

"I Want You to Panic"

THE UNITARIAN FELLOWSHIP OF PETERBOROUGH

REV. JULIE STONEBERG

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OPENING WORDS

Rise! (adapted for 2 voices) ~ Gretchen Haley¹

A: Because the tides are rising, so must we

B: Rise! to this moment

A: Rise! to this day

B: Rise! to this life

A: This place in the web that is yours, and ours.

B: Rise!

A: Because the earth remains our only home

B: And we fellow travelers its only hope

A: For healing, for wholeness, for salvation.

B: Rise! Before the mystery

A: Before the big bang that started it all

B: That this infinite universe still takes notice of us

A: Still feels the in and out of our breath

B: Still holds us, Connects us

A: Rise! Or surrender with gratitude

B: For this beauty....this chance to be a part of it all

A: To give back, to weave life,

B: Past, Present, Future

A: Everywhere, Always, As one

B: Come, let us worship, together

CHALICE LIGHTING

Light is Returning ~ Kate McPhee²

"Around us, light is returning. It rekindles the spirit of life in the skeletons of trees.

It brings forth new shoots from the soil.

It wakes us from our winter slumber, and invites us to see what lies beyond.

We light [our chalice this morning] in the spirit of our Earth's awakening and to reaffirm our commitment to the value of our home."

STORY FOR ALL

3-5-0 ~ Ben Wolfe (with apologies to Dr. Seuss)

(This story was written in 2010 for a 3-5-0 service. Using Seussian stanzas, it tells the story of a small being who is lifting up the need for us to listen to what the sky is telling us.)

READING *The Miraculous Pitcher*

~ Barbara Rohde³

During the hot Nebraska summers of my childhood, I spent hours, high in my treehouse, devouring the books I found in the small collection my parents had acquired from the estates of various relatives.

One of my favorites was *A Wonder Book*, Nathaniel Hawthorne's retelling of classical myths. My favorite of those stories was "The Miraculous Pitcher," the story of Baucis

¹ <https://www.uua.org/worship/words/opening/rise>

² <https://www.uua.org/worship/words/chalice-lighting/light-returning>

³ <https://www.uua.org/worship/words/reflection/miraculous-pitcher>

and Philemon. This elderly, poor, but generous-hearted couple invite two gods, disguised as beggars, to come into their cottage to rest and eat. The gods keep asking that their bowls be replenished, and the old couple become sad and embarrassed because they know the pitcher is empty. But the gods show them otherwise. No matter how often they pour from the pitcher, it is always full.

I suppose that as a child, what I liked was the thought of possessing such a pitcher. Much later I realized that in some sense I did. The story of the miraculous pitcher seems to be telling us that in the realm of the spirit there is no such thing as a non-renewable resource.

That is an important concept. Most of us have it backward. For centuries we have had it backward. We have believed that material resources are infinite but the resources of the spirit need to be hoarded with care. We act as if the supply of oil can go on forever but that there are limits to the amount of love we can give away. How often I have found myself closing off from people in need because I was afraid of being spiritually drained, only to find myself in the driest of deserts.

We have arrived at a time in our history when we are beginning to realize that this planet is our only home; we can no longer make a mess of the place where we are and then move on. A species can come to an end. Resources can be used up. All growth is not a sign of health.

But I suspect we doubt more than ever the truth in the story of the miraculous pitcher — or the loaves and the fishes. We find it hard to believe that we will find the spiritual nourishment to meet the needs of this chaotic age.

The wisdom of the centuries and our own experience tell us otherwise. If we do not let our fears have dominion, we may discover that in the midst of pain we find inner strength, in the midst of bewilderment we find inner clarity, in the midst of nourishing another we find ourselves nourished.

MESSAGE *"I Want You to Panic!"* ~ Rev. Julie

Ian⁴ mentioned the course he is taking on Ecopsychology, and in helping to prepare for today, he reached out to the instructor, Andy Fisher, and asked for some resources we might use. In a generous reply, Fisher sent a link to a video⁵ about the work of Joanna Macy, which she has called both the Great Turning, and the Work that Reconnects.

I'm familiar with Macy's work, but had never watched this particular video. I want to tell you a story it contains. It tells of a photographer named Chris Jordan who took pictures of dead birds whose stomachs were filled with bits of plastic. Bird after bird, decaying near a shoreline, with guts full of colourful bottle caps, battery casings, and toy parts. Of course, he was dismayed at their plight, but initially was apparently more interested in the 'art' of his photographs.

When he returned, he posted these photos and they went viral, which led to him being asked to speak about them. He tells of going to a classroom of young girls, all in purple dresses,

⁴ Ian Attridge was co-leader for this service, and he spoke of his climate activism and passion during the morning's welcome. He also provided many resources.

⁵ <https://vimeo.com/192937693>

whose teacher burst into tears at the end of his presentation, begging him to tell them where the hope was.

