

BECOMING A GREEN SANCTUARY

A Sermon By
The Rev. Susan Manker-Seale

I'm going to assume most of you saw Al Gore's documentary "An Inconvenient Truth" and that the rest of you are going to go out and see it as soon as possible. Today we are kicking off this new Green Sanctuary program in our congregation, and not only do we have Marion, Galina, Vince and Jan sharing information and reflections in the service, we also have speakers afterwards during the vegan lunch to entice you with more to contemplate and grow from. The UU Ministry for Earth program itself is also aimed toward helping us learn what we need to learn to make the necessary changes in our lives that, when added together, might just help swing the earth back toward balance, that is, if we add ours with that of our neighbors and friends to that of our larger world community.

There are the factual and theoretical presentations of the issues around global warming and being green, and there are the experiences we have of the earth in its healthy, natural state versus its unhealthy state. I think it's true that those changes or conditions we experience directly have the most impact on us and the greatest ability to motivate us to work towards healing the earth.

The unhealthiest condition facing us, which we experience directly every day, is that of air pollution. We can see it, especially when we stand above the level of the tallest downtown buildings and look out at the brown scummy smear across the city. We smell it when we sit in traffic and inhale exhaust fumes. And some of us have to take medicines just to enable us to breathe it. I was at my chiropractor's this week and she asked me "How are your allergies lately?" Then she offered me supplements to cleanse my cells from the toxins in the environment. For the first time, I bought them, admitting that maybe I do need some extra help for a change. The idea that we need supplements to enable us to live in our increasingly unhealthy world is now taken for granted.

We also don't think twice about buying bottled water, or at least, many people don't. We don't trust our water to be clean, even though the water department sends out literature every year trying to prove its safety. Water filters are standard on refrigerators and as part of new sink designs. Instead of cleaning up our act and insisting on having clean water, we apply band aids, like filters, to what is wrong.

The other condition that faces those of us who drive to Phoenix on a regular basis is the trash along I-10. It's a dump, literally – and that was a pun – litter—literally.... Disrespectful habits of the populace, and the lack of tax money to clean it up, or a lack of vision and commitment, leave us with the ugliest drive in the country, and it wasn't that pretty to begin with. One day I counted the black tire treads that were shoved to the side of the road or piled in the median. I didn't bother to remember how many there were. One every hundred feet, on average? Maybe?

These are things we live with day by day. There are also the things far away from our daily lives but that we're being warned about—things like the melting glaciers. Some people in our congregation went to Glacier National Park recently and witnessed first hand that the glaciers are almost gone. There are people who track the migrations of birds and the ripening of seeds and fruits who have witnessed the disjoint in the advent of spring that has resulted in the devastation of at least one species of bird. And those who track the weather—they tell us the warming trend is not natural—Al Gore showed that on his charts in an excellent way, a shocking way—up, up, and off the charts.

We have evidence which we directly witness and feel, and evidence which is presented to us by others. Which kind will move our hearts? Which messages will get into us and grab hold of us and inspire us to make the changes in our lives that we need so desperately to make? And do you believe it is desperate?

Which experiences will motivate us to vote green on Tuesday? Which kind of evidence, personal or theoretical, will propel us to make a change that, even if it doesn't appear to make a difference, is one step toward a cumulative difference on the part of society?

Those issues which directly affect us personally always have the greater power. It's hard to believe what we haven't somehow experienced. That is why we need to get out and witness what is happening, even as we embark on learning as much as we can about what it means to be green.

It occurred to me in the last year or two that I should take a summer vacation and visit all the most beautiful sacred places that I love before they're ruined. What a sad thought, but I admit that I had it. My sacred places include Grand Teton National Park and the Gros Ventre campground where we camped with the children eight or so years ago so they could attend Teton Science School. We watched moose drink from the river near our tent.

The California Redwoods are also sacred to me, where I camped as a child and played in the wet ferns and dark green moss on the banks of the streams, digging my fingers into the rich, bark-spongy loam. What will happen to the ancient trees? The Bristlecone Pines, which are the oldest trees on earth, will they die off? Will the polar bear die as a species because we couldn't control our greed, or demolish our apathy, or motivate ourselves to stop—to stop, consider, learn alternatives, and make a change?

We can't do this alone. Why? Because we're fighting society. We're fighting old teachings about how to live right, fighting our acquired habits, and fighting the ruts society has settled into.

We need a hand out of the rut. A collective hand. A hand, maybe, of god to some of you, but I'd like to express it more humanly as the collective hand we create when we bond together for a common purpose. We here, in this congregation, form a hand, a hand that can reach over and clasp yours, or mine, and give us a boost out of the rut, give us a boost to help set us on the path to healing and healthy living.

The lunch today is a boost—how to consider eating green, because the industry of raising meat is one of the most environmentally devastating things we do.

The Green Sanctuary work we're beginning today and which Jan will invite you to join in is a boost—to learn, to study, to read, to ask, to look around and find out what myths we are living under and what we can change.

The environmental audit Vince will tell you about—a boost so you can have help discerning what is green about your home and how you can make it greener.

I'm no green minister. I need help, too. We help each other. Marion here, and Peggy Rasglid who is catering the vegan lunch today, gave two sermons in past years which helped turn my children vegetarian, and eventually Curtiss and me, and they helped get us drinking soy milk. I still eat cheese and fish, but every supportive nudge you give us helps strengthen us to make a bigger effort, here, there, wherever we can. My next car will be a hybrid, and one of these days we'll get Tucson Electric Power out to our house to do an energy audit and we'll fill in the leaks along the edge of the roof of our family room. We have loads to do, and we're busy, busy, busy, just like you. But step by step we will make changes. Together. Each of our changes added to the rest can only help.

But voting green, now that might make the kind of difference which makes a difference—voting for people and issues which put the health of our planet over maintaining unhealthy corporate practices for blind (rather than socially responsible) profit—voting for people who support international efforts such as the Kyoto Protocol. That's what we can do, day after tomorrow. Are you voting?

When we say "Green Sanctuary," some of you may immediately see a picture in your mind of our new sanctuary, the one we dream about building up there on the top of our property. That is part of it, what we're doing. But we don't wait for that to happen before we begin to teach ourselves about being green here and now, and not only at church but also at home. In a sense, each of us needs to become a green sanctuary, the kind of person who holds the safety of our planet within our hearts and allows that to guide the choices we make.

Let us join our hands in caring for our Mother Earth, this beautiful world which is our only home and which I believe is clearly the most beautiful planet in the universe. In the vastness of the unknown and dangerous cosmos, it is our only sanctuary.