

“Whose Earth is it Anyway?': Environmental Justice”

April 14, 2019

The Rev. Heather Janules

“I come to announce to you some rather alarming news...In case you haven't yet noticed, Walden is burning! The woods, our beloved woods, are on fire! Our Eden, our idyllic retreat, our sylvan sanctuary from the mundane cares of the world, Eden is ablaze...”<sup>1</sup>

The Rev. Patrick O’Neill spoke these words in a sermon titled “Out From Walden,” preached before thousands of Unitarian Universalists at the annual General Assembly. The image of Walden Woods cremated into acres of pondside ash was perhaps traumatic to this community as Unitarian Universalists often claim Transcendentalists such as Henry David Thoreau and his friend and neighbor Ralph Waldo Emerson as spiritual inspirations. Earlier in the service, O’Neill asked how many had visited Walden Pond. And, this morning, I ask the same: Please raise your hand if you have been to Walden...To this, both O’Neill and I say: “UU's going to Walden are like Catholics going to Lourdes !...[I]t's as close as we come to having a pilgrimage.” In fact, last weekend as I parked my car outside a Unitarian Universalist church, I noticed another car with a vanity plate reading “WALDEN.” We are a devoted tribe!

I am a grateful pilgrim to the shores of Walden Pond. And while Walden’s connection to my faith tradition enhances my reverence for this beautiful place, my primary bond is through experiencing the pristine natural environment as Thoreau did so many years ago. In his book *Walden*, Thoreau speaks of this human need to immerse ourselves in such places. He writes:

Our village life would stagnate if it were not for the unexplored forests and meadows which surround it. We need the tonic of wildness -- to wade sometimes in marshes where the bittern and the meadow-hen lurk...We can never have enough of nature.<sup>2</sup>

To think of losing such a place to the devastation of fire does violence to the soul.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.uua.org/ga/past/2005/169571.shtml>

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.literaturepage.com/read/walden-238.html>

Patrick O’Neill invites us to imagine Walden Woods ablaze as he charges us to set aside the spirituality of sanctuary for the spirituality of social change. In his sermon, Walden is not literally on fire but the world around it is, conflagrations of poverty, war and human suffering. This was true when O’Neill preached in 2005 and it is still true today. He commissions us to use our spiritual authority to leave safe places of solitude and actively confront systems that insult the worth and dignity of human beings.

For Henry David Thoreau’s legacy also includes a call to defend human rights, as reflected in Thoreau’s abolitionism and his famous essay, “On Civil Disobedience.”<sup>3</sup> This essay, another work in the canon of Thoreau’s writing, sets aside the meaning of nature and focuses solely on the individual’s responsibility to live in the human world with integrity: “Let your life be a counter-friction to stop the machine,” he advises. “What I have to do is to see...that I do not lend myself to the wrong which I condemn.”<sup>4</sup> O’Neill reminds us that decades later, civil rights prophet Martin Luther King memorized passages of “On Civil Disobedience” and dwelled on Thoreau’s words when he was in jail. King did this, in his words “to center my spirit and to re-find my purpose, and then my courage is restored and my vision is again made clear.”<sup>5</sup>

And I recall this sermon as it also invites us to notice a polarity in our consciousness – between the haven of uncivilized creation and the human world, between Thoreau’s capital-N Nature and what he calls “village life.” Patrick O’Neill suggests there is the world of retreat and the world of social engagement, that these worlds stand apart from one another. I am grateful to Patrick O’Neill for his call to action, his insistence that we balance the renewal of sanctuary with the challenge of dismantling the world we have and creating in its wake the world our values affirm is needed and possible.

And I am equally grateful to those who teach me that preservation of ecological sanctuaries and the struggle for human rights are not necessarily distant from one another. That there is a connection between human and ecological suffering, that degradation of the earth often correlates with the presence of marginalized people as a result of systems that regard some land and some human beings as

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<sup>3</sup> <https://www.uua.org/ga/past/2005/169571.shtml>

<sup>4</sup> <http://xroads.virginia.edu/~hyper2/thoreau/civil.html>

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.uua.org/ga/past/2005/169571.shtml>

disposable. That those who lack the political power to prevent the trash incinerator or power plant being constructed in their community are often the ones who lack the political power to secure effective schools and safe and affordable housing.

