

A Future Where We Can Thrive

UU Climate Justice Revival Sermon by Andrew Batcher

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Our planet is hurting. We know this. Our planet is hurting because of climate change, and because of racism, poverty, war—problems that feel so wrong and overwhelming. There is distress in the interconnected web of life of which we are a part. Part of what brings us here as Unitarian Universalists is to learn how we will carry through together. This is a holy purpose, a wonderful reason to gather, and I invite us all to envision a future where together we shine an inspirational beacon for resilience and purpose.

Many look at the climate crisis as a political struggle. I believe in some ways the political fight actually distracts us from seeing a deeper truth. We are really in a spiritual struggle to embrace a future where we can thrive. It is a struggle because embracing the future requires letting go of the past. The future is uncertain and it's hard to let go of what we are used to. As we face climate crisis, we don't really know where we are going or how we will get there. We see many bumps in the road. People can be quite skilled at resisting good ideas and sometimes we come up with shockingly bad ideas. We see this in the embrace among some of fascism. For environmental sustainability we are often asked to do things we don't know how to do. Separating recyclables is hard enough sometimes, let alone tending my own garden. Sometimes we are asked to give up things we don't want to give up, like air travel. All of this is stressful, and I believe the spiritual stress of change is actually fueling so much of the political divisions we see. But these challenges are not insurmountable, and our shared faith is a source of transformation within us, between us, and beyond us.

To live in a thriving future on a thriving planet we have to step into the unknown, which is overwhelming, but we must do this because our children and our grandchildren don't have a choice. They have no option but to live in the future, and they need elders to move into that future with them.

I think a lot about what it must be like to be a child now. I wonder what my youthful preoccupations might have been if climate catastrophe felt so imminent in my formative years.

I really like the poet Khalil Gibran, and I'm going to quote his poem that I hear most often, On Children. Gibran writes;

Your children are not your children.
They are the sons and daughters of Life's longing for itself ...
You may house their bodies but not their souls,
For their souls dwell in the house of tomorrow, which you cannot visit, not even in your dreams.
You may strive to be like them, but seek not to make them like you.

For life goes not backward nor tarries with yesterday.
You are the bows from which your children as living arrows are sent forth...

Gibran's poem is about children and elders, but I think it could equally be about the future and the past. The future of our children is the arrow which hopefully flies from a stable bow. There is a role for everyone in building the future we long for.

I want to broaden our conversation about the climate to be about the future because I think the future is what we really are concerned about when we talk about climate change. I speak of children to remind us that the future is not some distant abstraction but the world our people will definitely live into.

I also speak of the future because I think it helps us to see 2 principles that I believe are vitally important for grounding a meaningful conversation about climate change. First, climate change is really not only about the climate. Second, creating a future where we responsibly address climate change will require coalitions who are committed, not just to addressing climate change, but to racial justice, economic justice, gender justice, and more.

I'll speak first to the point that climate change is not only about the climate. Climate crises do not exist in a vacuum independent of racial hierarchy, economic systems, or our struggles to be in community. It's hard to get a job in the middle of a hurricane or a forest fire or a global pandemic. If you're getting minimum wage, it's hard to buy vegan or an electric car. Extractive industries, like mining, often operate in formerly colonized and currently exploited nations. Factories and toxic disposal sites are often placed near communities with majority low income people of color.

Politics doesn't operate on single issues. No politician is going to vote only on the environment. In this interconnected world, it just doesn't make sense for our social justice efforts to be siloed so that I speak up exclusively about the environment while you speak up exclusively about racism. What we can do is seek out, locally, the opportunities to contribute to the future we wish to see. In my work in Virginia where there've been attempts to ban books, we've shown up at school board meetings, held teach-ins on critical race theory, and organized a festival to celebrate banned books and the people who make them. This is work about education, censorship, race, gender, LGBTQIA+ rights, and I believe it also serves environmental justice because it's really about supporting a progressive coalition who cares about the future. It is about the people who will inherit the future, and a sustainable planet must be part of that inheritance.

