

## **Justice on Earth**

a sermon by

The Rev. Bryan Jessup

at the Humboldt UU Fellowship

Sunday January 6, 2019

*Koyaanisqatsi! Koyaanisqatsi! Koyaanisqatsi!*

Do you remember that film from 1982? For 85 minutes that film filled the screen with scenes of environmental devastation and *Koyaanisqatsi!* was chanted again and again and again.

*Koyaanisqatsi!* in the Hopi language means “life out of balance.” As a film *Koyaanisqatsi* is part of a three film series created by Godfrey Reggio. The other two films are *Powaqqatsi* (which means “our old ways of life in transition” and which focuses on indigenous ways of life being crushed by corporate greed) and *Naqoyqatsi* which means “life as war.”

Life out of balance – Indigenous ways of life being crushed – Life as war! This is pretty raw! But it is also very real - and as we Unitarian Universalists enter a new year our faith calls us to engage the raw energy of the issues presented in these films and to shape that raw energy toward harmony, toward respect for all people and toward Justice on Earth.

From our compatriots in the UUA we have received a recommendation that we all read talk about a collection of essays in a book called ***Justice on Earth***. The sub-title of the book is: *People of faith working at the intersection of race, class and the environment*. Our Social Action Committee here at the Fellowship has responded to that recommendation and will be offering three workshops on this topic. (You can find a flyer about the workshops in your Order of Service and the book ***Justice on Earth*** is available both in the Foyer and online.)

Our service here this morning is the beginning of the conversation. And I want to begin by saying that for that conversation, mindfulness, patience and courage will be required. Because we are in a mess folks! And sorting that mess out is going to take a lot of work over a long, long time. It is going to require that we change our individual mindsets, change our behaviors and change our systemic ways of doing things. Change is often very difficult for us.

A couple of weeks ago I had a great conversation about change with Pat Carr who (along with a whole group of other members of HUUF) has established an Ad Hoc Committee to deal with Climate Change.

I was talking with Pat about all of us living in a time when human thought is evolving. Pat and I were talking specifically about “ableist” metaphors that we are fond of like “Standing on the Side of Love.” In the UU Association we have sung “Standing on the Side of Love” for about 20 years and “Standing on the Side of Love” has been one of our UU mottos. But – things are changing. People who cannot stand have suggested that we change the wording so they can feel more included.

After some initial resistance, both the UUA and Jason Shelton the writer of the song heard the need of those people. The UUA changed the motto from “Standing on the Side of Love” to “Siding with Love,” and Jason changed the lyric of his song to “Answering the call of love.”

The story of that change sparked for Pat a memory of some psychological research that was done several years ago about the process of human behavior change.

The starting place is: We haven’t even thought about change or the need for it yet, and when the topic of change comes up we resist it!

The next step is: We give in and at least start thinking about change and why it might be important.

The third step is: We embrace the need for change and start making plans for how to do it.

The fourth step is: That we implement our plan.

The fifth step is: That we revise and keep revising our plan and maintain our commitment to change.

The sixth step is: That (darn it) relapses often occur and we often have to return to the process. - Not to the exact same place, but to the part of the process where we again embrace the need for change and return to the effort.

I really appreciate this outline of the steps of change because it helps me understand and accept myself and other people. If we are “struggling some” with change it does not mean that we’re horrible people. It just means that we’re human and involved in the process. Perfection is impossible, but growing and moving toward harmony and right

relationship isn't. Furthermore growing and moving toward harmony and right relationship is absolutely essential for our survival on this planet.

Two of the powerful messages in the book *Justice on Earth* are: 1) That growth and moving toward harmony are possible and 2) That all the issues of injustice that surround us are inter-related!

For me one of the inter-related threads is surely the Hopi word *Naqoyqatsi* or life as war. From time immemorial, that war-like approach to life has held us like an evil spell. It has made us afraid. It has pitted us against one another, against the planet and against our own bodies. It has focused us on “me and mine” in conflict with other people and the rest of the web. And it has often led us to treat other people and the world around us as something to be used without thought or care.

**If life is war**.... then the Hopi word *Powaqqatsi* or “our old ways of life in transition” come into play because **if life is war** then indigenous people and their way of life are there to be conquered by me and mine for our material comfort and wellbeing. The losers in battle are “other.” They are alien and they do not count. We can feel free to build walls to keep them out.

