

“I am in love with this world. I have nestled lovingly in it. I have climbed its mountains, roamed its forests, sailed its waters, crossed its deserts, felt the sting of its frosts, the oppression of its heats, the drench of its rains, the fury of its winds, and always have beauty and joy waiting upon my comings and goings.”ⁱ

These are the words of John Burroughs. I share them with you because I feel them. I love the earth. I love people. I hope you are in love with the earth. I hope, like me, you fall in love with the earth and its people over and over, everyday. The first answer to the question “whose are we?” is that we are of the earth; we belong to the earth.

One of the questions for reflection in your order of service is “How do you care for what you love?” For me, this is a question for frequent reflection, consideration. I am filled with love and gratitude for life, for this lovely world and I am frightened.

Why am I frightened? I am frightened because I love the earth. When I told a Unitarian Universalist colleague that I was joining the Interfaith Power and Light National Preach-in on climate change, she teased me. “What, you’re not doing a Standing on the Side of Love service!” I replied seriously that it was a Standing on the Side of Love message. I am not talking today about marriage equality which I fully support or about the important issues of immigration reform. These are both important campaigns of the national Standing on the Side of Love group but this morning is about Love: love of the earth, love of all earth’s creatures, and love for humans. It is about climate justice. If we do not care for the earth and address climate change all of our other problems will only get worse. Those who will suffer the most will likely be the world’s poorest people.

In a Meadville Lombard seminary course, *Practical Theology: Nature, Community and Ministry*, both in the reading for the class and in the classroom, I experienced hope and fear, love and urgency. My fear is based on the growing realization that it may already be too late to save the earth from ecological disaster. Human made climate change is already well under way. We may have already reached or even passed the tipping point to global catastrophe. The hour is very late.

The Rev. Clare Butterfield, the instructor for the class, is a Unitarian Universalist minister, Illinois Director of Interfaith Power and Light, and the founder of Faith in Place.ⁱⁱ The Sunday before the class began several of us went to hear Clare preach. She told us about methane chimneys. Methane is about twenty times more powerful as a greenhouse gas than carbon dioxide, and a vast amount of methane is stored beneath the Arctic. As the Arctic warms, holes are forming in the permafrost, vents which release much more methane than previously. This may be linked with more rapid global warming.ⁱⁱⁱ I woke up and began to pay more attention: recent reports include

that Antarctica's glaciers "are melting faster and across a much wider area than previously thought."^{iv}

Scientists are now warning that a global temperature increase of 4 degrees Celsius is "increasingly likely." This increase would put millions of people worldwide at risk in coastal flooding. There would be a significant decline in fresh water availability, and perhaps half of all plant and animal species would face extinction. There won't be enough food. Weather patterns are already more inconsistent with more storms and more powerful storms. In much of the world, food prices are already higher due to climate change.

This temperature increase could lead to the loss of 85% of the Amazon rainforest. The effects would be catastrophic, far beyond what we have experienced in our lifetimes.^v The ocean levels could rise by twenty one feet which would put New York City, London and Tokyo under water.

British scientist James Lovelock was the originator of the Gaia hypothesis, the idea of earth as a living, self-regulating system. He is described as an independent, respected scientist but also a "climate science maverick." "Lovelock believes that global warming is now irreversible, and that nothing can prevent large parts of the planet becoming too hot to inhabit, or sinking underwater ... He believes that) we need to start planning (now)how to survive."^{vi} He predicts that we will lose up to 90% of the current world population.

"Nothing we could do now to stabilize carbon could be too fast or fast enough," said Tom Athanasiou, director of Eco-Equity, (a California based climate research foundation) . . . With climate change occurring faster than scientists have the ability to predict – and the impacts greater than anticipated—an international deadlock is unacceptable. 'Maybe the most important thing is to communicate the severity of the situation in a way that gets through people's defenses,' he says."^{vii}

So I am sobered and concerned. I am frightened because I love . . . Ever since I was a little girl, a girl scout, I have been concerned about our environment. I pick up trash in the woods. We used cloth diapers. We were part of the first pilot recycling program in our town. I "reduce, reuse and recycle." We have belonged to a CSA for many years, and we try to use local businesses. Still I am changed by what I have learned. I feel a need to do more to care for what I love - whatever I become aware that I can do. One thing that I want to do is to communicate that now is time for real and sustained action. I want to communicate urgency.

A March 2009 Gallup Poll showed that 41% of American people believe that the threat of global warming is being exaggerated. How do we effectively and lovingly communicate that this concern is not exaggerated, that we might lose this lovely and loved planet, that it might be too late for .action?

