

“The Theology of Oil”
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Harvard Unitarian Universalist Church
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On April 20th the Deepwater Horizon exploded and killed eleven workers. 115 crew members survived. Owned and operated by Transocean, and leased to BP until 2013, the Deepwater Horizon sat atop the deepest oil well ever drilled...over 35,000 ft in close to 5000 ft of water.

When others preached on the oil spill in May, June, or July, they didn't know how this chapter would end. We do. 152 days later, the well has finally been killed. Somewhere between 186 and 227 million gallons of oil spilled out into the Gulf of Mexico over approximately 3 months' time. In addition, an unprecedented 1.8 million gallons of toxic chemical dispersants were used to help break up the massive oil slicks.

By comparison, in 1989 the Exxon Valdez, a single-hulled oil tanker carrying 53 million gallons of crude off the coast of Alaska, ran aground spilling 11 million gallons before it could be contained. That is considered by many to be one of the top 15 environmental disasters ever. But the Deepwater Horizon spill was approximately 20 times that size. It will continue to take its toll on the environment for many, many years to come.

This past week there were a couple of massive fish kills in the bayous outside of New Orleans. Tens of thousands...perhaps close to a million fish died. In the pictures of the kill, the dead fish are so thick it looks like you could walk across the bay on top of them.

The Louisiana Department of Wildlife and Fisheries says the kills are not related to oil spill. They say such kills are a normal occurrence and have to do with unseasonably warm temperatures and a depletion of oxygen in those waters during low tide.

Residents, however, point out that the temperatures in New Orleans are always unseasonably warm in September...and that normal fish kills usually include 100's of fish of the same species. But we're now talking close to a million fish of just about every known species in the area, including crabs, eels, stingrays, many different kinds of fish, and even a sperm whale from a local pod. And, coincidentally, it happened just [days] after an oil-soaked tide.¹

We know how this chapter about the leak itself has ended now, but we still don't know how this book will end. Environmental disasters like this one tend to impact their eco-systems for many decades to come.

¹ <http://www.mnn.com/green-tech/research-innovations/blogs/government-denies-bp-oil-involved-in-record-fish-kill>

How do we make sense of such a major disaster? How do we make meaning in times of a crisis like this one? Often we look to theology for help. "Theology" literally means "words about God," and in fact, some people looked to God for answers from the very start.

You may remember hearing that Rick Perry, the Governor of Texas, made a statement in early May saying that the oil spill was "just an act of God," which may not have been preventable. Which left many people wondering...act of God? Or human error? Eventually he retracted his statement, acknowledging that the spill could have been caused by mechanical failure.

Meanwhile, the more liberal media mogul Ted Turner said that he thought the oil spill might be a message from God that we ought not be drilling offshore. Same with the earlier coal mining disaster in West Virginia. "Maybe the Lord's tired of having the mountains of West Virginia, the tops knocked off of them so they can get more coal," he said.

So, where is God in all of this? What might a UU theology of oil entail? Of course, not all UU's find the concept of "God" useful. So instead we might talk about the source of all...or what a physicist might know as "dark matter," or what a Taoist might call "the Tao."

As it says in the Tao te Ching:

The Tao is called the Great Mother:
Empty yet inexhaustible,
It gives birth to infinite worlds...²

Or:

The Tao is like a well:
Used but never used up.
It is like the eternal void:
Filled with infinite possibilities.
It is hidden but always present.
I don't know who gave birth to it.
It is older than God.³

Whatever you call it, if we did indeed arise from a common source, as theologians and scientists have often speculated, then we are all tied together now...no matter how invisible those ties may sometimes seem.

We begin the year with a focus on interdependence and our seventh UU principle: "Respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part."

It is easy to see how the oil spill fits in to this conversation. And in fact there are three levels of interconnection and interdependence that I want to explore briefly this morning.

² #6 from Stephen Mitchell

³ #4 from Stephen Mitchell

First, and most obvious, the spill and how it has affected the Gulf environment. This almost goes without saying. In late May, Katharine Jefferts Schori, the presiding Bishop of the Episcopal Church, wrote:

The still-unfolding disaster in the Gulf of Mexico is good evidence of the interconnectedness of the whole. ... Our collective sins are being visited on those who have had little or no part in them: birds, marine mammals, the tiny plants and animals that constitute the base of the vast food chain in the Gulf, and on which a major part of the seafood production of the United States depends....The hydrocarbons in those coastal marshes and at the base of the food chain leading to marketable seafood resources will taint us all, eventually.⁴

In fact, recently, according to scientists studying the Gulf, we learned that in some areas up to 50% of the algae is already showing signs of stress. It's like "removing the foundation of a house," according to David Hollander. Eventually the effects will work themselves up through the system...

The second level of interdependence that I want to acknowledge has to do with finger pointing. Soon after the rig exploded, people started talking about who might be to blame. Was it Transocean, which built and operated the rig? Was it BP, which leased the rig and called many of the shots? Was it the Federal Government, which failed to regulate and inspect adequately? Whose fault was it?

