

Caring for the Earth and Ourselves  
Sermon for the Unitarian Universalists of San  
Mateo by Dr. Thomas B. Newman  
August 5, 2012

Good morning.

Last Memorial Day I had a stiff neck. As a result, Johannah drove and I got to sit in the back seat with our daughter Rosie on the way to a barbecue in Los Gatos. Rosie was reading a book called "Trauma Stewardship," by Laura van Dernoot Lipsky.<sup>1</sup> She said, "Dad, you should read this. You would like it. It's for people like you, too."

I was puzzled about this book's relevance to me, but I was happy Rosie was reading it. The subtitle of the book is "An everyday guide to caring for self while caring for others."

Rosie has a tough job working as a child and family therapist, mostly with abused and neglected children. She sometimes tells me about her cases and they are heartbreaking. I worry about the effect on her of seeing so much pain and sadness hour after hour and day after day.

So I was happy that Rosie was reading a book that might help her take care of herself, to maintain her wonderful Rosie disposition in spite of the awful situations she finds her clients in and her limited ability to fix them. But I did not see what it had to do with me.

Nonetheless, I started reading this book there in the back seat and saw why she recommended it to me. The case studies in the book are not just about people dealing with victims of trauma like those in Rosie's caseload. One of the cases is an assistant professor of biology at San Francisco State University who studies amphibians. Here's an excerpt from the author's interview with Professor Vancd Vredenburg:

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<sup>1</sup> 2009, Berrett Koehler Publishers, SF

"I got into this because I love nature and care about our world. I feel absolutely privileged to be in these beautiful places with these gorgeous animals, but watching them struggle and die in my hands is the saddest thing I've ever seen. I always had the idea that if I had children, I'd take them up and show them these amazing frogs. Now what am I going to do? Is there going to be any place left, or are they just going to see it on a computer screen? And that is a horrible thought. I see so much beauty in life, but when I see species disappearing, I wonder what is going to be left. I don't want to be Mr. Grim, but that's what I'm confronted with. Sometimes I get really sad. Science is about facts, and there's no avoiding truth."

That quote was in a section on one of the warning signs of the "Trauma Exposure Response": feeling helpless and hopeless. And when I think about global climate change I sometimes feel that way – it is pretty overwhelming.

Another thing that attracted me to the book was that in spite of its serious topic, it is full of cartoons – there is one every few pages.

One of the first cartoons is of a planet doctor looking sympathetically at a planet earth patient. The caption reads, "I'm afraid you have humans."

This cartoon spoke to me, because while it's funny, it's also kind of sad. Sometimes it feels like our species is an infestation of the planet. We are to the earth what lice or tuberculosis or HIV is to a person. And that is a sad way to feel.

But unlike other infestations, we humans have the potential to recognize and transcend our germ-like tendencies. And that's what I want to talk about this morning.

I'll start by talking about some of the facts about global climate change, and some things we can do about it as individuals to reduce our own pathogenic impact on the earth. This will bring us

to the systemic, societal changes that need to happen to save our planet, but that can feel overwhelmingly difficult. I'll close with how to take care of ourselves and enjoy the journey as we struggle to make these transformations.

So, first some sobering facts. I think people across most of the political spectrum now agree that the earth is warming. Although scientists talk about an average 1.4° F rise in global temperatures in the 20th century, and estimate from 4° to 11.5° F for the 21st century,<sup>2</sup> what we notice most are extreme climate events: heat waves, flooding, extreme droughts, forest fires, hurricanes, tornados and blizzards. And most of us notice that the frequency and severity of these events are getting worse. In fact, according to the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, 2011 was the worst year ever, with a record 12 different climate disasters each with at least a \$1 billion price tag.<sup>3</sup>

The increasing frequency and severity of these events are hard even for climate change skeptics to deny. The controversial questions are the extent to which human activities are causing these changes, and the extent to which changing how we live might mitigate them.

So here's an inconvenient truth. It is impossible to know the answers to either of these questions for sure. Climate scientists do the best they can, using models to estimate, for example, how much an additional 50 parts per million of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere is likely to raise global temperatures and to project what effect that will have on weather.

As many of you know, the results of these projections are alarming. More and worse

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<sup>2</sup> IPCC. Climate Change 2007: The Physical Science Basis, Summary for Policymakers. Contribution of Working Group I to the Fourth Assessment Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change. Available at: <http://www.ipcc.ch>

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.noaa.gov/extreme2011/> accessed 1/2/12

droughts, famines, fires, hurricanes, and floods. Particularly scary are positive feedback loops like warming leading to ice melting, leading to less heat being reflected from ice and more being absorbed by water, leading to more warming leading to more ice melting and so on.

Here's another one: warming leading to permafrost melting, leading to release of methane, leading to more warming, leading to more permafrost melting and so on. All of this leads to projections for sea level rise that will put vast areas of the world underwater. Food insecurity, mass migrations, armed conflict, mass extinctions. It isn't a pretty picture.