One way to communicate can be through stories, through mythology and yes, through pop culture. David Meketon recommended a recent Margaret Atwood book to me: *The Year of the Flood*.^{viii} It's the first dystopian, end of the world as we know it, novel that I have read which was about climate change and human reactions rather than the world after nuclear war. It's a good read, scary, yes, but it is thoughtful. The end is hopeful if uncertain.

My favorite TV series was the recent *Battlestar Galactica*. I think this show had a lot to say about where we are, where we might be going. I like science fiction not for bizarre aliens or never ending battles with fantasy weapons. No, I like science fiction because by changing just a few things, the best science fiction can ask important questions about life, about being human, and about contemporary problems.

Excellent science fiction can help you to look at life in new ways. It's about who we are, who we are becoming. We can gain new vision, new insight. David Eick, executive producer for *Battlestar Galactica*, called the show "an allegory for the most difficult and sensitive subjects of our culture."^{ix} Among other tough topics, this show addressed human rights, terrorism and torture, the nature of conflict and religious fundamentalism and the uses, abuses of power. And they looked at these subjects honestly without providing easy answers.

In its years of existence the contemporary *Battlestar Galactica* truly developed its characters. None of its characters was fully good or fully evil. They asked challenging, meaningful questions. What does it mean to be human? How do you know who you are? How do you really know who someone else is? Can you really love someone who is different from you? How do you trust? Can you really make peace with those you thought were enemies?

Ronald Moore, also an executive producer, said that he "wanted people to think about the world they live in and (think about) the human beings sitting next to them."^x

But most of all, the show asked how human technology could lead to the destruction of human life, to the destruction of our planet. One of the main characters, Apollo, said, "Our brains always outraced our hearts. Our science charges ahead." How, he asked, can we change that? *Battlestar Galactica* asked, how do we live if it may be too late – too late to save humanity, too late to save the planet. How do we live if we are doomed?

For most of the series, you would not want to model your life on their behavior. The characters were not ideal, heroic models. They were very human. Even the cylons who were robots were very human. Through the years of the drama, we saw them all grow through love.

They left destroyed planets; most of humanity was already dead. How can humanity survive? The heroes made choices we might find horrifying. Indeed, they even

asked are we worthy of survival. A lead character, Bill Adama, said, “It’s not enough to survive; one has to be worthy of surviving.”

Are we worthy of surviving? I think so. I’ve heard some say that maybe the planet would be better off without humans, that with our species gone, earth would heal itself. Perhaps that may be true, who knows? But for me, that’s not the answer.

The TV series concluded that humans are worthy of survival. The survivors settled on a new, beautiful planet (earth, actually) with changed hearts and changed minds. Those who were still alive repented and they repaired their relationships. They learned patience, love, forgiveness, and reconciliation. Mary McDonnell who played the president on the series claimed that “The show created hope. . . We showed that the key to (human) survival and (growth) is forgiveness.”^{xi}

The characters gave up dualistic ideas of all good, all bad, and they learned to respect and communicate with “the Other.” In the end, they abandoned most of their technology. They were determined to treat their new planet with care.

But this was a fictional television show; one that intentionally created a mythology. Where is our hope? How do we live both to survive and to be worthy of surviving?

I said at the start that I loved the earth. BSG presented love as saving. It’s the Universalist message that there is a saving love for us all. Ecofeminist theologian, Rosemary Radford Reuther, wrote that to save the earth:

What we need is neither optimism nor pessimism . . . but committed love. This means that we remain committed to a vision and to concrete communities of life. . . . We also remain clear that life is not made whole “once and for all . . .” It is made whole again and again. . . . Being rooted in love for our real communities of life and for our common mother, Gaia, (earth) can teach us a patient passion, a passion that is not burnt out in a season, but can be renewed season after season.

Committed love, patient love is not passive. Love is action. If you love, you pay attention; you give care to what you love; you take action for your love. This kind of love doesn’t expect immediate responses or results. Fear is not a good catalyst for change. We need hope and vision. My Meadville Lombard instructor, Clare Butterfield and my classmates inspired me. They demonstrate hope. They were all committed to taking loving action in their own places. In the city of Chicago, I found love, hope and inspiration. I found people attending to their deepest values, to what they love and attending to their spiritual practices. I found people building genuine communities.

Hope grows from committed loving action and hope grows from spiritual practice. Clare founded Faith in Place an agency that now works with 500 religious communities in the Chicago area including Unitarian Universalist, Christian, Jewish, Muslim, Hindu,

Buddhist and Baha'i groups. These communities of prayer and practice come together to work on environmental issues.

