

## **Anxious About the Climate Crisis Yet?**

The Unitarian Universalist Association wanted to have congregations pay more attention to the climate crises, so it convened a committee that put together a whole weekend of suggested activities for what they called the Climate Justice Revival. Now, you know that I grew up in Nebraska, so I know a little about religious revivals. When the instructor for an Evangelical Christian seminary instructed missionary students that: “First, you damn ‘em, and then you save ‘em,” he was giving them the outline for a revival. Saturday (yesterday) could have been a series of small-group discussions on UU principles, but nobody here thought that would be popular or useful. When I discussed this proposed revival with the Rev. Lane Cobb, her Strawberry Road congregation thought they’d rather plant a garden on their front lawn. No other congregation in this area went for it at all. I have been connected here for over fifty years and I know that many of you have been constantly searching and questioning how you could slow down climate degradation.

The prescribed Climate Justice Revival Sunday service suggested a pre-packaged Worship Script--an exhortation and responsive reading. The revival committee published links to several resources, essays such as “Environmental Justice is Reproductive Justice Too!”, “Climate Justice is a Disability Issue,” and “Racism is Killing the Planet.” From their titles alone, you will not be surprised by this passage from one of the articles on the capital.org news site, and I quote:

Almost two years to the day of its last introduction, progressive leaders are reinvigorating a push to pass the Environmental Justice for All Act, a potential landmark bill that aims to address environmental disparities in majority Black, Latino, and Indigenous communities . . .[which] hopes to address public health inequities that have been exacerbated, and in some situations created, by a disproportionate burden of environmental pollutants. (capitalnews.org, 8/4/24, page2)

And I also quote this from the Sierra Club:

We will never survive the climate crisis without ending white supremacy. Here’s why: You can’t have climate change without sacrifice zones, and you can’t have

sacrifice zones without disposable people, and you can't have disposable people without racism. (Sierra Club, "Racism is Killing the Planet," 8/4/24, page 3)

The Worship Script, really a sermon substitute provided by Climate Justice Revival reflected this broad, political focus. At least a third of UU congregations are very small, 20-30 members, so the suggested worship service is an extended responsive reading, so the small congregations can afford to present a climate justice service without paying a speaker. Here is the Climate Justice Revival committee's introduction and responsive reading sample:

Fear stifles imagination and limits our capacity for relationships that embrace our beautiful and abundant humanity. Fear creates cynical cycles of supremacy and extractive relationships with each other and our planet.

Reimagining together is how we overcome fear. Reimagining together is how we build new relationships and a new era, putting love at the center. Today, especially, we put love at the center of our work for climate justice.

Please join us in the prayers of the people and the planet. Our congregational response is "Let us reimagine a new era together."

[Leader]: Beginning right here, in our congregation, we pray for ourselves, that we open our hearts to be companions, caring for a hurting world and committing to create a world of flourishing.

Congregational Response: Let us reimagine a new era together. (Worship Script, page 10-11)

Some of this is pretty good—listen to the repeated sounds in "Fear creates cynical cycles of supremacy" --but then they throw in abstract terminology like "extractive relationships" that deserves a sermon all to itself. The Climate Justice Revival staff had their well-meaning heads pointed in the right direction and their hearts full of love and justice. However, I became grim in reading through the script because I felt it asked me, as your minister, to bludgeon my congregants with fears and anxieties during what is called "corporate prayer." I will not impose that script upon you. You deserve a focused sermon today. Despite the committee's good intentions, only 45% of congregations bought into the Climate Justice Revival. Increasing anxiety deliberately has some positive, short-range effect but mostly increases pain in the long run and that's not why you are here, in

your community. I will visit anxiety and fear briefly before moving on to something loving. I will take off from a single sentence in the Climate Justice Revival script, and I quote: “Call to Worship: In the midst of overlapping climate crises and mounting social injustice, we are in a time of great change and profound anxiety.”

That is true, so let’s look at anxiety and fear more closely. We live in an anxious age and an anxious society. Anxiety and fear are distinguishable, but closely related. Anxiety is a general, usually amorphous fearfulness, and some people are temperamentally more inclined to anxiety than others. Anxiety is when you are startled awake in the night and you don’t really know why. Anxiety is when you are walking down the street, and something just seems “kind of off.” Anxiety is when you think you may have offended someone but you don’t know quite how or what to do about it. Anxiety is also when you know you offended someone, and you feel guilty, but you aren’t sure if you will be punished for it. Or, perhaps you know you offended your own sense of right and wrong, regardless of whether another person was hurt or angry. Anxiety is amorphous, ambiguous and generalized. It usually feels something like butterflies trapped in your stomach, lightheadedness, being keyed up and hypervigilant, or jittery. Not fun.

Fear is specific, recognizable and sharp-edged. You know **this**, whatever this thing consists of, is bad. You fear you might suffer pain or injury. Or someone you love is going to suffer. In regard to the climate crises we face, you know the oceans are rising and that alters ocean currents, which (in turn) creates massive, destructive storms. Yes, you should be afraid of **this**. In Europe during 2023, 47,000 people died from heat-related causes, the world’s hottest year on record, but as the New York times explained, “the number could have been much higher . . . had heat adaptive measures not been taken for two decades.” (“Toll in Europe From ’23 Heat: 47,000 Deaths,” New York Times, 8/13/2024, page 1) We should all be afraid of that happening again—and again.

