

“Nature Bats Last”

Rev. Leland Bond-Upson, given at 1st Unitarian Honolulu, 20Mar11

© The intellectual property contained in all UU sermons belongs exclusively to the people who created them. If you wish to quote from this sermon, please ask the permission of the author first.

Note the Vernal Equinox occurs at 1:21 HST

SOME say the world will end in fire,
Some say in ice.
From what I've tasted of desire
I hold with those who favor fire.
But if it had to perish twice,
I think I know enough of hate
To know that for destruction ice
Is also great
And would suffice.

Fire and Ice—Robert Frost

Well friends, we can end the suspense right now, because we're pretty sure we know how the world as we've known it is going to end, and—we will be there for it. Well, not us gathered here today, but our descendants. And this could happen in about the same number of generations hence as the builders of the Great Pyramids are behind.

The brief “interglacial period” we're in now will come to a close. In just a few thousand years the glaciers will return, as they always have. In time, a glacier two miles thick will scrape off the cities of Chicago, Indianapolis, Detroit and Cleveland and deposit them in Tennessee.

Our science and technology may permit us to survive this, although previous Ice Ages have lasted for 90,000 years and are characterized by numbing cold, ice, drought, and dust. Perhaps by then we will be able to manipulate climate change to save ourselves, by preventing the ice from building up. That would be i•ron•ic, wouldn't it?

But even if our species can survive an Ice Age, we're still doomed. Astrophysics predicts that in a billion years, the sun will be 10% brighter, and the mean global temperature will be 160 degrees F. Eventually, the oceans will boil off. In seven billion years an expanding sun will first incinerate and then absorb the Earth. That's if a comet or black hole doesn't get us first. There's an asteroid headed straight for us that will arrive in only 870 years. There's a nasty black hole only 1500 light years away. O yes, Nature will definitely have the last word. [BTW, there's an article in the Feb 28 New Yorker magazine about NEOs—Near Earth Objects and what's starting to be done to take them seriously.]

Contemplating these cosmic end-of-everything scenarios casts a pall on the age-old question of the meaning of life. I want to talk about the meaning of life and the purpose of life before I go.

It's good to remind ourselves from time to time that we live in a moment of blessing and wonder. These are the times of soft grass, of great trees, of rain and sun and fog; of plants and animals multiplying, and of gathering the bounty of the land and river and sea; of fruits and nuts, of wine and roses. It was hell on earth before, and it will be hell on earth later, but it is heaven on earth, right now. Or it could be, *were we but wiser!*

Einstein is said to have said "Only two things are infinite, the universe and human stupidity, and I'm not sure about the universe."

It is good to remind ourselves that the good times for human beings, and for the Earth, are scheduled to end in ice and fire. So it is with our individual lives, which are scheduled to end in our individual deaths. In both cases, it is what we do with this time that's been given us that counts. It is here that there is meaning for us as individuals, and for us as a people.

*

*

*

Have you experienced the interconnectedness of all existence? [pause] I have. Once. It has been my delicious privilege to have once known and felt oneness of Creation. I have had an epiphany.

Since then, I have not experienced--with such religious intuition--another revelation of inter-relation. Perhaps it's one of those things, like first love, that can only be experienced once in such a way. After that it is only a reminder, or a variation, and can no longer pack the power and thrill of the first time.

Mine occurred on a solo wilderness trip, in a special place on a sacred mountain. During my rambles and meditations, it came to me at mid-day, with a clarity and power that transcended normal knowing, that everything was moving and interacting perfectly with everything else.

Everything was breathing and transforming, each in its own way, snow melting, plants absorbing water and air and sun, water vapor escaping the rocks, trees breathing in CO₂ and exhaling oxygen, insects, birds and animals going about their business, wildflowers growing where they were able, all in natural harmony, and me, a part of it, not an invader, not a despoiler. I felt that I was a child of this Creation, and that I had a perfect right to be there.

