

“Half Earth”

By Rev. Kim D. Wilson

Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of the Poconos

April 19, 2015

Next Wednesday is Earth Day. It also marks the 45th anniversary of what many people would say was the birth of the global environmental movement. If you're over 45, think back for a moment about what it was like in 1970. If you're under 45, try to imagine.

Smoke stacks belched black smoke into the air. Thick smog covered industrial areas. Cars with huge V-8 engines spewed leaded exhaust. Crop dusters sprayed DDT and other poisonous chemicals on the land, and the eagles were disappearing. Water pollution was at an all-time high, killing birds, fish and other creatures. I remember driving over a small bridge in Paterson, New Jersey around that time, and seeing the Passaic River –it was full of old refrigerators, tires, shopping carts and garbage. The water was a sickening grayish-brown. Unfortunately that was a typical sight in many of our waterways.

Rachel Carson had set the stage for the environmental movement with the publication of her book, Silent Spring, in 1962. In it, she raised awareness of what was happening to the natural world as a result of what we called “progress.”

In 1970, many young Americans were protesting, but not about the destruction of the environment. Most Americans were still completely ignorant of any environmental concerns. Young people were focused on organizing protests around the war in Vietnam.

The idea for Earth Day came to Gaylord Nelson, who was then a Wisconsin senator. It happened after he witnessed the after-effects of a massive oil spill off the coast of Santa Barbara, California. He was inspired by the student anti-war movement, and he thought he might be able to infuse the energy for protests with consciousness-raising about air and water pollution. If he could do that, he thought that environmental concerns would be brought to the national political agenda.

Senator Nelson announced to the media that there would be a “national teach-in on the environment.” He gathered people to work with him to promote events across the country.

Because of his organizational efforts, on the 22nd of April, 1970, 20 million Americans showed up in parks, inside auditoriums and out in the streets to demonstrate for a healthy and sustainable environment. Thousands of colleges and universities organized protests. Before Earth Day 1970, there had been small, isolated groups that had been fighting against oil spills, polluting factories and power plants, raw sewage, toxic dumps, pesticides, the loss of wilderness, and the extinction of wildlife. A lot of these folks showed up on that first Earth Day. And suddenly they realized that they all shared common values. And that was pretty exciting. Because Earth Day had brought them all together.

The first Earth Day led to the creation of the United States Environmental Protection Agency and the passage of the Clean Air, Clean Water, and Endangered Species Acts. Earth Day is now recognized all over the world.

Joanna and I want to share with you now some voices of people who speak to the relationship between humans and the earth.

JOANNA: “One has only to develop a relationship with a certain place, where the land knows you, and experience that the trees, the Earth, and Nature are extending... [out] to you to know there is so much we can receive from the Earth to fill our hearts and souls.” –Inti Malasquez, Inca

KIM: “We live on a mostly unexplored planet. The great majority of organisms on Earth remain unknown to science.” --E. O. Wilson

JOANA: “The Earth...is our Mother. We do not dominate her; we must harmonize with her.” --Hayden Burgess, Native Hawaiian

KIM: “The human juggernaut is permanently eroding Earth’s ancient biosphere... [It] is destined...to reduce half of Earth’s still-surviving animal and plant species to extinction or...endangerment by the end of the century. Human-forced climate change alone...if unabated, could eliminate a quarter of surviving species during the next five decades.” –E.O. Wilson

JOANNA: “When the last red man has vanished from the Earth, and the memory is only a shadow of a cloud moving across the prairie, these shores and forests will

still hold the spirits of my people, for they love this Earth as the newborn loves its mother's heart-beat." --Sealth, A Duwamish Chief

KIM: "Sadly, our knowledge of biodiversity is so incomplete that we are at risk of losing a great deal of it before it is even discovered." --E.O. Wilson

JOANNA: "Though the exact number is impossible to determine, an unprecedented mass extinction of life on Earth is occurring. Scientists estimate that between **150** and **200 species** of life become extinct every 24 hours." – United Nations Environmental Program

"E.O. Wilson" is Dr. Edward Wilson, a highly respected biologist, Harvard professor and author. He has earned over 100 scientific awards and two Pulitzer Prizes. He tells us that there are about sixty thousand known species of fungi – mushrooms and molds— but scientists estimate that more than 1.5 million species exist. Then there are nematodes, which are tiny worm-like organisms. Wilson says that 4 out of 5 organisms are nematodes! About 16,000 species have been discovered, but there could be millions that are still unknown. And bacteria –we've identified over 6,000 species, but we think there are at least 4 million more species, just in the soil.

