

If not now, when

A service by Laurie Stuart

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Introduction

Sallie McFague writes: Each of us has a theology. Each of us has a picture, a set of assumptions, usually not conscious, of how we think God, or the ultimate organizing reality, and the world are related. These unconscious or implicit theologies are very powerful. They control many of our decisions and actions; we rely on them as justification for what we do personally and as a nation. Theology matters.”

In today’s service, I am hoping we weave together the idea of eco-theology: that the world and ourselves are better served when we think of the earth as the it is the body of the earth as a whole of which we can call the highest power, with the particular atmosphere in which we are living. To that caldron as it were, I want to suggest that now is the time to become radicalized and to turn belief into action.

And to set the stage, let’s sing along with Carrie Newcomer.

Opening Hymn:

If not now, tell me when.

Affirmation and call to worship #457

I am only one

But still I am one.

I cannot do everything,

But still I can do something.

And because I cannot do everything

I will not refuse to do

The something that I can do.

Edward Everett Hale

Chalice Lighting:

This Little Light of Mine. I’m gonna let it shine. This little light of mine, I’m going let it shine.

Candles of Joy Sorrow and Concern

Offering Hymn: Come Sing a Song with Me #346

Children’s story: Stone Soup

The story of Stone Soup is as much about cooperation as it is about scarcity. When things become scarce for the villagers, they find themselves acting miserly, thinking only in terms of their own survival. With the help of a humble but clever traveler, they find that renewed strength, and a delicious soup, can come from cooperation, partnership and generosity. So it is in nature. While there is a role for competition in the evolution of different species, the survival of every life form, from cells on up, depends on cooperation and partnership.

Shifting gears a letter from Sandra Steingraber:

Tuesday, April 23, 2013

As everyone knows, being booked into jail involves rites of passage: mug shots and fingerprints. What you may not know is that being fingerprinted no longer involves ink and paper. Like everything else, including the mug shot, this ritual has been digitized. The booking officer first rubs your fingers with a sequence of baby wipes and then splays them onto the glass plate of a scanner. Voilà! There they are, many times larger than life: facsimiles of your fingertips floating in the computer monitor. A series of happy electronic chirps means the pictures are keepers; a single beep means re-do (and out come the baby wipes again).

Meanwhile, you stare transfixed at your own disembodied black-and-white fingers, hailing you from behind the screen – their contours, whorls, and ridges, all familiar and alien at the same moment. And then it hits you: how exactly like looking at one's own breasts on a mammogram! Only this time: you already know the length of your sentence; it's far shorter than having cancer, and it doesn't involve the possibility of death....

I'm incarcerated in the Chemung County Jail for trespassing at a compressor station site on the banks of Seneca Lake, where the nation's largest energy storage and transportation corporation seeks to store the vaporous products of fracking – methane, butane, propane – in abandoned salt mines under the lake. If Inergy, LLC has its way, my tranquil Finger Lakes home will be turned into the fracked gas storage and transportation hub of the entire Northeast. For my act of civil disobedience, which involved blockading this site with eleven other residents, I received a 15-day sentence.

As someone who grew up amid heavy industry – downwind from the Illinois River Valley's biggest polluters – who was diagnosed with bladder cancer at 20, who documented, in my 30s, the presence of solvents and other carcinogens in my hometown drinking-water wells, who became a mother in my 40s, I highly value clean air and water and am motivated to protect them. I think a lot of cancer survivors feel that way. What I didn't expect – as a first-time civil disobedient – was how well prepared I was for jail by my prior experience as a cancer patient. As far as I can see, if you've ever spent time in a hospital, tethered to a catheter tube, you have all the skills you need to cope with incarceration.

Hospital: Bad food; lights on all night; strip searches; people you've never met control your life; confined to a small space; little access to daylight; delayed response to call-button request; annoying television in the background; ice chips.

Jail: Ditto, minus the call button.

Basically, if you can be a cancer patient, you can be an inmate. Have you ever walked down a hospital corridor pushing an IV stand with one hand while trying to hold shut your backless, blue gown with the other? If so, you will have no trouble with ankle chains and an orange jumpsuit. Have you ever laid alone on an examination table with your feet in the stirrups, prepped and draped, waiting endlessly for the doctor to finish up with the previous patient and walk through the damned door? If so, then you will know how to occupy your mind while handcuffed to a wall while the officer finishes booking the inmate in the next room.

I say all this because there is a great need, at this historical moment, for citizens in general and cancer patients in specific to vigorously insert themselves into the political process. I'm not calling you to unlawful behavior. Civil disobedience is a highly personal decision and, for me, came as an individual act of conscience – but I do contend that there is more to fear from our inaction than from the consequences of our actions.