Beyond politics, every day we shape the world with how we travel, what we eat, what we do and don't do. As Unitarian Universalists, it is central to our purpose to ask how we can make space to revere the interconnected web of life of which we are a part. In asking this question, I think it's important to not be prescriptive but to give each other grace and understanding because this is genuinely hard to figure out. We need to respect the stress we are dealing with. It is hard to let go of the past we are used to, even if we know we must. By showing understanding, we enable each other to succeed.

Now for the second principle of what I believe is necessary to have a meaningful discussion about climate change. We need to build coalitions who are committed, not just to environmental sustainability, but to racial justice, economic justice, gender justice, and more. And it follows that those who are focused on racial justice, economic justice, and gender justice benefit from building coalitions for environmental sustainability.

If climate activism is your passion, you probably also care about access to health care, that people have homes, and that people are not being attacked because of their race, religion, sexual orientation, or gender. And if climate activism is not your passion, you probably still want a livable future on a healthy planet.

I believe that all social justice issues are really different lenses on the same goal. It's all about creating a thriving future. For people to thrive we need a planet that thrives. I believe that also means honoring the species who shape this planet. Achieving a thriving future requires coalitions that are joined by folks of diverse backgrounds and perspectives who unite around the possibilities that are life-giving and love-nurturing.

The potential of a ministerial voice for justice is really found in the vision we can articulate and live by our example. In the world of Unitarian Universalist social justice, we often find ourselves occupied in the business of developing charters and competing over small amounts of funding. What the world really wants is for us to demonstrate how we are a home, a haven, an affirming space for inspiring action and nourishment for the souls who long to shape a thriving future in community. Many of us are here because we have found a rare sort of home. People are yearning for the haven we can provide; far more than those we see within our walls.

A future where we can thrive is intersectional. There is no sustainable future with an economy that only values the 1% or the 10%. There is no unified coalition that could revive the planet without the embrace of the diverse cultures of the planet. And every climate activist knows that our future cannot depend solely on climate activists. A legislative victory here and there is not enough to tackle the problems of planetary overshoot. What might be enough are the masses of diverse people embracing sustainable beloved community.

What is our role? How do we get there? It is not an easy or a straightforward road, but I think we can make more progress with welcome and gratitude.

These holy Unitarian Universalist sanctuaries have raised children, formed friendships, been a spiritual salvation and grounding, provided prophetic voice and a glorious community that human beings seek in our bones. There is so much to honor and celebrate in who we have been, in our past.

As we look to the future, we can grow on who we have been and become more fully who we wish to be. We can challenge euro-centric empire and create spaces of true appreciation for the diversity of people, culture, history, language, perspectives, and wisdom that we all can learn from. We can make space for emerging leaders who are committed to a thriving future and represent the diversity that is central to Unitarian Universalist values. We can promote

economies that do not force people to live on the edge, barely able to survive. We, in our congregations and by our actions, can be havens for spiritual growth in a world often chasing the bottomline. We can be a source of welcome and love, and a light in the dark. And of course we cannot do all of this in isolation. We must be in partnership, in coalition to make the world a better place. What we have to offer is our care, our welcome, our commitment to learn and to support the people who are dedicated to the thriving future we also believe in.

It isn't easy. It can't be done all at once. But we sure can figure out how to do something right and build on what we do right and keep building. We reach a goal, perhaps a green sanctuary goal, and then we build towards the next one. This is holy work. We have something to offer, and the world is thirsty for inspiration.

I am grateful for the planet, which is the source of all I see and love. I am grateful for Unitarian Universalism, which has accepted me when others would not. I am grateful for those who raised and guided me, those who will carry on when I am gone, and for everyone near and far who is united in the common cause of liberation. Our potential is magnificent. Let's build a world everyone can celebrate and carry on. Let this be a day of planetary revival. Let tomorrow, next week, and next year be the same. And let you look to find the faces of friends who will help you on your journey. Because above all it is important to know, you are not alone. All of us live with our challenges, our concerns, and our daily demands that make it easy to get lost in our own heads. Religious community brings us out of our isolation and helps us recognize that we are, in fact, in this together. Let us be together in love and purpose. We are not here to dwell in doom and gloom. We are here to demonstrate a vision for how we can live with love and purpose in the face of the challenges in front of us. We will do this. Together, we will do this.