

A TINY LITTLE WORLD

A Sermon Preached by Cheryl M. Walker

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Recently, I've been reread one of my favorite novels. I prefer reading fiction to nonfiction and sometimes I like to go back to reread one of my favorites just to see if I still like it as much as I did when I first read it. Fiction, unlike nonfiction, gives us a snippet of how a society sees itself subjectively, rather than a so called objective view offered by nonfiction. And science fiction often gives us a view of what people hope for in their future or problems they see in their present expressed in new terms. One of my favorite science fiction authors is Ursula Le Guin and one of my favorite of her novels is called the *Lathe of Heaven*. I first read it many years ago and I am glad to say that I am enjoying it as much now as I did back then.

Science fiction writers face a particular problem: if they put their book too far in the future, the future they imagined could have happened way before they predicted but if they put their work in the not too distant future then what they thought might happen might not have and we'll all know it. In the *Lathe of Heaven* events are set in the late twentieth century, the book itself was written in 1971. None of the things she predicted happened, and some of the countries she wrote of don't even exist anymore, there is no Soviet Union left. But it's still a good read and still poses a interesting dilemma

Without giving away the ending, the protagonist, George, is a man who has the ability to shape reality through his dreams. Whatever he dreams becomes real and no one knows that reality has been changed except for him. If he dreams of rain, it rains and everyone believes it's been raining for days or months. And then if he dreams it's a sunny day, no one can remember the rain. It's a neat trick except that he can't control exactly how his dreams are going to turn out and he doesn't even know beforehand if his dreams will be effective. Sometimes he dreams and nothing changes, but sometimes he dreams and all reality has changed. It seemed harmless enough until one day he had a particularly disturbing dream. In his dream an annoying aunt who is living with his family and overstaying her welcome is killed in a car crash. When he wakes up he finds that no one remembers her living there and everyone believes she died in the crash years ago.

Eventually he becomes afraid to go to sleep so he starts taking drugs, legal and illegal, that will prevent him from dreaming. That doesn't work out too well and he is arrested and sent to rehab. This is how you know it's a work of science fiction, in the future we send people with drug addictions to rehab and not directly to prison.

George finds himself under the care of a psychiatrist who specializes in people with sleep disorders who self medicate in order to avoid dreaming. The psychiatrist eventually finds out George's secret and after having George dream of making himself the head of an Institute with a big office and a great view, he decides to direct George's dreams towards solving problems for the greater good. So he tells George to dream of a world where the overpopulation problem has been solved. And George does just that. He dreams there is a plague and instead of there being 6 billion people in the world, there are only 1 billion people left. The problem is solved but the cost was the lives of 5 billion people.

I won't tell you the rest of the story just in case this little introduction has interested you enough to want to read the book for yourself. Let it suffice to say that this was not the only case where George's dreams had the intended effect but the consequences to other people were unintended. George was not an evil person, he just did not see and could not see, beforehand, the cost other people would have to pay for his solutions to the world's problems. I am rereading this story because we are like George in many ways. We want to solve the problems of the world but sometimes it is other people who suffer because of our well intended actions.

Two things occurred this last week, we celebrated Earth Week, it's no longer a day, and there were food riots in many parts of the world. On the surface these two may seem like unrelated events. We celebrate Earth week as a remembrance that the care of the world is in our hands. It is a time for us to recommit or commit ourselves to being better stewards of this little planet we live on. So we think about ways to better use our resources and do as little damage as we possibly can. The newspapers and news shows are full of simple things we can do to help preserve and improve the environment. Our environment. But George's tale is a cautionary one.

While we are thinking of new ways to continue our lifestyle with some minor adjustments in order to solve the problems of pollution we have had some serious unintended consequences. By using less petroleum based products and more organic based products we have unintentionally created a food shortage. Farmers in this country to meet the demand for corn based products are now growing one third less wheat than before. This has caused the price of wheat to dramatically increase and the supply to dramatically decrease. While we, in America, still have enough wheat for our needs we are exporting less wheat and the rest of the world's population is suffering a severe shortage. And it is not just wheat, but other staple products as well. Our intentions were noble and good, but our consequences have been deadly.

We are in quite a bind. The solutions that will help alleviate the damage we have done to the environment as result our actions in the past could mean starvation for other people on this planet. We can't just go back and continue to use the earth's resources as we have, the effects are too destructive for everyone, yet we cannot just create solutions that

work for us but no one else. The instability that would be caused would soon be felt here as well. A starving people are a dangerous people. Already in South Africa, where the wheat shortage is being felt most acutely among the urban poor, there is talk of another revolution. A revolution not to bring justice to a people whose rights were for so long denied, but this time to take away the rights of people. The right to own land, the right to have a say in government.

When the world was big and what happened in one part of the globe had little effect in other parts, we could insulate ourselves from unrest in far off reaches. But we don't live in a big world anymore, we live in a tiny little world where there is an interdependence the likes of which we have never seen before. What happens on the other side of the equator matters very much to those of us on this side of it. It may not seem so at first, but it does. Sometimes the effects are subtle but sometimes they boil over and we are faced with people who resent our wealth and lifestyle and will do almost anything to destroy us.

