

## Cultivating a Climate of Change©

A Sermon Offered by Rev. Kathleen Rolenz

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For Unity Church Unitarian

The date was June 22, 1969. I was skimming the Akron Beacon Journal when a small headline caught my eye. “Cuyahoga River catches fire.” I remember asking my mother: How is it possible for a river to catch fire? What I know now that I didn’t then, was that the Cuyahoga River had a history of catching fire that dated all the way back to the late 1880’s and as far as the fires go, this one was relatively small. But as the week unfolded, so did the disgust. Why did this one fire spark such outrage? For decades, a polluted Cuyahoga River was seen as a sign of progress; understood as a necessary consequence of an industry that made Cleveland prosperous. But sometimes, a conflagration of events occurs, which can either destroy or illuminate – and in this case, Cleveland, Ohio woke up. That one small fire on the Cuyahoga eventually led to the passage of the Clean Water Act

Fast forward to 1971 and I was waiting out the commercials in anticipation of my favorite TV show, Dark Shadows. One commercial in particular grabbed my attention. A man dressed in Native American clothing paddled a canoe towards a landscape of ever-increasing environmental degradation; waters strewn with trash, a person throwing garbage out of car window, smokestacks like the ones I saw spewing black smoke from Akron’s rubber factories were on the horizon. The camera zooms in on the face of this Native American and a lone tear falls from his eye. “People start pollution” the ad intones “people can stop it.” I can’t tell you the impact that ad had on me. I became an anti-pollution zealot. As a Girl Scout I insisted we clean up the roadsides. If people threw trash out their car windows, I would demand my parents stop the car and pick it up. I was doing it for the planet, yes, but more importantly, because I wanted that Native American to stop crying about the landscape that he once cherished. I wanted to return the land back to its pristine state

I know that I am dating myself by asking this question – but how many of you remember that television ad? Just as the Cuyahoga River fire launched the Clean Water Act, this ad launched the anti-littering organization Keep America Beautiful, (KAB for short) aimed at changing consumer behavior. And, it did. What I didn’t know at the time – nor did my parents or those of us who suddenly became inspired to not become Litter Bugs (because every litter bit hurts) was two things. First, the ad pandered to American stereotypes of native peoples. In fact, the actor who played this part, Iron Eyes Cody was Italian American. Even more than that, however, is a story of concealed motives. Keep America Beautiful was formed by corporate and civic leaders who were also members of wealthy packaging and beverage companies, including the American Can Company, Coca-Cola and Dixie Cup who had a vested interest in litter, but not in the way you would think.

Here’s the evil genius behind this sleight of hand. The KAB knew that their single-use and disposable cans, bottles and cups were contributing to the litter problem. So rather than changing their business practice, which would have included producing refillable bottles that produced less waste,, they decided to tackle the problem by pointing fingers at people buying and using their products. They shifted the blame to the consumer – telling them “You aren’t disposing of our products properly”. The Keep America Beautiful campaign put the blame on you – on me – for being litter bugs; for not recycling. All this may seem far removed from today, except – it isn’t! Companies such as Shell and Exxon Mobile; McDonalds and Coca-cola

continue to successfully sell recycling as a personal and moral responsibility while supporting the solid waste industry, which generates profits exceeding 81 billion by 2023. Shell and ExxonMobile are investing in the construction of new plastic facilities, which will help fuel a 40% rise in plastic production.

I tell these stories because of the complexity behind them. The Cuyahoga River catching fire was a bad thing – but it forced people to take seriously the industrial pollution which nearly ruined it. What's called the Crying Indian Ad, which not only promoted harmful Native stereotypes, but shifted the blame to the individual was a bad thing – but it did wake up America's consciousness to become a nation more aware of how we – as humans on this planet – do have a personal responsibility to make a difference, even one decision at a time.

So, these examples, combined with thousands of smaller, less dramatic decisions, have indeed cultivated a climate of change – and I'd argue that's good thing! It is true that individual actions, taken collectively, can and do have an impact! And, it has created a climate whereby our personal and individual actions are being ever more closely scrutinized – by each other! What do you mean you don't compost your food scraps! Shame on you! Did you know that a meat based diet is responsible for the decimation of the rain forests? You should become a vegan. You mean you still own a fossil-fueled car? Aren't you aware that you are killing the planet and contributing to the oil industry?

In a very real sense, the advertising strategy profligated by the Keep America Beautiful Campaign – worked. It turned our attention away from the large corporations who are heavily invested in single use products and gas-fueled everything – by turning all that anger towards one another. When we feel that something is beyond our control; when we feel powerless in the face of climate change and potential destruction of all that we hold dear – it leads to anger, accusations and despair. What we fear is living in a Mad Max landscape in a not-so-distant future; no trees, grass, flowers or forests; no clean water or fresh air; species dying; food shortages, one dystopian novel away from utter disasters.

