



Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Athens

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“It’s the End of the World as We Know It – and I Feel Fine”

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Centering Thoughts:

What the caterpillar calls the end of the world, the Master calls the butterfly. Richard Bach

The end of the world is on people’s minds. We have the power to destroy or save ourselves, but the question is what do you do with that responsibility. Nicolas Cage

I feel pretty good. My body actually looks like an old banana, but it’s fine. Mike Piazza

Everything is going to be fine in the end. If it’s not fine it’s not the end. Oscar Wilde

Reflection:

So... How is everyone feeling this morning? Ok, how many of you are feeling “Fine?” If you are feeling fine right now please raise your hands....No really, not a trick question. Raise them up if you are feeling “fine”....Terrific... Well I do feel fine also. We tend to focus on our own individual situations and if they are doing well we will feel fine.

I know some of you are personally facing some rough patches but I am hoping that most of you are doing well this morning. Personally, my health ain’t too bad; I still have money in my retirement account and most of all I am here today with you all, enjoying this lovely building and the chance to be here in this pulpit. So I do feel fine...

However, maybe we should feel so fine. Have you all been paying attention lately? In 1987 R.E.M. released their song “It’s The End of the World As We Know It” and as I listen to them I cannot help but wonder that perhaps there are a lot of things that are really disturbing in this world.

Now we just got through with another election and I for one am glad that I will not have to see or hear another political ad for at least a few more months. No matter who you support I think you will have to concede that those constant attack ads are really annoying. But the real problem is the intense division in this country, (and in fact in most of the world) between the two poles of the political spectrum. The lies, the attacks, the vitriol and the simple fact that no one is listening to each other or even believing what is being said is very disturbing and I think quite unhealthy for our Democracy. Now this is not the place to take any side or comment on the election results but I just wish folks would treat each other with a little more respect.

Regardless of that, reading, viewing or listening to the news makes me worry about the end of the world as we know it. The rise of poverty and homelessness, the widening wealth gap between the ½ percent and the rest of us, the treatment of immigrants both documented and undocumented, the world wide refugee crisis, racial and gender discrimination and the killing of un armed men and boys of color are real and horrid problems which are disturbing to any person on conscience. But those are not the issues I will focus on today.

I want to draw your attention to some of the other serious problems that this planet is facing. Maybe after looking at some of the things going on in this world we might not be feeling so fine... but perhaps these are things we each can do something about.

First we need to think about the air we breathe. I don't have statistics for Athens but let us look down the road at Atlanta. The American Lung Association's 2018 "State of the Air" report found an increase in the number of unhealthy days of high ozone. This is in keeping with a trend seen across the nation of higher ozone pollution levels. The report found that unhealthy levels of smog, year-round particles and short-term particle pollution in Atlanta put our citizens at risk for premature death and other serious health effects such as asthma attacks and greater difficulty breathing for those living with a lung disease like COPD according to June Dean of the American Lung Association in Georgia. She noted "more than four in 10 Americans – 133.9 million – live in counties that have unhealthy levels of either ozone or particle pollution, where their health is at risk." Pollution is one of the biggest global killers, affecting over 100 million people. That's comparable to global diseases like malaria and HIV. People who live in places with high levels of air pollutants have a 20% higher risk of death from lung cancer than people who live in less-polluted areas. According to a scientific study, about 1 in every 8 deaths that occur in the world is somehow associated with air pollution.

We can reduce air pollution personally by cutting back on our automobile use and driving cleaner cars but we can do more by answering the Lung Association's call to encourage the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency to implement and enforce the law instead of trying to roll back major safeguards like the Clean Power Plan and cleaner cars, both steps that help us fight climate change and reduce air pollution.

The waters of this planet are also at risk for pollution. Approximately 40% of the lakes in America are too polluted for fishing, aquatic life, or swimming. Each year 1.2 trillion gallons of untreated sewage, storm water, and industrial waste are dumped into US water. In 1975, the National Academy of Sciences estimated that ocean-based sources, such as cargo ships and cruise liners had dumped 14 billion pounds of garbage into the ocean. The Mississippi River carries an estimated 1.5 million metric tons of nitrogen pollution into the Gulf of Mexico each year, creating a "dead zone" in the Gulf each summer about the size of New Jersey. We know massive deadly oil spills are created after tankers or drilling rigs have accidents but in fact, for every million tons of oil shipped, there is always one ton of oil spilled – without any accident. Over 1 million seabirds and 100,000 sea mammals are killed by pollution every year.