How could I not be, when I was exchanging my molecules with those of the trees and huckleberry bushes?

I had always been a conservationist, but this experience gave me a respect for Creation that I had not known before. To Albert Schweitzer, the idea of "reverence for life" came to him in an epiphanous moment. To me, the idea came, of "reverence for everything."

Years later, I discovered a poem, "A Dialogue of Self and Soul," in which the poet Yeats, in the last lines of what some say is his greatest poem, writes,

We must laugh and we must sing,
We are blest by everything.
Everything we look upon is blest.

Have you experienced the interconnectedness of all existence? There are many ways. Sex. Pregnancy and childbirth. Deep friendships. Deep learning. One's garden. Contemplation. Star-gazing.

For most of human time on earth, we lived like the weak and frightened animals that we were. The Neolithic trackways on the downs of England remind us that high, open ground was the safe place for us, and that only the most brave or the most desperate ventured down into the valleys and glens where the bear and wolf and tiger dwelled.

We were no match for the sabre-tooth tiger. We still aren't--lions and tigers and crocodiles kill thousands of us every year. But we survived and we began to learn new things. Tools. Fire. Weapons. Hunting strategy. There came a day in our pre-history when we killed the last sabre-tooth tiger.

And there came a day when we had the ability to shape and smooth the ground, and walked on paths of our own making instead of following trails made by animals. Then we made them hard enough to allow chariots and carts and carriages.

The early engineers, built roads and aqueducts that curve and follow the land. They did it because they had to. They didn't have the power to blast and fill.

Looking at them now, these structures feel graceful, and natural, reminding us that it was not so long ago that we once lived in better harmony with the earth.

Even well into the 20th C., our highways followed the land. If you take the old highways, that, since the building of the interstate system now exist as secondary roads, you will have a driving experience that is like a time machine. Route 66 is a famous example. Another one is old U.S. 40 over the Sierra summit from Soda Springs to Donner Lake. It's a revelation.

If you're ever near the Columbia Gorge, 20 miles upriver from Portland, may I suggest taking the old Columbia River Highway that begins at Troutdale. It's a marvel of engineering, half of it built by hand. This highway, with its sculptural retaining walls, is featured in many automobile ads. It looks like a European highway taken from Monaco and set down in the fir and cedar forests of Oregon, and in fact, Italian stonemasons did the work.

The industrial revolution began with harnessing the power of hot water. The steam engine appeared. Suddenly we had the power to move mountains, and we did. The industrial revolution changed everything, much of it for the better, but at great cost to the structures of our former lives. Rock and river were no longer the obstacles they had been throughout our history. The connection of people to the land and Nature was gravely weakened, as jobs in the factories drew families off the farms and crowded them into fetid slums of the new towns.

In the rush to capitalize, we lost the old balance. In the stampede, Nature was often trodden underfoot. The pollution and scarring wasn't *war* on nature, it wasn't intentional. It was merely careless, headlong. As soon as we had tamed the land, we started building parks, to restore things a bit. It is in our nature to do both.

Gerard Manley Hopkins, an English Jesuit priest, lamented the wanton destruction of the natural world in his poem, "Binsey Poplars, felled 1879."

My aspens, dear, whose airy cages quelled,
Quelled or quenched in leaves the leaping sun,
All felled, felled, are all felled;

Of a fresh and following folded rank,
Not spared, not one
That dandled a sandaled
Shadow that swam or sank
On meadow, and river, and wind-wandering, weed-winding bank.

O if we but knew what we do
When we delve and hew,
Hack and rack the growing green!
When country is so tender,
To touch, her being so slender,
That, like this sleek and seeing ball
But a prick will make no eye at all,
Where we, even when we mean
To mend her, we end her,
When we hew or delve:

After-comers cannot guess the beauty been.
Ten or twelve, only ten or twelve
Strokes of havoc unselfe
The sweet especial scene,
Rural scene, a rural scene
Sweet, especial rural scene.

