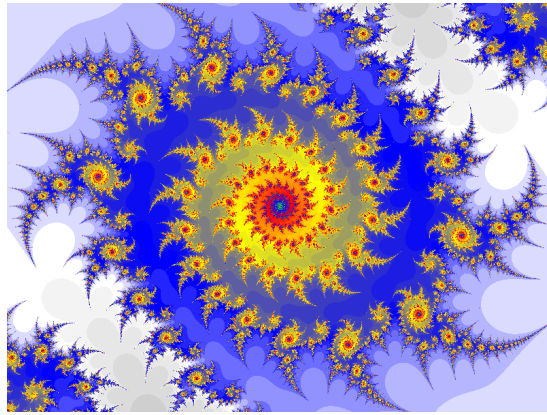


Fire and Ice



A Sermon by **Rev. Carolyn L. Price**
Universalist Unitarian Church of Santa Paula
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Reading for the Time of Meditation and Prayer:

The year was 1920 when Robert Frost wrote his great and simple poem, *Fire and Ice*. There is an anecdotal story of a conversation Frost had with a leading astronomer of the time, Harlow Shapley, which may or may not have inspired or contributed to his poem¹. At a faculty dinner at Harvard, where Frost was serving as poet-in-residence, he was speaking with Shapley, and asked, rather pointedly: "Now, Professor You know all about astronomy. Tell me, how is the world going to end?" Taken aback by Frost's directness, Shapley didn't answer right away. They spoke only briefly, it is said, but not about the end of the world. Then they each became involved in other conversations ... and were soon in different parts of the room. But ... later, Frost sought out Shapley again and asked him the same question. "So," said Shapley as he recalled the encounter some years later: "I told him that either the earth would be incinerated, or a permanent ice age would gradually annihilate all life on earth."

Whether or not Robert Frost actually intended his poem to reflect scientific projection, we will never know. Surely he meant for it to reflect the climate of the human heart, and its potential to change us, to destroy us, or to save us.

¹ See http://www.english.uiuc.edu/maps/poets/a_f/frost/fireice.htm for the information upon which this section is based.

Listen to his words, as we move into a time of shared silence and meditation.

Some say the world will end in fire,

Some say in ice.

From what I've tasted of desire

I hold with those who favor fire.

But if it had to perish twice,

I think I know enough of hate

To say that for destruction ice

Is also great

And would suffice.

The native people of Greenland, the Inuit, have a word to describe their lives at the artic, *sila*, which means both weather and consciousness, simultaneously. For up in the cold and ice, there can be no life without a complete awareness of both the weather and the human conditions. In a place with extreme sub-zero temperatures, where Darwin's concept of "survival of the fittest" shows itself daily and undeniably, the reality of life outside is every bit as real as the life inside the minds of the men and women who have made their homes in this far away land for generations. There is no separation; no sense of the human being apart from the climate.

In days to come, we will need to learn to live this way, and the concept and practice of *sila* must become our own. This is not a casual invitation; life on earth as we know it has changed, and will change so that we no longer recognize the world we live in; and we must change in solidarity with it, if we are to save what we can. Like the Native people of our own land, whose everyday morning call we shared today with our children, we must remember who we are, children of the earth, children of the moon and and the stars; of the wind and the rain, of the sun which gives and takes away life, children of the fire and of the ice.

We have known about global warming for almost thirty years. The sheer number of reports, articles and books attest to this constantly

increasing note of alarm from scientists all over the world. For those not familiar with the basics of this inevitable and already at this point somewhat irreversible climate change² I hope you will come to the 1:30 showing of Al Gore's film, *An Inconvenient Truth*, here in this sanctuary, but let me offer a primer right now:

Carbon dioxide and other gases warm the surface of the planet naturally by trapping solar heat in the atmosphere. This is a good thing because it keeps our planet habitable. However, by burning fossil fuels such as coal, gas and oil and clearing forests we have dramatically increased the amount of carbon dioxide in the Earth's atmosphere and temperatures are rising. This is not a good thing.

The vast majority of scientists agree that global warming is real, has begun, and is the result of human activities and not a natural occurrence. The evidence is overwhelming and undeniable. We're already seeing changes. Glaciers are melting, plants and animals are being forced from their habitat, and the number of severe storms and droughts is increasing. For example:

The number of Category 4 and 5 hurricanes has almost doubled in the last 30 years. Katrina, in this sense, was no accident. Just this last week, the National Hurricane Center Director Max Mayfield left his job with the

² This section is based on the information found on the "An Inconvenient Truth" website at <http://www.climatecrisis.net/thescience/>.

government of more than 34-years. He left out of frustration with people and politicians who refused to listen or learn from him, and his unwelcome warning, that “Hurricane Katrina was nothing compared with the big one yet to come.” But he is not done working; he is only going to find places and situations where people are willing to listen.

