

Green Sanctuary

A Sermon by the Rev. Ann Marie Alderman

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Unitarian Universalist Church of Jacksonville, Florida

This winter and spring our children and young people will be exploring our natural environment as they are encouraged to search for what might give their life meaning and purpose. The Religious Education program volunteers who work with our youngest children hope to simply lead them to express awe and wonder about leaves and kittens and other such profundities. Other teachers will be leading the older younger children on a more intentional search for meaning as they move together through the award-winning UU curriculum known called "Treasure Hunting." The older children and the teens will learn about UUs who have been creative change agents, taking on justice issues related to science and ecology. We hope to light a fire so our young people will do some wrestling of their own with issues that concern them. It is our intent to give them the want to and the skills to make the changes that they see need to be made in this not yet perfect world. Our guiding belief is that the world will be a better place because of them.

A couple of years ago, the Religious Education Committee and I, with John, our senior minister's help, decided to be very intentional about offering what we call program studies first UU history, then World Religions, then our Judeo-Christian heritage, then religion and the environment. When the four themes are done, we start over again.

This winter and spring's focus on religion and the natural world around us led me to look into an accreditation program for UU congregations called Green Sanctuary. I thought it would be a good thing for us to qualify. Given our lovely campus, our proximity to Tree Hill, the fact that there are several environmental scientists and many nature lovers among us; it would seem that what it takes to be known as a Green Sanctuary should be easy for us to achieve and give us another good message to say to those who want to know who we are and what we stand for.

I certainly think our hearts are in the right place. Like many of you, a large part of why I choose to live in Northeast Florida and love working here is because I find it so beautiful. Nature is soothing to me, and uplifting. I have no reservations about finding something deeply meaningful in a beautiful sunset or sunrise, in the ocean. Every weekday when I am here and take my stroll on our nature walk, I am comforted and inspired when I see raccoon footprints; the Christmas the colors in the trees around our pond were as spectacular as any I've ever seen.

It was evident in the meetings of the Long Range Planning Committee this past fall that many of you find in this piece of land and this building something beyond real estate, wood and concrete block. The idea that we have been, that we are, that we will continue to be a "Green Sanctuary," is not foreign to us. For me, and I know for many of you, this campus and the way our buildings fit into it function like an oasis, a place made special by our caring for it.

I am grateful that we gather here. This is a place I enjoy and love. May we protect it and preserve it for the many generations that come after us.

Yet, like every home, no matter how much beauty and comfort they may give us, sometimes way beyond the sum of what work we must do to maintain their functionality ... this congregational home of ours makes demands on us for far more than just our grateful appreciation of its aesthetic appeal.

Becoming part of the Green Sanctuary program will likewise take a lot of work on our part. There'll be a lot to think about and discuss. Some of our habits will have to change. And we will be asked to look beyond protecting our little piece of the Earth. If we choose to be known as a Green Sanctuary we must take a leadership role in our wider community as a congregation that puts its beliefs into practice and in so doing changes lives.

Did you know that our church is listed in the yellow pages under wedding chapels? "Beautiful, natural setting" are the most prominent words in our ad. I have to laugh (to myself) ever time

a couple looking for a place to be married calls asking if they have reached a “beautiful, natural setting.” It is true. They have reached just that and more! They have called a faith community, a church, a congregation. When couples call looking for a lovely location, I am to be their minister, reminding them of how much more than just finding a beautiful setting it takes to create a lasting relationship!

The more I looked into the Green Sanctuary program materials and discovered all the work we would need to do to be accredited the more I began to see the parallels with the couples who call looking for the lovely setting.

We have a distance to go yet, before we, as a congregation, arrive at a relationship with our little piece of the world that goes beyond an appreciation for its visual appeal. And, we have more to do than basic and routine maintenance! I think we are ready.

As a congregation, who claims to live an embodied, reflective faith we are called to continually struggle with who we are and what message we are really giving others/want to give others, including our own children. We are called to look far beyond the next five years, far beyond our piece of the earth and broaden our horizons as far as “seven generations forward”... to appreciate, to be aware of/to respect the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part ... to live out our seventh principle. We are not just a wedding chapel, in the business of selling comfort, or beauty. We are not merely managers of an older building and a piece of real estate.

Like our children, we, too, are called to be change agents, to lead the way to a more perfect world. Like them, our growth will come in stages. I think there are plenty of folks out there looking for us to be leaders in this ever more complex and interdependent world. I think are ready. I believe becoming a Green Sanctuary is on of our “growing edges.”

What we do with our children to get them ready to be adult UUs is lead them through the state of expressing awe and wonder, into the place where they begin to understand how all things are connected. Understanding the connections is the essence of our 7th principle.

My awareness of how interconnected things are began before I ever heard of Unitarian or Universalism. In the early seventies, a Roman Catholic priest who had come to my college to teach a theology course. He had been living with the poor in South America teaching them to read. One of the tenets of liberation theology is that to be fully human, one must become a change agent, capable of creatively interacting with the world. A first step to knowing oneself as more than caught in the demands of mere survival, was gaining the ability to read and write. This priest wasn't there to teach us language skills. What he impressed upon us was how interconnected our choices were, our habits, how our daily life styles directly and indirectly impacted the third world. He was trying to make us more human in the same fashion that he had been trying to make the illiterate more human.

