

Earth Day  
Kitsap UU Fellowship, April 27, 2008  
Reverend Elizabeth Stevens

### Chalice Lighting

The Rev. Burton Carley

Let this hour be for us a time of celebration and renewal.

In celebration

let our minds be awake  
to the common miracle of the earth,  
the flowing grace of the river,  
and to the answering spirit within us.

In renewal

let our minds be aware  
of the deep down freshness of a new day,  
of holiness let loose in Creation,  
and of the responding yes within us.

Let this hour be a time of celebration

when we feel at one with the Mystery  
in which we move and have our being.

### Meditation

Please join me now for a time of prayer or meditation.

In the midst of busy lives, we give ourselves this great gift...  
the moment of shared silence.

Free of responsibilities, free of requirements,  
we relax into a time of simply being together.

Let your mind be at peace...

bring your awareness to the holiness you hold within you like a seed.

Let your heart be at peace...

Tears shed and unshed water the seed,  
while love and beauty flood into you like sunshine.

Let your spirit be at peace...

Let compassion and happiness bloom in you like a flower,  
precious and tender and real.

The peace we find in this moment

is with us always,

like the earth,

waiting to take root,

to burst forth,

to bloom.

**Story** The Gathering: A New Creation Story by Claudia and Phil Kern

In the beginning was mystery and the unknowable void.  
The void stirred, and the Great Gathering began.  
Out of the dark nothing came space and time,  
energy and form-  
all transformed in blinding light into matter.

The void became Cosmos, gathering into being the first atoms. Cosmos swelled and grew thin,  
the first light failed,  
and there was again darkness in the deep.

But the gathering went on-  
atoms gathered again and yet again  
to birth a multitude of stars that burned hot and long,  
melding atom unto atom until each star burst forth again –  
recasting its atoms to seed yet more new stars.

Thus the stars multiplied,  
and many lights were set in the firmament.  
And now the light remained.

Stars gathered themselves in swirling galaxies,  
and the galaxies gathered unto themselves in clusters,  
until veils of galaxies glittered where darkness had been.

And all was well.

Around these star-suns, planets were gathered,  
and each took light and heat from its star.  
And it came to be that, on some planets,  
atoms gathered together in molecules,  
and thence into minerals and rocks,  
dry land, clear water, and sweet air.

On one planet the dry lands were called Earth,  
and the waters were called seas.  
In the seas small molecules bound themselves  
into new complexities until,  
in this watery world touched with sunlight,  
the first single cells of life – bacteria – arose.

And life went from the waters,  
onto the dry land, and into the air.  
As bacteria exchanged sunlight,

minerals from the earth, and food,  
some came to live cell within cell,  
And the bacteria had dominion over the waters,  
the air, and the lands,  
bringing forth algae, protozoa, and other microbes.

From these beginnings life flourished.

Cells gathered, into mosses, sponges and worms, and fungi.  
The fungi gathered themselves  
within the cells of mosses,  
trading water and minerals from the soil  
for sugars made by the mosses  
from water, air and sunlight.  
Thus the mosses flourished and evolved into ferns,  
and still the fungi were gathered within  
and caused the ferns to flourish.  
The ferns, in their turn, brought forth plants  
yielding spores and seeds,  
and fruits which carried seed.

And all was well.

Still life gathered evermore unto itself,  
and the first animals appeared.  
From sponges and worms, communities of cells,  
then tissues and organs and complex bodies arose –  
corals, clams, squids, sea stars, lobsters, shrimps,  
and all the boneless animals of the seas,  
and of the land and the air.  
Then gathered animals with jointed legs –  
velvet worms, trilobites, and crabs,  
and later insects which would gather pollen for the plants,  
anticipating flower and fruit.  
And so the Great Gathering continued –  
atoms, molecules, and cells,  
dancing cooperatively, building complexity,  
calling forth the first animals with backbones –  
the finned fish, then amphibians, and scaled reptiles,  
birthing the birds of the air and the suckling mammals.