So now we get to the "What you can do" part. Most of you have heard these things and many of you are doing them. Replace your incandescent light bulbs, turn off lights, insulate your house, use less gasoline.

But here's another important one that has gotten a lot less attention. Eat less meat. The United Nations estimates that livestock contribute more to global climate change than cars. In fact, a diet that includes significant amounts of red meat has about the same carbon footprint as driving an SUV. Cut out the red meat like I have, and stick with moderate amounts of fish, poultry, and dairy products and you've cut down to the carbon footprint of a Camry. Eliminate animal products altogether, as Johannah has, and your diet is down to the carbon footprint of a driving a Prius.<sup>4</sup>

Here's another one that has a much bigger impact than people realize: airplane travel. I had to get off – way off – my high horse with my family about reducing our household's energy use after I learned the carbon footprint of one the round trips I make to Washington DC is about 2 tons of CO<sub>2</sub>, about the same as that of the average

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<sup>4</sup> Gidon E, Martin PE. Diet, energy and global warming. Earth Interactions 2006; 10:1-17. Available at <http://pge.uchicago.edu/workshop/documents/martin1.pdf>

Californian's household electricity consumption for an entire year.

Ouch. So now I can even feel guilty for attending Board of Directors meetings for Physicians for Social Responsibility!

But wait! There is a solution. I can buy carbon offsets!

How many here have heard of carbon offsets?  
How many have bought them?

I certainly have. In fact, one year I bought carbon offsets for my entire holiday gift list! (They thanked me politely.)

It works like this. You go to a website to figure out how much carbon is generated by a particular activity you are interested in offsetting. Then you enter your credit card number and are assured that the money they are charging you is being used to plant trees or build wind farms, thus absorbing carbon or preventing it from being emitted by another source and presto! Carbon is offset and guilt gone.

But something feels not quite right about it. Carbon offsets have been likened to indulgences sold by the corrupt Roman Catholic Church in the middle ages.

The carbon offset business has been deftly satirized on a website called "cheatneutral.com." Here's what they say there:<sup>5</sup>

"What is Cheat Offsetting?

"When you cheat on your partner you add to the heartbreak, pain and jealousy in the atmosphere. Cheatneutral offsets your cheating by funding someone else to be faithful and NOT cheat. This neutralises the pain and unhappy emotion and leaves you with a clear conscience.

"Can I offset all my cheating?"

First you should look at ways of reducing your cheating. Once you've done this you can use Cheatneutral to offset the remaining, unavoidable cheating."

But that isn't really fair. Because unlike heartbreak, pain and jealousy, carbon really is fully interchangeable. Emitting 1 ton and preventing another ton from being emitted really is the same as not emitting that ton and not preventing the other ton. And it passes the "What if everybody did it?" test.

But there are two problems with buying carbon offsets. The first is knowing for sure that your money prevents that amount of carbon from entering the atmosphere. It is disquieting that the price range to offset a trip to DC varies across different websites by more than a factor of 10. And the other problem, not only with carbon offsets, but with all of the individual actions I suggested before, including eating less meat, is that they will not be sufficient.

Derrick Jensen in an article called "Forget Shorter Showers"<sup>6</sup> that Reverend Earl Koteen recommended to us at his workshop here 3 weeks ago, stressed the limits of individual virtue.

"An Inconvenient Truth helped raise consciousness about global warming. But did you notice that all of the solutions presented had to do with personal consumption—changing light bulbs, inflating tires, driving half as much—and had nothing to do with shifting power away from corporations, or stopping the growth economy that is destroying the planet? Even if every person in the United States did everything the movie suggested, U.S. carbon emissions would fall by only 22 percent. Scientific consensus is that

<sup>5</sup> See <http://www.cheatneutral.com/>. Accessed 7/16/12.

<sup>6</sup> Jensen D. Forget shorter showers. Why personal change does not equal political change. Available at <http://www.orionmagazine.org/index.php/articles/article/4801/>. Accessed 7/16/12.

emissions must be reduced by at least 75 percent worldwide.

Jensen reminds us that

"the role of an activist is not to navigate systems of oppressive power with as much integrity as possible, but rather to confront and take down those systems. "

So basically we need to take down the growth-addicted, resource consuming, inherently earth destroying capitalist system that we live in if the planet is to survive. Does that help? Oh, and because of all of the positive feedback loops I mentioned earlier, it may be too late even for that.

This is where I start to relate to how Rosie must feel when dealing with some of her clients, who, through no fault of their own, are stuck in incredibly bad environments that neither she nor they have much ability to fix.

Because unfortunately, that's sometimes where I feel I am – personally extremely fortunate, but also aware, to varying degrees, of all this horrible other stuff that makes me grieve.

So what do we do? Denial? Despair?

No! At least not all of the time! Ours is no caravan of despair! What we need to do is figure out how to live each day with compassion and integrity, minimizing our own contribution to the problem, saving some energy to work for more systemic solutions, and also slowing down enough to smell the roses and hear the music ourselves.