After two decades of researching, writing, speaking, and submitting expert testimony as a biologist on the role of chemical carcinogens, endocrine disruptors, and developmental toxicants in an attempt to bring about toxic chemical reform, I have to admit that very little has changed. Now I am watching the fracking boom – which uses and releases chemical carcinogens, endocrine disruptors, and developmental toxicants and enjoys exemptions from most of our federal environmental laws – undo what little progress we have made and hurtle us further down the road toward the catastrophe of climate change.

Here is what I am now convinced of: the oil, gas, and coal industries – and all the hydrocarbon carcinogens they produce and release – will not be dismantled by good data alone.

And here, from cell block D, are my recent observations: having been arrested three days prior to a cancer checkup, the latter, while deeply familiar, was far more frightening than the former. The images from my 2013 fingerprinting were far less terrifying than those from my 1995 colonoscopy. And lying motionless for 45 minutes in an MRI tube is a bigger ordeal than five days in 24-hour lockup. In a jail cell, you can reacquaint yourself with the bible, you can do pushups, you can think.

- Sandra Steingraber

If not now, tell me when. I may never see this moment, place or time again, if not now, if not now, tell me when.

Sallie McFague says it a different way

Sallie McFague is a Christian theologian who is at the forefront of the eco-theological movement. Sallie is making connections between how we view ourselves and how we view our God. And she says that when we change from a anthropocentric God, the view of God as a human

being who takes care of our human needs, and shift to the concept that we are part of a body in our small human existence, a radically egalitarian emerges that claims that all deserve the basics (food, habitat, clean air and water.)

“We have seen the result of living within the machine model for several hundred years now and the verdict is overwhelmingly negative. Is time to return to the model of the world – and ourselves – as a body? The body as measure, as the lens through which we view the world and ourselves, changes everything. It means that human beings as bodies, dependent on other bodies and on the body of the earth, are interrelated and interdependent in infinite mind-boggling, wonderful and risky ways. It means that materialism, in the sense of what makes for bodily well being for all humans and for the earth, becomes the measure of the good life. It combines the socialist with the ecological vision of human and planetary flourishing. It means the good life cannot be the hoarding by a few individuals of basic resources for their own comfort and enjoyment. Rather, if we desire to take care of ourselves, we also must take care of the world, for we are, in this metaphor, internally related and mutually dependent on all other parts of the body.” (A New Climate for Theology, page 131.)

She moves from the idea that to be true to one’s religion does not mean that we need to become like Dorothy Day, of the Catholic Worker and live a life of voluntary poverty, but rather to use our special gifts to influence legislation and make systemic change in a materialistic world. She says that we need to address ourselves to climate change and we do that by moving our belief into action. She, like Sandra Steingraber, advocates that each of us has something to add to this energy. To me, that is what the Stone Soup story is about. A rich broth was created by each of us adding what we have; we need to add that which is personal to us.

If not now, when? If not you, who? Carrie, short clip, stop before Paradise.

The aim is to develop a "universal self," an understanding of who we are in the scheme of things, that includes every living being--even such lowly ones as caterpillars! This concern includes the health of the biological systems such as climate that help all creatures to flourish. We need to be so deeply empathetic with all these others that we are willing to sacrifice what is peculiarly our own, assets such as money, power, influence, and expertise.

In summary, voluntary poverty for folks like myself is the initial wild space that will cause us to use ALL our considerable assets, at personal, professional, and public levels to seriously reduce energy use through the sacrifice of ourselves (and all we have, control, and can influence) to bring about a new way of being in the world, a way that moves away from the narrow, individualistic understanding of the self to a wide open inclusive view of who we are, a view that has no limits.

Wild space is defined as the area where someone’s personal identity is distinct from the normal or “typical”. Being old, disabled, ethnic or odd creates a “wild space” for the individual to see the world from a non-standard perspective. She feels this is important since most of what is portrayed about the “world” assumes a “typical” perspective. The uniqueness and exquisiteness of the world may best reveal itself from odd angles.)

Becoming personal

I don't know about you, but I really relate to this theology. I think one of the reasons that I settled here in the Upper Delaware River Valley stems from spiritual experience that I felt as I led groups of young woman on the river in the early 1970s. With a rhythmic pulling on a canoe paddle, my own agency, aided with the current, I would watch the shoreline and the valley walls slide by, feeling at awe with the landscape and tiny within its immenseness. It was here that I deeply connected and understood my place in the world.

And how do we live our place in the world, in nature, in our technological human made existence. And to that end, I support Sallie's idea of finding the wild spaces in each of our lives.

These wide spaces, these perspectives that are uniquely ours, have the capacity to save us and the world and the time to act is now. It is in these wild spaces, our uniquely flawed and fragile selves that there is huge strength.

