

First Unitarian Universalist Society of Albany, New York
“Faith for a Crowded World”

Rev. Sam Trumbore March 18, 2012

Spoken Meditation from Teilhard De Chardin:

Love

is the free and imaginative outflowing
of the Spirit over all unexplored paths.

It links those

who love in bonds that unite,
but do not destroy,

causing them to discover

in their mutual contact
an exaltation capable of stirring
in the very core of their being,
all that they possess

of 'uniqueness' and 'creative' power.

Love alone

can unite living beings
so as to complete and fulfill them,

for it alone joins them by what is deepest in themselves.

All we need is to imagine

our ability to love
developing until it embraces the totality
of the people of the Earth.

READING

The [Manifesto on Planetary Consciousness](#) was drafted by Ervin Laszlo, systems philosopher, integral theorist, and concert pianist and the Dalai Lama and adopted at a meeting at the Hungarian Academy of Sciences in Budapest on the 15th of September 2001. It begins with these words:

In the closing years of the twentieth century, we have reached a crucial juncture in our history. We are on the threshold of a new stage of social, spiritual, and cultural evolution, a stage that is as different from the stage of the earlier decades of this century as the grasslands were from the caves, and settled villages from life in nomadic tribes. We are evolving out of the nationally based industrial societies that were created at the dawn of the first industrial revolution, and heading toward an interconnected, information-based social, economic, and

cultural system that straddles the globe. The path of this evolution is not smooth: it is filled with shocks and surprises. This century has witnessed several major shock waves, and others may come our way before long. The way we shall cope with present and future shocks will decide our future, and the future of our children and grandchildren.

The challenge we now face is the challenge of choosing our destiny. Our generation, of all the thousands of generations before us, is called upon to decide the fate of life on this planet. The processes we have initiated within our lifetimes and the lifetimes of our parents and grandparents cannot continue in the lifetimes of our children and grandchildren. Whatever we do will either create the framework for reaching a peaceful and cooperative global society and thus continuing the grand adventure of life, spirit, and consciousness on Earth, or set the stage for the termination of humanity's tenure on this planet.

In the summer of 2010, Ervin Laszlo [wrote](#):

Einstein said that we can't solve a problem with the same kind of thinking that gave rise to the problem. His insight applies also to the domain of consciousness: we can't solve the problems of our time with the same kind of consciousness that created them. We live in global times, yet most of us have a tribal kind of consciousness – it's me or you, my group or yours, and whoever isn't with us is against us. The continuation of tribal consciousness is nothing less than a recipe for disaster in a world of nuclear weapons, environmental devastation, increasing population and dwindling resources.

There can be no doubt: if we're going to live sustainably and in peace with each other, we must all shift from a tribal to a planetary consciousness.

...

But what do you think? Assuming you agree that we must evolve beyond tribalism if we are to survive, would you consider yourself to have planetary consciousness? Here are ten questions that I believe, if answered honestly, will tell you whether you do.

Do you –

1. Satisfy your basic needs without diminishing other people's chances of satisfying theirs?
2. Pursue your own happiness with due regard for the similar pursuit of others?
3. Respect the right to economic development for all people, wherever they live and whatever their ethnic origin or belief system?
4. Live in a way that respects the integrity of nature around you?
5. Work with like-minded people to safeguard and restore your local environment?
6. Require your government to relate to other nations peacefully and in a spirit of cooperation, recognizing the legitimate aspirations of all the members of the

international community?

7. Buy from companies that accept responsibility for stakeholders at all levels of the supply chain?
8. Consume media that provides unbiased information relevant to you and your community?
9. Do something to help at least one other person escape the hopeless struggles and abject humiliations of extreme poverty?
10. Believe all young people are entitled to the education they need to be productive members of their community?

Answering these ten questions with an honest *yes* doesn't call for money or power. It calls for dedication and solidarity, for the spirit that creates true community, both locally and globally.

The evolution of planetary consciousness is without question an imperative for human survival on our planet. In its absence it's difficult to see how all seven billion of us will be able to live in peace—or even just survive. To paraphrase Gandhi, “Live consciously, so that all of us may live.”

Sermon

The major religions of the world have major impediments to becoming faiths for a crowded world. Primary among those impediments are their exclusive truth claims and their otherworldly visions for the purpose of human existence. Their focus on existence beyond this world can serve to diminish the existential value of this world. But the most difficult impediment arises because all these ancient religions developed before the birth of planetary consciousness. Today we need a faith that can think globally.

I see Unitarian Universalism as striving to become just such a faith.

To understand why we need a faith today that can think globally, we need to recognize the modern problems ancient religions didn't have to address when they began. These changes include the limits of our planet to sustain human life, our constantly evolving technology, and changes in our ability to communicate.

