

**How Shall We Live?**  
Rev. Kenneth Read-Brown  
First Parish in Hingham (Old Ship Church)  
Unitarian Universalist  
April 22, 2007

**Reading** – “This Holy Earth” by Starhawk

The earth is a living, conscious being. In company with cultures of many different times and places, we name these things as sacred: air, fire, water, and earth.

Whether we see them as the breath energy, blood, and body of the Mother, or as the blessed gifts of a Creator, or as symbols of the interconnected systems that sustain life, we know that nothing can live without them.

To call these things sacred is to say that they have a value beyond their usefulness for human ends, that they themselves become the standards by which our acts, our economics, our laws, and our purposes must be judged. No one has the right to appropriate them or profit from them at the expense of others. Any government that fails to protect them forfeits its legitimacy.

All people, all living things, are part of the earth’s life, and thus are sacred. No one stands higher or lower than any other. Only justice can assure balance; only ecological balance can sustain freedom. Only in freedom can that fifth sacred thing we call *spirit* flourish in its full diversity.

To honor the sacred is to create conditions in which nourishment, sustenance, habitat, knowledge, freedom, and beauty can thrive. To honor the sacred is to make love possible. To this we dedicate our curiosity, our will, our courage, our silence, and our voices. To this we dedicate our lives.

**Sermon**

How shall we live on the earth – on our rapidly warming planet? That, really, is my complete title this morning.

I could begin by going into great detail all over again about all the bad things that are happening, will happen, might happen because of global warming. But you know much of this, and you can learn about the rest: Melting glaciers and icecaps, potentially catastrophic sea level rise, effecting the poorest most vulnerable communities on the planet first; melting permafrost, with the danger of releasing huge amounts of additional greenhouse gases into the atmosphere, thereby accelerating global warming; killer heat waves and killer storms – already and more to come; the possibility that as many as half of all terrestrial species will become extinct within this century. The list goes on. Scientists are worried, even scared. That should surely alarm the rest of us, maybe even cast us into a well of despair.

Just the other day I read about a community in Alaska no longer able to hunt by sled or snowmobile, because the ice isn’t there any more. The government plans to relocate the entire community. Tears came to my eyes, as tears come to my eyes every time the enormity of what we have been doing to the earth’s climate comes home to me through one more story, one more statistic. It is sadness more than fear that I feel – deep sadness. How could we do this to our home planet?

And, after all, how else should we feel as we contemplate all that we are doing – *we are doing* – to the earth, to the living, breathing, beautiful system of life of which we are a part?

This said and named. I do not want to stay in that place of despair. First of all, it's not very pleasant.

Secondly, people who only and ever are in despair do not make good activists. Despairing people will not save the earth, will not create sustainable societies, will not save species, will not cut carbon emissions by 80% by the year 2050 or sooner. Yes, we must feel the threats and the realities to our bones, and we will have our tears and our times of despair. But our lives cannot be sustained by the draining energy of despair. Rather, our lives are sustained by care and kindness and community. And it is through the energy of care and kindness and community, and of course our inventive human creativity that will create a more sustainable way of life on the planet.

And the good news is, the really good news is, that the tide might be turning towards that better way of life – a *better* way of life, reducing and eventually eliminating our reliance on fossil fuels, poor people getting what they need, rich people consuming less of what they/we don't need; and all of us, once our basic needs are met, deriving our well-being and happiness from one another, from community, from family, from friends... not from ever more stuff.

Yes, the tide might be turning. Isn't it remarkable how the political and cultural landscape has shifted in less than a year. Was it Al Gore's film "An Inconvenient Truth?" Was it the latest, sobering report from the International Panel on Climate Change? Was it Arnold Schwarzenegger and California getting on the green bandwagon? Was it the accumulation of actual seeing is believing evidence of climate change and its devastating effects? Or maybe all of these things – and more – taken together.

Whatever it has been, towns and cities are signing on to goals of dramatic CO2 reductions – most recently Cambridge and Boston. I hope Hingham, through its new energy committee, won't be far behind. Corporations are signing on, and finally Congress may be poised to take action – for example to cap or tax carbon emissions, to set new efficiency standards. And thousands, maybe millions, of ordinary citizens are committed to voting in an administration in the White House that will be on board too, that will actually do what we elect them to do – which is to *lead* when it comes to this most urgent issue of our time.