It wasn't until later that I would also understand that my choices affected not only third world persons and their access to resources, but that the choices I made in my consumption habits affected the world's air, animals and plants.

I am sure many of you have your own story of how your own global consciousness first came into existence and how it has developed. I imagine there many of you that have a much more refined and mature sense of the interdependent web of all existence than I do, and a way of life that is kinder to the environment and more caring of other life. The last several decades have seen a great deal of progress in our ecological sensitivities. In many ways collectively we are way ahead of where we were say fifty years ago. Yet, we as individuals are still all over the map. And UUCJ is behind. In this arena we should be the leaders!

I look at programs like Green Sanctuary and want to just keep sitting in the awe and wonder stage, because I know it is work to move forward to achieve more integration of thought, belief and action. I know the work will make me more whole, more fully human.

While I was in college in this class I was describing, my dad's brother and his wife, who were only a generation ahead of me in age, came home with a big, new huge gas-guzzling car. They were so proud of finally being able to own such a luxury that they felt they had worked

hard to afford. As college students with lots of information, but little maturity will sometimes do, I didn't hesitate to point out the worldly implications of their misguided and selfish purchase. My hasty judgment did not cause them to be transformed!

I've been resistant to change, like we all are. I know when I feel self-righteous that I've done something supposedly kind to the environment, in reality, my choice may have only been a tiny drop better than what my neighbor might choose to do. The truth is; as much as I honor natural beauty and have no trouble with expressing awe and wonder, I have kept myself only peripherally informed about environmentalism. And I don't always practice the practical implications of what awareness I do have.

I'm ready to move on! I can do better. We can do better.

I'm sure many of you heard about the murder this past week right next door to us in the Spanish Oaks Apartments, which are HUD housing units. We know that we are needed there. We have already begun work teaching the practice of non-violence and helping with their after school program. Also right next door to us is Tree Hill. We share our wetlands with a non-profit ecological preserve that specializes in teaching young people about the environment. When their director visited us last summer to tell us about their constructing an ecologically sensitive building, I felt ashamed that we weren't partners in that endeavor.

In the past my inching towards better choices has come out of an immediate need or a convenience rather than a continually educated vision of what choices might lead me to a more equitable sharing of the world's resources and the preservation of our natural environment.

I became a vegetarian several years ago, not because I was aware of how much energy goes into the production of meat, but because the person I wanted to be close relationship with was vegetarian and didn't like the smell of my breath. I stay a vegetarian because it is one of the ways I can put my beliefs and commitments into action that makes a difference.

I went to a workshop at General Assembly last summer about how congregations and individual consumers can make choices that will reduce our impact on the Earth. This workshop was led by Warren Leon, whose book "The Consumer's Guide to Effective Environmental Choices" I highly recommend. He covers the seven categories of consumption habits that have the most impact on the environment and suggests a few very practical changes that we could make that would have significant impact. There are changes we as individuals could make. There are changes this congregation could make.

He says we've been worrying about things that really have little impact on the environment and losing sight of those that will make a significant difference. Eating less meat is one of the primary changes that he suggests. The little things we don't need to worry about and don't need to get so hung up on are the kind of diapers we use, how we dispose of carpet, what kind of clothes we wear, what kind of toilet paper we use, using Styrofoam or plastic cups and utensils. It is much more important to drive a more fuel-efficient vehicle, to eat locally produced, even organic food, and to purchase the most efficient appliance.

It makes no sense to drive a huge SUV to the grocery store for a steak, and ask that it be put in a plastic bag.

It is not just about "What Would Jesus Drive?" but what would Jesus eat, and which refrigerator would he choose!

I actually am quite impressed with the evangelicals who started the What Would Jesus Drive campaign. I want our children's children to have this planet to love, too. I want our children's children to study about how we were leaders how we cared to put our beliefs into practice. How even though it was hard and changed our habits we made informed choices that had the least impact on the environment and we take pleasure in living simply.

The question for us is What Would UUs do!

My hope is that there are some of you that care about taking the next steps so that we are the

leaders!

The Green Sanctuary program consists of five goals: building awareness of societal, environmental issues among UUs, generating commitment for personal lifestyle changes, motivating UUs to community action on environmental issues, and building awareness of and rectifying environmental injustices.

Over ten years ago, in 1991, a number of UUs established and managed an independent affiliated organization entitled the Seventh Principle Project. At the 1999 UU GA at Social Action Issue was adopted concerning Responsible Consumption. During the years from 1999 to 2001 UU congregations were to study the issues. A booklet entitled Green Sanctuary, and an accreditation program with the same name – similar to Welcoming Congregation – is in its second edition.

It is time for me, for us to be leaders, to reconcile our actions and practices with where our hearts already are. It will take forming a working group who commits to making our practices as a congregation reflect what we care about, educating ourselves about how we can live with the least impact on our environment and have the most impact on making this a better world.

I look at myself and am proud of who I have become so far. I look at you, at this congregation and am proud of who we are, so far. But I see so much that is yet to do. Becoming a Green Sanctuary is not just about going through the motions so we can use this certification on our website as a shorthand way of telling people who we are. Becoming a Green Sanctuary is about reconciling who we say we are with what we actually do. It is about how we live our everyday lives. It is time for us to move forward ...

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