

Pledge Drive 2014

To Enrich Our Ecosystem: UCV's 2014 Pledge Drive

Remarks by Rev. Steven Epperson

April 13, 2014

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Just awhile ago, before the offering, David and Jack talked about the transformative magic that takes place in making invisible energy visible in our congregation's ecosystem; and speaking of magic, let's acknowledge the magic that occurs when David Marmorek sits down to create yet another funny, informative and inspiring Pledge Drive skit; and thank you Jack for being willing to be the straight man to David's antics.

There's something in the skit I want to run with—it's when Jack said: "let's turn over the soil of this ecosystem metaphor...", and in so doing, David pointed out that our "ecosystem has tremendous species diversity," and then he began a running list and description of some of UCV's critters: Elderly Eagle, Generous Giraffes, etc. Now there are ecosystems and ecosystems: some are great swaths of corn and wheat fields in North America's Midwest, or endless groves of palm trees cultivated for oil extraction that, through the machinations of agribusiness, have become near monocultures: one crop landscapes as far as the eye can see. A mono-culture, too, is an ecosystem; and mono-cultural agriculture may reap enormous short-term benefits for those who engage and control it. But historically, intense one-crop cultivation has wreaked environmental, economic and human disaster. The Irish potato blight of 1846 led to the deaths of a million people; the European wine industry collapsed in the late 19th century; the US Southern Corn Leaf Blight epidemic destroyed hundreds of millions of bushels in 1969-70.

The opposite of a monoculture is a poly-culture, which in environmental terms is called bio-diversity. And in the past forty years, it has become unequivocally clear, that the intricate web of life forms and habitats on our planet depend on thriving bio-diversity and its crucial contribution to the stability of functioning ecosystems through time. It's so important, in fact, that a world-wide United Nations Convention on Biological Diversity was signed by virtually every country back in 1992 with strict provisions for conservation, education, sustainable use, reporting and for recovery of viable populations of species and ecosystems under stress and threat. Here are the first two whereas statements from the preamble of the UN Convention:

“*Conscious* of the intrinsic value of biological diversity and of the ecological, genetic, social, economic, scientific, educational, cultural, recreational and aesthetic values of biological diversity and its components,

Conscious also of the importance of biological diversity for evolution and for maintaining life sustaining systems of the biosphere...

I don't think I've heard of any international agreement, treaty or convention conceived with such universal scope, taking in, as it does, what David called both the living and non-living components of a viable ecosystem. David stated that calling our congregation an “ecosystem” was a *metaphor*, but, significantly, he told us that it's also *literally true*, and in so doing underlined our bio-diversity—bio-diversity: something which has come to be seen and acknowledged as essential for the evolution and sustenance of the viability of life itself.

Our congregation is a bio-diverse poly-culture, not a monoculture. And our diverse ways of being, our service and financial support to this congregation are essential to ensuring that it flourishes now and for years to come. And the flourishing of our diverse Unitarian ecosystem, I believe, is crucial for the well-being—not only of ourselves and our children—but for the wider culture as well. Let me give you an example via a thought experiment.

A 2007 study conducted by the National Science Foundation found that if any one type of species or component is removed from an ecosystem, the life giving cycle of that system can break down and the community becomes dominated by a single species—it becomes a monoculture. Now imagine in your mind's eye the following: take away Unitarians and the Unitarian story from the landscape of religion in Hungary and Romania, the Philippines, the Khasi Hills of north eastern India, take it away from Great Britain, from the Continent, and from North America, take it away from the 16th century and the Protestant Reformation, from the great religious and political ferment of the late 18th and early 19th centuries, take it away from the Bible Belt, from the secularizing northeast, and from the past hundred and five years in Vancouver—imagine what that landscape would look like—I believe it would be a tendency toward an impoverished religious and moral monoculture.

