

## Sustainable Living I – An introduction

(Covenant Group Guide from the 1<sup>st</sup> Unitarian Green Sanctuary Committee, 2014)

**Your group's opening** meditation/music/silence/chalice lighting.

**Opening Words:** *"If you look at the science about what is happening on earth and aren't pessimistic, you don't understand the data. But if you meet the people who are working to restore this earth and the lives of the poor and you aren't optimistic, you haven't got a pulse".* Paul Hawken, to a graduating class in 2009.

**Check-in:**

**Topic:** We come to the idea of sustainable living through our UU 7<sup>th</sup> principle, "Respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part". Our interpretation of this principle is informed by individual experience and learning and reflects the complexities of our relationships with each other and the Earth. In 1969, the photo *Earthrise* was published in Life magazine. Brian Nelson comments on the publication of this picture taken from space in his collection of meditations "Earth Bound":

*"As people around the world saw the planet from a distance for the first time, a fundamental shift in human consciousness began. Certainly we knew that Earth was not the center of the universe from a scientific perspective, but to actually see our globe hanging there in space had a startling effect --. ---we recognized both the beauty and the fragility of our true place in the cosmos. ---Every time you see a photograph of the Earth, remind yourself that we are all in the picture."*

Do you remember your response the first time (and the last time) you saw this photo?

Do you agree that there has been a shift in human perspective on our place in the cosmos since the 1970's ?

Sally Ride commented on her seeing the Earth during her time as an astronaut: *"The view of Earth is absolutely spectacular, and the feeling of looking back and seeing your planet as a planet is just an amazing feeling. It's a totally different perspective, and it makes you appreciate, actually, how fragile our existence is. You can look at Earth's horizon and see this really, really thin royal blue line right along the horizon,--- and then you realize that it's Earth's atmosphere, and that that's all there is of it, and it's about as thick as the fuzz on a tennis ball, and it's everything that separates us from the vacuum of space."*



She too expresses both awe and a sense of the fragility of our planet, and the limits of that 'thin blue line' that protects us from the conditions of space which preclude life.

Do you ever consider the impact of your way of life on that 'Thin blue line'?

Take a few minutes to consider an item close by—clothing, furniture, etc. and the impact of its path to you from extraction/manufacture of materials to transportation to retail stores, your use, and eventual disposal.

Would application of the principles of repair, reuse, recycle help minimize these impacts?

Viewing our planet from space may allow reevaluation of our place in

the universe, but it may also obscure our ability to see the damage we have done to the planet, especially during the post-industrial revolution years. The concept of 'Sustainable Living' is one idea born of an awareness of our accelerating consumption of Earth's resources, not only through our population expansion but also through the "improvement" in the standard of living of more of us. The Northwest Earth Institute (NEI) "Choices for Sustainable Living" course lists several definitions of Sustainability:

*"Sustainable development is meeting the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs". —OUR COMMON FUTURE, UN World Commission on Environment and Development.*

*"Sustainability is human consumption based on biospheric production or, using the Earth's resources at a rate slower than they regenerate." — Jim Merkel, Alternative Transportation Task Force founder & author of Radical Simplicity.*

*"Sustainability is part of a trend to consider the whole instead of the specific. Sustainability emphasizes relationships rather than pieces in isolation.... Sustainability is not at all about regressing to primitive living conditions. It is about understanding our situation and developing as communities in ways that are equitable, and that make sense ecologically and economically". — Center for Sustainable Communities*

Is there anything here that resonates with your concept of sustainability? What would you add? Delete? Do you think the label 'Sustainable' has been hijacked by businesses and brand managers in such a way as to make it meaningless?

Most of us are protected from the most damaging aspects of our unsustainable consumption of energy supplied from coal and fossil fuels; the burden is borne by those working in, and those whose communities have been/are being destroyed by, extractive industries. The public witness at the 2013 GA held in Louisville, Kentucky addressed the devastations of mountain top coal removal, a visible example of **disrespect** for the Earth and people in often poor rural communities that bear the burden of our society continuing to enjoy 'cheap energy'. **Wendell Berry** (born August 5, 1934, an American novelist, poet, environmental activist, cultural critic, and farmer) spoke to these issues saying:

*"I'm concerned about mountaintop removal and climate change. But when we delay our concern until dangers have become sensational, we're late. ... Even if we are too late, we still must accept responsibility and try to make things better. ... We must understand that fossil-fuel energy must be replaced not just by clean energy, but also by less energy. If... we become determined to keep the industries of poison, explosion, and fire from determining our lives and the world's fate, then we will steadfastly reduce our dependence on them and our payments of money to them. ... Then, finally, we will be serious enough, our effort complex and practical enough. **By so improving our lives, we will improve the possibility of life.**"*

Do you think he overstates the importance and potential impact of changing from non-sustainable to sustainable sources of energy? Of using less energy, regardless of its source? Can you visualize such a change as an **improvement** in your life? Is that Physical or Spiritual improvement? How do we balance the current environmental and local 'people' damage with the apparent benefit to our larger society of coal and petroleum products?

The NEI course on 'Choices for Sustainable Living' includes: Call to sustainability, Ecological Principles, Food, Community, Transportation, Consumption and Economy, and finally Visions of Sustainability. Thus this brief encounter barely introduces the subject and its relevance to our spiritual and practical lives. Perhaps you will choose to explore some of these aspects, or topics that have surfaced during this discussion, in future meetings.

**Closing words:** "The care of the Earth is our most ancient and most worthy, and after all, our most pleasing, responsibility. To cherish what remains of it and to foster its renewal is our only hope."

— [Wendell Berry](#)

**Your group's closing** meditation/music/silence/chalice extinguishing.