

Greta and the Power of One
Rev. Ken Read-Brown
First Parish in Hingham (Old Ship Church)
Unitarian Universalist
January 26, 2020

Readings

from “Love Letter to the Earth” by Thich Nhat Hanh

Dear Mother Earth,

The human species is but one of your many children. Unfortunately, many of us have been blinded by greed, pride, and delusion, and only a few of us have been able to recognize you as our Mother. Not realizing this, we have done you great harm, compromising both your health and your beauty. Our deluded minds push us to exploit you and create more and more discord, putting you and all your forms of life under stress and strain...

We know that you want us to live in such a way that in each moment of our daily lives we can cherish life and generate the energies of mindfulness, peace, solidity, compassion and love. We vow to fulfill your wish and respond to your love. We have the deep conviction that generating these wholesome energies, we will help reduce the suffering on Earth, and contribute to alleviating the suffering caused by violence, war, hunger, and illness...

For balance in nature to be achieved, at times some species have to endure loss. In those moments, we have turned to you, dear Mother, and asked whether or not we could count on you, on your stability and compassion. You did not answer us right away. And then, beholding us with great compassion, you replied, “Yes, of course, you can count on your Mother. I will always be there for you.”

But then you said, “Dear children, you must ask yourselves, “Can your Mother Earth count on you?” Dear Mother, today, we offer you our solemn reply, “Yes, Mother, you can count on us.”

from Greta Thunberg’s speech at the UN Climate Action Summit, September 2019

My message is that we'll be watching you.

This is all wrong. I shouldn't be up here. I should be back in school on the other side of the ocean. Yet you all come to us young people for hope. How dare you!

You have stolen my dreams and my childhood with your empty words. And yet I'm one of the lucky ones. People are suffering. People are dying. Entire ecosystems are collapsing. We are in the beginning of a mass extinction, and all you can talk about is money and fairy tales of eternal economic growth. How dare you!

For more than 30 years, the science has been crystal clear. How dare you continue to look away and come here saying that you're doing enough, when the politics and solutions needed are still nowhere in sight.

You say you hear us and that you understand the urgency. But no matter how sad and angry I am, I do not want to believe that. Because if you really understood the situation and still kept on failing to act, then you would be evil. And that I refuse to believe.

The popular idea of cutting our emissions in half in 10 years only gives us a 50% chance of staying below 1.5 degrees Celsius, and the risk of setting off irreversible chain reactions beyond human control.

Fifty percent may be acceptable to you. But those numbers do not include tipping points, most feedback loops, additional warming hidden by toxic air pollution or the aspects of equity and climate justice. They also rely on my generation sucking hundreds of billions of tons of your CO2 out of the air with technologies that barely exist.

So a 50% risk is simply not acceptable to us — we who have to live with the consequences.

How dare you pretend that this can be solved with just 'business as usual' and some technical solutions? ...you are still not mature enough to tell it like it is.

You are failing us. But the young people are starting to understand your betrayal. The eyes of all future generations are upon you. And if you choose to fail us, I say: We will never forgive you.

We will not let you get away with this. Right here, right now is where we draw the line. The world is waking up. And change is coming, whether you like it or not.

Thank you.

Sermon

So many stories about the power of one.

Usually not “one” who does everything, but one person who steps out and steps up, takes a chance or a leap... and inspires another... then another... and before you know it, they’ve started a movement.

Think Rosa Parks of course.

Think Mohamed Bouazizi, the Tunisian man who in 2010 immolated himself in protest and started the Arab Spring... which still holds in Tunisia.

Think Margaret Chase Smith, who in the 1950s was the first voice in the Senate to speak out against the shameful red-baiting of her fellow Republican Senator Joseph McCarthy, leading others to join her... the beginning of the end of McCarthy’s career.

And, of course, think Greta Thunberg.

By now most of you know her story. Almost two years ago, frustrated and angry about political leaders’ in her own Sweden inaction on the climate crisis, she decided to protest by taking Fridays off from school and holding up a sign outside parliament reading “School Strike for the Climate.”

Before long others in Sweden were doing the same. And in the blink of an eye, about as quickly as a wildfire in Australia, the movement became global.

Greta herself, now often accompanied by other youth activists from other nations, has been speaking before the United Nations and other world bodies and forums – never letting up (as we heard earlier from our own young people) in her accusations directed to the rest of us. Accusations paired with her challenge: Can she and her generation count on those of us who are older to change our ways, to change course, to avert the worst of climate change?

The power of one.

We’ve heard the challenge she poses. And we heard as well the challenge the Buddhist monk and teacher Thich Nhat Hanh posed, imagining Mother Earth asking us: Can she count on us?

And we heard, in the song we’ve just sung, Pete Seeger putting this challenge in other words, another metaphor: God’s counting on me, God’s counting on you.

The power of one adding up to the power of us.

