

Kearsarge Unitarian-Universalist Fellowship service 2024-04-21
Earth Day: Avoiding Despair, Practicing Hope
Betsy Woodman

“Oh, no! I got a demerit!”

In my boarding school in India, you got a demerit for leaving the light on in your dorm room during dinner. Three demerits in two weeks and you were gated—confined to quarters for the weekend. Electricity was scarce.

Hot water was another scarce resource and you were supposed to limit showers to three minutes.

Back in thrifty New England, my grandmother followed us from room to room flicking off lights we’d left on.

My dad did likewise. He stomped around saying, “Think of all that electricity just sucking in here!”

We got the idea that our habits mattered.

Tomorrow is the fifty-fifth Earth Day. If you’re taking part in an Earth Day event, you’ll be joining over a billion people world-wide. That’s quite a party.

In 1962, Rachel Carson’s *Silent Spring* alerted us to the dire damage we were doing to the planet. Eight years later, in 1970, Senator Gaylord Nelson (Democrat from Wisconsin) and Congressman Pete McCloskey (Republican from California) teamed up to pass legislation establishing Earth Day.

20 million people in the United States (10% of our population at the time) held rallies and meetings and teach-ins to raise people’s awareness of the environmental mess and what they could do about it.

In this country, we went on to get the Environmental Protection Agency and the Clean Air Act and the Clean Water Act and the Endangered Species Act.

These measures made a big difference. Air quality in the United States improved dramatically. Acid rain was reduced. There was reason for hope.

But in these days of climate change, it's easy to despair. The nightly news is one environmental catastrophe after another. Wild fires, floods, droughts, and heat waves across the globe. And who hasn't seen appalling pictures of the toxic waste and pollution fouling the planet?

Especially plastic pollution.

Perhaps you've heard of the GPGP.

What is the GPGP? It's the Great Pacific Garbage Patch. This is an accumulation of debris, much of it plastic, in the Pacific Ocean. No one really knows how big it is, since the teeny tiny microplastic particles below the surface can't easily be seen. Scientists used to estimate that the patch was as big as Texas. Then they said as big as Alaska, possibly bigger. There are actually at least two of these messes in the Pacific, with significant patches in the Atlantic and the Indian Ocean as well.

The problem can start hundreds of miles inland, when a plastic bottle gets tossed outside someone's car window. It rolls down a river bank, and then gets a ride on that river to the ocean.

Weird stuff gets into the deep. Bicycles. And shoes—flip-flops, sneakers, expensive Prada sandals.

Then much of the stuff washes up on shore. On one beach, a woman found what she thought was a decapitated corpse—but it turned out to be a store mannequin.

More tragic are the turtles and seals that get caught in discarded fishing nets.

Humanity, it seems, is not content with making a mess of the oceans. Now we're turning our formidable destructive talent to the deserts.

With junk cars. Discarded tires. And textile waste. In this country, says *Atlantic* magazine, we buy five times as many clothes as 1980—and wear each an average of 7 times. After we're done with them, some lucky garments go to thrift shops to get adopted. Others get baled up and shipped overseas.

There, some are sold and used...but much is just plain dumped.

In Chile's Atacamba Desert, the mountains of discarded clothing can be seen from space. Ski jackets, jeans, ball gowns, bathing suits—the discards are typically cheap products of the fast fashion industry. They're made from synthetics, and are about 60% plastic. When these piles of clothes catch fire, black swirls of foul-smelling toxic smoke rise into the air.

In West Africa, parts of Ghana are literally being buried in “obroni wawu”— “dead white man's clothes.” “Dead” refers to the clothes, not the men. CBS News reports 1.5 billion pounds of discarded clothing on the beaches of Ghana.

It's discouraging. One wonders if there's any point in trying to swim against the tide, do one's bit. Why donate used clothing if it's

going to end up poisoning a desert? Why rinse out that plastic bottle and put it in the recycling bin, when only 5 to 9% of plastic gets recycled?

Not long ago, I walked up and down the aisles of the grocery store and felt trapped. Plastic to the left of me, plastic to the right of me... Plastic encased salads and nuts and laundry detergent and yogurt and so much of what I buy. Was there any escape?

Once home again, I stared once again at a bag of water filters that I'd been accumulating for three years. Supposedly one can register on a website and get a mailer to send them somewhere. But there they sat, next to my file cabinet.

There was also a bag of clothes sitting on the floor of a closet. Could I make braided rugs with them? Oh, sure, I told myself. Get real.

I could see why people just refused to think about environmental matters. Others perhaps had succumbed to, as the expression goes, "the seduction of despair."

During the Great Depression, President Franklin D. Roosevelt said that the only thing we have to fear is fear itself. Could it be that now, the only thing we have to despair about is despair itself?