This is a tall order. Ms Lipsky has some suggestions, many of which are drawn from or have parallels in religions around the world, but none of them are magical. I'll share some of the things she suggests and how I am trying to do them.

I don't claim to have all, or even most of the answers. But these are really important

questions and I have faith that acknowledging and discussing them together must be better than denial, despair, or struggling with them alone.

First, Lipsky suggests creating space for inquiry. This means frequently asking ourselves why we are doing what we are doing, asking whether it is working for us, and making the decision to continue one that is intentional.

"When we carve out the time to contemplate our intentions, we renew our connection to the needs and desires that have shaped our experience. We remember that we can take action to alter the course of our lives. This will help us to alleviate the sensation of being tossed around in the waves of uncontrollable and overwhelming events."

I am using this one to some benefit to keep finding time to try to increase awareness about sustainability at UCSF. I think about how nice it would be to work in a place that is known for caring about the big picture as well as the individual patient, and it helps me gear up for the next round of meetings.

Second, particularly relevant for this sermon, she emphasizes building compassion and community, cultivating a microculture of support around ourselves.

"Our microculture should support us in two ways: by showering us with encouragement and holding us accountable."

This congregation is part of my microculture of support. I'm incredibly grateful for it, but I think we can do even better. I don't think we spend enough time showering each other with encouragement. I'd like to start right now. I'm incredibly grateful to Caryl Hughan, who besides being our social justice queen stepped up to organize our Sunday services. Connie Spearing, who with Caryl organized a great workshop on climate change 3 weeks ago with Reverend Earl

Koteen. Julia, for agreeing to be my worship associate and Robin, Mary, Dave, Paul and Shawn for the incredible music, and Mark, who gave up a weekend away to be here to do the sound. I'd like to see more such appreciation on Sunday services and throughout the week.

But I also think we need to hold ourselves accountable. We all care about the environment. Why have we still not gotten around to becoming a "Green Sanctuary"? What can we do to help each other to do more? I've just agreed to be the co-chair of the facilities committee with Linda Jacobs so I can move this agenda forward. I've already been showered with encouragement by Linda and Tish Davis-Wick. Now we need you to hold us accountable! But wait! I want to thank Diana Candee and her son Kyle for stepping up and knocking 6 things off our To Do List in her first week on the committee.

Third, Lipsky recommends finding balance. One element of that is between work and relaxation.

"Remember that the labor movement and countless other individuals worked hard to create weekends and breaks and more humane working conditions. Resolve to honor those who have gone before you by agreeing only to a sustainable work schedule and sticking to it."

I'm pretty good at that. I really do avoid work on weekends.

Unless you call this work. I don't, but I guess I wouldn't call it relaxation, either.

One of the first services I attended here was given by Dr. Jerry Motto. He read a quote I've always remembered since then. "Please do not feel personally, totally, irrevocably responsible for everything. That's my job. Love, God."

Finally, Lipsky recommends some sort of daily centering. I was relieved that she did not suggest setting aside an hour a day to meditate. Instead,

she suggests two things: creating an intention each day and cultivating moments of mindfulness.

I have trouble with mindfulness. I have too much on my mind– it keeps flitting away from the present moment to something else.

But I am trying to do this, making a deliberate effort to live in the moment more. For example, I walk my mother Carol's dog Lola at least 4 evenings a week. I used to use my smart phone to read email while I was walking Lola. I decided to try keeping the phone in my pocket and just appreciating the world and the walk and the scenery and my senses – my ability to see and hear and feel and smell. Well, maybe I don't always appreciate the smell, but I can transcend it. And I do appreciate Lola and Carol and the walk. It's not much, but it is one more mindful and intentional thing than I used to do.

I'd like to close by reading from the closing passages of Trauma Stewardship.

"By now we know if we want to decrease suffering in our world, we will need to learn a behavior that is fundamentally different from the ones that have caused such pain and destruction. We must open ourselves to the suffering that comes from knowing that there are species we can't bring back from extinction, children we can't free from abusive homes, climate changes we can't reverse, and wounded veterans we can't immediately heal. We must also open ourselves to the hope that comes with understanding one thing we can do. We can always be present for our lives, the lives of all other beings, and the life of the planet. Being present is a radical act. It allows us to soften the impact of trauma, interrupt the forces of oppression, and set the stage for healing and transformation. Best of all, our quality of presence is something we can cultivate, moment by moment. It permits us to greet what arises in our lives with our most enlightened selves, thereby allowing us to

have the best chance of truly repairing the world."

May it be so.

#### CLOSING WORDS

"Our time has come to trade the sorrows of Empire Community for the joys of Earth Community. Let our descendants look back at this time as the Great Turning, when humanity made a bold choice to birth a new era devoted to actualizing the higher potentials of our human nature. The work begins with embracing the truth that it is within our means to choose our future and to place our capacity for reflective choice at the service of Creation's continued unfolding. We are the ones we have been waiting for."

- David Korten, *The Great Turning*, (pg 359). (SF, Barrett Koehler)