Pete’s own life of activism has sometimes been described as a “revolution of one.” Of course he was part of huge movements – whether the labor movement, civil rights, anti-war, environmental – but he never felt the need to wait for others to join him in protest and activism. One of my favorite Pete stories is that someone driving along Route 9 or some other road north of New York City on a rainy morning saw a lone figure standing on a corner holding a sign that simply said “Peace.” Looking again, this observer could see that it was Pete, already in his 80s, doing what Pete had done his whole life, often in front of thousands, but if no one else was around... well, manifesting the power of one.

Okay then. Are we, here at Old Ship, inspired by Greta and her courage of one? Can she and her generation, the generation of our own impassioned youth, count on the rest of us? Can Mother Earth count on us? Can God count on us?

We are told, correctly so, that we have at best a decade to turn things around – and that even if we do everything we *must* do to stop pouring carbon and methane and other greenhouse gases into the atmosphere, climate change cannot be averted... only (a critically important “only”) made less catastrophic than should we continue to deny and delay.

A decade. Which is not a very long time at all.

So... what will we, what can we, do here at Old Ship? How can *we* be counted on?

Certainly each of us can continue to make changes in our personal lives and energy use, as I know many among us do. The power of one often inspiring another, and another.

At least as importantly we can work for political change, joining with others to lobby for meaningful legislation and commitments from local to national; we can and must vote (each one vote matters) and support in whatever ways we can candidates who share our concern for the climate crisis – this presidential election year, as I'm pretty sure you would agree, perhaps the most critical in the history of our nation, for many reasons, certainly the climate crisis among them.

Here in Hingham we can support the article that will be voted at Town Meeting committing the town to net zero emissions. We could join with the local 350MA chapter (started by our own Turner and Joan Bedsoe and Connie Gorfinkle) that meets in our Fellowship Hall twice a month; and/or join the new Hingham Net Zero committee (spearheaded by our own Laura Burns).

Plenty to do.

And... what about our own Old Ship carbon footprint?

Well, having taken the Parish House off the market (following years-long valiant efforts to sell, a reasonable and hopeful path) we have an extraordinary opportunity: to make our old Parish House a green example for the community, reducing our carbon footprint even as we help ourselves financially. Yes, the latter is a leap of faith, but boy if we ever needed a leap of faith it is now, this decade, this year.

Further, staying in our current Parish House means we wouldn't be building a new parish house, which, however green it could be, would further increase the overall carbon footprint of these properties – both in the construction itself and continuing year to year. Staying where we are also means we will not be cutting down trees – also a very good thing when it comes to carbon and climate.

In short, we might ask ourselves, what is our responsibility not only for the financial well-being of our parish home, but for the ecological well-being and sustainability of our earth home? And what sort of example do we choose to set (the power of one congregation)?

All grounded of course in our Unitarian Universalist principles and values – which lift up the inherent worth and dignity of every person, justice for all, and our part in the interdependent web of life...

...as we contemplate the forced migration of thousands, eventually millions of the poorest of the poor on our planet from homes – entire islands in some cases – threatened by rising seas and encroaching deserts.

...as we contemplate the deaths of thousands in ever-worsening heat waves.

...as we contemplate the destruction of a billion creatures in Australian wildfires.

...as we contemplate the loss of habitat for thousands of species as the sixth great extinction rolls on.

...as we contemplate the nature of the lives of those who are now children who will be living into the end of this century and many of them into the next.

What *is* our responsibility? What do our values here and now on this earth we share call us to do? Of course not only in regard to our Parish House, but in whatever other ways as well.

One of my colleagues in ministry, Rev. Karen Johnstone, composed a recent blog that mostly had to do with her making a piece of art in a mosaic class.

She wrote that she:

... learned that there were two ways for us to turn large sheets of glass into smaller, usable pieces: the intentional precision of a pistol-handled glass cutter, or using a ball-peen hammer and a thwack of force. Each method renders very different results, both of which are necessary. The beauty of our mosaics emerged from a mixture of precision and chaos, control and surrender.

Then she generalized from this mixture of methods, the precise and the somewhat random or uncertain... generalized to an idea that could apply to just about any part of our lives, whether as individuals or as social movements. She offered this advice:

Resist the urge to fully map out the future. Instead, cultivate humility: a sign of strength, not weakness. Find within you the capacity to trust, no matter how small; grow that.

To trust... as we, sometimes, simply need to take a leap. With the best knowledge available to us, imagining (switching a bit the mosaic metaphor) in broad strokes of the brush the future we would like to help create, and then making the next brush stroke and then the next, humbly allowing the future that wants to emerge... to emerge.

Each of us with our own brush – the power of one – but all of us together, inspired by one another, creating the grandest work of art: a beautiful, more sustainable way of life on the one and only home we have, our Mother Earth.

Can we... here at Old Ship... each of us... and all of us on the planet... can we be counted on to strive mightily to do this?

May it be so.