"I don't know what's with this weather," my neighbor and Narrowsburg Motor Sales proprietor said to me when I dropped off my car this past Thursday. I was having tires switched out, since the new ones that were put on were not giving me the mileage that I wanted. We noted that it was good that it was cooler, that I didn't want the apple blossoms to come out before the threat of frost. We were remarking how strange it was that the days were fluctuating from the high 70s to the 30s.

"I don't know what's with this weather," she had said. I looked her in the eye and said, "Yes, you do. You know exactly what is up with this weather."

She laughed. And agreed. We all know what is up, even those people who are not aware of what's up. Now as we have heard, they may have a story about what's up, a rationale to explain away what they instinctively know.

And while we might feel superior, because after all, we all know that there is climate change going on, we all have stories that we tell ourselves. We all have mechanisms and habits which keep us from radical change.

Of course, a lot of it is culture and the social mores that we have adopted. And now is the time to take a look at them.

I was struck this week during a video by Jack Kornfield, Buddhist psychologist, who said, "The neuroscientists are finding that there is no place in the brain that is identified as the self. (Of course, as soon as you say that, I can point to how the neocortex, that front part of our brain, determines our personality. Still, with no place for self, our experience becomes the stories that we tell ourselves.

This idea of no self, which sounds familiar to the Buddhist philosophy of no self, and Sallie's thought that we are actually all part of the energy of the earth as body, is fascinating to me. 'Okay,' I say to myself, 'if there is no self, then my reality is really the sum of the thoughts that I am telling myself. Additionally, since I think there is a self, I have to assume that it is from our heart energy. The essence of our beinghood.' And so, I am taking a different look at my thoughts, even the ones that are most reasoned.

Interestingly, one of the tenets of Unitarian Universalism is our reasoned thinking. For me, ideas and thinking is the essence of the human experience. At least I thought so. But maybe I need get into the body. Maybe these thoughts, whatever they might be, are simply energy that fuels my beinghood. So now, I'm beginning to take the authority away from thoughts, and into experience.

There is power in experience. I think that's what Sandra Steingraber is saying. The experience of being a cancer survivor is harder than the experience of being in jail. We need to dig in, and the time is now. The planet, our body, needs us.

I have never been so committed to becoming alive and to be rooted in this place as now. And what I am about to tell you could be dis-settling. Just as I find myself uniquely suited for my life, I am beginning to embark on a journey.

I have accepted an invitation to a one-year internship at Quimper UU Fellowship in Port Townsend, WA. There I will be part of a three-person professional ministry team that takes care of the 350-person congregation. I will be traveling across country with Stephen in August, get settled into an apartment there, and stay for 10 months, while Stephen flies home and tends to our home. In June, he will reverse the process and fly to Washington and we will make our way back across the country. This was unexpected, and I think it is good.

In McFague's newest book, she talks about kenosis and climate change. Not to get into too many details, she is talking about how there is limited nature to the expression of God. If God, this omnipresent force of life is truly in all us, it has within it a self-limited nature. And it is in this self-limited nature, that there is room for you and me.

McFague says that: 'In creation, God allows space for others to exist by divine limitation, not as a self-denying act but as an affirmation of the other, in a way similar to the Genesis announcement, "It is good."'[6] The idea of God's self-emptying or self-limitation is not intended to convey the idea that God is powerless. On the contrary, it affirms that self-restraint is one of the ways that God exercises power.

So think about all those things as I ponder my own place in stepping up to the plate in the way that Sandra Steingraber, using my unique gifts as a strong voice for transformation. I don't think she reasoned her way into it. In fact, it's the opposite. She is feeling her way, she is using her body of energy. And I find myself in that same place.

I, like my neighbor, often say I don't know about something. But what I don't know, is how talk about it. That is what I need to learn now. And I so totally agree with Sallie that theology matters.

And I think the timing is perfect for all of the different organizations and affiliations that I'm in energy with. I have every confidence that this congregation will blossom as each of you has the space to fill that I have been occupying. I am excited to share at the Board meeting the things that I learned at the Leading Edge conference. (As a preview: That congregation has figured out how to creatively plan out their whole year in advance. And then simply followed their plan.) Pat and I have been talking a bit and we'll share more at the meeting. (do stay!)

The time is now. You can kind of feel it. Everything is heightened. This makes all the more fascinating, that thoughts are not by themselves, the final authority. And I love that the neuroscientists have found that there is no place in the brain where the self resides. Our selves are fluid, energy, a field of experience, in a large world where there is an infinite amount of other beings in that same place.

Eco-theology, neuroscience, the urgency in the world. And look, we're in it. We are the ones that we have been waiting for.

Congregational comments

Closing Song and Benediction: If not now, when

It's you, it's all of us. It's a stone soup, it's a life's journey. It's a collective world. It's now.