

Rev. Beth Chronister

Sermon at University Unitarian Church

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14-minute audio at:

<http://www.uuchurch.org/2017/reflection-rev-beth-chronister-november-26-2017/>

"Awaken to the Earth"

Part 2 of joint sermon/reflection with [Michael Foster](#)

Joanna Macy writes:

“Never before in history have our destinies been so intertwined. The crises facing us are too vast and complex for any one of us alone to comprehend, much less adequately respond. The fact that our fate is a common fate has tremendous implications. It means that in facing it together openly and humbly, we find again our mutual belonging and our power to act.”

Take a breath...

Feel what is alive in your body right now...

And listen to what you are feeling, having heard what you just heard...

Feel what is alive in this moment, in this room, on this patch of Earth where we gather each week...

And now imagine something in nature that you love...

As we took time for grief in the prayer earlier, I want to acknowledge the very real feelings of grief, fear, anger that come with opening up to the realities of environmental degradation and climate change.

It takes courage to see these truths. It takes companionship to awaken one's consciousness and then show up as accountable – accountable for the actions, accountable for the change.

And I want to express my profound gratitude to Michael Foster on this morning, for being with us here to share his story – and to ask us to join him.

In her work, *Coming Back to Life*, eco-philosopher and environmental activist Joanna Macy writes about how grief, anger, and fear are healthy responses to the harsh realities of our time – and that these responses need not lead us to denial or despair, but if honored (if sat with) can free us from paralysis and move us toward creative action.

This is what she calls "the work to reconnect." It takes courage. And so in guiding, she has a book that guides others to do this reconnecting. And in this work she describes a spiral in the work to reconnect – a spiral that moves through successive phases to go into those emotions of awakening one's consciousness in order to go forth.

And personally, I can feel so frightened and so overwhelmed when I open to these realities. And so I want to share with you a little bit of what these stages are because for me they have been a lifeline to not become stuck, to try not to look away.

The spiral of the work that reconnects begins with gratitude – for gratitude quiets the mind, can make us more present and can bring us back to the Source so that we can feel not only our love for the Earth, but also acknowledge how our pain is connected to the pain of the Earth.

By acknowledging our pain and daring to experience it – that's the next stage: honor our pain – and in doing so, we can begin to learn the true meaning of compassion, which mean, *suffering with*. We begin to know, when we enter into these feelings, the immensity actually of our hearts and our minds. And this might guide us beyond our isolated individual suffering to deliver us into the wider reaches of our shared existence. (You should know that Joanna Macy is a Buddhist. This greatly informs her work.)

And from there as we start to reach out, going from gratitude to honoring our pain, we begin to see with new eyes and realize how deeply interrelated we are with all of life. And from that deep inter-relatedness we begin to realize our power – our power of being part of a collective and so we might go forth into action.

And she describes this cycle as an ongoing endless cycle, almost as the seasons of the year or the cycles of life. And this is the cycle that I certainly witnessed and experienced when I had the profound privilege of going to Standing Rock just a few short weeks after Michael and his companions were turning the valves on the pipelines across the nation.

There, at Standing Rock, hundreds of indigenous Water Protectors and allies had come together to challenge the construction of the Dakota Access Pipeline – a project that denied tribal sovereignty and would threaten the water supply of over 17 million people.

And at the center of life at the camp there was a sacred fire, where people gathered throughout the day. It was a place where both grief and gratitude flowed seamlessly. There, speaking into a microphone that would spread out the voices over the camp, Indigenous People from all over the world would share their stories and their prayers – stories about languages forgotten, children removed, and sovereign rights denied. Prayers for all of those who were experiencing PTSD from their time on the front lines at the camp, and prayers for people on the other side. Prayers of gratitude for the Earth.

And each day at the camp in the morning, it would start with prayers for water. Circled around this same fire, people gathered each morning to give thanks. We would gather in the circle, singing, as grandmothers slowly walked around to bless each person with the water.

And from that circle we would walk down to the river's edge, praying and singing to offer our thanks to the sacred waters of life.

"Water is Life" was both the rallying call of the movement and the fundamental spiritual truth that grounded the people there.

These were some of the profound practices that were part of a larger transformation that happened – and continues to happen – from the Standing Rock reservation.

And while the pipeline was approved on one of the first days of Trump's presidency, the fight continues in the courts. And the transformation that began at that sacred fire will continue to radiate out to all corners of this planet.

Which brings me to something else that I'm holding onto as a lifeline right now. I'm learning to hold onto it to help lead me out of denial or despair. It's the reality that *any movement for justice cannot be measured by the success of a predetermined outcome.*

Justice work, the work that reconnects life to one another in the face of systems and societies broken by greed and isolation – this work is about transformation. It's not about transaction.

Yes, the Water Protectors were organizing to stop a pipeline – and the pipeline was approved anyway. Yes, the Valve Turners were turning the valves to stop the flow of oil from the tar sands and they did greatly disrupt the flow of oil on that day – and yes, the pipelines were turned back on.

However, these acts of civil disobedience were about joining their action to a wider movement – a wider movement that has deep history and future, that is calling attention to the danger of our dependence on oil. These people, these communities, they took risks because of the dire need to be brave and bold to protect life as we know it. And so, it becomes transformational if we join.

They are calling us into a greater transformation – a transformation that will continue, even as the oil that continues to flow and the Valve Turners themselves possibly serve time in prison. If people like me and like you and communities like this one pick up the call, the transformation continues, the valves continue to turn.

In his final writings before his assassination, Martin Luther King wrote,

“A final victory is an accumulation of many short-term encounters. To lightly dismiss a success because it does not usher in a complete order of justice is to

fail to comprehend the process of full victory. It underestimates the value of confrontation and dissolves the confidence born of partial victory by which new efforts are powered.”

When Michael and the others turned those valves, they were participating in a greater turning: a turning that cannot be stopped – not by the legal system, nor denial, nor greed – a turning that says to all of us with ears to hear, “We need you.”

Life is in peril. We need the strength and the commitment of millions of individuals and thousands of communities to continue to turn the valves, to practice living in ways that do less harm, and to come together to build our collective power.

In feeling our gratitude, we can reconnect with what is precious in this life; we are surrounded by it. In honoring our pains, may we grow more compassion. When we tell the truth, when we hear it, we may know our inter-relatedness and discover new powers within.

And inspired by the courage spoken here this morning in Michael's story, we may too be inspired to go forth.

Michael shared with me that when he saw Timothy DeChristopher speak here, he was very greatly inspired *his* choice to engage in civil disobedience. And so, I want to close with these words of thanks.

Timothy DeChristopher said,

“What one person can do is plant the seeds of love and outrage in the hearts of a movement. And if those hearts are fertile ground, those seeds of love and outrage will grow into a revolution.”

Michael, thank you. Thank you for planting the seeds of not only many trees – and calling us to do the same – but planting the seeds of love and outrage. May they find fertile ground *here* and beyond.

CLOSING HYMN: Wake Now My Senses, verses 1 and 5

Wake, now, my senses, and hear the Earth call;
feel the deep power of being in all;
keep with the web of creation your vow,
giving, receiving as love shows us how.

Wake, now, my vision of ministry clear;
brighten my pathway with radiance here;
mingle my calling with all who will share;
work toward a planet transformed by our care.