So what are we to do? We can't stand still, we can't go back and we can't go forward, blindly. Now more than ever the stakes are very high and the road is not clear. I can't say that I have the answers. I wish I could give us all a list of things to do that would solve our problems and at the same time do no further harm to anyone else. What I can suggest is that it is time for an attitude shift. Part of the problem is that we want solutions that don't require significant changes in our way of life. We want what we want without any idea of sacrifice. We want our SUVs and central air. We want takeout food and convenient packaging. Our solutions have been geared at not changing us, just the things that we use. If gasoline is the problem, then let's build cars that use bio-fuels. If plastic is the problem then let's use packaging made out of corn. Let's not ask how might we change our way of life, let's just figure out new ways to keep the same lifestyle.

Sacrifice is a word we like want to hear. It is not a part of our culture. We are told we can have everything, if only we have the money. And we can have any material thing our heart can want that our money can pay for. But there are some things that cannot be bought. No amount of money can buy a peaceful world, that requires something that our wealth cannot purchase. It requires us to make sacrifices for the greater good. Some may not be big but some might need to be, We still have the ability to choose, but if our choices do not change, then our options will begin to fade away. We have already seen, in our lifetime, a curtailment of our civil liberties. If you don't think so, just try getting into certain buildings or flying anywhere without a government-issued id. This year you cannot even attend our General Assembly without a government-issued id. It may not be a big thing to have to show a valid driver's license to board a plane, but it is a change. We have sacrificed some of our liberty for the illusion of safety, and we didn't choose to do so.

That's another part of the problem, we think sacrifice is always something that is imposed upon us, rather than something we can choose to do. But the idea of sacrifice can be something we embrace rather than something we abhor. We can decide to live in a way that benefits the whole of humanity rather than just ourselves and our small piece of the world. People have come up with all sorts of a creative ways in which to live more simply. They have given up the dream of big houses with central everything and chosen

to live in smaller more efficient homes. They use good old fashioned pedal power instead of gas powered everything. This is not to say that we need to live in stone caves in the middle of a forest but we can live without some of the things we don't really need but like to have.

Now I am a person who loves her creature comforts. I have gadgets for just about everything, I'm a gadget girl. If it's electronic I either have it or I covet it. But even I know that some of these gadgets are not necessary. Like, do I really need a battery powered letter opener? No. Do I just love that little gadget, yes I do. But when I stop to think about the fact that I either have to use electricity to use rechargeable batteries, which sadly I don't, or I have to use disposable batteries, well I could give that up in a New York minute and my quality of life will not be impacted at all. I could sacrifice that convenience and make a little impact. And there is the temptation to do just that and call it a day. I could do little things that do not ask me to sacrifice very much. But I would still be part of the problem and not the solution. The solution will require me and you and everyone else who uses more resources than necessary to take a hard look at our lives and start making some real sacrifices.

This tiny little world needs all of us to make some serious changes in our lifestyle. And it requires us to be ever so careful in what we decide to change and how we decide to change it. It may not be as easy as we think it will be, it will take some serious thought about the ramifications of our actions. But you know we're a pretty resourceful lot, we human beings. We can do more than we think and we can change more than we have.

As Unitarian Universalists we know that we have a responsibility to this planet and the lives on it. We state it clearly in our last principle "we covenant to promote and affirm respect for the interdependent web of existence of which we are a part." The question for us is not whether we have a responsibility, every religion ever created speaks of a responsibility to the earth, the question for us is what are we willing to do to live up to that responsibility. What are we willing sacrifice to insure that this planet can heal from all that hurts we have inflicted on it, that it may continue to sustain us. Make no mistake about it, the earth will exist with or without us. I like to think we add something of value by inhabiting it. Though our history says otherwise, our future may yet prove that we are more creative than we are destructive. The future begins now.

This is your planet, these are your people, all of them, not just the ones you know or the ones who look like you. What are you willing to do for them? What are you willing to do for yourselves? For in the end it is for you and the legacy you will leave that you make the sacrifices needed to keep the earth sustainable. We here, this morning, are blessed with the means to feed ourselves and our children. And we share that blessing by feeding those who do not have the same resources. But even we will find that if we do not change the ways of our living that the earth will no longer sustain us. So at the very least we must ask what are we willing to do for ourselves?

So here's a suggestion - when you leave this place today, and enjoy some Sabbath time, take a moment and ask yourself the question - what am I willing to do for this earth. And then take a piece of paper and write a love note to the earth and promise her something. Something you will do to help her. She calls out to us, can you not hear her.

She needs us as much as we need her. Now is the time people, tomorrow may be too late. This tiny little world we live in gets smaller every day and everything you do counts for a lot more. Make it count for the good. It will take some sacrifices and it will take our hearts and hands to do the work of repairing the world. I can do it, you can do it, we can do it together.

Amen, blessed be, ashay.