air pollution may contribute to the development of asthma in previously healthy people. In severe cases, asthma attacks can be deadly. They kill more than 3,000 people every year in the United States.

Dr. Lynn Ringenberg of Physicians for Social Responsibility said: “The pediatric asthma prevalence for the state [of Illinois] is 200,000 to 300,000 kids, with close to 20,000 that had Emergency Room visits last year” That is pretty significant putting Illinois in the top six or seven states in the country for asthma prevalence.

Joel Kaufmann, professor of Environmental and Occupational Health Sciences, did a detailed, long-term study on: “Air Pollution and Disease,” which demonstrated the connection between heart attacks, strokes and air pollution. It showed that women living in areas with higher particulate matter exposure have a 25% increased risk of heart attack or stroke.

Just this past December, the Harvard School of Public Health published results of the first nationwide study on the link between airborne particulate matter and autism. It showed that pregnant women exposed to high levels of fine particulate matter may face up to twice the risk of having a child with autism as women living in areas with cleaner air. Air quality matters to our health and to our children’s health.

Since Rachel Carson wrote her ecological manifesto *Silent Spring* in 1962 much has changed in our awareness of our place in the interconnected web of existence and much has changed in our behavior toward the rest of the web. The other night after the board meeting we got to discussing the show *Mad Men*, which is about New York advertising executives in the 1960’s. There are many reasons to dislike the characters portrayed in the show none of who are particularly sympathetic, but the reason I love this show is because it gives me hope of how things have changed. There’s one scene where a nice middle class family—mom, dad, 2.4 children and the family dog—are picnicking on a lovely grassy bank. When it is time to pack everything back into the station wagon, dad

picks up the picnic blanket and shakes it out leaving a whirlwind of food wrappers, soda cans and assorted garbage lying in the grass. The family walks away past the Lady Bird Johnson “Keep America Beautiful” sign. I remember that campaign and I remember that people once thought nothing of dumping their garbage alongside the road. Few of us would dream of doing that today. It gives me hope that we have changed some behaviors for the better.

Yet, truly substantive change in our habits of consumption and pollution has yet to take place, and the kinds of changes needed now are not the ones we can affect through sorting our recyclables. What is needed now is a larger voice to change the corporate habits of America—to move to clean energy sources, to change habits of how much we consume and what we consume. What is needed now is stronger regulation and enforcement of regulations already in place.

This is not to say that there haven’t been successes. We’ve had some local ones and there have been national ones as well. Last year, car manufacturers were handed largest fines ever levied under the 1970 Clean Air Act for misrepresenting the gas mileage of their cars. Last month President Obama signed an executive order reducing government’s heat-trapping emissions by 40 percent over the next 10 years, and also announced the strictest federal fracking regulations to date. But the news is not all positive. Many legislators still contest the reality of climate change and big energy still wields the power. At the same time that we celebrate successes in clean energy usage we wait to hear the Supreme Court decision in the suit energy companies brought against the Environmental Protection Agency for trying to enforce Clean Air Act regulations. It could go either way.

So what can we do besides sit and wait and hope the EPA doesn’t get sued out of existence? The UUA *Commit2Respond* initiative asks Unitarian Universalists and our allies to commit to three actions:

- to shift to a low carbon future,
- to advance the human rights of the communities affected, and
- to grow the climate justice movement.

You can make this commitment by joining the *Commit2Respond* national movement through their website, but you can also support their efforts right here in Illinois through UUANI, the UU statewide advocacy network. As part of a coalition of faith and environmental groups, UUANI introduced the Illinois Clean Jobs bill, the most significant environmental policy since the Clean Air Act. This bill would:

- Ramp up renewable energy, creating tens of thousands of clean energy jobs
- Establish the first-ever carbon pricing market in Illinois, so carbon polluters can no longer pollute for free and
- Target resources towards low-income communities and communities with power plants.

If you want to support this effort you can sign the petition available from our Social Justice Committee, which will become part of the statewide petition, and you can join in an Earth Day rally for Climate Justice in Springfield on April 22. There is a signup sheet

for carpooling in the Fell Room and the petition will be available in the narthex after the service. UUANI is anticipating strong resistance to the Clean Jobs Bill from the nuclear and coal industries, so they are aiming to collect thousands of petitions and gather hundreds of UUs from congregations across the state. We showed up in large numbers for Marriage Equality and it made a difference. We can make an equal commitment to climate justice.

The state of the environment and far reaching climate justice can feel like an overwhelming problem, even like a fight already lost, but when we join together and take on achievable local efforts, it makes a difference. In one of the NRDC testimonial videos I didn't show this morning, Robert Redford admits that the oil, gas and coal companies have the money to drive to drive this issue, but we have what politicians fear most – a voice and a vote. We have to use those to change how things are done.

As Unitarian Universalists, we see ourselves as one thread in a single fabric of all existence. We embrace nature's beauty and are in awe of its power. We have a responsibility to care for our home and stand in solidarity with those most affected by pollution, environmental destruction, increasingly severe natural disasters, and other impacts of climate change. We are diverse in spiritual belief, yet united in faith that a better world is possible and that our collective power can create change. United in collective action, connected through partnership, we will change the world.

So in the next few days, every time you become aware of that Habitat song running through your head, let it remind you of the sacredness of your own habitat and your own power for ensuring its future.

Namaste. Por lo tanto puede ser.

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