

Our Home Is On Fire

Unitarian Universalists of Gettysburg

The Rev. Phyllis L. Hubbell

Greta Thunburg declares that our house is on fire. Has any of you ever been in a fire? Literally? Unitarian Universalist minister, Peggy Clarke, tells this story about her husband and his family.

When my husband was in college, he was on the phone with his mom when he and she heard a little pop on the line. His mother said there was a big storm and she got off the phone. She then saw smoke from behind the couch and pulled it from the wall. Flames erupted. She called her husband upstairs who was already running down to get her. Lightning had hit the electrical system and every wall was on fire. They ran out of the house. It was engulfed in flame within minutes. Fire trucks were there before they'd even had the thought to call and neighbors ran from their houses to stand with the stunned couple.

Everyone who saw what was happening, reacted. They moved quickly, responding to the crisis in front of them. Emergency mode—we all have it. There's no time to debate, no time to wonder about alternative options; there is only immediate action.

This summer I heard that students in 170 countries were asking adults to join them this Friday for a Global Climate Strike. The Unitarian Universalist Association is supporting that strike. Our president, Susan Frederick-Gray, will be representing us. UU ministers have created worship materials to make it easier for us to preach on this, some of which I've used in this service.

The students leading this effort ask us to stop what we're doing – our jobs, our shopping, our classes, our afternoon naps and find or organize a demonstration. They even have a way to protest if we have a website or a blog. The closest climate strike we could find to UUG in Pennsylvania will be held in Harrisburg. That's possible to reach, but not very convenient.

But isn't that the point. Stop! They say, our home, this planet that feeds and shelters all of us, is burning. John was preaching on global warming twenty-five years ago. We need to do something inconvenient. If we are fortunate, we have something like eleven years to stop the planet from warming more than a half a degree Celsius or many of the forces we have been ignoring will be irreversible. We must act now If we want our children and our grandchildren, let alone our polar bears and our frogs, to have a decent life. Many people will be forced from their homes, from their countries. Some already have been. Many species will die. Some already have.

Eleven years.

In eleven years, I'll be 86. Connie, my oldest child will be 65. Colin, my youngest grandchild, will be just 21. Twenty-one-years-old, with all of his life left ahead of him. But what will their lives be like if we fail in reversing the damage we are causing to our climate?

Eleven years.

Well not really eleven years. Virtually all scientists agree that we are already feeling the effects of global warming and that they are getting worse. We have told you of our two years at what was then called the Unitarian Church of Norfolk ("UCN"). UCN was a poster child in all the wrong ways for climate change. The church basement had twice experienced hundred-year floods in the ten years before we came. Another hundred-year flood occurred in

our third month that dumped six or seven feet of water into the church basement and took out its boiler for the third time in those ten years. John and I have lived climate change.

The people in the Bahamas and North Carolina who lived in the path of Hurricane Dorian have lived climate change. The people of Puerto Rico who were devastated by Hurricane Maria in 2017 have lived climate change.

Scientists have concluded that climate change has already increased the range of invasive insects, such as termites and ticks. Termites destroy houses. Ticks bring disease. Think about the number of people you know who've gotten Lyme Disease in recent years and compare it to the number of people you knew with the disease twenty, thirty years ago. The number of people who have gotten Lyme Disease has doubled since 1991. They, too, have lived climate change.

Eleven Years.

I would bet that the vast majority of you here this morning believe the scientists on climate change. I do. Or at least we believe that the evidence is so great that we can't afford to ignore it.

But the question I have kept asking myself in the last few weeks is do I really believe it? Do we really believe it? If I really believed that this big, beautiful planet home of ours that is so essential to our health and well being is just a few short years from irreversible damage—damage that will cause more extreme hurricanes like Dorian, droughts, famine, pestilence, wars, economic collapse, disease and death on a massive scale, wouldn't I, wouldn't we be radically changing our behavior? Wouldn't we be demanding that our government and our industry make changes yesterday, and if not yesterday today?