But I am here to offer a counter narrative. Ahhna is here to offer a counter narrative. Because this sermon is about cultivating a climate *of* change, not climate change. The last thing I did before leaving Cleveland, OH was to swim in Lake Erie and to kayak down the Cuyahoga River. The earth reclaimed its beauty, with help of course. Very few people would consider throwing trash out their car windows anymore – or, if they did, they could be fined. Cultivating a climate of change – of lasting, effective change *is* happening.

So, don't think for a minute, I'm not encouraging everyone one of us to consider your personal choices. What I am encouraging us to do is two-fold. First, supporting one another's choices, even if they aren't OUR personal choices. You choose not to fly in airplanes any more. Great! I choose not to eat animal flesh. Fantastic! You own a completely gas-free vehicle. Fantastic! I have stopped buying plastic clothes. Woohoo! You have created a garden, growing your own food and teaching children to do the same. Yes! Huzzah! We MUST celebrate every change in our lifestyle; every commitment we make to the planet; every single time we turn away from death dealing habits to life affirming choices – we should celebrate not shame or blame one another – because there is another entity which is bigger than us and IS worthy of our blame.

Since I've been thinking about this sermon, I've tried to keep an ear to the ground of what's happening out there in the wider world that addresses the largest contributor to climate change. So the second part of this message is look at the creative solutions that ordinary people

are doing to go after the biggest polluters on the planet – corporations; and the most powerful agents for meaningful change – our governments.

In the April 2024 edition of the Minnesota Reformer, the headline read: “*After a long slog, climate change lawsuits will finally put Big Oil on trial.*” After years of legal appeals and delays, some oil companies are set to stand trial in lawsuits brought by state and local governments over damages caused by climate change. What is coming to light is that oil companies' own research projected the dangers of climate change decades ago- even as they tried to undermine scientific consensus about the crisis. The charges against these big oil companies include failure to warn, fraud, racketeering and I like this one - being a public nuisance.

They would be forced to stop greenwashing, using deceptive advertising, not unlike what we saw with the crying Indian in the 70's, to portray them as companies which support climate justice even as they continue to increase their fossil fuel production. These lawsuits could put the oil industry on the hook for billions of dollars. Billions. If these lawsuits are even half-way successful, this could make a huge difference in our ability to arrest the pace of climate change.

Internationally, change is afoot too, led by youth and our elders. Most of us have heard about Greta Thunberg, but are you familiar with the KlimaSeniorinnen? The KlimaSeniorinnen is an association of Swiss women, who sued the Swiss Federal government to take greater action on reducing emissions. They charged that their government's inadequate efforts to combat climate change put them at risk of dying during heatwaves. Bruna Molinari, who is in her eighties, delivered her claim to the European Court of Human Rights last year, stating “as a grandmother and mother, I think they have the right to a climate that is better than the one we have.”

The European Court of Human Rights ruled in favor of the elderly Swiss women. They received the biggest victory possible.

With temperatures out West soaring into the 100's; with tornados in suburban Maryland, with fires in California and floods in the South – we all do have reasons to feel scared, hopeless and gloomy. But here again, nature may be instructive – and to illustrate this point, I want to tell you about the tree that's in my backyard in Charlottesville, VA.

Outside our sunroom is a red maple tree which we love. In the summer it blocks the western sun and provides a home for our birds and squirrels. In the fall, its leaves turn bright red as if on fire with the setting sun. The year after we moved in, we noticed it looked as if it were dying. At that point, we decided to call in a tree expert to see if the tree could be saved. The tree expert gave us a diagnosis. He said: “your tree is afflicted with gloomy scale.” I looked it up. Gloomy scale are small insects which use their piercing-sucking mouthparts to penetrate the tree bark. If left untreated, trees will exhibit twig and branch dieback, thinning canopy and eventual death.

Gloomy scale seemed like a perfect metaphor for our own confronting of climate change, because the scale of what's happening right now feels – well - pretty gloomy. Although it's one tree of millions of trees--but the thought of losing that one particular tree, hit me as hard as if it were a dying friend.

“Can this tree be saved?” I asked the arborist. He looked at me kindly. “It's up to you. It likely will die without intervention.” I looked at the other, seemingly healthy maple trees in my neighbor's yard. I asked him, “what might the impact be of us treating this one tree on the other trees that are close by?” He really couldn't say, he said. “But it's good to start with this one.” And so we did and I'm happy to report that the tree didn't die but has continued to thrive with

our consistent efforts. We tend to it every year, feeding it and treating it, with the hopes that it will give us – and itself – many more good years on the planet.

“It’s good to start with this one.” Pretty sound advice as we think about what it’s going to take to save the earth and in turn, ourselves. We need to grieve, yes and recall all that is lost. We need to name the species that are extinct. At the same time, we must remember these words from Robin Wall Kimmerer who reminds us: “Even a wounded world is feeding us. Even a wounded world holds us, giving us moments of wonder and joy. I choose joy over despair. Not because I have my head in the sand, but because joy is what the earth gives me daily and I must return the gift.” It is my hope – and the hope of the Act for the Earth team – that each of you find a way to cultivate a climate of care that can – and will – change the world. May it be so. Amen.