So the question is, what are all these microscopic organisms doing? We are living on this planet, and we have no idea. They form the framework for the basis of life on earth, and our lives depend upon these creatures.

We are now losing species at 1000 times the natural rate. Clearly, we need a plan. Edward O. Wilson has one. He calls it "Half Earth." He believes that the only way to avoid a mass extinction crisis is to set aside half the planet as permanently protected areas for all non-human species. Half the Earth for us, half for them.

Wilson says, "Of course, you'll say, Oh, but that's impossible! According to United Nations estimates, the population will peak at about 10 billion by the end of this century and then begin to come down." The digital age, industry and economy "indicate that the amount of space needed by each human is going to shrink... This will free up territory for the other species.

"The way it could be done is to take the remaining wildernesses of the world, on both land and sea, and set those aside as inviolate, while we go on with our chaotic and unpredictable, destructive future. Safeguard the rest of life until we settle down.

“The big task is to settle down before we wreck the planet. There are large enough sections of wilderness and there are procedures for protecting them that can work. This is practicable. And I think we should at least start seriously considering it as an alternative.”

Wilson and others imagine a chain of uninterrupted protected corridors, forming “long landscapes.” National parks, wilderness reserves and conservation easements would be linked together to protect flora and fauna in perpetuity. In the US, north-south stretches would allow life to move north as global warming progresses, and east-west corridors would enable life to move east, as the west gets drier.

There are already several projects underway in North America. The Yellowstone-to-Yukon Conservation Initiative will join vast areas of the Rocky Mountains in the northern US up through Canada, and the even more extensive Western Wildway Network will extend that corridor up through northern Canada and Alaska and 6000 miles south to the Sierra Madre in Mexico. The Western Wildway project probably offers the best chance for threatened mammals that require long-distance pathways, like the grizzly bear, lynx, jaguar, ocelot, wolf and mountain lion.

Still, even if we agree that the half Earth concept make sense, the thought of implementing it, of the process that would be required in order to put half the earth into conservation, and of overcoming the resistance and the financial and political barriers that the project would undoubtedly engender...for many people, the thought of all those hurdles would be enough to squash their spirits.

How do we connect to something this, well, global? To something that feels somewhere between daunting to completely overwhelming.

I think that it requires great courage and great faith. I think that it requires that we open our hearts to embrace every living thing and beyond that, to the Earth itself. It requires a sense of reverence for the land and all the living things that dwell upon it. I think we would do well to adopt the perspective which we’ve heard expressed this morning by several Native Americans.

Some of us may already share that perspective. But, for the rest of us, how do we cultivate that sense of reverence and deep caring?

We might begin with something we love. It could be an animal or a place or even a plant. Let’s take a moment to reflect on what that thing we love might be.

And then, to realize, that this thing we love is interconnected with everything on Earth and beyond. That everything is dependent on everything else.

I think most of us here share a sense of moral imperative about trying to reverse environmental damage. Because it's the right thing to do, and because we want the next generations to be able to have the same or better quality of life on earth that we've experienced.

Rachel Carson, with her book, Silent Spring and the organizers of Earth Day together have brought the world's attention to the fact that we can no longer afford to ignore what is happening to the environment. We can celebrate the fact that at least we have the awareness. And the Earth Day organization continues to increase that awareness and to rally people to have a positive impact. We have other organizations and individuals who are working to make a difference, including Edward Wilson. Wilson believes that when all else fails, we will turn to reason.

"I'm optimistic about the future," he says. "It's going to continue failing. But when the waters lap over downtown Miami and the species counts plummet to the point that they can't be ignored anymore, when we see how badly we're destabilizing the world, then I think we'll turn to reason. And with reason, we can solve these problems."

I hope and pray that he's right.

I close with these words by Wendell Berry:

When despair for the world grows in me
And I wake in the night at the least sound
In fear of what my life and my children's lives may be,
I go and lie down where the wood drake
Rests in its beauty on the water, and the great heron feeds.
I come into the peace of wild things
Who do not tax their lives with forethought
Of grief. I come into the presence of still water.
And I feel above me the day-blind stars
Waiting with their light. For a time
I rest in the grace of the world, and am free.

May it be so.