

New Moon for Gaia¹
Rev. Myke Johnson
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Allen Avenue Unitarian Universalist Church

Gaia is a name we call our beautiful earth to help us remember to love her and care for her. Instead of an earth day this year, we are celebrating 30 days for the earth, beginning today, as a New Moon for Gaia.

Excerpts from the Readings: From "12 Questions"

Alice Walker²

Anything we love can be saved... It is essential that humans learn to love the entire planet as passionately as they love their own gardens. We must persevere in our appreciation of this wonderful place, Earth. We must never despair of Earth because there is bad behavior almost everywhere we look. If we look closely we see that Spring continues to arrive. Winter comes with its refreshing snow. Summer stuffs us with its fruits, and its smells of sweetness and plenty. Autumn prepares us for rest. No bad behavior by any human being has ever stopped the changing of the seasons and their incomparable gifts to us. ...The person who stands in front of us is the person we change the world with. ... Beginning with our own selves is always the right place to start.

From *Anything We Love Can Be Saved: A Writer's Activism* by Alice Walker³

It has become a common feeling, as we have watched our heroes falling over the years, that our own small stone of activism, which might not seem to measure up to the rugged boulders of heroism that we have so admired, is a paltry offering toward building the edifice of hope. Many who believe this choose to withhold their offerings out of shame.

This is the tragedy of our world.

For we can do nothing substantial toward changing our course on the planet, a destructive one, without rousing ourselves, individual by individual, and bringing our small, imperfect stones to the pile.

Sermon

For many years now, I have observed the cycles of the moon. At first I wondered why sometimes I would see the moon in the evening, and sometimes in the morning. I wondered about the changing shapes from crescent to full and back again. When I was in my twenties, I took it upon myself to study what the patterns of the moon were, and so I learned the beautiful rhythmic dance of the lunar cycle.

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2 <http://alicewalkersgarden.com/2008/10/12-questions/>

3 Alice Walker, *Anything We Love Can Be Saved: A Writer's Activism*, 1998.

I learned that we can see the waxing crescent moon in the evening, in the west of the sky, where it appears as the light grows dim, and it sets just after the sun sets. As it grows fuller each day, it appears higher in the sky at dusk, and remains longer in the sky, setting later and later each night. In about two weeks, when it reaches fullness, we can see it rise in the east about sunset and set about dawn. As it wanes, it rises later and later each night. It is the waning crescent that appears in the morning, in the early light of dawn. What we call the New Moon is actually when the sun and the moon are aligned in the sky, so the moon is hidden within the larger light of the sun during the day. The night is dark, with no moon at all.

Now, every once in a while, I will be reading a novel, and the author will tell us that the crescent moon was rising in the evening sky—and I think—no it was not! The moon doesn't do that. But of course, many people in the modern age have lost the knowledge about what the moon does or does not do.

As I began to know the moon, I began to use the rhythms of the moon for my own rhythms. Now, each new moon day, I read my journalings from the previous 29-30 days since the last new moon. This regular opportunity to read my journal gives me a chance to reflect on the events of my life, to notice patterns, and make meaning. The old farmer's almanacs recommended planting seeds during the waxing of the moon. There was the farmer's belief that anything we want to grow, we can align with the growing of the moon. And so for me, the new moon has become a time to make change in my life, to start new activities.

Today is a new moon day, and today we are looking at changes we might make to bring greater wholeness to our relationship with the earth. We have spoken many times in this sanctuary of the troubles in our relationship with the earth. We know that our society is using up the resources of the earth faster than they can be regenerated. Our everyday lifestyles generate toxic waste which is poisoning the waterways, the air, filling up the land with trash. Our whole economic system is based on this imbalance, this assumption that we can use everything up, and throw everything away.

But as Unitarian Universalists we have a different vision. We have a vision of walking with care on this earth. We have a vision of living in harmony with the earth, in a mutually beneficial relationship. I know it can be discouraging, to see how far we have to travel to arrive at our vision. Even right now, in our own state government, the politicians are proposing rolling back the laws that are meant to offer some small beginnings of protection for the environment. But—especially in a discouraging situation—it is important that we not lose sight of the power we have to create change.