The dumping of garbage, especially plastics including plastic bottles and bags and even drinking straws is another major environmental problem approaching disastrous proportions. An average

family in North America, Europe and Australia throws away more than a ton of garbage every year. Every year, more than 14 billion pounds of garbage is dumped into the world's ocean. Most of it is plastic that is toxic to marine life. Thousands of marine animals including fish, turtles, dolphins etc. die after swallowing plastic bags that resemble jellyfish. In America alone, 3 million plastic bottles are thrown away every hour. However, it takes up to 500 years for the plastic bottle to decompose. Almost half of all seabird species, 22% of cetaceans (whales and dolphins), all sea turtle species and a growing list of fish species have been documented with plastic found in or around their bodies. Current research indicates that the Great Pacific Garbage Patch is rapidly accumulating plastic. A team surveyed buoyant ocean plastic with multiple vessels in July through September 2015 and aerial surveys in 2016. They wrote, "Our model, calibrated with data from multi-vessel and aircraft surveys, predicted at least 79 (45–129) thousand tons of ocean plastic are floating inside an area of 1.6 million km² (an area twice the size of Texas) ; a figure four to sixteen times higher than previously reported." There is now a program to try to clean up some of the floating garbage but that will remove only a percentage of the garbage on the surface and once the plastic breaks down into small particles they sink to the ocean bottom and will not be picked up. These small pieces are still toxic and get into the food chain.

This garbage and other environmental factors are endangering many species around the world. There are over 3,300 animal species that are threatened with extinction. Many have died out in recent years. The last male Northern White Rhino died last May. Let's look at another threatened animal:

The beautiful Hawksbill sea turtles have a lovely shell which has been prized for tortoise shell jewelry. Like many sea turtles, hawksbills are a critically endangered species due mostly to human impact. Hawksbill eggs are still eaten around the world despite the turtle's international protected status, and they are often killed for their stunning shells. These graceful sea turtles are also threatened by accidental capture in fishing nets.

Worldwide, hundreds of thousands of sea turtles a year are accidentally caught in shrimp trawl nets, on longline hooks and in fishing gillnets—a threat known as bycatch. Sea turtles need to reach the surface to breathe, and therefore many drown once caught. Turtles are highly migratory and are very likely to come in contact with a fishery, particularly in shrimp gillnets and longlines. As fishing activity expands, this threat is more of a problem.

Eating plastic bags thinking them to be jellyfish can also make them sick. Human activities have tipped the scales against the survival of these ancient mariners. Nearly all species of sea turtle are classified as Endangered. Slaughtered for their eggs, meat, skin and shells, sea turtles suffer from poaching and over-exploitation. They also face habitat destruction and accidental capture in fishing gear. Climate change has an impact on turtle nesting sites. It alters sand temperatures, which then affects the sex of hatchlings.

Climate change previously called global warming is the last factor we will examine which threatening to end the world as we know it.

Climate change refers to the rise in average surface temperatures on Earth. An overwhelming scientific consensus maintains that climate change is due primarily to the human use of fossil fuels, which releases carbon dioxide and other greenhouse gases into the air. The gases trap heat within the atmosphere, which can have a range of effects on ecosystems, including rising sea levels, severe weather events, and droughts that render landscapes more susceptible to wildfires. In the American West, wild fires used to be rare seasonal events. Now they are occurring year round with increasing frequency and severity.

Melting of the polar ice caps not only raises sea levels but with less snow and ice on the ground less sunlight and heat is reflected back into space, accelerating the warming of the planet.

There is now doubt that climate change is a real and pressing problem. Scientists have high confidence that global temperatures will continue to rise for decades to come, largely due to greenhouse gases produced by human activities. A report issued in October by the UN Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change describes a world of worsening food shortages and wildfires, and a mass die-off of coral reefs as soon as 2040 — a period well within the lifetime of much of the global population. Global climate change has already had observable effects on the environment. Glaciers have shrunk, ice on rivers and lakes is breaking up earlier, plant and animal ranges have shifted and trees are flowering sooner.

Effects that scientists had predicted in the past would result from global climate change are now already occurring: loss of sea ice, accelerated sea level rise and longer, more intense heat waves. The intensity, frequency and duration of North Atlantic hurricanes, as well as the frequency of the strongest (Category 4 and 5) hurricanes, have all increased since the early 1980s as I am sure you have been aware from news reports. Average U.S. precipitation has increased since 1900, but some areas have had increases greater than the national average with severe flooding as in North Carolina and Texas, and some areas have had decreases. More winter and spring precipitation is projected for the northern United States, and less for the Southwest, over this century.

Projections of future climate over the U.S. suggest that the recent trend towards increased heavy precipitation events will continue. This trend is projected to occur even in regions where total precipitation is expected to decrease, such as the Southwest. Droughts in the Southwest and heat waves (periods of abnormally hot weather lasting days to weeks) everywhere are projected to become more intense, and cold waves less intense everywhere.

Summer temperatures are projected to continue rising, and a reduction of soil moisture, which exacerbates heat waves, is projected for much of the western and central U.S. in summer. Record heat waves are repeatedly happening...remember last summer?