And meanwhile we can each change our light bulbs to compact fluorescent, we can each drive less, and when we buy new cars or appliances purchase energy efficient models, we can each turn down the thermostat in the winter and in the summer save the AC only for the dangerously hot days. Here at Old Ship we can and must continue our efforts to make our own buildings more energy efficient in whatever ways we can.

So – I could go on, immersing you as I often immerse myself in all kinds of detail about the realities of climate change as well as about the wide variety of responses to climate change – for there is not just one solution, but multiple responses that taken together can, we must hope, prevent the worst from happening and, indeed, create a better way of life on the planet.

But enough details for the moment. Today, I'd like to conclude with a few more words about the *spirit of living* to which I would invite us, a *spirit* of living I believe the challenges of our times call us to embrace, a spirit of living very much aligned with my message of last week, the invitation to follow Emerson's advice and nurture an original relation with the universe, and, we might also say, with life, with nature, with one another.

So – aside from the many critically essential details of light bulbs and thermostats, wind turbines and solar panels... how shall we live? In what spirit?

First, we must maintain a deep connection to nature, the nature of which we are after all a part.

And so, whatever else we are doing, I think it is important to spend at least as much time in natural settings as it is to be reading about the latest global warming and climate change research or watching documentaries about melting glaciers, ice caps, and permafrost, sea level rise... and on and on. I know that, in any case, it is important to my personal well-being.

That's one of the reasons I do a good part of my daily running in the woods. It's why when I'm not looking into my computer screen or into the pages of a book I'm often looking out the window at the passing clouds and the budding trees.

Yesterday my run took me to the top of Turkey Hill – blue sky, ocean, Boston in the distance.. and the Hull wind turbine, Hull Wind 2, quietly without pollution producing energy. An inspiring, beautiful sight.

Yes, we must nourish our love for this world, nurture our connection and love for nature – as an antidote to despair, and as a source of sustaining spiritual energy as we do the practical things that need to be done in our daily lives and to make necessary change in the larger world.

Second, we must nourish community. Bill McKibben's latest book, *Deep Economy*, has for its context global warming and peak oil and all the related issues; but he spends much of the book talking about how we might live differently with one another in community. We begin to realize that buying more locally not only saves the energy of transporting food from California or South America, but also means getting to know people at a farmer's market, getting to know our neighbors; and that not driving or flying as often to faraway places for entertainment or vacation means getting to know people on Nantasket Beach or at a performance of the Hingham Civic Music Theater or in a class right here at Old Ship.

McKibben points out that people in extreme poverty need more things in order to increase their well being and happiness. Of course: three meals, a warm home, and so on. (And he goes into great detail concerning the ways in which eliminating extreme poverty and reducing global warming are linked.) But then – according to all sorts of research and self-reporting – beyond a certain amount (which is way less than the average American has) more stuff and a higher income simply does not bring more happiness. What does? You don't need a research grant to figure out the answer to that one. What brings more happiness? Family, friends, community. Good for us. Good for the planet.

Third, we must use our imaginations – we must imagine the world we want to see, a sustainable world, with diverse and healthy ecosystems and communities. Imagination is not sufficient – we need creativity and hard work too. But we also need to imagine ourselves into that better world.

And finally – borrowing a phrase from one of Mary Oliver's poems, we just might wish to *dare to be happy* – all the easier if we nourish ourselves through the gifts of nature and community and imagination.

For as I said at the outset, the world does not need more despair; the world does not need more people in despair. The world needs more joy, more love, more kindness... more plain old

fun! And it is people who develop a capacity for joy and love and kindness and fun who are and will be the leaders in creating a more sustainable way of life on the planet.

We will each have our hard days, even our despairing times. All the more reason to nourish our capacity for joy and happiness... so that we can lift one another's spirits along the way.

Bicycling from Old Ship to the two wind turbines in Hull last Saturday, on the national day of climate action, just wouldn't have been as much fun alone. Oh, I like time alone too. But the day, the event, nature, community, and plain fun – children, people of all ages, even dogs! And simply riding a bike is one of the most pleasant things there is. We lifted one another's spirits on a day that eventually turned pretty chilly and gray.

It is how we must live more of the time – lifting one another's spirits no matter what may come.

Because it *is* people who have a capacity for joy and love and kindness and fun who will create a more sustainable way of life on the planet.

May we be among them.

### **Benediction**

As Rabbi Tarfon said centuries ago:

It is not your obligation to complete the task,  
but neither are you at liberty to desist from it...”

May we continue – with persistent love and wisdom.

So may it be.