That, through this lens, Thoreau's experience on the shores of Walden is both an iconic narrative of humankind's communion with the earth and a sign of his privilege, born of his race and class. That, as James Cone reminds us in this morning's reading, an ecological movement dwelling on the Waldens of the world and indifferent to the lives of inner-city children with asthma inhalers reinforces systems of domination that threaten both unspoiled areas of "wildness" and the very survival of those too disenfranchised to dwell near these places of refuge.

I had heard the term "environmental justice" before but came to understand it in a new way through this year's Unitarian Universalist Association common read, *Justice on Earth: People of Faith Working at the Intersections of Race, Class and the Environment*. *Justice on Earth* is an anthology of essays exploring the historical, social and spiritual dimensions of ecology and human rights from a liberal religious perspective. In the words of one contributor, Sofia Betancourt, "environmental justice" is simply a movement that "seeks to repair environmental devastation while at the same time addressing gross injustices within the human family."<sup>6</sup>

Sophia Betancourt's essay illustrates how land conservation, a movement heavily influenced by Thoreau's famous memoir,<sup>7</sup> became so absent of people-of-color. The lived history of enslaved African Americans makes these reasons clear. Betancourt observes that "after centuries of forced migration, brutal violence, the stripping of agency, inhumane unpaid agricultural labor conditions...a prevailing question remains whether African Americans can or should see themselves writ large as benefitting from a connection with the land."<sup>8</sup>

Perhaps illuminating Betancourt's question, history reveals that Thoreau first became inspired to live at Walden Pond when he observed a formerly enslaved

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<sup>6</sup> Betancourt, Sofia. "Ethical Implications of Environmental Justice." *Justice on Earth: People of Faith Working at the Intersections of Race, Class and the Environment*, Skinner House (Boston, MA,) 41.

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.walden.org/education/for-students/thoreaus-legacy/>

<sup>8</sup> Betancourt, Sofia. 42.

black woman, Zilpah White, living there alone in the woods.<sup>9</sup> At the time, Walden Pond was where the social outcasts of Concord resided as the land was too sandy for farming and thus unwanted.

With Thoreau's connections, he had the freedom to easily undertake his curious adventure. Yet, for Zilpah White, her time at Walden was due to economic necessity, not a wish to "live deliberately." Perhaps, unlike Thoreau, White could not count on relatives walking in from town to bring her prepared food.<sup>10</sup> And, as Indigenous people had either died or were forced out, the landscape was clear for, in Betancourt's words, the experience of, "one white man...alone in nature, in solitude...[where] all others are ghettoized into urban wastelands to preserve for the privileged few an imaginary, untrammelled wilderness."<sup>11</sup>

Another contributor to the anthology, Paula Cole Jones, provides a brief history of the experiences of those "ghettoized in urban wastelands." The 1970's was a time of increasing awareness of how industries polluted our water, our air and the soil beneath our feet with highly-publicized cases such as the Love Canal contamination. Sociologist Robert Bullard first brought public attention to the correlation between environmental degradation and race. Bullard and his wife Linda McKeever Bullard filed a lawsuit against the city of Houston when they observed that eight of the ten solid waste sites in the city were built in predominately African American neighborhoods and an eleventh was slated for another black community. His research also found that middle-class blacks were statistically more likely to live in polluted areas than poor whites.

While the lawsuit failed, a movement was born. The next significant milestone of the environmental justice movement was the First National People of Color Environmental Leadership Summit in 1991, bringing together activists from many ethnic communities struggling against industries and public works facilities polluting where they lived.<sup>12</sup> These struggles continue today, as reflected in the powerful anthem the choir sang this morning about the water crisis in Flint, Michigan.

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<sup>9</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Walden\\_Pond](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Walden_Pond)

<sup>10</sup> <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2015/10/19/pond-scum>

<sup>11</sup> Betancourt, Sophia. 43.

<sup>12</sup> Jones, Paula Cole. *Justice on Earth*, 16-19.

Paula Cole Jones concludes her essay with a number of engaging questions: “What cases have been fought in your community?” she asks. “Which ones have been won and which ones still need attention?”

In this month of exploring the theme of “journey,” I am grateful for how *Justice on Earth* has brought me from one place of awareness to another. From seeing the fight for a healthy environment and the struggle for racial equity as two separate movements to movements challenging the same social and historical root. From accepting without question what are “wastelands” to asking why some are places on earth are protected while others are treated as disposable.

A leader in this congregation, Patty Shephard, and I took Paula Cole Jones’ questions to heart in advance of the recent Community Conversation we led with Director of Youth Ministries Sam Wilson. This program was continuing education for our youth group in advance of their service trip, beginning tomorrow, repairing coastline in rural Maine, damaged by climate change.

