

*What Is Our Social Responsibility?*¹
Rev. Myke Johnson
October 17, 2010
Allen Avenue Unitarian Universalist Church

*Our reading today was Prayer for the Earth, by Barbara Deming.*² *Excerpt:*

Our own pulse beats in every stranger's throat,
And also there within the flowered ground beneath our feet,
And—teach us to listen!--
We can hear it in water, in wood, and even in stone.
We are earth of this earth, and we are bone of its bone.
This is a prayer I sing, for we have forgotten this and so
The earth is perishing.

As part of preparing for this week's service, I invited members and friends of the congregation to let me know what you believe are the most important social issues of our time. So, first of all, I want to thank all of you who responded, who shared your thoughts and feelings with me. I appreciate that you took time out of your busy lives to put some words to paper. The thoughts of one person reminded me that even to ask this question says something about our values as a congregation—that it is not insignificant that “we promote social responsibility.” She wrote:

I think the most important social issue to address as a congregation is the very question you pose...

What IS our collective social responsibility - as a community, a state, and a nation? In this severe economic climate, it is tempting to abandon the social contract in favor of each taking care of him/herself. We see the results of this perspective as cuts to social services continue, hunger, family homelessness, and lack of medical care expand, and the mentally ill live on the streets, unable to care for themselves. Why is it that other, less wealthy countries than ours are more committed to social responsibility, and what is the collective impact? What does it mean to be "our brothers keepers," and what positive return is in it for us?³

I am reminded that any one of us who cares about the world—who gives time and energy to work with other people, to serve food at the soup kitchen, to volunteer with immigrants, to teach children, to visit the sick, to work for compassionate legislation—you are weaving that web of social responsibility—that network of compassion which creates a beloved community. So I want to thank all of you who are doing that—who reach out to others in so many ways.

Of those who responded to the question, I would say that the majority of people were most concerned with economic or environmental issues—and the interconnections between those issues. I will say more about that in a moment.

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2 From *We Are All Part of One Another: A Barbara Deming Reader*, edited by Jane Meyerding.

3 Lynne Gibbs email 10/7/10

Many people also mentioned the importance of celebrating differences, ending discrimination and hate, and assuring equal rights for all people. Many people talked about the hate-mongering and rancor in our political climate, and hoped for ways to better communicate with people across difference, to find common ground—civil discourse that will enable us to work together.

A few specifically mentioned wishing they could learn more about immigration.⁴ A few people spoke about war and peace. Two people mentioned criminal justice reform, and tied that to issues of economic and social priorities. A few people offered very concrete suggestions—for example, to work with pre-school education, or troubled youth, or the education of women worldwide, as steps toward addressing larger issues.

But the largest number of concerns expressed were about economic and ecological imbalance—about the growing divide between haves and have-nots, global poverty, and how our habits of human consumption are threatening to destroy the physical environment on which we depend for everything. One person mentioned how difficult it is for people to really take hold of an issue that does not fully affect us for the space of two generations—and yet how important it is that we begin to feel for the people of at least seven generations ahead, as the indigenous communities of this land speak about.

Carrying these voices from A2U2, I found myself led to attend a gathering this past week, of the International Council of Thirteen Indigenous Grandmothers. I wasn't sure what to expect, but I felt this call to listen—just as I feel called to listen to the voices of people at A2U2—I felt a call to listen to what indigenous elders were teaching about these times in which we find ourselves. Our dominant society has got us into a mess—economically and environmentally. So to find the way out, it felt important to listen to the ones outside of the dominant culture.

These thirteen grandmothers first came together in the fall of 2004 in response to a vision seen by a white woman named Jyoti. They arrived from North, South, and Central America; Africa; and Asia. They came together at the Tibet House Menla Mountain Retreat center in upstate New York. Within three days they had decided to form an alliance for the good of all beings. Since then, they have been traveling at least twice a year to places all around the globe.