There’s more. Literally every periodical I receive or, in the course of visits to doctors and therapists as my shoulder heals, pick up in waiting rooms, speaks of the dangers – both real and immanent – of global warming.

A few more facts:

Malaria has spread to higher altitudes in places like the Colombian Andes, 7,000 feet above sea level. The flow of ice from glaciers in Greenland has more than doubled over the past decade.

At least 279 species of plants and animals are already responding to global warming, moving closer to the poles.

If the warming continues, we can expect catastrophic consequences. Deaths from global warming will double in just 25 years -- to 300,000 people a year.

Global sea levels will rise, 15 to 30 feet or more as the shelf ice in Greenland and Antarctica melts, devastating coastal areas worldwide. The coastlines of Ventura and Santa Barbara County will in no way be exempt

from this. Heat waves will be more frequent and more intense. The past ten years have been the hottest summers on record.

Droughts and wildfires will occur more often.

More than a million species worldwide could be driven to extinction by 2050, 43 years from now.

The Arctic Ocean could be ice free in summer by 2050.

While researching this sermon, I read “the Future of Ice” by Gretel Ehrlich (Pantheon Books, 2004), a book of reverence and lament for all we will lose. The artic, where she wrote much of the book, and the species who live there, are the “canaries in the mines” for climate change. And that region, the change has already begun, and it is irrevocable.

Ehrlich’s words may help us to hear the cries of warning issues by climatologists and scientists, artists, and ex-vice- presidents, all over the world; to hear them over the strident voices of politics and greed and amorality. Listen to her encounter with one of the Arctic’s own, the Bearded Seal:

His “front flippers look like hands; the ones in back are knotted together almost playfully. It doesn’t take much to see how in the ... minds of Inuit hunters, (that, as legend has it) the merging and (marrying) of seals and humans could occur”.

It was night on the ship, when using a hydrophone – a hearing device for underwater – she first heard the mating call of the male seal. It came to her like a “fluttering whistle”, she noted, in astonishment, beginning “high and falling slowly down... a guttural whistle that ululates” ... A **ululation** (for those who, like me, might not have heard this term) is a long, wavering, high-pitched sound ... like the midnight howl of a dog or a wolf. It is an onomatopoeic word, a word that sounds like what it describes.

As these calls swept deep inside her, Ehrlich knew them. They were “the watery calls of longing, ... wavering, fragile, doomed, eerie, and beautiful.” These calls of the male bearded seal come only in April and May; and the Inuit words for the phenomena translate as “the seal who at this time of year is singing.” And when they sing, it is as if what the Inuit call the *yua* – the force of all the soul – pushes forth to be borne into the world, as if time was beginning all over again.

Hearing that singing is like hearing the song of the universe, and Ehrlich asks, “what is it that lifts the notes after they fall? Is it love and loss and more love – don’t they always happen in the same kind of rushing slowness and arching falls?”

Remember, hearing is the last sense we keep, before death. Years back, in a coma, unable to move or see, Ehrlich heard – through a door

which was closed between them – the doctor whispering to her mother – saying “I don’t think she’s going to make it.” And in that room, with her own heart slowing to a stop, Ehrlich remembers, she could hear her mother’s heart beating out in the hall. And she lived.

And though she does not say it in this lovely, sad book, I hear in her ode to the beauty of the love call of the bearded seal the hope that even after it is gone, even after human causation has destroyed the climate upon which that amazing animal depends, that we will hear its song, rising up from another time, and we will remember.

Ehrlich is a poet, environmentalist, a Buddhist, and an atheist. She believes not in a supernatural power but in the fecundity of the life-song that beats at the center of the cosmos, in frozen rivers and sunburned mountains; in trees and dogs and seals, in all living things – they are all sacred to her. As they are sacred to Buddhists, and to Native Peoples everywhere. In our own tradition, the theology underpinning our 7th principle, that we affirm and promote the interdependent web of all life, of which we are a part, concurs, in what our Unitarian forebear, Albert Schweitzer eloquently termed “reverence for life”. Theologically speaking, attaching ourselves to this issue of global warming is what the teenagers of this church might call “a no brainer”.

Ehrlich reminds us all:

“A glacier is an archivist and historian. It saves everything no matter how small or big, including pollen, dust, heavy metals, bugs bones, and minerals. It registers every fluctuation of weather. A glacier is time incarnate, a moving image of time. When we lose a glacier -- and we are losing ... them – we lose history, ... we lose stories of how living beings evolved, how weather vacillated, why plants and animals died. The.. disappearance of glaciers ... means that we’re burning libraries and damaging the planet, possibly beyond repair. Bit by bit, glacier by glacier, rib by rib, we’re living the Fall.”