I was amazed by the hopeful things that we witnessed in Chicago: urban farms, beekeepers and beehives on the roof of the city hall, reclaimed brownfields. All of these hopeful signs are right here in Philadelphia. Philadelphia is in top 10 list for green roofs; urban farming is well-established here as are co-ops such as Weaver's Way. Even the city government has a green initiative.

This week as I was thinking about this worship service, I listened to a podcast of Krista Tippett's show. She was interviewing writer and naturalist, Terry Tempest-Williams. The writer told a story about meeting someone at a party who said, "What do you do?" She replied, "About what?" Ms. Tempest-Williams went on to tell Krista, "What do you do is such a superficial question - What do you see? What do you love?" We fear losing what we love.^{xii}

I also read this week about Transition Towns also called the Transition Initiative.^{xiii} Rob Hopkins wrote *The Transition Handbook*.^{xiv} He has a hopeful and practical vision for building a simpler and happier future after we "powerdown." This movement began in 2006 in Great Britain and has spread worldwide. There are now 79 transition towns in the U.S. and two of them are right in Philly area (Media and newest one - Cheltenham). Some emphases include re-skilling, re-localization, local foods, buying local.

We need community and we need spiritual practice to sustain us, to help us to discern what we are called to do to heal the earth. We need spiritual practices to sustain us when we feel fearful or despairing. We are called to attend to our deepest values, to reflect, pray and then to act. Let us ground our actions in love, in prayer and in knowledge.

This morning, the choir sang "Everything, everything is holy, now," and I believe that it is so. This holiness calls us to live with reverence, love and wisdom.

May we be guided to right action, to right relationship with each other, with the earth and all its peoples. May we act with committed love and in wise hope. May you live in the daily knowledge of love.

Prayer

Source of Everlasting Love, Spirit of Life,

We are full of gratitude for the gifts of life and love. Even in our sorrow and fear, we remember love. We remember that our sorrows come from our deep loves. Help us to love freely and to let go of our fears. Help us to remember Hope. May we see the ways to grow as a community of healing and transformation. May we live, too, in joy and beauty and in celebration.

Help us to listen deeply and to embody committed love, rooted in this community.
Please help us all to change our hearts toward active love of all creation. Guide us in
the ways that we may help to heal this planet, our earth home.

Amen

ⁱ Burroughs, John in *The Earth Speaks: An Acclimatization Journal* edited by Steve Van Matre and Bill Weiler. Warrenton, IL: The Institute for Earth Education, 1983, p. 50.

ⁱⁱ www.faithinplace.org; www.interfaithpowerandlight.org

ⁱⁱⁱ Connor, Steve. “Exclusive: The methane time bomb” from *The Independent*, September 23, 2008.

^{iv} Engeler, Eliane of the Associated Press. “Antarctica’s quickening glacier melt threatens sea levels” in *The Patriot News*, Harrisburg, PA, February 26, 2009, p. A9.

^v Adam, David. “Global warming ‘will be worse than expected’ warns Stern. At www.guardian.co.uk/environment/2009/mar/12/climatechange.

^{vi} Aitkenhead, Decca. “Enjoy life while you can” At www.guardian.co.uk/the-guardian/2008/mar/01/scienceofclimatechange.climatechange

^{vii} Grossman, Elizabeth. “Why Leading Scientists Underestimated How Quickly We’re Scorching the Atmosphere” in *Earth Island Journal* at AlterNet, www.alternet.org/environment/130855/why_leading_scientists_underestimated_how_quickly_we’re_scorching_the_atmosphere/

^{viii} Atwood, Margaret. *The Year of the Flood*. New York: Doubleday, 2009.

^{ix} UN Panel Discussion with Battlestar Galactica on Tuesday March 17, 2009. Link found at <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=102205790>

^x UN Panel Discussion with Battlestar Galactica on Tuesday March 17, 2009. Link found at <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=102205790>

^{xi} NPR interview, March 21, 2009 at <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=102205790>

^{xii} Tippet, Krista. *Krista Tippett on Being: The Vitality of the Struggle*. Interview with Terry tempest Williams, February 3, 2011. <http://beingpublicradio.org>

^{xiii} www.transitionnetwork.org; <http://transitionus.org>;

^{xiv} Hopkins, Rob. *The Transition Handbook: From Oil Dependency to Local Resilience*. White Junction, VT: Chelsea

Green Publishing, 2008.