

Optimism In This Time of Chaos

*spiritual environmentalist friend Rita Lucy's public talk
at First Unitarian Universalist Church of West Volusia
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You know things are a mess nowadays. Doom & gloom from possible wars along to environmental disasters. Perhaps putting our head *under a pillow* would be the best and most peaceful solution. Yet I look around me and here IS what see:

children walking safely to school, parents at the bus stops, teachers waiting at the school door to greet and teach.

As I travel North, I see fields planted in hope of bountiful harvest: cotton, grains, vegetables far as the eye can see. I see cattle grazing past areas redolent with the smell of pig manure ! Yes, North Carolina ! Tides are moving in their pre-ordained timely manner. The Gulf rests in its magnificent blue-&-greens.

And there is promise in the air: the rise of youthful climate activists. But is it not their future that's at stake? Here at the face of climate change, here are calls with urgency to teenagers, even the 11-year old recently seen on *60 Minutes*. They file lawsuits, stage walkouts, and do know how to lobby lawmakers. Student walkouts do have the support of former Vice President Al Gore's *Climate Reality Project*, and the *Union of Concerned Scientists*.

Yes, climate deniers are alarmed . . . *rightfully so !*

On a Saturday mid June in Germany, thousands of people under the banner of Ende Gelände, (loosely translated to mean *end of the line*), worked together to shut down the nation's coal mining industry. On that same Saturday in a small town in Maine a dedicated group of people were arrested as they demanded our government stop building warships at the Bath Iron Works, and invest instead in urgently needed renewable energy. Meantime, in Manhattan's center hundred of people surrounded New York Times' headquarters to demand that it start doing a better job treating "climate emergency", as the crisis it is !

Meantime again, to protect southern Amazon's indigenous, the people of Ecuador took to the streets and the courts to defend their rights. More than 1500 people from the Napo province shut down 36 oil wells on Kichwa territory for five days, then blocked a major highway through Amazon region. (Yes, Amazon rain forest is considered by the Gaia Theory to be the lungs of Mother Earth). Finally,

on day 5, an agreement was reached that met the very demands of these 72 indigenous communities - *perfect example of the grassroots' power of essential strategy to achieve justice !*

Challenges arrived ? Yes ! But we're seeing these offset by the opposite of doomsday, that is the most vocal and most abundant on our evening news and morning media. Nowhere are we hearing of world progress so visible to me and many in my generation.

According to United Nations statistics, over one billion people around the world have been lifted out of extreme poverty in the last twenty years. Women now have far more opportunities. Plus we continue to live longer due to medical breakthroughs - vaccinations, antibiotics, cancer and heart research. I especially appreciate the simple conveniences of electricity, automobiles, the internet, and indoor plumbing. (Yes, here in my lifetime I have once experienced the lack of all of these !) And too have been the wonders of travel as I stood in awe of temples in the Far East, cathedrals and museums of Europe, and these natural wonders here on our own continent's national parks.

But oh, indeed too have I wept looking out the windows of a Philippine restaurant, witnessing the poverty of the hillside before me. Weeping too those children begging on the streets of our own southern cities. Weeping the homelessness, and the inequality of housing in every major city on this earth. I shame myself that in my youth (being between 20 & 30), I never did understand the overwhelming forces of poverty. I bargained in Mexico for garlic, in southern Florida for strawberries, and on the streets of Moscow for a collection of stamps. In desperation, yes I gained these items at such costs of despair of other human beings lacking any necessity of life earned by labor. Perhaps this on a much larger scale is what drives corporate greed.

But wait ! . . . do you know too about the group of twenty, begun by Warren Buffett and Bill Gates in 2010 ? It's called *The Giving Pledge*. Over 40 billionaires committ to give more than half of their wealth during their lifetime or in their will. Yes, some of these names are familiar to us : *Warren Buffett, Bill and Melinda Gates, Michael Bloomberg, George Lucas, and Ted Turner*. But even across this earth I also see people sharing in some of these blessings, as solar power comes to Africa, as cooking stoves no longer require wood from miles away, as sanitary conditions and the lack thereof are addressed. More child education too. Such progress more and more becomes available in villages, in ghettos, through the internet, and in libraries.

Not only are peoples from different cultures engaging with the needs of others, but governments, non government organizations (NGO's) are at the heart of making this a better world. I've witnessed electricity brought to the mountain people of Central America by Japan, the husbandry-skills shared by Germany with the people of El Salvador, the Medical teams from Cuba helping and teaching in Haiti and Venezuela. My mid-wife Floridian friend Anne shares her knowledge and skills, training women in child birthing skills in the mountainous regions of Haiti, setting up a triage-medical unit for women in Afghanistan.

One of the many blessings taking place throughout the world is rise in literacy. Several years ago, while traveling to Cuba with *Witness for Peace* we heard gratitude from those people for many things. And this one in particular: Shortly after Castro took over, he assigned high school students of island barrios to teach people how to read ! Per the UN, literacy now stands at 99.8%, compared to a dismal 41.7% in the rural areas of that island under the Batista regime.

And another simple thing: *little free pantries*. Remember that roadside library idea - put in a book / take a book ? That was originated by one person, and now exists in many front yards, and has spread as far as Australia ! That was followed by free pantries, successfully copying, with non perishable food items

instead of books – a loaf of bread, a jar of jelly, peanut butter, a can of soup, canned fish, crackers !