The power of our machines means instead of going with and around, we cut through. We do it because it makes the way straighter, wider, faster, more profitable. We do it for the trucks. We do it to save time. We do for safety. Some say we often do it just because we can.

As a boy, I witnessed a dramatic destruction of a natural wonder. The Dalles Dam, built to provide power, make the desert bloom, and control flooding, drowned Celilo Falls, the traditional fishing center for the Indians of the area for thousands of years.

I hope to live to see the day when the dam is no longer needed, and the Falls reappear. It's not impossible. Dams are being removed on rivers all over America. We thought we'd never see San Francisco's Embarcadero Freeway come down. But an earthquake happened along, and now we have back the Dock of the Bay.

In his book *"The Control of Nature"* John McPhee wrote about three human attempts to defy nature. One was the attempt by the Army Corps of Engineers to keep the Mississippi River in its current channel. The river, you see, wants to resume its course down one of its other channels, which we call by its Indian name, the Atchafalaya. So far the Engineers have contained Old Man River, but it's taking a mighty effort. The Corps is infamous for not considering the whole picture.

The second attempt was that of diverting a lava flow away from a town in Iceland by strategically pumping seawater onto the leading edge so that it would cool and harden and become its own retaining wall. It was close, but the plan succeeded.

The third attempt McPhee describes is the practice of people in the San Fernando and San Gabriel Mountains building expensive homes in ravines that are the avenues for flash and debris floods. These buildings are doomed, but they build anyway. It the same thing as the folks in my home area who insisted on building their homes in the flood plain of the Yakima River, and then, when a flood came and ruined their houses, they sued the town for damages.

Nature bats last. Is this baseball metaphor a reassuring faith statement, or a revenge fantasy by discouraged conservationists? For reasons already discussed, it is not reassuring to know that Mother Nature has the last word. And if some conservationists derive pleasure from thinking that nature will 'win,' they're not considering the lives and the suffering involved. That Nature has the last word is simply a cold, hard fact.

The reason we want to control nature is that nature is uncaring. We may love nature, but nature, for all its beauty, does not love us back. We must not fool ourselves about that. Nature has, in the words of the poet, “a gaze blank and pitiless as the sun.”

Left to her own devices, nature delivers floods, hurricanes, tornados, blizzards, earthquakes, pestilence, plagues of locust, drought, famine, flooding, volcanic explosions, lava and pyroclastic flows, forest fires, earthquakes and tsunamis, viruses, bacteria, funguses, birth defects, insanity, and dementia.

So it's good for people that we've learned to control nature as much as we have. Understandably, it's less good for the other inhabitants of the planet, and it's been disastrous for many of the wild places.

In many areas we've been too successful, we've gone too far. We need to be smart about all this, and despite Einstein's opinion, we can restore some balance, and some equity.

After his retirement Walter Cronkite said that there are three great challenges to our survival that must be overcome. What come to mind for you? His three were

1. Nuclear holocaust
2. Poisoning the planet's air, water, and land
3. Over-population

He put them in the order of how quickly each could destroy us.

Today's sermon could be said to address all three, but the poisoning issue is the most directly related, so I'll give an example from that realm of the type of work we need to do. Not surprisingly, it involves weighing and balancing.

We cannot stop the advance of knowledge and technology, so we need to manage it wisely. We are charged, as the creators of this mess, with the task of figuring it out, and making good choices.

Now this should be easier for us religious liberals than some others, because we're accustomed to this kind of work. We are already in the habit of thinking things out for ourselves, rather than accepting some authoritative answer from the experts, and dear leaders.

Take the problem of nuclear energy. Not nuclear weapons—that's a separate problem--but nuclear energy, to generate electricity. It's in the news again.

The question is, what is the best solution for our energy needs? There is no one right or easy answer, for each of the alternatives has a set of problems.