Think of it this way: according to the ecologists Felicia Keesing and Drew Harvell, changes in biodiversity from poly-to mono-cultural ecosystems elevate health risks because the species most likely to disappear are those that buffer against infectious disease transmission, while surviving species tend to be the ones that increase disease transmission, such as the West Nile Virus, Lyme disease and Hantavirus. I'd never thought of it like this, but it seems compelling to me: thriving biodiversity of religious landscapes over time and space could be contingent on something as small and mighty as flourishing Unitarian congregational ecosystems and the tremendous species diversity within those ecosystems.

Imagine, again, with me in your mind's eye the following: we've spoken about how living and non-living components each have an important place and role in ecosystem viability. Imagine taking away the memorial gardens and plaques and the trees planted in memory of loved ones at 49th & Oak. Take away our gardens and orchard, other trees, flowers and bushes from this site. Imagine further taking away the roof above us and the surrounding walls; take away our hymnals, our library collections, our music and art....and there goes beauty, memory and our rootedness in this place and in our past—a past resplendent with characters, with thought, worship, tradition and meaning. It all begins to disassemble and disperse—“all things solid melt into air” leaving us huddling in “bare ruined choirs” and on the thin edge of ever fleeting, flickering moments with little defence against the constant barrage of the mono-cultural commodification of everything.

One step more: imagine this place without humanists, or pagans, or mystics, agnostics, and believers, or musicians, physicians, quilters and painters, authors and voice hearers, activists and cooks, teachers, nurses, librarians, gardeners, mowers of lawns and storytellers; imagine no children or seniors, or those of middling years—take away each or any one of these and the words of that Science Foundation study come to mind: if any one type is removed from the system, the cycle breaks down and the community becomes dominated by a single species...and that, for us, would be a kind of death, wouldn't it?: a valedictory to who and what we once *were* and *are* and to—who knows what we *would have become*.

Our congregational ecosystem—with its tremendous species diversity—occupies a crucial niche within larger trending-towards-increasingly mono-cultural systems: there is a global commercialized system wherein the worth of a thing is accounted solely in terms of

extrinsic, instrumental value. We often hear that everything exists to be converted into cash, and that whatever does not yield a return should be exterminated to make way for things that do. As well, there is a cultural mono-system wherein complexity, curiosity, and nuance are plowed under in order to raise a crop of bite-sized nuggets of easy-to-swallow, pre-digested celebrity info-tainment. And what and how and who can offer some kind of alternative, some kind of shelter from *that* storm, if not us, this place, and the tradition we uphold and sustain?

A couple of stories and some final thoughts.

Almost forty years ago, the construction of a dam on the Little Tennessee River was brought to a halt by the discovery of an endangered minnow-sized fish called the snail darter. The story made a big impact on me then and still does. The Little Tennessee was the last undammed river in the Tennessee River Basin. Going back to the 1930s, the Tennessee River Authority (or TVA) built 65 dams that impounded 4000 square kms of rivers and adjacent watersheds. The dams helped regulate sporadic and disastrous flooding and brought hydro-electricity to one of the most impoverished rural areas in the US. The thing was—the damming of this last undammed river was going to destroy family farms, wipe out the best trout stream east of Montana, and flood land sacred to the Cherokee Native American tribe. On top of it all, the dam wasn't really even needed—the Little Tennessee River wasn't prone to flooding and the dam had no electric generators; its construction was justified by the TVA because it would create a recreational lake; and it just so happened that it was surrounded by private farmlands condemned for resale by the Boeing Corporation—and I thought Boeing only made planes!

Farmers, anglers, the Cherokee and environmentalists tried to halt the construction to no avail until the summer of 1973 when the snail darter fish was discovered along with its only known habitat—the fish would be wiped out with the building of the dam. Claiming that the snail darter qualified for protection under the Endangered Species Act, litigation ensued that went all the way to the US Supreme Court, and construction of the Tellico Dam ground to a halt because of a two inch long fish. I remember clearly the controversy that ensued. Bureaucrats and politicians were outraged at the fantastic disproportion: that something like the construction of a mighty dam could be blocked because of what they called a worthless little fish.

