

# **“RELIGION, WHOLENESS, AND CARE FOR THE EARTH”**

**by Reverend Preston Moore  
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Ninety-five Aprils ago, a society lady boarded a luxury liner in Southampton, England. She asked a crew member, “sir, is this ship safe?” He responded, “Madam, God himself could not sink this ship.” And ninety-five years ago today, an iceberg ripped a gash in the hull of that luxury liner, sending 1500 people to a watery grave. The British commission of inquiry investigating the sinking of the Titanic concluded that excessive speed was the primary cause. Excessive speed in an area of the ocean known to pose a serious risk of a disastrous collision with nature.

Here we are again, cruising through troubled waters, only this time, all waters are troubled. Those at the helm are saying “full speed ahead,” and most of us are hanging out on the A Deck, sampling the champagne and caviar, telling each other there is nothing to worry about. But not you. You’re standing here in the rain at a rally about global warming. And you’re worried. And you’re right to be worried.

Among the diverse causes that brought you here is the personal commitment of Bill McKibben, a Methodist Sunday school superintendent. Ten years ago, Bill wrote a book about global warming called *The End of Nature*. In an article he later wrote for Christian Century magazine, he talked about the kinds of laws needed to alter our course on climate change policy. And then, he said something very striking: that the leadership of churches in the climate change movement was “absolutely mandatory.”

Absolutely mandatory? What do churches have that’s so essential to this movement? Is it our deft strategic feel for the political landscape? Or maybe it’s our cadres of highly disciplined shock troops who can ring doorbells and run phone banks tirelessly? I don’t think so! Bill McKibben saw churches as having a unique capacity to declare that “some things are more important than endless economic growth. That “some goals are more important than endless accumulation.” What might those goals be?

The most important one, I believe is the one after which every church worthy of the name strives and struggles: to engender an experience of wholeness in the lives of everyone it touches. To be whole is to have a sense of unity with all that we are a part of. We lack this sense of unity because we suffer spiritual wounds. These wounds result in an experience of being apart from, rather than a part of, the larger whole. When ministers talk about what is holy, they are talking about wholeness, and about the mission of religion, which is to move people toward wholeness through the healing of spiritual wounds.

What is it that we need to be reunited with? Churches usually have answered these questions by focusing on three aspects of spiritual wholeness. The first is wholeness with our own deep selves, which I hear in these words from the poet Mary Oliver. She writes

“And if your spirit  
carries within it

the thorn  
that is heavier than lead ---  
if it's all you can do  
to keep on trudging ---

there is still  
somewhere deep within you  
a beast shouting that the earth  
is exactly what it wanted ---

each pond with its blazing lilies  
is a prayer heard and answered  
lavishly,  
every morning,

whether or not  
you have ever dared to be happy,  
whether or not  
you have ever dared to pray.”

We cannot be united with that sensual, animal part of ourselves if the earth it longs for is wounded. Toxic. Uninhabitable. Desecrated.

The second aspect of spiritual wholeness is with other people, which I hear in the words of the poet e e cummings when he writes

“-- how fortunate are you and I, whose home  
is timelessness: we who have wandered down  
from fragrant mountains of eternal now,

to frolic in such mysteries as birth  
and death a day (or maybe even less).”

If we continue on our life-altering, world-altering collision course with global warming, will there be any places for frolicking with each other in life's mysteries, in its relational joys, in its revelations of our deep connection with each other – revelations profoundly inflected by the medium of nature, which all that passes between us must traverse?

The third aspect of spiritual wholeness is wholeness with God. Observing that “we are engaged in the swift and systematic decreation of the planet we were born onto,” Bill McKibben asked “does God look at our actions and pronounce them good?” I hear an answer to that question in the poetry of George Ella Lyon, in which God speaks these words to humanity:

“I’ve had it  
You cast your trash upon the waters –  
it’s rolling in

You stuck your fine fine finger  
into the mystery of life  
to find death

& you did  
You learned how to end  
the world  
in nothing flat

Now you come crying  
to your mommy  
Send us a miracle  
Prove that you exist

Look at your hand, I say  
Listen to your sacred heart  
Do you have to haul the tide in  
Sweeten the berries on the vine

I set you down  
a miracle among miracles  
You want more  
It’s your turn  
You show me”

It is indeed our turn – our job -- to work miracles, to find a miraculous exit from the mess we have made. Our relationship to God cannot be healed until our relationship with nature is healed. Without caring for the earth, we cannot move toward wholeness with God, or with Goddess, Buddha, universal spirit, the interdependent web of all existence, or whatever name causes you to bow down before the given natural world in a posture of profound respect, communion, and humility.

We cannot move toward wholeness with self, with others, or with God without addressing our estrangement from nature. So any church that takes its fundamental mission seriously must come to terms with global warming. Churchgoers must be as fervent about what happens in this domain as we are about more familiar areas of religious life. As fervent as the eco-prophet and poet Wendell Berry in his manifesto for what he calls the Mad Farmer Liberation Front:

“Invest in the millennium. Plant sequoias.  
Say that your main crop is the forest  
that you did not plant,

that you will not live to harvest.  
Say that the leaves are harvested  
when they have rotted into the mold.  
Call that profit. Prophecy such returns.

Put your faith in the two inches of humus  
that will build under the trees  
every thousand years.  
Listen to carrion – put your ear  
close and hear the faint chattering  
of the songs that are to come.”

We spiritual inhabitants of Sunday must reclaim our rightful places in the Monday through Friday world, in which nature is bought and sold every day, like just another publicly traded stock on the New York exchange. When we do that, we will find ourselves disagreeing about what should be done. Climate change is becoming a priority not only among liberal religions like mine but also among conservative ones. Green Unitarians are discovering Green Evangelicals, and vice versa.

These encounters are a classic example of the opportunities opened up by the arrival of crisis. In global warming we may finally have an issue that forces churches to rethink our cherished stereotypes about each other. The 13<sup>th</sup> century Sufi poet Rumi declared that there are a hundred ways to kneel and kiss the ground. Global warming may be the classroom in which the world's religions begin to learn that, with all of our hundred divergent methods of ground-kissing, there still is just one ground. And we all share it.

In confronting the issue of climate change, in bringing yourself to this rain-soaked spot today, you have embarked upon a healing profession. It is a noble calling. It is holy work, whether or not you ever use words like church, religion, or God. Praise whatever path brought you here. Praise whatever path beckons to you as you leave here today, in search of solutions to an urgent problem in which all souls have a profound stake. Praise whatever way you find for kneeling and kissing the ground; for loving the earth; and in that love, for moving toward wholeness.

AMEN.

*(For more information concerning Reverend Moore and the Unitarian Universalist church in Williamsburg, go to [www.wuu.org](http://www.wuu.org). This text and a video of Reverend Moore's comments at the Step It Up event are posted on the website. On the home page, scroll down to the "listen to recent sermons" section. )*