Gas and oil are highly efficient and the machines that run on them are already built. However, they have noxious by-products, the supply is going to run out pretty soon, and they keep us tied to the corruption and danger of oil and Middle East politics. This is becoming conventional wisdom.

How about coal? We have enough of to last centuries, and it's cheap. But it's dangerous to its miners, the land is stripped to extract it, the streams are poisoned, and burning it has noxious by-products too, such as carbon monoxide and the sulfur in it creates acid rain.

Hydro-electric? It's clean, and the fish are being better cared for than ever before. But dams submerge valleys like the Hetch Hetchy and Glen Canyon, and falls like the Celilo, and turn free rivers into a series of lakes. And anyhow, there aren't many good places left to dam.

How about windmills? They are only suitable for a few windy locations, and a lot of people think they're unsightly.

Solar panels? Still not cost-effective.

Tidal generators? Still not cost-effective.

Fusion? Can't seem to make it work.

Alternative fuels? Methane is being worked on with some success. And hydrogen seems to hold a lot of promise, but at best, it's years away.

Nuclear? Nuclear power plants now provide a steadily growing percentage of our electricity. Few of us would be happy if this contribution were lost. It's clean, except for the problem of nuclear waste disposal. And a serious accident would be worse than a serious accident at a coal-fired generator-- but not as bad as a big breached dam.

[BTW, I heard that Vladimir Putin has begun planning to move Russia's Pacific coast reactors inland.]

In the interest of full disclosure: I remind you that I come from a nuclear energy town, and have lived close to the issues, and do not have a horror of the idea. The thing about nuclear waste is to store it in a safe, geologically-stable place until we figure out a way to detoxify or re-use it, and that's being worked on now.

So the answer is that there is yet no answer. In the meantime, we must keep juggling the pros and cons of all of them.

The most helpful thing, of course, is to consume less, and more and more of us are 'thinking green.' It is said that a 20% improvement in automobile fuel efficiency would end our dependence on Middle East oil. But Detroit and Washington still aren't much interested. And Big Oil is opposed.

[Cheney story about conservation]

My next car will be a hybrid or all-electric. But not till my current car dies, because even though it only gets 18mpg here, it takes more of the world's resources to build a new car than it does to keep operating an old one. If fuel keeps going up, I will have to recalculate.

In every other issue that deals with our relation to nature, there is a similar requirement to take everything into account.

Loggers have families to support, but should every tree, in every place be cut down before our society assumes some responsibility for retraining these hard-working ax men for some other line of work?

Fishermen have families to support too, but can't something be done for them AND keep the fisheries from being exhausted?

Can wolves be re-introduced into the lower 48 to restore ecological balance while preventing the ranchers from suffering slaughter of their calves and sheep?

Can we transition to a better-planned economy so that economic expansion does not require constant population growth? We must.

Can we learn how to share? We have the ability to provide for all, but half the world has next to nothing.

Can either side of the abortion fight see any virtue in the position of the other side? This subject is not off-topic--it's the same kind of inclusive thinking that's needed to find compromise, same as with the competing claims of Man and wild nature.

In my description of this sermon, I spoke of balance within us. Human nature bats last too, but it is not simple. We're not just one thing. We can be really really smart, and really really stupid at the same time. It's as remarkable contradiction as the fact that we love peace with all our hearts, but we also love war, and can't seem to do without it.

Your individual nature probably will bat last too. My mother in law Gwen used to say that as we get older we become more like ourselves. Whenever I remember this, I think, uh-oh. Time's running out for my makeover.

To the extent any of us would prefer not to become more like ourselves, we might want to consider making some changes, and soon.

You younger people have more time, but as we older ones know, it's easy to fall into bad habits, and getting out of them, not so easy. Be self-aware. Observe yourself behaving.

As the poet Walt Whitman wrote, the answers lie waiting in all things. We, as religious liberals, are as well-equipped as anyone to determine the highest good for the greatest number. And the highest good for ourselves. Because we can, we are summoned to do that work, and then to speak, and then . . . *act*.