I think this is where a lot of us are today, right? We see the devastation of our planet... the loss of hundreds of species, the plastic in our oceans, the melting polar caps, the rising temperature, increasing floods, hurricanes, and forest fires...and we burst into tears. Where is the hope? Yes, a few of us, like Ian, are 'infernal optimists,'⁶ but others... too many of us...have fallen into hopelessness. It is easy to feel that it's too late and there's nothing we can do.

I love the picture of Greta Thunberg that is on the cover of the order of service. Greta is the Swedish teenager whose climate activism has captured millions of hearts and spirits. She is the one who has inspired student walk-outs. She is the one who has said, "I want you to panic."

If you haven't gotten to know her, I sure encourage you to do so. She has a TedTalk, and there are countless videos of speeches she has given to groups like the UN Climate Change COP24, and the World Economic Forum, and the European Parliament.

A story last month in The Guardian⁷ said this of Thunberg:

"Greta Thunberg cut a frail and lonely figure when she started a school strike for the climate outside the Swedish parliament building last August. Her parents tried to dissuade her. Classmates declined to join. Passersby expressed pity and bemusement at the sight of the then unknown 15-year-old sitting on the cobblestones with a hand-painted banner.

Eight months on, the picture could not be more different. The pigtailed teenager is feted across the world as a model of determination, inspiration and positive action. National presidents and corporate executives line up to be criticised by her, face to face. Her skolstrejk för klimatet (school strike for climate) banner has been translated into dozens of languages. And, most striking of all, the loner is now anything but alone."

Take a look at her. In everything that I've seen, she is unflinchingly direct. Facing us, and the reality of climate change, head on. Unswervingly dedicated to her message.

And her message? I want you to panic. Our house is on fire. I want you to panic.

Now, I was taught that panicking is never a good choice. Panicking is what one does when one has lost control, and along with it, all reason. Panicking is running around like a chicken with its head cut off...lots of action, but not much thought. Panicking feels bad in my body...a heightened heart rate, a frozen brain, shaky limbs. So...my first response to Thunberg is not, 'oh, alright. I'll do that. Happy to panic.'

But then I listened more closely. In her TedTalk,⁸ she says that the kind of panic she is talking about is the kind that makes us act...panic that gets us out of our comfort zones, and changes our behaviours, so that we do everything we can for the planet. She goes on to say that she doesn't want our hope, because we have had 30 years of hope, and clearly it hasn't worked. Her take is that it is action that will bring hope, not the other way around. Grow up, be adults,

⁶ As Ian refers to himself.

⁷ <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/mar/11/greta-thunberg-schoolgirl-climate-change-warrior-some-people-can-let-things-go-i-cant>

⁸ https://www.ted.com/talks/greta_thunberg_the_disarming_case_to_act_right_now_on_climate?language=en

she says.

How does it feel to hear Thunberg's message? Ready to act? And if so, do you know what to do?

Here are some hints. Note where Thunberg began. At the Swedish Parliament. Note what she is doing. Breaking the rules by going on a school strike for the climate. Note where she is speaking. To politicians and government leaders.

Ian put together a list of suggested actions. Some were listed in Friday's Flame. And as he said, there are handouts on Florence's Table outside these doors.

That's a start. But what if you haven't enough energy, or courage, or determination, or passion to act? Let me turn now to the spiritual sustenance one needs, and how we as a community might help each other with that.

Chris Jordan, that photographer, said that when the teacher burst into tears in front of him, he realized that he hadn't yet done the deep unpacking work that he needed to do in order to understand his experience of the dead birds. And that's when he turned to Joanna Macy, and asked her to provide some words of wisdom to accompany an upcoming book of photographs. In meeting and talking with her, Jordan was able to begin to make meaning of his work. We'll come back to that.

Joanna Macy is an 89-year-old environmental activist, author, and a scholar of Buddhism, general systems theory, and deep ecology. Macy, like Thunberg, chooses to look at things head on. She looks at the despair and hopelessness we feel, and believes that rather than pathologizing our pain, we need to befriend it, and to hear what it has to teach us. When we tell the truth about our feelings and what is happening on our planet, she says, it makes the world around us more vivid, and cracks open our love for the world.

Our pain, our despair, is not the enemy. Rather, it alerts us to what needs our attention. If we're not afraid of our pain, Macy says, then nothing can stop us.⁹

As I said, Macy's project is the Work that Reconnects, so it's no surprise that Andy Fisher, in his work on Ecopsychology¹⁰, is connected to Macy. Ecopsychology imagines that the psyche is not some individual human interior, but that it arises only in a field of relationships, both human and more-than-human. Our reality is ecological...a thick interdependent web of existence. Ecopsychology seeks integration rather than separation, communal connections rather than individualism.

Fisher believes that we need to reconnect our individual selves with society and with nature, and it is only in this three-way interconnection that we will find wholeness. He makes a powerful case that capitalism is the cause of our separation, and that re-connecting is the work and the promise of decolonization. Or, put another way, colonization is part of a capitalist system that seeks to alienate us from ourselves, our society, and the natural world.