Grandmother Agnes, from the Takelma people of southern Oregon, is the eldest, at 86, and chair of the council. She has been a leader and activist among her own people for many decades. She says: “We grandmothers have come from far and wide to speak the knowledge we hold inside. In many languages we have been told it is time to make the right changes for our families, for the lands we love. We can be the voice for the voiceless. We are at the threshold. We are going to see change. If we can create the vision in our heart, it will spread. As bringers of light, we have no choice but to join together. As women of wisdom we cannot be divided. When the condor meets the eagle, thunderbirds come home.”⁵

⁴ I want to insert here a thank you to our worship committee and others who led last Sunday's worship service on immigration. I had a chance to read your presentations on the church website, and found them very moving. I also understand that the social action committee has just scheduled a program with Beth Stickney from the Immigrant Legal Advocacy Project on December 12th, which will focus on questions about Immigration.

⁵ From the *Sacred Blessings CD* of the International Council of Thirteen Indigenous Grandmothers. Liner notes.

The condor is the sacred bird of the South Americans, just as the eagle is sacred to North America. This saying refers to the coming together of south and north, and the coming together of intellect and heart, that will bring change to the world.

Many of them spoke of prophecies about this time—stories that were told by their elders. Three of the grandmothers were not able to be with us—one of those was Yupik Grandma Rita from Alaska. But we heard the story of how—when she was a little girl—her own great-grandmother, before she died, said to her, “I am giving you 13 feathers and 13 stones—you must take good care of these—someday you will bring them to a council of 13 grandmothers, and you will give one to each and one to yourself.” They spoke of how the elders often told them about things happening in these times—that we are living right now in the times of purification. Grandmother Mona, of the Havasupai and Hopi people said: “I was always told to look around me. Look at the water, the wind and the air, the fire, even the sun. Nature is telling us what we need to know.”⁶

They didn't have all the answers, but they did joke about how the men had messed things up over the last hundreds of years, and now it was time for the grandmothers to take charge. Grandmother Maria Alice of the Amazon forest in Brazil said: “We too have a prophecy that says that it will be the women who will lead this last time of transmutation. And here we are.” They did not exclude men, however—they said that balance was needed, and men had to find their feminine side; after the imbalance of masculine control, the feminine ways of love and compassion were needed to bring the earth together.

The vision they offer is one we have yearned for here in our congregation as well- a world of unity and compassion—where people care for each other, not for profit and gain. They want to restore the ancient ways of walking in balance with the earth and all creatures. People have forgotten that all life is sacred and all life is one.

Most powerfully, I was struck by the force of love I saw embodied in these grandmothers. They have been willing to leave behind their home communities, and travel the world to speak a message of compassion. They offered healing prayers for all of us who had attended the gathering—simple and transformative. Even in the face of severe oppression, they commit themselves to the practice of love and compassion. They preached that love is the power that can save the earth. That message felt familiar to our own values—and yet, it rings new when experienced through the deep commitment and actions of people who have suffered.

I felt hope from them—that this transformation is possible—that we can all learn to live in harmony with the earth and with each other—even though we may not be able yet to imagine exactly how it will happen. They are putting their lives on the line to accomplish this transformation. Grandmother Mona spoke of the Hopi legend of the butterfly: “Only by going into darkness and breaking down our old ways can we move from the [limited] view of the caterpillar to the expanded view of the butterfly—a necessary view if we are to save the beauty and resources of our planet for the next seven generations to come.”⁷

6 *Grandmothers Counsel the World*, by Carol Schaefer, p. 123.

7 *Grandmothers Counsel the World*, p. 127.

Grandmother Tsering, as a young woman, walked out of Tibet with her two babies in 1958, walking in the night over the mountains, to escape the Chinese occupation. She founded the international organization, the Tibetan Women's Organization, and helped the Dalai Lama escape from Tibet. She spoke of the importance of teaching our children the path of peace and compassion.

One of the most important messages they brought, is also one that might be most challenging for many Unitarian Universalists. They spoke of the importance of prayer—that what is required of us is a spiritual awakening. We cannot face great crisis without a connection to the beloved Creator, the Spirit of love that joins us together and guides us through the darkness. Grandma Agnes said, “The spirit world is just a breath away, right here for us to tap into. We grandmothers of the council are being nudged by the Grandmothers and Grandfathers of the Spirit World that speak through us from there.” But she wasn't talking about going to church, or any particular form of prayer—she said we each have access to spirit right in our own hearts.