For the first time in the history of human civilization, the earth can no longer support our demands upon it for material resources. Almost all the land that can support agriculture has been dedicated for that purpose. Fresh water supplies are at their maximum usage in many places around the globe. You may have heard of peak oil production. Experts are concerned we're seeing peak production in copper, phosphorus, mercury, cadmium and uranium in the next 50 years. Rare earths are already pretty scarce, yet technological progress increases our demand for products in which they are used like lighter electric motors for hybrid cars like

the Prius. Great inequality will be the result of resource scarcity. It is not physically possible for everyone in the world to live like most Americans do today. There is just not enough stuff.

The world religions didn't evolve in a time of cars, literacy and the Internet. The major world religions weren't codified during a time when we knew how to split the atom. Moses, Jesus, Mohammed and the Buddha had nothing to say about the ethics of radiological and nuclear weapons, human organ donation, genetically modified foods and stem cell research. Many of the thorny ethical issues of today can only be addressed by traditional religion through simile and analogy rather than direct teaching or law.

Those ethical issues arise out of a much greater awareness and understanding than was available when their founding religious teachers lived. None of them had a clue about Quantum physics. None of them understood the enormity of the universe, nor did they have pictures of deep space from the Hubble telescope. Those pictures showing just how ancient the universe is, really puts the travails of humanity in a much bigger picture. None of them understood the evolutionary processes that drive species diversity. None of them knew the role DNA plays as a building block of life. And none of them recognized the theory of systems that drives so much of our understanding today from how groups behave, to how ecosystems function, to how machines can develop intelligence.

But the greatest accelerator of change today is our worldwide communications systems. Whether, radio, television, cell phones, computer networks or the Internet, information movement takes on a life of its own through these systems. Most recently, the phenomena of viral videos like the KONY 2012 campaign against Joseph Kony's army of child soldiers or the practically immediate awareness of the massive earthquake in Japan a year ago, supports a global awareness that is greater and more pervasive than ever before.

For all these global changes that have never been experienced before, humanity still remains much the same. The human genome hasn't changed at all during this period of time. Each baby born is genetically the same as the ones born in Biblical times. Human drives haven't changed at all. We still need the same amount of food and water to survive. We still need shelter from the elements. People still enjoy sexual relations, seek committed relationships and want to create families, whatever their sexual orientation.

And we still want to find ways to cope with the burden of knowing we are mortal and need meaning to live a satisfying life. To find that meaning, many will want to participate in processes of growth and development. We are *happiness seeking* and *suffering avoiding* creatures who are unclear about how to accomplish those goals. The way we behave often sends us individually and collectively in the opposite direction. With all the global changes, so much hasn't changed about humanity. And the consequences for unskillful, selfish actions in a crowded world are adding up at the global level.

Historically, religion has facilitated greater social organization. From family groups to tribes, from tribes to nations, from national to transnational and international, organized religion has led the way in providing purpose and meaning for individual life and society.

So what does a globally aware, crowded world need from religion for the twenty-first century?

First and foremost, the world needs a religion that encourages us to lower our material demands on the planet. It needs to encourage us to eat and drink lower on the food chain, so more can have adequate nutrition for health. It needs to help us recognize we can have a good quality of life consuming less stuff and using less energy. My inspiration for consuming less are Buddhist monks. These are people who renounce possessions save just a robe, a begging bowl and personal hygiene items. They only eat the food donated to them. Yet these monks are some of the happiest people you'll ever meet. They know from personal experience what we know from the other side, possessions are more of a burden than they are the source of lasting happiness.

Second, the world needs a religion that facilitates deeper, enduring bonds of relationship. Traditionally people have found those enduring bonds in large extended families. The world cannot and will not support very many large families of greater than 1-2 children. Many will not have any children. Yet great human satisfaction comes from being in relationship to people of all ages, from the very young to the very old.

In congregational based community organizing, we talk about the value and satisfaction of public relationships. Most of us can only have deep personal relationships with a small handful of people, due to the time these relationships require to be maintained. Public relationships are ones mediated through an organization that provides the context for the relationship. Religious and civic organizations can be excellent ways to form these kind of relationships. The world needs a religion that builds these relationships across boundaries between groups and organizations that connect people rather than separate them in a way that fulfills common purposes and creates meaningful relationships.