Where are those people who dare act with hope.

The answer, it turns out, is everywhere. One billion, remember, are participating in Earth Day. That's about one in every eight people on the planet. And it so happens that the theme for Earth Day, in 2024, is "Planet versus Plastics."

Activities are scheduled across the globe. In New Delhi, India, a dental clinic will give out free bamboo toothbrushes to replace plastic ones.

All over the planet, there will be beach cleanups. In our country, they'll happen from Hawaii to Florida. They'll take place in Brazil, Portugal, Italy, Ghana, Nigeria, the U.K., Ireland, Thailand, Australia, Indonesia, Japan and many more countries.

The Great Global Cleanup, as it's called, is bringing humanity together in common cause.

Also of note is that the United Nations Environmental Programme (UNEP) Intergovernmental Negotiating Committee on Plastic Pollution is meeting in Toronto this coming week. This will be the fourth of five sessions. They're hammering out an agreement to drastically reduce plastic pollution and the harm to human health and the environment by the year 2040.

Also rays of hope are in countries you might not think of. In 2017, Kenya banned the manufacture, sale, and use of single-use plastic bags, punishable by fines or up to four years in jail.

So--plenty of people aren't practicing despair.

On the local scene here in the Hudson Valley, just a few weeks ago, I met a young environmentalist and entrepreneur who exuded such enthusiasm that I caught some of it myself.

Amelia Legare is the 33-year-old owner of a business called the O-Zone, located on a peaceful country road in Red Hook, NY. The rustic-looking sign says, "Your Low-Waste Sustainability Center." The driveway

leads to a classic red barn, with a greenhouse and gardens in the background.

Amelia's business has many facets. It picks up food waste from individuals and organizations, composts it, and sells it to farmers. It partners with environmental organizations to recycle clothes, water filters, electronic waste, and batteries. It has a retail section that sells useful gifts such as stainless steel water containers to replace the dreaded plastic bottles. It sells bulk foods and bulk cleaning supplies. Amelia's pride and joy is the nursery and garden center. She also holds all sorts of workshops on site and can show you how to make your own cosmetics.

I returned the next day with those bags of recycling I'd been procrastinating about and a fine matched set of clean peanut butter jars.

In the bulk foods section, I filled the jars with walnuts and cashews and almonds and peanuts and wild rice. That cost less than buying them (packaged in plastic) in the grocery store. And I filled a yogurt container with powdered laundry detergent.

Later, I had a chat with Amelia about her life. What made her tick?

She'd originally studied nursing, but decided that profession wasn't for her. She did various other jobs and travelled. Then she saw an ad as a "garden educator" for the local public school. Amelia's two grandmothers had been avid gardeners and given her a good education in gardening. She came up with her own program to teach the kids.

And the kids gave her a lot back. They were smart and optimistic and natural-born environmentalists. One of them figured out the connections of humans and nature:

“Good citizens clean the beach.
Then the fish don’t die
And the fishermen don’t die of hunger.
And the sushi joints don’t go out of business.”

Out of the mouths of babes! A systems approach of looking at the interdependent web of life.

After that garden education experience, Amelia went on to establish her gardening business and things evolved from there.

I asked her to describe herself as a person—in three words. She came up with “driven, passionate, industrious.”

“How about optimistic?” I asked. That seemed like a natural. Yes, she said, by nature. But...her face clouded over. “The way the world is going—it’s pretty bad,” she said.

Then her energetic expression returned.

“What else can we do but go on?” And so that’s what she does.

With little time left before we roast the planet, we have to reject despair and go on.

Robin Wall Kimmerer is a botanist, activist, and best-selling author. She puts it this way: we have to act with “equal parts outrage and love...to paddle against the wind singing our hearts out...”

Kimmerer adds that a student of hers surprised her by saying, “This is the best possible time to be alive.”

Really? How could that be? Because, she said, “we’re on the precipice...so that means that...my life matters.”

Our lives do matter. Our habits matter. And thank goodness there are enthusiastic and committed people who keep reminding us of that.

Perhaps new technology and artificial intelligence will offer some solutions to the environmental crisis. We shall see. In the meantime, we’ve can use those old time-honored tools. We can use boycotts—the power of the purse to get companies to make the right products. We can use protests and political campaigns, to make politicians do the right thing. We can support our favorites of the hundreds of environmental organizations. We can develop the thrifty habits that our grandparents practiced. We can act with outrage and love.

The acts of a single individual might not make much of a difference. But think of the billion people observing Earth Day. A billion people do make a difference.

So, make every day Earth Day, but particularly tomorrow. A billion other people will be working and celebrating right along with you.

Copyright © 2024 Betsy Woodman