So, we must reconnect. We must see that nature is a society that is part of all the society that is; that the individual is a part of nature, as much as nature is within each of us; that society and

⁹⁹ These two paragraphs are taken from Macy's words in a video called Turn Toward Life.

¹⁰¹⁰ Fisher, Andy, Ecopsychology as Decolonial Praxis, not yet published.

the individual cannot be split apart. All of the world...everything in it and of it...is kin.

Fisher says that “once you get into this subject matter, you quickly realize that there are no ‘business as usual’ ways to approach it. The times call for extraordinary spiritual growth and political literacy in order to be able to really face this moment with an open and skillful heart.”

Extraordinary times. Times in which many feel despair and fear. A time when we need to step outside of our comfort zone and break the rules. A time in which we are called to grow spiritually. A time when reconnection will save us.

Ben Wolfe shared some thoughts to help me prepare. He told me about Rob Hopkins’ work. Hopkins is the founder of Transition Town, a grassroots community-based project that aims to increase self-sufficiency in order to reduce the potential effects of climate destruction.¹¹

Hopkins is currently focused on the power of imagination.¹² You see, he believes that we have lost our imagination to see how things could be better, and therefore can’t see how we could actually make a difference. When we lose our imagination, we become fearful...which might look like chicken-without-its-head-style-panicking. When we’re trapped in fear, we can’t help or do anything.

So what to do? Hopkins suggests that the cure is to spend more reflective time in nature. We need to be outside...in the woods, by the river, in the meadow...connecting with the earth. Listening. Watching. This is where imagination grows, and imagination is key to being able to act.¹³

Let’s go back to Jordan and the birds. Remember that he went off to meet with Joanna Macy to find words of hope? Well, she told him only that he had to go back and spend time with the birds, because he hadn’t yet seen the whole story. And so he went and spent time with the albatrosses, on a small island as far away from human contact as is possible. He lay quietly on the ground and got up close and personal with them in all of their largeness. He saw their beauty, their curiosity, their gentle acceptance of him. And yes, he saw again many baby birds dying from plastic ingestion. He saw the whole of it. And that he was part of it.

Clearly, we do, collectively, have the ability to destroy the world. The plastic in the ocean is the cumulative result of many small actions. Jordan realized in going back to be with the birds that when we see ourselves as insignificant in the big picture...as if it doesn’t make a difference what one of us does, good or bad...that the catastrophe is that we then behave as if it doesn’t matter what we do.

When in fact, each of us does make a difference. It is only everyone together that will create what happens next. Only everyone together can reverse climate change.

Everyone together. Connected, and aware of our connection with all that is. Everyone together, claiming and practising our spirituality and our activism. Everyone together. Because when we feel the reality of our interconnection, we can know that we are large enough to handle whatever comes.

Macy says that when we face our pain, and share those feelings with others, it helps us to see

¹¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Transition_town

¹² <https://www.robhopkins.net/>

¹³ Previous two paragraphs are from notes from a conversation with Ben Wolfe.

that we are not alone. We see that our emotions are fluid, and that we're not stuck in any one feeling. Feeling connected helps us to realize that we are big enough to take it, that we are grown up enough to respond.

Together, we have the capacity to actually be here, present, in this world, whatever it is, whatever it becomes. This is our home. It's where we belong. Our full, awake presence to the world is the greatest gift we can give it.

Fisher encourages us to re-connect in ways that break down barriers between the individual and society and nature. And Hopkins concurs; we need to spend quiet time in the outdoors. Thunberg doesn't have some grand mission. She says she simply wants to do everything she can to make a better world. Macy says that we can't tell the ways in which our actions are effective, so we should just be glad that we can act...out of compassion for the planet, and because we love being with the people who are at our side.

This earth. It's where we belong. None of us is too small to make a difference. Together let us imagine a new way, and together bring it into being. We are connected. We are anything but alone.

So be it.

*** CLOSING WORDS** *Committed to Respond* (adapted) ~ Lynn Harrison¹⁴

In this week's *On Being* podcast,¹⁵ poet and theologian Pádraig Ó Tuama told of a saying about trust from West Kerry in Ireland: 'You are the place where I stand on the day when my feet are sore.' We are that place for each other.

Committed to respond to the call of a wounded world...

We join together [our] loving hearts, hands and minds.

Embracing the interconnected web of water, air and earth...

We [have together lit] a fire of sustaining hope, ever bright with love and justice.

May we [now] bring forth [into our days] new wisdom, strength and courage

To create a new world not of wealth, but well-being.

A world of new peace and abundance for all.

As we give thanks for this earth, our shared and singular home,

May we dedicate ourselves to its ongoing care.

Rising to the calls deep within us, and all around us...

May we respond today and always with courage and with love.

So may it be. Amen.

EXTINGUISHING THE FLAME

¹⁴ <https://www.uua.org/worship/words/reading/committed-respond>

¹⁵ <https://onbeing.org/programs/padraig-o-tuama-belonging-creates-and-undoes-us/>