

Out of the Depths
A Service for Earth Day
For Unity Temple Unitarian Universalist Congregation
Sunday, April 22, 2012
Rev. Dr. Clare Butterfield

Left: "The Earth. . . is a sparkling blue and white jewel. . . laced with slowly swirling veils of white. . . like a small pearl in a thick sea of black mystery."
(*Edgar Mitchell, US Astronaut*)

Floor and center: "All creation is a song of praise to God." (*Hildegard of Bingen, Mystic*)

Right: "O moving force of Wisdom, you encircle the wheel of the cosmos, you encompass all that is, all that has life, in one vast circle." (*Hildegard of Bingen*)

All: "All creation is a song of praise to God." (*Hildegard of Bingen, Mystic*)

Left: "It could be that god has not absconded but spread, as our vision and understanding of the universe have spread, to a fabric of spirit and sense so grand and subtle, powerful in a new way, that we can only feel blindly of its hem." (*Annie Dillard, naturalist writer*)

Right: "All creation is a song of praise to God." (*Hildegard of Bingen, Mystic*)

Floor and center: ". . . stardust is not just fairy-tale magic; it is what we are really made of. . ." (*Elisabet Sahtouris, Ecofeminist*)

All: "All creation is a song of praise to God." (*Hildegard of Bingen, Mystic*)

Left: "Great Spirit, . . . give me the strength to walk the soft earth, a relative to all that is! . . . all over the earth the faces of living things are all alike. . .

This is my prayer; hear me!" (*Black Elk, Oglala Sioux*)

Right: "All creation is a song of praise to God." (*Hildegard of Bingen, Mystic*)

Floor and Center: "There is not anything new to be born. It has been within you from the beginningless beginning. It has only to be awakened, to become aware of itself in you." (*Zen saying*)

All: "All creation is a song of praise to God." (*Hildegard of Bingen, Mystic*)

Left: ". . . for in God we live/ and move/ and have our being." (*Acts 17:28*)

Right: "All creation is a song of praise to God." (*Hildegard of Bingen, Mystic*)

Floor and Center: ". . . When you stand in the presence of the moon, you become a new creation. . . The elementary particles of your body have absorbed an influence and in that sense they--and you--are brand spanking new, a human being resonating everywhere with moonlight." (*Brian Swimme, physicist*)

All: "All creation is a song of praise to God." (*Hildegard of Bingen, Mystic*)

Left: "We shall not cease from exploration/ And the end of all our exploring/ Will be to arrive where we started/ And know the place for the first time." (*T. S. Eliot, poet*)

All: "All creation is a song of praise to God." (*Hildegard of Bingen, Mystic*)

A Litany of Thanksgiving:

A Litany of Thanksgiving:

O give thanks to all that is good;
to the love that endures for ever.

You sun and moon, you stars of the western sky:
give your thanks and praise.

Sunrise and sunset, night and day:
give your thanks and praise.

All mountains and valleys, thickets and talus slope, cedar swamps and prairies, lakes, rivers, oak savannas, fields of grass:
give your thanks and praise.

You rivers and streams, bogs and fens, aquifers, great lakes, clouds and rains:
give your thanks and praise.

You maples and oaks, morels and mosses, grasses and sunflowers, asters and milkweed:
give your thanks and praise.

You coho and whitefish, mussels and plankton, songbirds and monarchs, egrets, cranes, and walking sticks:
give your thanks and praise.

You field mice and voles, salamanders and whitetail deer, Indiana bats and mosquitos, warblers and owls and hawks:
give your thanks and praise.

All peoples immigrant and native, women and men, who inhabit these beautiful plains:
give your thanks and praise.

All you saints and martyrs of the Great Midwest:
give your thanks and praise.

(After the "Benedicite Aotearoa", New Zealand Book of Common Prayer, p. 457)

Reading: From Wendell Berry's book *Citizenship Papers*, an excerpt from the essay called *The Whole Horse*:

I will not be altogether surprised to be told that I have set forth here a line of thought that is attractive but hopeless. A number of critics have advised me of this, out of their charity, as if I might have written of my hopes for forty years without giving a thought to hopelessness. Hope, of course, is always accompanied by the fear of hopelessness which is a legitimate fear.

And so I would like to conclude by confronting directly the issue of hope. My hope is most seriously challenged by the fact of decline, of loss. The things that I have tried to defend are less numerous and worse off now than when I started, but in this I am only like all other conservationists. All of us have been fighting a battle that on average we are losing, and I doubt that there is any use in reviewing the statistical proofs. The point – the only interesting point – is that we have not quit. Ours is not a fight that you can stay in very long if you look on victory as a sign of triumph or on loss as a sign of defeat. We have not quit because we are not hopeless.