Alice Walker reminds us, "There's always something to do - always. And the reason that's true is that you always can work with yourself. You don't have to go out and worry about what other people are doing, or how to start this or that out there, you can start ever so much in yourself.

And that will evolve outwardly. So... just hold that thought - that it really is up to each of us, and we're all trying to get to a place where collectively we can effect change. But we can't really do it from being a collective before we are actually self-collected."⁴

Our individual actions matter because we are all related in the interconnected web of life. Everything we do affects everything else. When I take a walk outside, I am shifting the energy of my day, and shifting the energy of my neighborhood. When I plant a small garden, I am shifting my relationship to the earth, creating a partnership, opening up a place to learn and grow my self along with whatever plants I have begun to tend.

We should never underestimate the power of the changes we make in our own lives. But we should realize that when we take action in collaboration with other people our effect is multiplied exponentially. I think about changes that have already occurred in our wider culture, that just 40 years ago were unknown.

Recycling, for example, began with individuals making an effort to throw away less plastic and paper and aluminum. Now it has become institutionalized in many communities. In the town I live in, we bring our recycling to be picked up along with the trash, in separate containers. We don't even have to sort it out into paper and plastic. That happened because people all over started doing recycling bit by bit, on their own, until finally a communal change took hold.

We are seeing a similar shifting happening now with the idea of eating locally grown food. As more and more people start looking for local organic food to buy, more local people are able to make a living growing foods and selling them at farmer's markets and local supermarkets. Do you notice how the supermarkets now have special displays for local produce? They have picked up on the energy of people looking for those foods.

Ultimately, the challenges facing our planet are not ones that we can face or solve alone. But when we begin to act, we discover that there are many others who are feeling and thinking the same way. It might not make the evening news, or the legislative agenda. Neither the Republicans nor the Democrats are really looking at the big changes we need in order to thrive as a human species on this planet, not to mention to keep from destroying our fellow species. That makes me sad. There is so much our nation could do, if it had the will and the vision to do it. But in the absence of leadership from our leaders, we need to join together and lead the way ourselves.

This past week we held our sixth session of the Common Security Club here at A2U2. About 20 people have been part of the entire program, and we have been meeting every other week to deepen our understanding of the economic crisis, and strategize how we can help each other during these challenging times.⁵

⁴ <http://alicewalkersgarden.com/2010/10/conversation-with-alice-walker-by-marianna-schnall/>

⁵ For more information see www.commonsecurityclub.org

One of the important lessons we have learned is that our current economic system is not sustainable. It is based on the practice of using up resources from the earth, and we are reaching the limit of what the earth can provide in the way of fossil fuels, food, and fresh water. We need a new plan. I have been inspired by the group as we use our diverse creativity to imagine new ways of living together that can endure. We have talked about wanting more social connection, and less stuff. More sharing of skills and tools and resources, and less isolation. We talked about a future in which more of us are growing food in our own yards, and sharing our bounty with each other and with those who might not have access to such gardens.

Can you imagine it? Wouldn't it be cool if more and more people in our church began to grow some sort of food. If more and more people in the wider Portland area began to grow food? If we were learning and teaching each other how to do that in ways which enhance the fertility of the earth? When we can imagine it and talk about it together, it begins to become a reality. I came away from our sessions with such a sense of abundance and hope.

Because—change is not going to come from our leaders. It comes from the changes we make as small groups of people, setting out on a journey. It is important to remember that this is a journey. We won't fix the problem in 30 days, or perhaps even in 30 years. But as we make choices that lead us in the direction of our values, we will learn what new choices can take us further and further down the path. I am reminded that we are not truly venturing into something new. We are seeking a way back to something really ancient, but ever evolving and re-created for our own time. We are restoring a relationship with our true home. Our most important teacher on this journey is the earth herself, the earth we are invoking today as Gaia.

