

**“The Sustainable Soul”
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During a recent vacation to visit family in Wisconsin, each day I grabbed binoculars and wandered the roads in the country outside of Sturgeon Bay. My heart soared at the sight of indigo buntings, their feathers electric blue when the sunshine bounced at just the right angle. My soul celebrated at the sight of cedar waxwings, debonair, well groomed, crested birds whose tails look as though they were dipped in bright yellow paint.

One day, outbound, I made it past a neighbor's two unchained dogs. They woke up as I was nearing the edge of this neighbor's property and made up for their earlier sleepiness by ferocious barking and pacing. I was not going to retrace my steps past their property on the inbound leg of my walk. I decided to walk twice as far – four miles instead of two miles – all the way around a country mile out of an abundance of caution. I was part of nature, one animal gauging the risks and rewards of moving in one direction instead of another given the reality of other animals. Sometimes the desires for well being among nature's creatures spawn conflict.

Later on the walk, I was musing on what I had not yet seen on my trip. Where were the deer? I usually see deer in that neck of the woods. In the road up ahead, not far beyond a flattened snake, I saw a large dried patch of blood. Parallel lines of blood marks swerved like a tipsy music clef, then stopped abruptly about 20 feet later. There had been a deer in that neck of the woods. It failed to miss the car, and I failed to see the deer alive. Outside of a car's rigid metal and plastic, racing dogs out-compete racing humans. Inside of the metal and plastic car casing, racing humans out-compete racing deer.

For all nature's capacity to inspire us, nature has the capacity to horrify us, as well. The destruction of nature stuns with power and unpredictability. Years ago, as a preteen, I had a goldfish. It was a single goldfish in a simple fishbowl with a shell or two of fish home furnishings and a spring of “seaweed.” Saturday was the time for cleaning the fish bowl. Providing fresh water made me feel good. I imagined the goldfish liked swimming in clean water better than in murky water.

This afternoon in late summer was warm. I wore shorts and a tank top. That morning, I had been shopping for school clothes. This was in Wisconsin, where the stores always sold clothes appropriate to the following season, not the current season. I had found new, knee-high winter boots. Of course, I had to wear them. So I was cleaning the fish bowl in shorts, a tank top, and knee high winter boots. In the middle of the fish bowl cleaning process, I stopped everything because my goldfish had disappeared. One minute it was there, and the next minute, it was not. I had just turned my back for a minute to get fresh water from the sink.

Some of you may have guessed the sad ending to this story. I discovered that my goldfish had leaped out of the bowl and landed on the floor. My new winter boots prevented me from realizing that I had stepped on and squashed my own goldfish. I was a part of nature unintentionally doing damage to another part of nature. Nature's destruction horrifies.

Tectonic plates shift, buildings crumble, and people crumble. In the meditation "Earth Swallowed Them," Peter Tufts Richardson writes, "From the red Earth comes the bounty of harvest. From Earth comes birth and from Earth comes death. The terrible snap of rock grinding, the pouring of bricks upon bodies in the dark, Earth moves us to terror; Earth who feeds us, nourishes us, comforts us in the evening songs of dusk, rains death upon us in the dawn."

This morning's theme is environmental sustainability and its relationship to sustainability of the soul. By "soul," I mean the part of ourselves that makes meaning. Environmental sustainability is about living within limitations. I am gently encouraging us to consider the limits of nature in our search for meaning in life. In *Religious Naturalism Today: The Rebirth of a Forgotten Alternative*, Jerome A. Stone outlines the contributions of philosophers and theologians who are religious without believing in God. My favorite humanists are there, as well as some unknown to me, in their intellectual and cultural context.

These are philosophers and theologians who do not romanticize nature or look for it to anchor meaning in shallow ways, yet who are deeply inspired by nature. Jerome A. Stone speaks for me when he writes:

“Is nature enough? No. Nature is not self-explanatory. Nature is not completely meaningful. Nature does not offer complete and final fulfillment of our deepest longings. Nature does not give us the answer to our moral dilemmas. Nature does not give us a foundation for our epistemological, metaphysical, or valuational searches.” Allow me to unpack that sentence: Nature does not give us a foundation for our searches for small “t” truth, big “T” truth, or meaning.

Jerome A. Stone continues, “Nature is not enough for all our wishes. But nature, including human culture, is all we have, and often it suffices magnificently. In short, there are pockets of meaning that sometimes we can enlarge.”¹

Pockets of meaning that sometimes we can enlarge – that may sound like a modest aspiration. It may *sound* modest, but it thrills my soul. It is a sustainable aspiration. It is a challenging, exciting collaborative effort. Unitarian Universalism has a role to play in enlarging pockets of meaning. In contrast to popular opinion which emphasizes Unitarian Universalism’s open endedness, I would argue that Unitarian Universalism acknowledges limits of knowledge, limits of freedom, and limits on the good of which we find ourselves capable. By not necessarily relying upon supernatural explanations, we limit ourselves from indulging in an easy way out of the challenges of life.

