

Along the Greener Path

A Personal Statement on Nature

Carol Hepokoski

Our Unitarian Universalist communities can challenge, nurture, and sustain us as we learn to live more responsibly with the Earth. We have a long tradition of turning toward nature for spiritual inspiration. Many of our religious educational programs celebrate the Earth and teach the importance of living in environmentally responsible ways. Some congregations have become green sanctuaries, and many congregations serve as spiritual homes for environmental activists. Our religious community has welcomed those who embrace Earth-centered spiritualities. Unitarian Universalists are finding pathways within our religious tradition that lead us toward a healthy, just, and sustainable world.

Many Unitarian Universalists are environmental activists, practicing ecological citizenship through environmental and eco-justice projects. Individual UUs are involved at many levels-as organizers of grassroots community projects, as leaders in national and international environmental organizations, and as individuals trying to live in more ecologically responsible ways. In our congregations, we have people who are environmental educators, energy conservationists, organic farmers, members of natural food cooperatives, artists, bird watchers, environmentally minded legislators-and the list goes on.

Like many Unitarian Universalists, I walk an environmental path. It is a path I have created through a love of nature and a concern for Earth and humanity. For me, it is a religious path.

After living for much of my adult life in a Minnesota lakeside cabin, I've recently moved to Chicago. For years my life was grounded by the great white pines, the starry night sky, the cry of the loon, and the smell of earth. Now I live in the midst of an immense urban area. While there is abundant evidence here of our many broken connections with the Earth, there are also signs of life and hope. I'm discovering that this urban landscape is one of compelling environmental realities.

Air that is difficult to breathe, potholed streets, neighborhoods where race, class, and ethnicity are all in transition. Dust from lead paint on children's fingertips. Brown fields of toxic waste. Lighted skylines instead of starry nights. An urban garden. Temperatures too warm for the season. Music, laughter, car horns, and dogs. Conversations on the sidewalk. Urban imagination.

This picture multiplies across continents, spans oceans, and divides humanity. Global environmental concerns form a complicated and confusing picture of poverty, hunger, deforestation, ground water depletion, pollution, and warring over resources. In the midst of this global collage, there are slender threads of hope, glimpses of a different way

of living, emerging pathways toward a more just and sustainable world. For many of us, walking along those pathways is a religious journey.

I've tried to remember the roots of my love for the Earth. Perhaps it was camping in the California mountains, or catching butterflies with my friends. Maybe it was creating a childhood hideout in a suburban empty lot, or watching sunsets through the branches of an old oak tree. Perhaps it was gardening with my father.

Most of us who walk an environmental path find that we are sustained by our love of the Earth, by the beauty of the Earth itself. In the natural world, we find experiences of the religious, the holy, the source of life. It is our connection with nature that nurtures and sustains us.

The flight of geese, the sounds of their wings, their honking voices. The falling snow gently swirling through the air. A red cardinal flitting from bush to bush. The first glimpse of a pussy willow, pale softness against a dark branch. Prairie grasses waving in the sunlight, roots anchored deep below, networking into the soil.

These miracles of life sustain my soul. They put life into perspective for me. Learning to deeply appreciate the wild forms of life surrounding us can be a spiritual path that will connect us more closely to the places where we live.

Living in place means being attentive to the world around us. It means coming to know the plants and animals that live with us, the patterns of our seasons, and the landforms surrounding us. It means learning the natural and human history of our region-how the natural landscape was formed, how humans have interacted with this land over millennia, and where the sacred spots are. Learning to live in place means developing a lively curiosity about the world in which we make our home.

As we come to know more about a place, we begin to see that we live in a humanity-nature matrix. We see how humans shape the landscape, contain nature, cultivate plants, and work in cooperation with the natural world.

This understanding of our interdependence with nature helps us guard against the temptation to romanticize nature, to view it as something out there, entirely separate from us, something that is good and pure, in opposition to our human culture, which we often view as destructive and negative. In place of this notion of an uncontaminated nature, I suggest an exploration of the relationship between humanity and nature, which is knowable in specific places. Such an understanding would attend to particular interactions of humanity and nature, and develop in us an appreciation for the complexity, beauty, and destructiveness of nature-and for how we humans are embedded in that complexity.

Look around you. In all likelihood you are in a building constructed by human intention, interaction, energy, and labor. What are the walls made of? Probably of a combination of natural and processed materials. How is the building heated or cooled? Perhaps by

natural gases or oil from deep within the surface of the Earth. How did you arrive at the building? Chances are that, like many others, you came by automobile, made from the iron of the Earth, processed by human labor. In this communal building you are sheltered from the forces of nature as they sweep across an evolving landscape, one shaped by human needs for food, shelter, and livelihood.

We are dependent on nature, and nature is now dependent upon our protection. We share a common future. In large measure, the prospect for that future is in the hands of our human community.

The work of making our human communities more sustainable is not work we are called to do alone; rather it is work we are called to do in community, in support of one another, in joint efforts. Some of our congregations have pledged themselves to be green zones, thereby enacting our environmental faith. They are involved in projects such as making energy-efficient improvements to their buildings, creating sustainable gardens from native plants, housing tool co-ops or lending libraries for toys. In some of our congregations, members come together in small groups to talk about their own lives. They support each other in efforts to live simply, and they struggle together toward changes that make a difference beyond their own lives.

In the Chicago area, I work with a long-term project that encourages congregations to join in interreligious networks to nurture a more just and sustainable metropolitan region. In interfaith neighborhood circles, we are planting butterfly gardens; taking steps to improve public transportation; envisioning dark, starry skies; and strategizing for safe, affordable housing. As we work together on these projects, we link our communities of faith to make the common journey toward a healthier world. It is a journey of faith and action.

The air is fresh this spring morning as I walk along the sidewalk. I stand in reverence, admiring the buds on the tree that have burst into green fireworks against a clear, blue sky. Such beauty, right here next to the street! Then I see a bird's nest, hidden among the branches. In that nest, infant birds and newborn hope shelter in the midst of noise and distraction.

Such sightings sustain my soul, reminding me once again just how fragile-and tenacious-life is upon this blue-green planet we call home.

Rev. Dr. Carol Hepokoski teaches ethics at Meadville/Lombard Theological School in Chicago. Prior to joining the faculty at Meadville/Lombard, she served Unitarian Universalist congregations in Minnesota and Iowa.

Purchase paper copies of this UUA Pamphlet Commission Publication from the [UUA Bookstore](#) for distribution or display