

Hope Earth Day Sermon

I love moss. I delight in examining the many textures and colors of moss. I actually get down on the ground and sniff moss. The fibers and threads of moss are as varied as the forest. I stare long enough to imagine I am in a fairy land where I am tiny and live amongst the moss. I envision myself sitting in a moss bed sipping coffee and eating chocolate chip cookies. Moss carpets have long been a place I contemplated napping. I love when my foot goes into their endless squishiness. Moss is like another land and yet it has so much to teach us.

I don't know about you, but when I think of Earth Day, I get depressed. I have read dozens of articles leading up to Earth Day that paint a grim picture about how the United States uses more water, more energy and more of Earth's resources per capita, than almost everyone else on earth. Not even just a little bit more, but hundreds of times more than most people on the planet.

America's oil, coal and natural gas consumption is the most per person of any country, using 21 percent of the world's energy. President Obama signed the Paris Agreement in an effort to leave office with a plan to address climate change, but Donald Trump's decision to abandon the Agreement – signed by 195 other nations – has increased the U.S.'s production and consumption.

Considering this rampant consumption and human infestation into every corner of livable earth, I look to the similarities and juxtaposing characteristics of moss. Like humans, moss inhabits nearly every ecosystem on earth, and mosses have the ability to clone themselves from broken off leaves or tattered fragments. Unlike humans, moss is integral to the functioning of a forest. Humans are not integral to the functioning of this planet.

We maintain our American lifestyle at the expense of the rest of the planet. This is the height of avarice. Our current lifestyle demands we perceive our existence as more important than almost everyone in the world. Contrast this with moss, which survives by living in harmony with every ecosystem on the planet.

Unitarian Universalist Rev. Fred Small, co-chair of Religious Witness for the Earth, a national interfaith network dedicated to public witness on environmental issues, especially global climate change, writes: “Poor people and people of color are the first victims of environmental poisons and natural disasters. Disparities of wealth and status lead to waste and pollution by both the affluent and the deprived. We simply cannot solve the problems of ecology without facing the problems of inequity, nor vice versa. Throughout the world, poor and working people, and especially people of color, are pollution’s first victims. Their air, water, soil, and shelter are more contaminated, they toil in more hazardous workplaces, and they are more vulnerable to environmental catastrophes. Invasive development threatens the health, religious traditions, and social fabric of indigenous peoples.”

Rather than assuming wealthy, white America’s ideas about sustainability are superior, I wondered what I would learn if we looked to native people, those most impacted by the dominate culture’s consumption? I looked to Robin Wall Kimmerer’s writings about moss, in her studies as a botanist and bryologist and member of the Citizen Potawatomi Nation.

Kimmerer states: “Science asks us to learn **about** organisms. Traditional knowledge asks us to **learn from** them. And when I think about mosses, in particular, as the most ancient of land plants, they have been here for a very long time. They’ve figured out a lot about how to live well on the earth, and, for me, I think they’re really good storytellers in the way that they live. An example of what I mean by this is in their simplicity, in the power of being small; mosses become so successful all over the world because they live in these tiny little layers on rocks, on logs, and on trees. They work with the natural forces that lie over every little surface of the world, and to me, they are exemplars of not only surviving, but flourishing by working with natural processes. Mosses are superb teachers about living within your means.”

How can we be more like moss in our approach to the environment?

Consider how recycling is not simply about putting an object in the correct container. Nor is it about passing a law to make recycling required. Any effort we undertake to improve our planet has to be done in concert with the entire planet. Sadly, the United States made laws about recycling without building the kinds of processing facilities needed to actually recycle

our own goods. We have been putting our plastic bottles and cardboard on ships that use coal and natural gas to send them to China to be processed there. Now the Chinese are rejecting almost all of our recyclables, sending them back to us and we are burning them in incinerators that do not have the proper filters, and are putting toxic fumes into our atmosphere. Most of these incinerators are located in neighborhoods inhabited by poor people and people of color.

It is easy to be disheartened about all this. I know I am. It is difficult to think you alone can make a difference. I would argue that you, YOU ALONE, cannot make a difference. Instead, you have to be more community building and cooperatively living like moss.

Moss does all of its work by cooperating within the species and within the place it lives. This is how we can create hope.

Growing up, I was taught all of nature was dependent upon a ruthless survival of the fittest. I now realize that is not true. Indeed, for us to address everything from what we consume, to where it goes, we must look at the problems we created cooperatively, like moss.

Moss is the oldest living species and rather than depending upon competition to survive, moss lives through cooperation. If humans, especially Americans are the hostile alpha organisms devastating this planet as we now know it, then the more than 22,000 kinds of moss, at over 20,000 years old, are the collaborative peacekeepers.