The name Gaia originated in Greece as the ancient Goddess who was the earth, and who gave birth to all the other Gods. James Lovelock revived the name in 1979 in his book, *Gaia: A New Look at Life on Earth*. His "Gaia hypothesis" proposed that the earth is a dynamic system shaped by the interactions between all living organisms and the inorganic material of land, water, and air. The Gaia hypothesis recognizes the earth as a living organism which includes all of us within it. We are Gaia, and we have a relationship with Gaia. By invoking the earth as Gaia, we are shifting our awareness of that relationship, and helping to re-awaken and heal that relationship. Gaia is a love name for the earth.

Our modern society has made the earth into the object of our use, seen it only as a resource for our industries. We must begin to see the earth as a being, our mother, our lover, our child, in order to renew our harmony with all creatures. Cultural historian Morris Berman advocates for a re-enchantment of the world. He writes, "The view of nature which predominated in the West down to the eve of the Scientific Revolution was that of an enchanted world. Rocks, trees, rivers and clouds were seen as wondrous, alive; and human beings felt at home in this environment. The cosmos, in short, was a place of belonging."⁶

6 Berman, *The Reenchantment of the World*, (Cornell, 1981)

When I take a walk in my neighborhood, I am opening my mind and body to learn from the wisdom of the earth. When I plant a garden in the earth, and tend it, and watch it, I am opening my heart and hands to learn from the earth. I can see that the earth is full of such diversity and abundance. In just a few weeks, green plants will start growing in every inch of soil, by some ancient magic of transformation. And so, when I think about how we change our relationship to the earth, I am reminded that there is room for so many diverse ideas and actions. There is no one way to reach our goal.

I learn from the earth that beauty and music are everywhere, that movement and rhythm and color and abundance are essential to life. And so I remember that on our journey of change, we must not become too grim and hard and punitive, but make room for fun and games, art and songs. We don't have to wait until we arrive in some utopian future to have a celebration and a party. This journey is our life and we'd better have parties in all seasons. I learn from the earth that there is magic and mystery everywhere.

What is the earth telling you about how to change your life? Remember, it starts with an intention... And then, with joining our intentions to those of other people. For 30 days, can I focus on one thing?—say for example, carrying cloth bags in the trunk of my car, so that I never have to use plastic bags at the store. Or can I consciously choose local or organic foods when preparing dinner each night? It is easy to become overwhelmed if we try to do everything at once. But choosing one activity to make a change in our habits, that feels possible. And then, perhaps, with that success under our belts, we can choose one more change at the next turning of the moon, or turning of the seasons.

This month the UU Ministry for the Earth is inviting congregations all over the country to participate in a collective effort. Our efforts at Allen Avenue will be joined together with the actions of our fellow UU's. Each congregation is shaping its own activities. Along with our 30-day pledges, there will be earth-related themes at several worship services, and adult education events during the month. You can join up with our Green Earth Committee next Sunday at 12:30, if you want to help shape our collective future actions. The Natural Resources Council of Maine will be holding a lobby day on Tuesday April 5th at the State House—another way to join with others to make our values heard.

I come back to the wonderful words of Alice Walker: "...we can do nothing substantial toward changing our course on the planet, a destructive one, without rousing ourselves, individual by individual, and bringing our small, imperfect stones to the pile."⁷ Each of us is important to the most important work of our time.

7 Alice Walker, *Anything We Love Can Be Saved: A Writer's Activism*, 1998.

She tells us:⁸

The world has changed:
Wake up and smell
the possibility.

The world has changed:
It did not
change
without
your prayers
without
your faith
without
your determination
to believe
in liberation
&
kindness;
without
your
dancing
through the years
that had
no
beat...

The world has changed:
Wake up!
Give yourself
the gift
of a new
day.

Closing Words

Remember, "The person who stands in front of us is the person we change the world with. We need never go very far. Beginning with our own selves is always the right place to start... Anything we love can be saved."⁹

⁸ Excerpt from "The World Has Changed," in *Hard Times Require Furious Dancing*, 2010, pp. 96-97.

⁹ Alice Walker, <http://alicewalkersgarden.com/2008/10/12-questions/>