I get it—fear has been seen as twice as powerful a motivator for change than joy. TV ads promote a paper towel brand that stops spilled grape juice from staining your white rug JUST IN TIME! Send money to----- (fill in the blank candidate for office) or all will be lost! Dr. Ayana Elizabeth Johnson, a scholar of

the climate crisis, has published All We Can Save and What if We Get It Right? about the climate crisis and has this to say:

Some people are very motivated by the bad news. They're like: "Whoa, that's terrifying. What can I do to prevent the worst-case scenario?" Some people need that jolt, and that's what gets them going. Some people are overwhelmed by that and don't know where to start. Sixty-two percent of adults in the U.S. say they feel a personal sense of responsibility to help reduce global warming, but 51 percent say they don't know where to start. (David Marchese, "Ayana Elizabeth Johnson Says Our Climate Sacrifices May Not Be Sacrifices at All," *New York Times*, 5/26/24, page 12)

But the data is not consistent, which may have motivated the strident words of the Climate Justice Revival. My heart goes out to people worried about climate crises, because between 2019 and 2022, "the percentage of U.S. voters who view climate change as the most important problem facing the country amounted to 1%." (*Harper's Magazine*, "Harper's Index," August 2022, page 9)

I'll take a clue from Dr. Johnson here, when she says: "The No.1 thing that drives people to do something about climate change [is] love for the future . . . love as an enormously powerful motivator." (Marchese, op. cit., page 12) She pointed out the options for change in the future and her interviewer, David Marchese, said he would like to save the possibilities of his two children, 7 and 9 years old. And she replied: "I assume you care about other people on the planet, besides your children." He replied, "My wife." Dr. Johnson wished him well, but did not press her advantage as I might have—what about the possibilities for loving the other 8 billion people on earth, just a little bit? Do they not also deserve to be included in what you think about possibilities? Or, to put it more neutrally, is there not a possible joy right here and now to knowing that one is being loving, helpful, or even simply less harmful for others? Could not we all feel more successfully loving and accomplished that we have stood with our values against the decay of pollution and mis management?

But I can easily understand how that kind of love is too self-centered, excessively vague and terribly general. Love is more than a feeling; it is a decision and an action. Let's consider what you actually, specifically do—my dear

congregants--in loving others, joining with others to accomplish something like the list I previously read aloud here today to produce less pollution, more recycling, fewer noisy intrusions by polluting leaf blowers, less of a carbon footprint, and joining with others in this congregation to take our endowment money out of TIAA. That transition was not easy, but several congregants here worked for months to move our endowment. TIAA had been invested in burning and farming over 800,000 acres of Brazilian rainforest, the most potent carbon sink on earth but you and the Unitarian Universalist Ministers Association pension fund—and other pension funds and nonprofits-- are no longer part of TIAA's profit picture. You have joined with others to keep the Clearwater sloops sailing the Hudson and you have cheered each other on to compost garbage and recycle plastics, glass, metal and paper to lower the climate's temperature trajectory.

You are not only doing **what you can** to counter climate crises, you are saving yourself. There is self-love in this, which sounds on the surface like self-indulgence, but is really self-respect. When I attended "Join or Die," a showing of a documentary about Robert Putnam, author of Bowling Alone, I thought the title of the film was overblown. Die? Really? But as part of the film, Putnam explained that the chances of dying are 50% lower for people who join associations, clubs, and other social activities compared to people who do not. Add to that, the satisfaction that you are not simply joining a sewing circle or a chess club, you are joining with others to live better and do something eminently worthwhile, you are joining with others to make the long-term survival of the human race more possible.

I am partially appealing to your self-interest in joining with others to make good things happen for the climate because it is good for you. You have joined with us to figure out how you can advance your highest values and we want you alive for a good long time. You are valuable to us. I have been here for over fifty years, so I am in a uniquely qualified position to point out that all of you—quirky, sometimes erratic or eccentric, intelligent and well-meaning—all of you are valuable here. You help each other develop great values and thrive. The sense of feeling overwhelmed is thereby lessened because **one person can only do a little**

**to counteract the climate crisis, but several together can do more, exponentially.** You are setting out an example for others to emulate.

You remember what Jesus said about the Golden Rule as one of only two commandments that are necessary: Do unto others as you would have them do unto you. He was simply echoing a passage in Jewish scripture from Leviticus: Do not do unto others what you would not have them do unto you, which is more passive than Jesus' commandment. I propose a further elaboration: Do unto others as you would have them do unto those for whom they are responsible. This commandment 2.0 takes into account that the climate crisis is a crisis of responsibility to set an example for everyone. People see and hear what you do to save the climate. You provide an example for those around you, and support those who are already doing something. All the ways humans have depleted and debased what we took to be owned in common--the earth, the oceans and the air, the spacious skies, the fruited plain--we are now increasingly responsible for the future of those common goods. We can no longer believe that there is no major, long-lasting cost to all of us for our ways of life that treat commonly held resources as if they are infinite and infinitely renewable. Love is a decision to recognize the truth that we are responsible for the world and for each other. When I put it that way it sounds like a crushing burden. But each of us is only one of eight billion people on the earth, so each of us is responsible only for one eight billionth, or as much more as we can possibly, realistically handle.

When we do what we can individually or together, we are doing our part. If, as often happens, we discover we can do more after we do a little bit, that's what happens when we learn more about love. When we discover that we can do more together with like-minded people, we can thrive in new-found love. We learn to love more and better. We learn we are loved more and better. Others appreciate what we are doing. Love applied to this world is increasingly less a struggle, less anxiety-provoking and more rewarding. There is less to fear because we have been a little effective and we see that we can do a little bit more.