And among the mammals there gathered  
thought and intelligence in primates,  
in apes and humans.  
Cosmos could now reflect, and saw that all was well.  
For mind and conscience, beauty and truth,  
knowledge and spirit, good, evil, mystery and wonder

had come to be.

And this gathering of awareness  
came to watch over and witness  
to all the fish and creatures of the waters,  
the birds and insects of the air,  
over the plants and the creatures of the land,  
and over every microbe and creeping thing.

From a single blazing moment of beginning  
you and I have come to be this awareness –  
atoms recycled.  
We are infinitesimal glimmers of cosmic conscience  
able to wonder in amazement  
at the Great Gathering of atoms  
and their journey through space and time.  
Our lives, minds, and consciences were seeded  
in the stars and the atoms they birthed,  
seeded in those atoms which gathered  
to become molecules, cells,  
creatures sharing resources,  
the interdependent web of all existence –  
all is gathered and gathering.  
Let us respond with awe and humility  
and be worthy of our place in the Cosmos.

May all be well.

### **Reflections:** Caring for the Earth: The Story Continues

Thousands of years ago, our ancestors turned from gathering to planting, and over time, people have come to see the earth as a commodity, something that can be bought and sold, and nature as something to be controlled. We could trace these misbegotten ideas back to a single mistranslation: the word “dominion”, as in,

“Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness,  
and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea,  
and over the birds of the air,  
and over the cattle,  
and over all the wild animals of the earth,  
and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth.”

Dominion is a translation of the Hebrew “Radah,” a word that comes out of a tradition where the king, Israel’s king, has a covenantal responsibility to care for those over whom he ruled. (“The Moral Landscape of Creation” by Russell A. Butkus, p. 20).

For too long, too many people have heard the word “dominion” and interpreted it to mean, “God put human

beings in charge, so we can do whatever we want with the earth" instead of "it's our job to care for the earth," which is the meaning behind the word 'radah.'

Clearly, more and more people are realizing that the sense of entitlement that grows out of this idea...dominion...needs to be replaced with a sense of shared responsibility, a commitment to stewardship.

As Thomas Berry has put it, we need to see that "The universe is a communion of subjects, not a collection of objects." Global warming, the specter of nuclear war, poverty, the food crisis, I think we all know that we are in for a rough fifty years or so. It's hard to think about, because the data is so complex and the earth is such a massive and unpredictable system. It's hard to know what to feel...despair, fear, anger, guilt, resentment...all of these emotions and whatever other emotions well up in you when you let yourself be aware of the challenges we are facing as a species...all feelings are completely normal and absolutely acceptable, except for one: apathy.

Because far more important than the things we think, the things we say, the things we feel, are the things we do, our practices. Our time requires us to change our practices, to change what we do, and to change how we do it.

There are so many different angles from which to approach this work, which eco-spirituality prophet David Korten calls "The Great Turning."

The Earth Charter, drafted in 2000, puts 16 tasks in front of us:

1. Respect Earth and life in all its diversity.
2. Care for the community of life with understanding, compassion and love.
3. Build democratic societies that are just, participatory, sustainable and peaceful.
4. Secure Earth's bounty and beauty for present and future generations.
5. Protect and restore the integrity of Earth's ecological systems, with special concern for biological diversity and the natural processes that sustain life.
6. Prevent harm as the best method of environmental protection and, when knowledge is limited, apply a precautionary approach.
7. Adopt patterns of production, consumption and reproduction that safeguard Earth's regenerative capacities, human rights and community well being.
8. Advance the study of ecological sustainability and promote the open exchange and wide application of the knowledge acquired.
9. Eradicate poverty as an ethical, social and environmental imperative.
10. Ensure that economic activities and institutions at all levels promote human development in an equitable and sustainable manner.
11. Affirm gender equality and equity as prerequisites to sustainable development and ensure universal access to education, health care and economic opportunity.
12. Uphold the right of all, without discrimination, to a natural and social environment supportive of human dignity, bodily health and spiritual well-being, with special attention to the rights of indigenous peoples and minorities.
13. Strengthen democratic institutions at all levels, and provide transparency and accountability in governance, inclusive participation in decision-making, and access to justice.
14. Integrate into formal education and lifelong learning the knowledge, values and skills needed for a sustainable way of life.
15. Treat all living beings with respect and consideration.
16. Promote a culture of tolerance, nonviolence and peace. (from the Earth Charter)