Eleven Years

I am not a scientist. I have had to do a lot of research in the last month. Still, there is much I do not understand. But I do know this. Global warming is already here. It is going to get worse.

While people who live on the coast are more directly at risk, if warming continues at its current rate, food shortages will affect all of us. Millions of people would be forced to emigrate because of food and water shortages and, on the other hand, flood damage. We've already seen how massive immigration stresses nations. Who would take them?

Look at the United States right now. We are the country known throughout the world for Emma Lazarus' words on the Statue of Liberty, "Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free, The wretched refuse of your teeming shore. Send these, the homeless, tempest-tossed to me, I lift my lamp beside the golden door!" Of course, we have broken that promise before. But who will take these people in if we don't want them?

Eleven Years

What can we do in eleven years? Scientists tell us we can do a lot. There is hope. But only if we start today. The students have proposed three core demands. First, we must ensure climate justice equity in any plans we make. The poor and the powerless, should bear less of the economic and technological burden of the necessary changes. We in the wealthier nations who already have our cars, our planes, and our air conditioning need to shoulder more of the cost of the steps necessary to change directions. Costs that we created by our own careless living.

Their second and most technical demand is that we must agree to prevent global average temperatures from rising more than another half a degree Celsius. To do that would take immediate, concerted action on the level of preparing for a world war. But this

time it would be preparing for life. This time it would mean fewer deaths and illnesses. It would halve the number of people who lack fresh water. The world's coral reefs might survive. 150 million people would live longer lives. The initial costs of achieving this goal would be huge, but there would be even larger economic benefits in the longer run.

Their third demand is that we listen to the best "united" science available. We cannot afford to gamble that the tiny minority of outlier scientists somehow know better than the vast majority. The cost is too great. Our home is already on fire. We must act now.

That is the other thing our children and grandchildren are asking of us. "Take action now. Our Home is on fire, and we are caught upstairs, trying to get out on our own." They need us to call 911. They need us to call, write, email and Instagram our leaders. Today. They need us to march, vote, change our own lives, change our government's policies, bring pressure on big business. Today. There are still things we can do. Today.

I have asked myself where is the holy in this global climate crisis. I'm not interested or qualified to give a science lecture. I will talk politics in some other forum. But how we care for our planet, how we care for the creatures on this planet, goes to the core of our faith.

The climate crisis calls us to consider our deepest values and ask ourselves whether we are living them. It calls on us to pray, to reflect, to journal on our second Unitarian Universalist principle, "Justice, equity and compassion in human relations." What does that principle ask of us when people are being forced out of their homes with no country to take them in.

This crisis also requires us to remember our seventh principle, "respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part." This planet has given us food and shelter. What are

we giving back? This crisis demands that we consider our obligation to protect and preserve life. What faith does not in some way ask us to love our neighbors as ourselves? This crisis reminds us that we have an obligation to all our grandchildren, all our great grandchildren.

Eleven years.

What does this last twenty minutes mean when you walk out those doors? Only you can answer that question. Again, I encourage you to pray, to reflect, to journal to discern what you are called to do. Prayer without action is sacrilege.

Preparing this service has been profoundly meaningful for me. As a result of my reflections this past month, I have given up eating beef. I have organized a walk and the beginnings of conversations on the environment at my retirement center. This is not “my issue.” I am passionate about Racial justice. LGBTQ rights. Science was never my favorite subject. But that doesn’t matter. This issue belongs to all of us.

Our faith is calling on us to read the science and search our hearts, to ask what you can do, to talk with our loved ones about what we can do together to make the most difference, today. On Friday, when Greta and students around the world stop their lives in the hope of getting us to take a stand, let us do something. Let us write a letter to the editor, call our leaders, talk with our families about what we are going to do differently. Let us go to Harrisburg. Let us act .

Each week, we end our time together by saying “and now the service really begins.” May the service really begin. Today.

Our home is on fire.

Eleven more years. **

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