My own aim is not hopelessness. I am not looking for reasons to give up. I am looking for reasons to keep on....

Out of the Depths
Sermon for Unity Temple Unitarian Universalist Congregation
Earth Day, April 22, 2012
Rev. Dr. Clare Butterfield

The first earth day was in 1970, so I'd have been 9 (turning 10 later that year) and in fifth grade. So I'm not sure that I remember that year or the second earth day, which would have been when I was in sixth grade, or even the year after that when I was in junior high, but still going to school in the old three-story red brick schoolhouse, consolidated district number 1 in Fisher, Illinois.

There were 55 people in my graduating class from that school. I remember Mr Meier, the teacher we all loved, who had come in to replace a woman who had not changed her teaching style since she began teaching history, some time in the previous century, climbing out of a car which also contained my math teacher and someone else. Carpooling for them probably burned more fossil fuel than just driving separately, because none of them could have lived within five miles of any of the others. They all looked a little more ruffled than usual that morning, but they were trying to teach us something.

It was the beginning of the environmental movement, and the beginning of my life as an awake person, and the two things have always opened up in parallel for me.

I lived then on 40 acres between Champaign, Illinois, where my father was a professor at the university, and Fisher, a town of 1200 people, into whose consolidated school district our land fell. Every day my sister and I would walk our quarter-mile lane to the road and wait for the school bus, which blew up in a cloud of dust and gravel. We did this winter and summer, crouching down with our skirts pulled over our knees on cold days in the juniper bushes that marked the end of our lane, because girls weren't supposed to wear pants to school in those days, and the winter, children, was colder then.

The route from my house to the school was seven winding miles through the country, through cornfields and bean field, by barns and houses, and over bridges that the township has no doubt long since condemned. I did not know then what I know now about pesticides and soil destruction, and I thought those fields very beautiful and the people who worked them beautiful too. I still think so, truly, though my view is less romantic than it was. I know the price we've exacted from the land, and I know that the farmers have paid it more than most of us.

The Sangamon River ran near Fisher, and through the land to the south of it, and we crossed over it on the way to the school every day back and forth. In flood times, we sometimes had to redraw the route because some bridge or other was under water, and there were woods along the

river that were left alone because they were in the flood plain and it was too wet to plow too much of the year. There were more trees on our land, and some undisturbed Oak Savanna on the parcel next to ours, much beloved by the farmer who owned it, whose wife knew the latin names of every plant that grew there.

I grew up in those woods.

Neighbors, in that part of the state, are people who live within a mile or two of each other. I and the girls on the neighboring farms would sometimes meet out on the road early and ride our bikes the seven miles to school and the seven miles home again, which seemed a lot farther then than it does now.

And the trees sheltered us along the route. The old growth by the Sangamon of cottonwood and Oak. The hedge rows planted by early settlers of osage orange. The flowering crabs, that got there somehow – I don't know if they were native or another innovation by early farmers but the ones on our place were decades old then.

And my father, who was, to put it gently, eccentric, planted 9000 more trees on our land. Arranged by type, height, and growth speed, in rows in a 20-acre field formerly planted in corn.

It sounds charming I suppose, but it was insane.

Trees were everything.

Trees were how I understood myself as a being alive in three dimensions. Trees set the horizon, and a canopy over my head. Two flowering crabs joined by a circular garden between them became my own playhouse. The garden was mine to do what I liked with, and I planted tulips there, and sometimes pitched a tent and slept, though I was a little squeamish about the toads.

Once I decided to walk home the seven miles from school, but it took longer than I expected and scared my mother.

I just loved being outside. I felt safe there. I still do. Safe in the sense of resigned to resting in the hand of God.

That first earth day was the beginning of pulling it all together for me. Not just a child alive in the woods, which is certainly where this child was most alive, and in love with the world around her. But an agent with responsibility to care for what she saw there.

That first earth day was a seed in the earth of my life, and it started growing the minute it was planted.

Now I'm not so big on Earth Day. It feels a little tired, and like every invented holiday in our oversold age, contrived. But then it felt as if we were at the beginning of something important. Rachel Carson had just warned us that something terrible was going on and it was our doing, and

people began to respond with a demand that we do things differently, and things changed as a result. That lesson doesn't wear out for me.

I associate the environmental movement with the towering oaks that stood over that old grammar school (since torn down) and with the Sangamon River, which I still recognize with a kind of physical jolt whenever I'm back in the watershed.

Those places are mine in the sense that they have shaped me, and because we shed and exchange molecules all the time, I've shaped them some too. Fertilized them with my dead skin cells and my sense of wonder, which I'm sure is molecular too.