A worthless little fish. Here's what Jimmie Durham of the Cherokee Nation had to say:

Who has the right to destroy a species of life?...Why is [the snail darter] considered so humorously insignificant?...Let me be emotional [about this]: to me, that fish is not just an abstract ‘endangered species’It is a Cherokee fish and I am its brother... From childhood we are taught that the animals and even the trees and plants that we share a place with are our brothers and sisters. We want our universe...with all of its fish and all of its life to continue....”

(quoted in Edwin Pister, “Endangered Species: Costs and Benefits,” www.umweltethik.at)

Second story: Most of us know something about the mythic account of Noah and the ark. It’s one of those daft, violent tales that can lead us, at times, to write off the whole Hebrew Bible as a farrago of unsubstantiated nonsense. With its deity subject to wild mood swings—in one chapter, ecstatic over the work of creation he just pulled off, and then a couple of chapters later filled with revulsion and despair over how it all went to pot, and so he swears to wipe the whole slate clean and start over.

But think of it again—take away the action movie and special effects, the cataclysm, and our engrained bias against something as improbable as the details of this story, and what do we see? Nowhere was the preservation of creatures—“two and two of all flesh in which there was the breath of life”—nowhere was their survival predicated according to hierarchy or usefulness. Each species—clean and unclean, from birds of the air to every creeping thing of the ground—was meant to live so that life, in all its diversity, without respect for its beauty, strength or cash value, would continue. And Noah, according to one rabbinical midrash, Noah became someone who “found favour in the eyes of the Lord,” not because he blindly obeyed the command to build the ark; no, he became a good man and was praised in the midrash when he fed the animals, mucked out their stalls, and stayed by their sides caring for them through the night when they were sick, and sore and afraid as they and Noah’s family journeyed over the waters of the deep.

What is the worth of a two inch, homely little fish? It’s like asking: What’s the worth of child? Or of the trees outside those windows, or the person who writes these sermons? Or the young people in child care who tend our little ones, or the couple who create our fabulous education program, our custodians and office staff? What’s the worth of those who vacuum and clean our buildings, the roof and walls that shelter us, the copy machine that runs off our orders of service, or the kitchen where we make our lunches and cater our events? What’s the worth of our tables and chairs and these pews on which we sit, or the sound system that enables you to hear these words? What is the worth of each and any of us, or the material things—the tools,

furnishings, the paint on the walls, the hymnals and pamphlets within hands reach, the parking lot, the sidewalks, the garden and orchard? If any one type—breathing or still—is removed from the ecosystem, the cycle of life of our congregation breaks down. And then our poly-culture, our thriving ecosystem, becomes mono-cultural, a desert of heart and soul.

Diversity of living and non-living things in a thriving ecosystem, according to the Preamble of the UN Convention on Biological Diversity has “*intrinsic value.*” That is, their worth is beyond price; it inheres, it belongs to the thing itself in its own right. “Existence in nature—of living and non-living things,” writes David Ehrenfeld, carries with it “the unimpeachable right to continued existence. Existence is the only criterion of value, and diminution of the number of existing things is the best measure of decrease in value.” (quoted in Pister, see above)

Beginning today and for the next three weeks, we have the opportunity, the blessing and responsibility, to contribute, by means of renewing our annual pledge, to the well-being of our flourishing congregational ecosystem; a system that thrives without excess; that thrives as we exercise responsible, transparent and democratic stewardship over what we have and are and aspire to achieve. May we give generously of our means, knowing the value of each and all that contribute to making this place an inspiring moral and spiritual home. For our own sake, for that of our children, and for the wider culture outside these doors that truly needs our continued, flourishing, lively, principled existence—let’s go from this place directly to the Lindsey Priestley Room in Hewett Hall and make a liberal, generous pledge to the work of our beloved congregational ecosystem.