The same is true for the earth. It is not the mother of a sacred web of life. It is just a resource for human beings like me and mine to use. And use it we have. So now we are now in a time of *Koyannisqatsi!* (Life Out of Balance!)

The three film series by Godfrey Reggio helps me see the **interconnection** of all the abuse and oppression that we humans have wreaked on one another and the earth. The book *Peace on Earth* helps us see the interconnection as well.

Paula Cole Jones who works for the UUA is a contributing essayist for the book.

In her essay she points out that working on environmental issues and working on racial justice issues are interconnected and must go together. While much of the organizing around environmental issues originally started among educated, affluent white people, much of the negative impact of environmental devastation is first felt by poor people of color.

Toxic waste dumps, city sewage systems, and polluting industries across our county are predominantly placed in neighborhoods where ‘poor people of color’ live. When the state of North Carolina, for example, came to terms with PCB contaminated soil all along its highways, it went through a huge clean up operation and then deposited the toxic waste in a huge dump in the North Carolina county most densely populated by

African American people. In the city of Houston eight out of ten dump facilities are in African American neighborhoods. In Flint, Michigan lead in the drinking water is still not considered serious enough to address immediately because it's mostly poor people and people of color who are really affected.

As we Unitarian Universalists continue to work on environmental issues and climate change – Paula Cole Jones says – we must understand that the racial and economic inequality that plague our land are inextricably part of the conversation.

**“Environmental Discrimination”** is based on the notion that white people are superior because they have won the economic competition - so the earth is theirs to plunder and the waste and pollution that results from that plunder can be located where folks of color live because they are losers in the war for economic and social dominance.

**“Environmental Justice,”** on the other hand is based on the notion that all people matter and must be included and cared for when we develop, implement, and enforce environmental policies. The goal of Environmental Justice is that everyone gets to live in a healthy world. Everyone gets to participate in the decision-making process. And the voice of the most vulnerable must be heard first!

Several years ago, Paula Cole Jones was part of an Environmental Justice workshop that took place in Detroit. She says while it was painful to see the economic and environmental devastation in much of the city, it was inspirational to see people in these neighborhoods banding together to create work opportunities, community gardens, safe schools, potable drinking water and clean air.

All these issues go together, Paula Cole Jones says. So we must learn to work locally, right where we are and the voices and the needs of the poor and vulnerable must lead the way.

We've been working to pay attention to this truth here in Humboldt for a while now, haven't we? We certainly have a long way to go, and our successes are never complete. But in November, the City of Eureka decided to give Duluwat or Indian Island back to the Wiyot Tribe. A month ago at a county Board of Supervisors meeting voices from the Hoopa tribe along with voices from some other environmental groups stopped the creation of a cannabis processing facility on Hoopa sacred land.

Three weeks ago (at the Redwood Coast Energy Authority Board meeting) concerned citizens spoke up and stopped a long-term agreement between the Energy Authority

and Humboldt Redwood Company's bio-mass energy plant, opening the way for the County to keep moving toward a carbon free energy future.

All these issues are linked. They are connected to the concept of "life as war" and "winner take all." And they are connected to the struggle for us human beings to stand up, speak up and evolve beyond a meek acceptance of oppression.

Our Unitarian Universalist Principles are part of that evolution. They remind us of the inherent worth and dignity of all people. And they remind us of sacredness of all life in the interconnected web of being.

We will need to remember both of those Principles as we continue to evolve so we can survive, overcome racial and economic oppression and protect all life on this planet.

We will also need to remember our third Principles which calls us to accept ourselves and each other right where we are – and to encourage ourselves and each other in our spiritual growth. Growth and change are difficult. Only care for our own souls and care for one another is going to keep us centered and nourished so we can participate in the process.

Come to the workshop this Saturday and we will both care for one another and continue this vital conversation.

**PLEASE STAND NOW AS YOU ARE WILLING AND ABLE – AND JOIN IN SINGING HYMN #317 – We are Not Our Own.**

**Extinguishing the Chalice  
Closing Words and Closing Song**

The Closing Song today will be – "Gonna Keep on Moving' Forward"

**And these Closing Words** come from the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr:

Rarely do we find people who willingly engage in hard, solid thinking. There is an "almost universal" quest for easy answers and half-baked solutions. But human progress is neither automatic nor inevitable... Every step toward justice requires sacrifice, suffering, and struggle;

As we depart this place today – may we again (as we are able) take up that struggle and let's keep on moving forward.

**Song:** Gonna Keep on Moving Forward