Global sea level has risen by about 8 inches since reliable record keeping began in 1880. It is projected to rise another 1 to 4 feet by 2100. This is the result of added water from melting land ice and the expansion of seawater as it warms. In the next several decades, storm surges and high tides could combine with sea level rise and land subsidence to further increase flooding in many regions. Sea level rise will continue past 2100 because the oceans take a very long time to respond to warmer

conditions at the Earth's surface. Ocean waters will therefore continue to warm and sea level will continue to rise for many centuries at rates equal to or higher than those of the current century.

Fire ants, ticks and the Asian Tiger Mosquito have increased in population and expanded their range northward. The Tiger mosquito carries the Zika virus, West Nile and dengue fever. I do not need to tell you about the dangers and annoyance of fire ants. Ticks carry Lyme disease and Rocky Mountain spotted fever as well as several other illnesses. A newly discovered condition called alpha-gal allergy is carried by ticks and causes the sufferer to become deathly ill whenever they eat any red meat. It may never go away in affected persons. Imagine if you could never again eat meat without becoming sick. This is prevalent here in the southeast and is spreading into New England.

Warmer winters let insects survive in greater numbers further north and agricultural pests like the Corn Borer and Japanese Beetles and many pests that attack our forests have increased in numbers and range. The higher CO2 levels and temperatures also seem to have reduced many plant's natural defenses against these insects. Warmer temperatures affect sea life. Coral reefs are dying. Warmer temperatures in the Gulf of Maine had led to increased lobster catches in some recent years but since 2017, the temperatures have risen above the optimum for lobster growth and catches have been dropping precipitously.

Climate change and pollution not only affect our planet but have profound effects on human health and mental wellbeing. These days, there are up to 500 chemicals in an average human body that were not found in humans before 1920.

We need to understand the direct psychiatric impacts of air and water pollution, increased temperature, flooding, opportunistic and pandemic infections, nutritional deficiencies, stress, and other factors on people especially those with current physical or psychiatric conditions. Recent studies indicate a significant increase in suicides related directly to temperature increases as well as long-term negative impacts on cognitive functioning from exposure to air pollution. Higher rates of individual and group violence have also been associated with increases in temperature.

Persons taking various classes of medications, including most classes of psychiatric drugs, are at greater risk of dehydration, hyperthermia, and heat stroke at higher temperatures and require guidance and support to avoid illness or death. Childhood development is particularly threatened by the many toxic factors to which children are and will continue to be exposed.

Anxiety and trauma symptoms/syndromes arise from rapid and extreme changes in one's environment. These include conditions variously described as psychoterratic syndromes, eco-anxiety, and ecological grief. Many clinicians are reporting that their patients are worried about the future with particular emphasis on the geophysical and political environments. We are seeing a myriad of social, cultural, health, and economic consequences of mass migration stimulated, in part, by global environmental disruption.

So do you feel a little less "fine" right now? If these things do not bother you, well you are clearly entitled to your views. If they do concern you, then perhaps this may motivate you to try to do something about these problems. While children make up 10% of the world's population, over 40%

of the global burden of disease falls on them. More than 3 million children under age five die annually from environmental factors. Is there something that you can do to change this?

Here is one possibility:

DoSomething.org is mobilizing young people in every US area code and in 131 countries! You can sign up for a volunteer, social change or civic action campaign to make real-world impact on a cause you care about. DoSomething members have for example claimed to:

- Clothed some America's homeless youth
- Cleaned up 3.7 million cigarette butts
- Run the largest youth-led sports equipment drive

Here at UUFA you can join with the Green Sanctuary team to learn about what this Fellowship is doing to save the planet. Come to their meetings and also the Social Action Committee meetings and check the UUFA Website Social Justice Tab to learn about these programs.

You can help with climate change by reducing your carbon footprints. Educate yourselves on how to do that. Join environmental action groups. Adjust your thermostats' to cooler levels in the winter and warmer in the summer. Drive fuel efficient cars and car pool. Eat less meat and more vegetables which require less fossil fuels to produce and in turn make less methane and CO2 when they are alive. Reduce your garbage output. Don't use plastic straws or bottles. Stop buying bottled water; carry water in reusable environmentally safe bottles. Recycle everything you can.

Finally, get involved politically. Yes, this year's election is over but there are elections every year. You can help register voters, join demonstrations, write letters and contact your representatives. The Environmental Protection Agency and the Clean Air act are being dismantled. I personally am appalled by that. Are you? If so, let elected officials know.

When I think about all that is going wrong with the world I do feel like it may be the start of the end of the world as I know it. However, when I take action that has some possibility of reversing some of the trends that I see; that helps me feel better. If I feel that I am doing something to help make the world a little better, then I do feel fine. Try it yourself and I expect you may feel fine once again. I truly hope that you will.

Questions for Reflection or Discussion:

1. What issues make you concerned that I may be the 'end of the world as you know it'?
2. How much does pollution, endangered species or climate change trouble you?
3. Are you ready to do anything personally to solve these problems? If so, what?
4. Do you think this congregation needs to do more about these problems? What should we be doing?
5. How do you feel about your own political involvement?