It's all overwhelming if you think about it in a way that makes it seem overwhelming. Sometimes, just for the exercise, I think about the arc of human development on the planet and I ask myself if there has ever been a human civilization that didn't view the resources of the earth as here to exploit for our ends, without any limit. There is an argument to be made about some of the American civilizations prior to European settlement, but they did have most of the continents under cultivation, and they may have only done the little damage that they did because there weren't as many of them as there are now. Europeans, of course, have no reassurance at all. Rapaciousness seems to be in the culture if not in the genes. The greatest deforestation ever in history, after all, was the one that

happened in Europe, and the greatest deforestation now going on is in the northern arboreal forests, regardless of what you've heard about the equatorial rain forests.

Maybe we're wired to take as much as we can, and the only reason we didn't hit the limits that we're hitting now 200 or 500 years ago is that there were fewer of us, and we were more vulnerable to things like plague, that took us off in some number.

Reasons to keep on. But if Wendell Berry can look around at his age and take comfort in his colleagues who haven't quit, then I can surely do the same at my younger age. I've got fewer decades in this game, and a lot of friends.

I'll be thinking about this next week, when I go with a small group of clergy from around the state on a two-day tour of the Illinois coal basin. We're calling it Deep Into the Country and we'll be meeting with citizens who are impacted by mining of various types, including long-wall mining. The mines are in Southern Illinois, as you might expect, but they are pushing north. Most of Illinois has coal beneath it, and the mineral rights have been severed from the surface rights in a lot of cases. Long wall mining, if you've never heard of it, is a way to mind that runs a machine under the soil between the room-and-pillar reinforced tunnels where the workers stand. These tunnels are about

400 or 500 feet apart, and the machines that remove coal take all of it out, letting the surface subside afterwards. Which means that fields which were formerly used for growing food now wave up and down, and sink, in places, back into the water table.

Where there is coal there is coal slurry – the wastewater and metal compound that comes from washing coal after its mined, and those slurry impoundments are big and getting bigger in the middle and southern part of our state. And the final product of coal is coal ash – another toxic product – the remnant after coal is burned. That has been disposed of for decades around Illinois, often in unlined and unlicensed pits, one of which is not far from where I grew up. In the room and pillar mines, once a shaft is deemed exhausted, the mining company will often request a permit to fill it back up with coal ash.

Given all the ways we can make electricity nowadays, it's hard to find anything much good to say about making it this way, and it may surprise you to hear that the projections for mining out the Illinois coal basin are growing in the business plans of some of the nation's largest coal companies. Which means it will push north, out of the most hard-scrabble part of our state into conflict with the rich agricultural uses, and into conflict with the rivers and streams. This is not just our demand, but the demand of people in other countries who are not as

moved as they might be by our concerns for the environment because they come from people who are largely responsible for all the damage thus far and who seem completely unwilling to change anything about our own manner or standard of living in order to make things better, while meanwhile their own people have been living in abject poverty. It's hard to argue with them until we're actually willing to challenge ourselves to do something different. Stopping long-wall mining might be a good start.

It's another thing for me to obsess about, but I'm trying not to do that. It doesn't help. I am trying to speak more clearly about the beauty I see in the place where I grew up, because I believe the counterpoint to our voraciousness to consume is beauty. Out of the depth we reach upward. Toward light and hope – and beauty.

I look at a ravine near where I grew up that someone bought and gradually filled up with coal ash, a ravine that now drains toward the Vermillion River, and I wonder how anyone could have thought it was acceptable to inflict this damage on the earth. And I look at a field sinking back down into the water table after the coal has been removed from beneath it and I wonder how anyone could think this was an acceptable outcome. All I have to lift up against that, besides the stories I'm going to hear next week, is the beauty of the place which I already know that not

everyone can see. I remember a New Yorker cartoon from my childhood of some travelers reading a highway sign that read “Welcome to the Midwest: Butt of a Thousand Cruel and Tasteless Jokes.”

Even then I knew why that was funny.

Now I only want to tell you that there is a clarity of light and sound in the place where I grew up which is unique to that place. That the Sangamon River still flows through bottomlands treed by oak and sycamore, and that dawn breaks across the grasses alongside the little creeks and ditches early down there and to the sound of cardinals and a million little birds. There is a stateliness to the way light progresses through the day, uninterrupted by anything as showy as a mountain. Some people need those, I understand. The place where I grew up holds the landscape of reason. It is what God’s mind looks like.

I am sure of that. So of course I am in favor of co-existing with it well, using the remarkable gift of soil that the glaciers brought, and treating the water as the treasure it is – one that must be kept for all future generations, because we do not know how to make any more of it.

We in these institutions must find words for this, and make safeguarding the beauty of the land and its people part of our ongoing business. If we do this because of our love we will do it well, and though

there are going to be many disappointing events between now and later,
we will find more reasons to keep on than otherwise.