Here is an example—Grandma Agnes most often spoke of the sacredness of water. We cannot live without water. Our bodies are over 75% water. She said, all of us are “waterbabies”—yet how often do we thank the water for our lives? She said, when you wake up in the morning, when you take a drink of water—thank the water. When you take a shower, thank the water. She said, Water can hear us, and our prayers of thanks can heal the pollution of water. She has also been a water activist—I was moved by her work to bring back the salmon to the rivers in her land—they got rid of several dams that were keeping the salmon from spawning, and revived the ancient salmon ceremonies of her people. So, in her I saw this amazing combination of prayers and action. She has gone around the world speaking to people about water, and praying for water.

At the gathering, we had a communal prayer three times each day, led by a different grandmother each time. All of the prayers had their own distinctive forms, yet had many things in common. A naming of our hopes and yearnings. A care for those who were suffering. A reverence for the earth and the natural beings. A willingness to be an instrument of healing and compassion. I felt my own spirit working hard—battling my own inner shadows of fear and anger—opening my heart to those with whom I felt no connection. I found myself experiencing the loving presence of my own great-grandmother, bringing joy and strength to my heart.

On my drive home, through a lot of rain, about halfway home, the sun broke through and I saw a beautiful rainbow. Then I felt a growing radiance in my heart, I felt full of love and compassion. I was remembering the faces of the grandmothers as they blessed us, and the love and compassion radiant there. I was remembering the story told by a Mohawk woman who had come to the gathering with several other Mohawk women, to see the grandmothers. She had grown up in the horrible residential schools that so many Indian children were sent to, as part of the plan to destroy native cultures. She said as she went through her days at the conference, many white people spoke to her of their sorrow and regret for what had been done. She spoke of the healing power of the ceremonies and all of her experiences here, and that she felt healed of the deep wounds from her childhood.

What do I carry away from that gathering? Hope. Our A2U2 mission speaks of our hope in the possibility of transforming the world through the power of love. We speak of celebrating the marvelous diversity of people and nature, of encouraging spiritual growth, and promoting social responsibility—that all of us must care for each other—move away from selfishness to a community spirit, that we must walk with care on this earth. I believe our hearts are in the right place. And yet, it is often easy to feel despair about what is happening in the world. To feel we are too small, too few, the troubles too big, and the people in power, too strong, to really bring about the change we need.

In these thirteen grandmothers I saw action joined to prayer, love joined to commitment--and hope that what we do will make a difference. That the earth herself is on our side, and all the unseen forces that give life to the earth. That of course change will happen from the ground up—from the women, from the earth loving people—outside of the centers of power and control. That life and love are calling us to this work, energizing us for this work, and joining forces with us to bring about a new way of being.

The last day we were there, the Mohawk women told us they had just learned of the death of Jake Swamp, a former sub-chief of the Mohawk Nation, and founder of the Tree of Peace Society. Chief Swamp shared a Tree Planting Ceremony all around the United States and the world, in an effort to bring awareness to environmental and social concerns. He had planted more than 200,000 trees for world peace. The tree used for this ceremony was the white pine, and the ritual was rooted in the teachings of the Peacemaker, who had brought peace to the nations that became the Iroquois Confederacy. It was hard to hear of this death of such a leader and visionary for peace and the earth. But we were reminded that new leaders would need to step up and do the work. We prayed for those new leaders.

On the way home, I heard a song by Holly Near, which spoke to my heart—the words of the chorus went like this: I am open, and I am willing. To be hopeless would seem so strange. It dishonors those who go before us. So lift me up to the light of change.⁸

It is up to us to do the work of this time. To bring about economic and ecological transformation. To learn what we need to learn, and take whatever steps we can see before us, trusting that an inner light will lead us on.

I want to sing that song for you now... and I invite you to join with me in the chorus if you wish.

I am open and I am willing.
To be hopeless would seem so strange.
It dishonors those who go before us.
So lift me up to the light of change.

8 “I Am Willing,” by Holly Near. See more info and lyrics on her website at www.hollynear.com.