Not only are moss scientifically impressive beyond measure, but following their example is the only way to sustain our existence. Moss is the answer. Moss can guide our hope for the future.

Moss exemplifies the 3 C's of Environmental Hope:

- Collaboration
- Community building
- Cooperative harmony

As a congregation who aims to create a just faith, we are called to continually refine how we live, how we treat others and how we address problems. We are called to look far beyond the recycling bin, farther than our household consumption, to across the oceans where we ship our garbage and then consider where each thing we touch comes from, and how it will be sustained, reused or disposed. It is only when we bring each of our UU principals into our homes, offices and communities that we can respect the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part ... to live out our seventh principle. Moss is an ideal symbol of our seventh principal.

When Kimmerer, was asked: Does moss “Communicate? Collaborate? Wage war? She answered: “Plants certainly do communicate, primarily through the exchange of chemical signals. They inform one another of insect and pathogen attacks, for example, which allows them to mount defenses. And there is evidence of collaboration as well as antagonism between plants. To my mind, plants meet any definition of intelligence. They have the ability to perceive, sense, respond to, and communicate about the environment. They create and maintain relationships with other beings. And they adjust their behavior in ways that benefit survival and reproduction.”

How can we adjust our behavior like moss does?

We too have the ability to perceive, sense and respond to the environment. We can create and maintain relationship with other beings – especially outside of our country to learn new ways of being collaborative in living on Earth. We have to continue to commit to the 3 C’s. Commit to being more like moss.

We’ve become accustomed to the convenience of disposable packaging and take out containers made from non-renewable oil like Styrofoam and plastic. I enjoy the comfort of year-round heating and air-conditioning. Without it would we even live here in Wisconsin? Without the independence of automotive travel, I wouldn’t be able to even have this internship. As any recycler or organic shopper can tell you, it’s almost always more expensive in time, money, or both to do the ecologically right thing.

The key to successful capitalism is unlocking the desires of humans, convincing them their comforts are actually needs. We are barraged with media everywhere from the gas pump to the phones in our pockets convincing us to procure vast quantities of stuff, much of which will break or become obsolete. I often wonder if the decline of community-based religious institutions has been overtaken over by a new religion of shopping. Yet again, if I look to moss as my example of how to live, I see it adapting to new ways of living over and over again. It is dependent upon the environment around it to survive. Can we care enough about the other species of this earth enough to adapt to new ways of living?

Kimmerer describes how “mosses are not good competitors at all, and yet they are the oldest plants on the planet. They have persisted here for 350 million years. They ought to be doing something right here. And one of those somethings, I think, has to do with their ability to cooperate with one another, to share the limited resources that they have, to really give more than they take. Mosses build soil, they purify water, they are like the coral reefs of the forest, they make homes for this myriad of all these very cool little invertebrates who live in there. They are just engines of biodiversity. They do all of these things, and yet, they’re only a centimeter tall.”

A centimeter tall. Do you feel small in this quest to save our planet? I often do. And yet, moss is a centimeter high and it improves our earth in so many ways. Consider how tiny moss are and how much might they have.

When we talk about moss, we are not talking about ONE THREAD of moss, we are talking about thousands of moss growing and working together. That is our hope. If we all work at consuming less, all work at changing laws, all work at sharing our resources and cleaning up our world, it is then that we will feel the magic of moss and the collective power of cooperation.

Kimmerer reminds us “ the realization that we are all beings on the same earth, and that we all need the same things to flourish...Kinship also comes from our reciprocal relationship with other species...They are fulfilling their responsibility to us, and we will fulfill our responsibility to them.”

Moss — the amphibians of vegetation, were among the first plants to emerge from the ocean and conquer the land. Mosses inhabit nearly every ecosystem on earth and grow in places as diverse as the branch of a birch and the back of a beetle. Moss have survived not through competition. Not through being the fittest. Not by ruthless corporate take overs or profiteering. Mosses survive by building their environment slowly. Kimmerer writes in her book *Gathering Moss*: “The rocks are beyond slow, beyond strong, and yet, yielding to a soft, green breath as powerful as a glacier, the mosses wearing away their surfaces **grain by grain**, bringing them slowly back to sand. There is an ancient conversation going on between mosses and rocks, poetry to be sure.”

Let us become part of that ancient conversation, creating poetry for our earth as luscious as luminous moss. When you look at this world we are leaving to generations after us, consider the community you don't even know. Be as collaborative as carpet moss. Cooperate and adapt to your environment like apple moss. The mark you make could be as magnificent as millions spores of moss.