Patty shared census data, comparing Winchester and Woburn. Woburn has about twice the population and one half the average household income as compared to Winchester. As both communities are about 80% white, the environmental justice story that unfolded was more a story of class than of race.

Winchester’s origin story is political. Not long after the Civil War, Winchester was formed from part of Woburn as an enclave of the Whig party, separate from a strong presence of Democrats.<sup>13</sup> At the time, as named on the City of Woburn website, Woburn was also defined by industry. Construction of a railroad in the region, development of the waterways for commerce and demand for leather during the Civil War made Woburn a center for leather tanning, a process that used harsh chemicals, chemicals that eventually made their way to the Aberjona River.

I remember visiting one of our elders, Emmons Ellis, when he was receiving treatment at the rehabilitation center on Swanton Street. A man in his nineties, he had spent all of his life in Winchester. Looking out the window at the Parkview condominium community, he reminisced about the tannery that once stood there.

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<sup>13</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Winchester,\\_Massachusetts](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Winchester,_Massachusetts)

Emmons' recollection confused me as I knew about Woburn's history with tanning but didn't think Winchester included this industry. A little research revealed that, after Winchester became a separate entity, it began actively eliminating polluting industries within its borders, installing parks along the Aberjona at the encouragement of civic leader Forrest Manchester. From the Town of Winchester website:

As more Boston professional men were making Winchester their home, a movement grew to move industry out of the town center and create a greenway beside the river...A mid-century planning effort to limit manufacturing to light industries and to a defined area succeeded, with the result that today the only industries are light and may only be found on the northern end of the town...

The "northern end of...town" is the area of Winchester bordering Woburn.

The historical account continues by illustrating the social impact of this decision:

The industries were an economic boon to their owners and the town, offering plentiful jobs, often taken by immigrant labor. This contributed to a stratified population, with distinct owner/management and labor classes. Conflicts occasionally broke out between the two over working conditions...but more antagonism arose between the blue- and white-collar portions of the population over the removal of industry from town...

This segregation of heavy industry to Woburn, which isolated working-class immigrants from their owning-class bosses in Winchester, helped create the two communities we know today. It explains why the well-publicized water contamination case in the 1980's occurred in Woburn and invites us to wonder how events would unfold if, instead, it had been Winchester children dying from leukemia from chemicals in their drinking water. Almost forty years later, according to the EPA website, the contaminated area of Woburn is still not ready for redevelopment.<sup>14</sup> And chemicals are still leaking into the Aberjona.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> <https://cumulis.epa.gov/supercpad/SiteProfiles/index.cfm?fuseaction=second.schedule&id=0100749>

<sup>15</sup> <https://www.cummings.com/industriplex.pdf>

“What cases have been fought in your community?” Paula Cole Jones asks. “Which ones have been won and which ones still need attention?” The anthology *Justice on Earth* inspired me to seek answers. History tells the story of cases fought in our local area, a story of occasional and fragile wins on behalf of all the creatures that depend on the nearby water, air and soil. I am left with the final question, about what needs attention now, and what these social and ecological wounds say about race, class and power.

I began with an image of Walden woods on fire. I end with a sign of hope, of green shoots literally sprouting out of a scorched urban wasteland. In *Justice on Earth*, Pamela Sparr tells of the Evergreen Cooperatives of Cleveland:

Their strategy is to build “green” cooperative businesses using local anchor institutions such as universities and hospitals to serve as an initial customer base for the co-ops. Their first venture was in Hough, an especially challenged neighborhood in an especially challenged city. Cleveland is second only to Detroit in levels of poverty, chronic unemployment...population loss, abandoned homes, and tax base erosion. Hough is a predominantly African-American neighborhood that burned after Martin Luther King Jr was assassinated and never recovered. Presently, three co-ops...are up and running...The plan is to enable worker-owners to have about \$60,000 in equity within about five years...Many of the workers have spent time in prison, and the co-op jobs represent a vital second chance. The greenhouse donates ten percent of its harvest to local families...Until the greenhouse started growing it, lettuce sold in Cleveland generally came from two thousand miles away. So all three co-ops... reduce carbon emissions, and promote sustainable and just economic development.

As Thoreau might say, as he wrote in *Walden*, “All change is a miracle to contemplate, but it is a miracle which is taking place every instant.”