Joanna Macy, in her book Coming Back to Life: Practices to Reconnect Our Lives (and) Our World organizes her recommendations under a single umbrella exhortation: Choose Life.

The practices which are of the most use in helping us to do this, she feels, are:

- Affirmation: Living from a place of profound Gratitude;
- Despair work: Owning and Honoring our Pain for the World;
- Shifting: Seeing with New Eyes, cradling and embracing all of life;
- Living in Deep Time: Reconnecting with Past and Future Generations; and
- Convening the Council of All Beings: Rejoining the natural world.

She lays out a path of small group work followed by active engagement followed by more reflection in small groups.

Dorothy Bass has collected a series of essays on practices such as honoring the body, embracing an ethic of hospitality, revamping household economics, discernment, keeping Sabbath, speaking and hearing truth, and singing, all of which help in the work set before us in this time.

Eckhart Tolle, in his newest book [A New Earth: Awakening to Your Life's Purpose](#) invites us to break free from the cage of our ego, to throw the cage doors wide and head out into the world to love it more fully.

I could go on and on and on...and I'm sure many of you could, too...from simple things like recycling and composting to huge shifts in consciousness, we are in the midst of something truly miraculous that has never happened before. A species is consciously...CONSCIOUSLY...choosing to evolve. Recognizing that evolution's major tools...mutation and death...are unacceptable to our tender hearts, we are on the verge of finding a new way.

It is scary, and it is hard, and it may not work. But it is happening nonetheless. Don't believe me?

Let's try something, a little experiment, if you will.

Close your eyes for a minute and think back on the past year or two. Have you changed your behavior, adopted a new, earth friendly habit? Have you changed your attitude, embraced simplicity, forgiveness, gratitude? Have you connected with other people in a caring and compassionate way? Even just by making the time to come to church, you are doing this. What are the ways you have responded to the challenges and the opportunities that shape our times?

Does everybody have some?

Now open your eyes and stand up.

I want you to find someone you don't know very well, and I want you to share with them one of the ways in which you have shifted...IN ONE SENTENCE...no run-ons allowed. Then I want you to look into each other's eyes to say, "Thank you for choosing life," and then move on to somebody else. My hope is that everyone will talk to three or four other people. In three minutes, I will ring the bell and we can return to our seats. Begin.

All around the world, in every faith tradition, in the academic community, in books and movies and power point presentations of Al Gore's "Inconvenient Truth," in documentaries and children's books and the Sunday comics, the message is getting out, and more and more people are finding the courage to listen and the strength to change.

In our own denomination, the latest news is that our denominational body, the Unitarian Universalist Association, has finally adopted the Green Sanctuary Program as one of its ministries, and funded a full-time position to support congregations in work around environmental education and advocacy. This is very, very good news, long in coming.

We are learning, together, as a world community, to care for the earth and each other as much as we care for our self and our loved ones.

We are weaving a tapestry of love within the context of the interdependent web of all existence.

It is hard...but it is also miraculous, and rewarding, and real—let us continue about our work.

## Closing Thoughts: Cared for by the Earth: Sustenance and Peace

The reason it feels so good, so right to care about the earth is that it does such a good job of caring back. When you think about the bounty of gifts that come from the earth, it's absolutely overwhelming. It's almost enough to make me wonder if Gaia, the earth mother spirit, is a little...co-dependent.

