

Sauntering and Secession: A Transcendentalist Response to the Climate Crisis

Rev. Dr. Lucy Hitchcock, guest preacher, Unitarian Universalist Fellowship, McMinnville, OR April 16, 2023

I am glad to be with you today. I find I am even glad to be with you giving a sermon. I retired in 2008 from our congregation in Miami, Florida after 30 years of ministry and this is the very first time I have preached since. I moved back to the Northwest to be near my sons in Bellevue and Portland. And to be among our beautiful trees, mountains and valleys of farms. I wanted to fulfill a lifetime dream of living close to the land. My son Matthew and his friend Pamela are with us today.

I retired first to an acre of forested land in Sultan, Washington. And a few years ago, I sought out a sustainable living community and found Pringle Creek Community in South Salem. It has a creek running through, two greenhouses, two orchards, and places to plant your own small garden. It is on 30 acres that were part of the campus of Oregon's Fairview school for the mentally retarded. One third of the acres will be kept green and undeveloped. Homes are still being built and we invite everyone who moves there to keep our land and practices helpful to the environment including wild turkeys, deer, bluebirds and children. All that is to say I'm a nature lover. And my mission in late life is to help save life on our planet. I'm one of those who believes the climate science. On our current course, the temperature rise will top 1.5 degrees Centigrade over pre-industrial temperatures and life as we know it now will be changed drastically. As we, who are not in denial know, across America and the world, droughts, fires, floods, ocean warming and the Poles melting, are happening now.

Bryan and I are in a small minister's group on zoom. One day he asked if I would be interested in speaking to your congregation on my all too obvious passion for saving the earth. I found I could only say "yes." Because I believe Unitarian Universalists can be leaders toward the solutions to our climate crisis.

I visited your service several weeks ago to get a feel for who you are. The first thing I noticed were the huge old growth trees behind the Grange. And then began to meet your welcoming people. Worship was set in a circle and it was an interactive service with small groups where we could talk with each other. The subject was experiences with travel around the world. Most, if not all of you, have

travelled widely and many stories were about being in communities, working often close to the land, to improve their lives without the economic plenty we experience in the United States.

So, the second thing that struck me about you is that you are a fellowship. It reminded me of the first UU congregation my family joined when we moved to Corvallis in 1970. It was then relatively small, with a part time minister, RCA Moore, who played the guitar and counselled draft dodgers in the Vietnam era. We were brand new to Oregon and the Corvallis fellowship welcomed us and adopted us in. Like McMinnville, Corvallis is a college town. The congregation had professors and students. My happy thought was, that in this religion I would have a lifetime of continuing liberal arts and science education by going to church. From my encounter with you, I also found you welcoming, thoughtful, open to truly involving folks in the subject of the service. In a fellowship, people get to know each other, learn what each other think about and take action on. Often you take turns leading the services and share your ideas. You seem to me fertile ground in the Transcendentalist mode of religion.

What I hope to convey are two themes. One is the urgent need to have intelligent faith communities like yours help lead the movement to overturn the economic, political and land systems that are killing life on our planet. The second theme is to embrace our own Unitarian heritage of Transcendentalist thought and practice that was so instrumental in creating positive systems in nineteenth century culture, as they witnessed the beginnings of the industrial revolution.

So, the second theme, “Sauntering” first. The transcendentalists embraced the idea of “self-culture.” To accomplish this, they read widely from scriptures of the world to political theory, science and poetry; they held conversations with friends and met in small groups like the Transcendentalist’s Club or Margaret Fuller’s circles of women. They delivered lectures, they wrote for and published a journal called “The Dial,” and travelled. They established simple, communal living communities called “Brook Farm” and “Fruitlands.” Part of their object was to combine thinking with manual labor. Sorry to say those communities did not last long when they found they much preferred thinking to manual labor. So, they created schools and worked for education, mental health, abolition of slavery, and democratic process.

To reach the motivation for these actions, they meditated, wrote in journals, and sauntered in nature. Thoreau wrote, "I think that I cannot preserve my health and spirits, unless I spend four hours a day at least, sauntering through the woods and over the hills and fields, absolutely free from all worldly engagements." UU Reverend Barry Andrews, in his thought-filled book (p.74), "Transcendentalism and the Cultivation of the Soul", reveals "Thoreau preferred the word *sauntering* to *walking* to distinguish between walking as transportation or exercise and walking as a form of contemplation. Sauntering is walking mindfully, with awareness, linking sights and sounds to higher thoughts. One must 'walk like a camel' Thoreau said, 'the only beast who ruminates while walking.'"

Thoreau was not the only saunterer. He did not always walk alone. His friends, like Emerson, also walked in nature as a discipline and as a joy. Emerson wrote, "I seldom enjoy hours as I do these." In his hymn "We Sing of Golden Mornings," we know Emerson must have sauntered because he *noticed* a golden sunrise, the sparkle of seas, the majesty of trees. That is hard to do with speed walking and ear phones, meant for exercise alone. They chose a simpler life, both solitary and communal, genuinely communal with friends who thought out loud with one another. And, together found guidance for action.