Hunger we know is a year-round problem for many. Days too without toothpaste, shampoo, soap. (Here in Orlando one of my friends distributes these personal hygiene items on a regular basis.)

That America, my country and yours, is in moral and legal trouble, under the present and past administrations *is pretty obvious*. Troubling stories of torture, aggressive wars under false pretenses, lethal drones, caged children . . . *We shudder at the evening news*. Is this our moment of discontent? Will that discontent move us to action? How would legislators hear the voice of their people if we do not contact them? Yes, I have Senators Scott and Rubio under favorites, and representative Michael Walz too. So, letters-to-editor? Yes, personal satisfaction comes to write, even if not published.

We are a nation that made great progress in human rights, memorializing that history in deep South exhibit- a horrific memory of the 4000 lynchings. And in our capitol, a museum to remind us of the Holocaust. And too, our Viet Nam Wall -testament not only to the dead but to the anti war movement that bought that horrendous chapter to a close.

Yes, I do believe there is a moral imperative to such activism. Yes, we are a hope filled people, as each of us, which constitute a majority of us, really do care ! Yes, we are the ones we have been waiting for. As Annie Dillard, one of my favorite theologians says “*There is only us. There never has been any other.*” Check the four major car makers, Ford, Honda, VW and BMW negotiating in secret with California to reduce emissions, while our country’s current administration attempted to strip that state of the right to set its own standards. Now a dozen other U.S. States are vowing to enforce stricter previous administration’s emission standards. (*BBC July 26*)

Ever heard of *The Teddy Trust* ? Started seven years ago in Leominster, Herefordshire, England, it now sends cuddly toys to children in 15 countries. The next batch of 10,000 teddies are going to Syria in September.

In an article entitled *Growing a Global Heart* we hear the story of Belvie Rooks and Dedan Ills, co-founders of a vision designed to inspire the ceremonial planting of millions of memorial trees honoring victims of urban violence. Here's their motto, "*Healing the wounds of the past in the present, while creating a sustainable future.*"

In a recently published book by Gregg Easterbrook titled *It's Better than It Looks: Reasons for Optimism in an Age of Fear*, he defines optimism as "*the conviction that problems can be solved if we all roll up our sleeves and get to work*". He devotes an entire chapter to addressing climate change and another chapter to over coming inequality.

So what can we do to fight hate? Well 14-year old Oregonian Claire Sarnowski was the inspiration for a new law to mandate Holocaust and genocide education in Oregon's public schools, after hearing the personal story of Alter Weiner, a 92 year old Holocaust survivor. And Byron Dondoyano, a Washington University student saw how difficult it was for Muslim students to take exams during the fasting of Ramadan. His efforts, after personally fasting to experience this first-hand, led to a bill to provide religious accommodations at US colleges and universities, so that students of all faiths can be accommodated if an exam falls on a major religious holiday.

In August, on the the 74th anniversary of the atomic bombing of Hiroshima/Nagasaki, seven individuals known as the *Kings Bay Plowshares 7* (Isaiah 32:1-4) appeared in Brunswick Georgia's federal district court for oral arguments on their non-violent action in April 2018 at Trident submarine base in St. Mary's, Georgia. They face up to 25 years in prison. Three have been in the county jail for the past

sixteen (16) months, and the other four (4) defendants are wearing ankle bracelets. I was pleased to be there myself at the gates of the Navy base as a supporter demonstrating too elimination of these weapons of mass destruction. The defendants await the decision of Judge Wood on outcome of the hearing that is the sentencing. Defendants claim the Religious Freedom Restoration Act (1993) as their defense.

Yes, demonstrations against nuclear power have a long history internationally. The peace symbol attests to the protests in the United Kingdom in the early 50's when protesters designed the symbol using the semaphore alphabet, the flag system depicted in many old movies, signaling ship-to-ship, where N and the D superimposed for Nuclear Disarmament.

Of the 253 power reactors originally ordered in the United States from 1952 to 2008, 48% were canceled and 11% prematurely shut down, testimony to what grass roots movements can accomplish. There is something happening in this world. People across the planet and in far flung communities are rising up. Yes, they are meeting resistance whether by police, cynics or government at all levels, who say *the world can be no other way than what it is*. But they - we - I , are not deterred.

Psychologist Michael Penn, writing in the magazine Parabola, says "*A world is dying and a new world is struggling to be born, and this new world that's struggling to be born ...is grounded in a recognition of the interdependence of all humankind.*"

I share with you, as my conclusion, some prose by Bishop Ken Unter of Detroit, Michigan . . .

This is what we are about
We plant the seeds that one day will grow

We water seeds already planted, knowing they hold future promise
We lay foundations that will need further development
We provide yeast that produces far beyond our capabilities
We cannot do everything, and there is a sense of liberation,
Realizing that this enables us to do something, and to do it very well
We may never see the end result
But that is the difference between the master builder and the worker
We are workers not master builders, ministers, not messiahs
We are prophets of a future not our own

. . .

So me, I say to all of you in this beautiful day here in church . . .

Don't just stand there !
Do something, anything ,
And while you are doing it . . .

MAY THE FORCE BE WITH YOU !

~ Rita Lucy