Be that as it may, for many of these thousands of years, while we have been owning, exploiting, expanding our so-called dominion, it has seemed as if the earth's resources were limitless, her capacity to give infinite. We know now, all too well, that that is not true, yet when we look more closely, we also see that there is enough to sustain us all, that we have the technology and the means to work within the limits that mother earth sets for us. The human ability to innovate...to learn from nature the ways to maximize productivity for the long term...is absolutely stunning. The wisdom we need to value those long term solutions over maximum short-term gain, to value the work of building life more than the work of preserving power, that is a little slower in coming sometimes.

Our hearts know what to do when we settle into the present moment. Our spirit knows what to do to keep hope, love, faith, and peace alive. Though sometimes it is challenging to sift through all of the messages from ego, from culture, and from our own wounds...putting this in one basket...and that in another, we all have the ability and the responsibility to discern the difference between what we want and what we truly need.

Generally, there are a lot of things that, on closer attention, we only want...we don't need. I think the kinds of things we need include:

- food and clothes and a place to feel safe and at home.
- people to know us, and people to know and love in return.
- time to process our lives, and to reflect on the times we are living in.
- air to breathe,
- the feel of sunlight on our skin,
- beauty and music and laughter,
- peace and harmony between peoples.

Anything we buy, consume, or in some other way bring into our life that doesn't meet one of our fundamental needs is a waste of time and energy.

Unfortunately, the culture is very good at convincing us that the way to meet those needs is to buy more stuff. I have a dear, beloved person in my life who has, I kid you not, twenty pairs of tan chinos. When I asked her about it, she actually could explain the differences...and why she needed yet another pair that had a slightly different cut.

What does she need? She needs to feel beautiful and comfortable in her clothes. Might there be other ways to meet that need that aren't found in a catalog?

If, when impulse strikes, we take the time to go deeper, to identify what need we are seeking to fill, we might just come up with some better options than a twenty-first pair of chinos. It's as if the earth mother is pleading with us..."Please, let all this that I have to offer, let it be enough!"

So many messages tell us that our lives aren't enough, that we aren't enough, and that we need to acquire more, do more, hoard more, because there's not enough of anything to go around...not enough love, not enough food, not enough kindness, not enough money...not good enough, not smart enough, not well-organized enough...

In the face of all these messages, we need to put our collective feet down to say, "It is enough. I am enough. We are enough. There is enough."

When we choose to stop striving and grabbing and buying and hoarding and instead start from a basic premise of enough-ness, we find our way to acceptance, forgiveness of ourselves and others, and peace. Generosity flows freely as we realize that each of us who are blessed and graced with privilege of any kind are diminished when we hang onto that privilege for all we're worth...and grow in stature and wisdom when we offer it up.

The gifts of the earth surround us...everything we truly need to sustain us is within our grasp, within our sight.

Whatever the source of this strange human blindness that has us looking everywhere for things we don't have rather than seeing and accepting the gifts that are before us...valuing the earth is one powerfully hopeful cure.

Wendell Berry calls it "The Peace of Wild Things."

He writes:

When despair for the world grows in me and I wake in the night at the least sound in fear of what my life and my children's lives may be, I go and lie down where the wood drake rests in his beauty on the water, and the great heron feeds. I come into the peace of wild things who do not tax their lives with forethought of grief. I come into the presence of still water. And I feel above me the day-blind stars waiting with their light. For a time I rest in the grace of the world, and am free.

The grace of the world is powerful, indeed.

What is asked of us in this time is not to save the whole world single handedly, but to be present to our own life fully enough that we can find the next step or two in our own particular life journey.

We can learn from the Earth, our mother, that evolution is a very slow process. VERY slow. We can learn the intricacies of the interdependent web, and enter into the sense of wonder and awe and connectedness that we are longing for. We can learn what we need, and find it in abundance.

With that knowing comes the sense of peace that allows us to do what we can, and to let go of the rest. With that knowing comes the courage to love this earth, our mother, our home, this beautiful, sacred, and miraculous place, without fear.

May it always be so...Happy Earth Day.