Access to physical, emotional, and spiritual resources is right up there in the list of life’s challenges. In the world of flesh and blood, in the world of microbe and cell matrix, competition for resources is an organizing principle. Competition for resources shapes who we are, how we aspire to live, and our perception of options. Competition for resources shapes what we actually accomplish. When we come up short and our plans fall flat, competition for resources often

¹ *Religious Naturalism Today: The Rebirth of a Forgotten Alternative*, Jerome A. Stone, State University of New York Press, Albany, 2008, p. 229.

shapes *why* and *how* that happened. When tensions rise in a family, in a congregation, in a country, or on a planet, the odds are pretty good that competition for resources is getting more intense.

Habits and practices that worked fine in the past are no longer be sustainable. New stresses require new responses. We need to evolve in our capacity to use materials at hand and emotions at hand and thoughts at hand and feelings at hand to cobble together a sustainable sense of well being for ourselves and our loved ones. The evolution of consciousness will allow us to do more and better with less and less. Rather than chafing at limits, we might eventually see limits as filaments of structure with which we construct firm but flexible protective boundaries. I have an inkling that it can be done. In Unitarian Universalism I look for traveling companions, cobblers of consciousness, weavers who revel in limits even as we enlarge pockets of meaning.

Unitarian Universalist Rebecca James Hecking has done her part in reveling in limits and enlarging pockets of meaning. For several years, she has written a blog called “The Sustainable Soul,” and now she has written a book by the same name. In her book of 24 essays includes four times that many concrete practices which can help us separate our worthwhile ends from unsustainable means.

She writes, “We let go of the idea of an endless, unlimited Earth. We let go of blind faith in silver bullet solutions. We struggle to let go of our addiction to stuff, to consumerism, to symbols of success and status. We wrestle with ourselves, letting to. We struggle. We let go of quiet desperation. We let go of ‘more is better.’ We take two steps forward and one step back. We let go of thinking of ourselves and our actions as disconnected from the larger whole. We let go of outdated ideas and images. We let go of spiritual concepts primarily born from justifications of our own desires. We let go, and then we let go some more.”²

We may find in that letting go not scarcity but sufficiency, if not abundance. One of the notable voices on sustainability is Bill McKibben, who is going to be in town for a conference called

² The Sustainable Soul: Eco-Spiritual Reflections and Practices, Rebecca James Hecking, Skinner House Books, Boston, 2011, page 70.

“Brave New Planet” on October 28 and Saturday, October 29. The location is Claremont Presbyterian Church. Preceding the conference, he will also give a public lecture at Big Bridges Auditorium at Pomona College on Thursday, October 27. Details are available through a link at the Progressive Christians Uniting website, www.progressivechristiansuniting.org.

“As McKibben sees it, we will need to continue and redouble our efforts in such areas as the attempt to stabilize and reduce the amount of CO₂ in the atmosphere, if only to avoid the worst climate-related disasters that might happen to us . . . According to McKibben, we will have to hunker down, concentrate on essentials, and create the type of community (in the neighborhood, in the town, but also on the Internet) that will be resilient enough to weather trouble on an unprecedented scale.”³

Will our future be doom and gloom? That is a possibility, but a gloomy, doomed future is not inevitable. Perceived scarcity bring out the scared child inside us. We wonder: What if there is not enough? So we stockpile, we pull back from sharing, we limit risks and gravitate to the tried and true. Yet stockpiling, pulling back from sharing, limiting risk, and gravitating to the tried and true will not get us out of the resource bind in which we find ourselves. Tried and true efforts to grasp material security are the root of the problem.

We need rudimentary physical and emotional security to sustain life – food, clothing, a roof over our heads, and supportive relationships. How much more can we expect, and how can this “more” be sustainable? The International Union for Conservation of Nature weighed in on this. IUCN is the world’s oldest and largest global environmental.⁴ In a document titled “The Future of Sustainability: Re-thinking Environment and Development in the Twenty-first Century,” the IUCN states, “Sustainability needs to be made the basis of a new understanding of human aspiration and achievement. The relevant metric of sustainability is ‘the production of human

³ See <http://www.progressivechristiansuniting.org/PCU/BraveNewPlanet.html>.

⁴ See www.iucn.org.

wellbeing (not necessarily material goods) per unit of extraction from or imposition upon nature.”⁵

Continuing, “The planetary future depends on what kind of culture of consumerism we build. We need to redesign and engineer the global economy so that people can get more yet consumer less. One aspect of this is an economy of services rather than objects, that generates value without generating waste or unnecessary physical or energetic throughput.”

We may not be professional economists, but we can be creators of an economy of services that enhances our wellbeing, the well being of those we love, and the well being of others who share this fragile planet.

One of my dreams for building a more robust economy of services is for our current Caring Connection group to transition from being reactive to being proactive. The Caring Connection is an opt-in email list for those who want to be alerted when a member is in need or has something to celebrate. If you would like to be on the list, please let me know. Please let me know if you would like to be part of proactively checking on people we have not seen for a while. This will help the Caring Connection to be more sustainable.

May we ask neither too much nor too little of each other. By working and playing together, may we enlarge our pockets of meaning. May it be so!

⁵ See http://cmsdata.iucn.org/downloads/iucn_future_of_sustainability.pdf, p. 12.