William Wordsworth was a Romantic poet who inspired the Transcendentalists. I would call him a poet theologian, a religious naturalist. Here are his words:

*And I have felt a presence that
disturbs me with the joy of
elevated thoughts;
A sense sublime of something far
more deeply interfused,
Whose dwelling is the light of
setting suns,
And the round ocean and the
living air,
A motion and a spirit, that impels
all thinking things, all objects of
all thoughts,
And rolls through all things.*

If we wish to save our earth, I recommend sauntering, strolling in nature, and conversations with friends. Time in nature to renew our love, our respect, our awareness of our UU 7th Principle “the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part.” You and I, in small cities, are blessed with the closeness of wild places, forests, fields, rivers. I fear for urban dwellers, especially children, who do not grow up climbing boulders and wandering fields, digging in sand and mud, listening to birdsong, learning the names of native trees and wildflowers, following their curiosity and their thoughts. While my house was being built, I lived in an apartment complex in Salem. There were families with children, but there was no safe place for children to play outside. Only a small swimming pool inside a fence open in the summer. I fear, because without a deep, personal love and comfort in the natural world, how will come the inspiration to save it?

The Transcendentalists lived in the early days of capitalism’s takeover of our Western societies. Their thoughts in nature and conversations in friendship inspired their actions for social reform. Emerson wrote, “what is man born for but to be a Reformer --- a renouncer of lies, a restorer of good and truth --- imitating that great Nature --- which sleeps no moment on an old past, but every hour repairs herself.” It seems to me, that in your Fellowship, in your worship services with their variety of styles, in your attention to living our principles in social action, you have the potential to create your own version of their Transcendentalist Club. A gathering that shares thoughts about the issues of our day and inspires writing, teaching, and direct action to make a difference, at least, or maybe especially, locally. I know from Edie and Bryan that many of you are already so involved. I pray, reminded of our love of the earth, we can do no other than endeavor to save our planet.

This leads me to my second theme of “Secession.” I struggled to find the right word for what I want to say. Secession is a strong word. It means leaving something established. The Confederacy seceded from the Union. Eastern counties of our state threaten to secede from Oregon and join Idaho. But it need not be a negative connotation. The United States seceded from institution of slavery. Transcendentalist Thoreau seceded from a way of life and lived alone at Walden Pond for two years. Later he seceded from a government that permitted slavery by not paying its poll tax. He was arrested and went to jail for one night. His friends couldn’t stand it, and paid the poll tax for him that year and the next.

He later wrote an essay on “Civil Disobedience” still read widely. There are times when, for the sake of life, we must break with what is harming body and soul.

I am *not* going to say aloud at least two -isms that we must secede from if we want to save life on earth. If I did, you might laugh and walk out at its impossibility. Instead, I am going to say what we must replace them with.

The first is with a *Commonwealth* beginning from the bottom up, from the town hall and the town Commons, to the city, the state, the country, to the Commonwealth of Nations. The second is a civilization grounded, not in politics, but in ecology. In the amazing eco-systems, from soil, to ocean to atmosphere that maintain and cause life on earth to flourish. An Ecological Civilization.

What does *Commonwealth* mean? It means that the treasures we have been given on earth are the right of and belong to everyone. Every being has the right to clean air and clean water; and to land enough for a home or nest and sufficient food. Now we have, what George Monbiot calls a culture of “private luxury and public sufficiency,” if that. In a commonwealth, we would have private sufficiency, enough for every one on earth to meet their basic needs, food, water and air, a home with access to energy, healthcare, education. With what is left we would have *public* luxury in plenty. Our parks, libraries and schools, government buildings, forests and beaches, laboratories for science and medicine, humane community, the arts and meaningful work. Beauty and time. Time to become the best we can be; the best we can give.

An ecological civilization would be one where the intelligent species of humanity, like our indigenous brethren, honored and integrated with the ecosystems of the natural world. Climate change is teaching us what we colonizers have not done properly. What too many in industrial civilization have not deigned to do. Every season is giving us the clear signals of drought and fire, floods and tornadoes, pollution and poisons, war and starvation that we can no longer miss seeing. Nature is helping us to see ecological facts and is telling us we have very little time to change, perhaps less than a decade.

You and I can continue to advocate for helpful legislation, especially in our state where there is some hope of passage. There is still money allocated to the states for climate mitigation from the Infrastructure Act and the Inflation Reduction Act. Cities can add public transportation, retrofit existing structures and build all

electric homes for those of low income. We can cut up our credit cards in the big banks that fund big oil companies and put our money in local credit unions and green banks. We can stop shopping for anything but necessities, and use the money saved to replace natural gas furnaces and stoves. Let's buy food only from farmers practicing regenerative agriculture and shop locally so our money recirculates here. We can practice self-rationing of fossil fuel use because the government will not yet do it for us. We can imitate what Europeans are doing with local energy cooperatives and municipalities buying out privately owned energy companies. With money saved from that there is more for public services. And we can plant trees.

Emerson told us almost two centuries ago,

“A person will worship something – have no doubt about that. ----. That which dominates our imaginations and our thoughts will determine our lives, and character. Therefore, it behooves us to be careful what we worship, for what we are worshipping we are becoming.”

These are not easy things to contemplate or to do. I recommend sauntering. I recommend conversations with the thinking people of faith in this fellowship. The transformation before us is huge. Every small secession from what harms the earth is needed.

I want to close with an observation out the window where I use my computer. It is my inspiration to do all I can.

I look out on an orchard with a house for bluebirds on a pole in the middle. Each spring a pair of bluebirds comes and nests there. One day I saw a neighborhood cat go over and begin to climb the pole. A female goldfinch saw it too and divebombed toward the cat which fell back to the ground. The cat looked around and started to climb the pole again. The goldfinch divebombed once more. A third time the cat scrambled higher getting closer to the bird house and a third time the wee goldfinch swooped at the cat who fell back and ran away. I haven't seen it try again. The wee goldfinch protected a family of birds not even of the same species. Did it take courage or instinct? I don't know. But if she can save a life, I and we can too.

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