Third, the world needs a religion that honors and affirms value in the non-human world. Such a religion must find inherent value in nature rather than seeing it as instrumental to human need. The resurgence of Paganism is one expression of the world's desire to have its natural wisdom appreciated as sacred. Humanity is only beginning to appreciate the delicate balance and complexity of natural ecosystems. When we tinker with one element, the system can swing way out of balance. For example, scientists from the World Health Organization used DDT to kill malaria carrying mosquitoes in Borneo. Unfortunately the DDT also killed wasps that ate larva that munched on thatched grass roofs. This became a crisis when they started falling down. The DDT also killed insects and the lizards and geckos that ate them.

Cats that ate the lizards and geckos died off, leaving the rats without predators. And of course rats carry serious diseases too. The 1959 solution was to parachute in 20 more cats from helicopters to deal with the rats.

Lastly, the world needs a religion that requires alternatives to violence in the resolution of conflict. In a nuclear age, might no longer makes right. The seeds of violence in traditional religion can easily be used by nations to fight holy wars against each other. No future war can be considered holy that triggers mutually assured destruction. Jihad and Apocalyptic theology are trouble waiting for some extreme situation to justify extreme responses. The world needs a religious tradition that will not justify the shedding of blood as sacred and redemptive.

Now I'm sure existing religions can argue that these elements are present in their traditions. Quakers already practice non-violence. Pagans find the holy in the natural world. Many traditions see the error of materialism. Yes these messages are there in the world's religious traditions. What hasn't happened for many is their global interpretation.

The traditional faiths are limited by the times they were recorded and world views of their prophets and teachers. Traditions by their nature resist change seeking to accurately preserve the revelation they have received. Historical artifacts resist reinterpretation for a global world. The Amish are stellar examples of this resistance to change. They have attempted to freeze technology and clothing styles to around the end of the seventeenth century, resisting any innovation after that. Not that they haven't adapted in small ways, like large milk tanks with electric stirrers required by the FDA. But they use 12 volt direct current to power those motors. They continue to resist the temptation that might come from using common 110 volt alternating current that could easily be used with conventional appliances.

Unitarian Universalism is on the other end of the religious continuum from the Amish and the orthodox. Being a non-creed based faith that has no theological test for membership, we can easily adapt to meet the needs of a globalized world. Yet unlike New Age religions that have sprung up recently trying to create a global faith, we have deep historical roots within the Jewish and Christian traditions. Our Unitarian focus on, at most, one God connects us with the Jewish religion Jesus practiced that worships one God. Both the Unitarian and the Universalist Churches that formed in New England at the turn of the nineteenth century separated from Congregationalism. Our form of governance and our style of worship traces itself to the practices of the early Puritans from England.

Though our roots run deep in Judaism and Christianity, we've been drawn beyond them practically from the start, when the Transcendentalists challenged the Unitarians of their day by suggesting we could have a direct experience of the divine through our intuition. Our

ministers were reading the first translations of sacred texts from the East. The great Hindu saint, Vivekananda, who spoke at the 1893 World Parliament of Religions in Chicago then spoke in many Unitarian and Universalist churches. Interest in the religions of the world in our movement has been strong ever since. That openness to diverse religious perspectives and practices is part of our innovative approach to religion that makes us able to adapt more easily to the need for a global faith for a crowded world.

You can see that adaptation already happening in our last two Unitarian Universalist Association Purposes, finalized in 1985. We claim the goal of world community with peace, liberty and justice for all. While other religions may have a global reach, the world community many of them seek is one dominated by their faith tradition. The world community we seek embraces a plurality of faiths including our non-specific path. We seek engagement with every faith without subordinating one to another.

It is our seventh principle however, respect for the interdependent web of existence of which we are a part, that positions us best as a faith for a crowded world. The seventh principle frames humanity as a part of the whole rather than the purpose for whom the whole exists. This principle restrains human planetary domination that sacrifices the biosphere to anthropocentric self-interest. It cautions us against treating the planet as a strip mine, convenience store, theme park and a garbage dump. This principle grounds our Green Sanctuary work and drives us to question the foundations of a growth based economy. This principle places Unitarian Universalism at the center of imagining a new kind of sustainable culture underpinned by an anti-materialistic, nonviolent, worldview. The web we imagine is a web of relationships between all species, races and cultures that seeks harmony with them all. We imagine creating a beautiful web of diversity rather than the oppressive monoculture of conformity currently taking shape.

The vision of the interdependent web I'm spinning for you now doesn't exist yet within Unitarian Universalism or the larger world. I spin it for you today because this is the direction I see us going. We can be part of creating a faith for a crowded world. We are well positioned to lead this effort because we have no theological, doctrinal or historical problems within our faith that stand in our way. What is needed and will be needed is our commitment and our support to move it forward, step, by step, by step ... for the earth is our blue boat home. (we sang the concluding song, "Blue Boat Home")