Surprisingly, after generations of disagreement on public issues, conservative and liberal religious leaders have joined together on this issue of global warming – believing, both from a Jewish and a Christian perspective, that we have failed God, and all life on the planet, as stewards of the earth. Some of you will have seen the recent special on PBS, moderated by Bill Moyers, entitled “Is God Green?” that explores this phenomena of union on the part of religious people across lines of right and left, that may yet – as Moyers suggests – save the world, and maybe, just maybe teach us how to live in peace.

But when we begin to talk about the end of the world, about the incineration of our planet, we need to speak not only of the climate of the earth, but of the climate of the human heart. For it is the heart which feels, the heart which resonates with the mating call of the universe; the heart which burns with a passion that sometimes – even when all is lost or nearly so – can save us.

Denial will not save us. Nor will sheer greed and desire for material wealth that has fed a rabid political system sold out to profit and power, and favored the few over the many. Blame will not save us– even as we can and do blame our government after most of the civilized world has signed onto the Kyoto protocol, the agreement to reduce greenhouse gasses and save what we can, but we did not sign, and as of this speaking, have not signed. The mind’s defenses of justification, blame, and denial serve only to allow us to turn away from truths that are inconvenient; and more – that are frightening and life-threatening.

There are times in all our lives when the loss or the threat of loss makes us turn away. Human grief can be like this; first the numbing comes, and sometimes it sets in a huge glacier of loss moving inside us; heavy, impenetrable, shutting us off from the world around us. If we stay like this,

too cold for too long, our own fragile ecosystems can go awry, until we have to change, no matter the cost, if we are to survive.

We are living in such a time, on a collective level, and the only way we can survive, and save what we can is to turn headlong into the truth. There is no other way. We must allow our hearts to fill with the truth; we must mourn everything we learn; we must prepare for losses which will be almost beyond our comprehension; and then— each of us in our own way and time — we must turn back to life, resolved to go forward, regardless of lines of theism or atheism, crossing the great divide of agnosticism, we must save what we can. We must revere the life that remains.

For the fall is now. The apocalypse of irreversible climate change is upon us. See the movie. See it again. Read what you can do, what you must do, to change. I have, and I endured whole days of being paralyzed by fear at what we will lose, no matter what we do— we will lose animals and glaciers and beautiful, far away places — and we will lose our own comfort. Like terrible loss and wracking grief, we will have to go on minus some things we believed we could not do without; knowing, if we are to make it, we will need to find another way. Like the archetypal journey into the underworld, if we survive, we will not do so unchanged; we will be carved through by

change just as in ages past the glaciers hewed valleys out of mountains of stone.

And make no mistake; despair will rise up in us like whole ice sheets rose up in seas that long ago were warm and swirled with life forms that now are frozen a thousand miles below the earth's surface. Despair will engrave our opening hearts and cut away at our vision of a better future for our children. Even our Unitarian-Humanist heritage of wild hope and the old stories that held us for so long – of the great loving heart of Universalism; though these will help, not even they will not enough to save us in a world in which winter may disappear completely before the end of this century.

But if we allow ourselves to live like this, to endure the underworld of loss and change, we will prevail. We will learn to live as the Inuit, and as native peoples have always lived. We will become a people who know simultaneously weather and human consciousness, with no separation between the two. We will embody *sila*. We will honor the seven generations as we once again or for the first time honor the ground we walk on.

As we permit the raw cold truth of what is happening to flow into us, we will not be lost in darkness. The light of our past, the fire of belonging and the fire of commitment that have marked our people for generations will rise heavenward still with the strength of the gathered community, as even

after decades upon decades of taking it for granted, together we bow down and declare our love for this earth.

And this is what we must remember when the bitter cold of our fearful hearts makes us turn away again, and we are cut off even from even the memory of warmth; that the call of life longing for itself will not be extinguished, like the light of the Arctic sun burns without end in mid-summer. And to hear that call we need not go to the ends of the earth, to the last icy places, if there are any left. We need only go inside ourselves; into that place where the spirit first breathed us into life.

For in that deep place, the fires burn still, like when all the earth was ice and the someday-seed of the temperate planet we have been blessed by warmed that bitter cold; the fires burn in us alongside the ancient call of a Bearded Seal whose longing for life was burned into our cells at birth, and whose whispering whistle will lead us on, even as death lights our way beyond this world.