In the Tao te Ching it says, "...the good person is the teacher of the bad person," but also that "the bad person is the resource of the good person." Derek Lin in his book *The Tao of Daily Life* writes that those lines have much to do with the familiar cliché that "when you point a finger at someone else, three of your fingers point back at yourself."

When we seek faults in others [he says], we are pointing the finger of accusation. We're also throwing stones of recrimination and blame. All too often we do so without thinking about our own faults. We cannot see the glass house in which we live.⁵

In early June, author Tracey Bianchi wrote about this very thing. On Memorial Day she "spent five hours with [as she put it] half the state of Illinois heading home from our annual assault on the state of Wisconsin." She says she sat in that traffic reflecting on the oil spill and on the irony of all of these people, herself included, consuming so much oil while, at the same time, getting angry with government officials and oil company executives.

...Rarely [she wrote] do I hear anyone getting angry with themselves. Really though, I am part of the reason for that oil spill. As I sat on the highway with thousands of

⁴ "A Lesson from the Gulf Oil Spill: We Are All Connected" by Bishop Katharine Jefferts Schori of the Episcopal Church, May 26, 2010.

⁵ Lin, Derek, *The Tao of Daily Life*, page 155.

motorists, all fresh off a weekend that chugged down gallons of gas to fuel boats and other recreational toys, I was reminded once again of the total dichotomy that is my life. On the one hand I want to sit back all smug and hope for the demise of BP and all things petroleum. But I cannot be so quick to hate the oil companies since I really like their product. It gets me from point A to B on a daily basis and it launches me into the state of Wisconsin whenever I need a vacation.

Yes, [BP should have had better protections in place](#). Yes, the Feds should have demanded those safeguards. ... But if I sit around and chatter about all these details I do little to curb the actual problem.

I love my car and I need gas to make it go. That is my problem.

Indeed, that is a problem that most of us share. And so no matter how much we'd like to focus our anger outside of ourselves, we are intimately and intricately connected to the problem. We are complicit.

And finally, a third level of interdependence concerning this oil spill...and this is the big one. This one has to do with how our whole economy, and the global economy...and our very lives...are built on oil. No matter how much we might like to – as individuals – get away from relying on oil, we find it nearly impossible to do. In fact, sometimes it almost seems like the interdependent web of all existence itself has been woven of petroleum.

Here's what I mean. The US alone consumes petroleum at a rate of 19.5 million barrels...a day. I'm no math whiz, but I think that's roughly 7 billion barrels a year. About 71% of that is used for transportation. The other 29% is used for making...well...just about everything else. Fertilizer. Clothing. Toothbrushes. Plastic bottles. Pens. Ink. Upholstry. Tires. CD's. Curtains. Vitamin capsules. Mops. Umbrellas. Roofing. Nylon. Shampoo. Antifreeze. Guitar strings. Heart valves. Dentures. Cold cream. Food preservatives. Antihistamines. Cortisone. Plastic bags. Toilet seats. Balloons. Crayons. Pillows. Deodorant. Insect repellent. Aspirin. Artificial limbs. Soft contact lenses. Perfumes. Soap. Lipstick. Shower curtains. Refrigerators.

You get the idea. Just over 19 gallons of every 42-gallon barrel of crude oil becomes gasoline. The rest is used to make over 6000 common products on which we've come to rely heavily.

It's funny...when I think about theology, I think about how for thousands of years people depended on God. Now we depend on oil. You might say that oil has replaced God in many ways. We've put our faith in it, individually and collectively. The kind of thing which has long been known as idolatry, by the way.

We've woven a web of oil. And it makes me wonder what will happen if the string is cut. Whether you believe in the concept of "peak oil" or not...it is clear that it's getting harder and harder...more expensive and more dangerous...to get oil...and the oil that we're finding is more complicated and costly to extract and to process...the string does appear to be unraveling...

The big question seems to be...once it begins to really unravel, on what will we depend? How will we weave our economy and our lives back together?

And the big answer seems to be that we will have to learn to rely on oil less and on each other more.

This past week I was reading about what has been called “The Transition Town” movement, which helps communities to begin to envision and embrace life beyond oil. The foundational belief of the movement seems to be that humans and human communities are resilient...capable of adapting and changing. We are also immensely creative...and a life without oil could be great if we are able to face it with the ingenuity and innovation of which we are capable. Maybe there’s something good, they have the audacity to say, about a life filled with fresh, local food, strong community relationships, a simpler pace, and less stuff.

This is a very hopeful movement, led by hopeful people. And it seems to me that the church has a role to play in the hope-filled future it proclaims. The role of religion has always been to help people in times of struggle, change and loss. Well, just now we are facing all three on the macro level...living as we are during a time of economic and political instability, climate instability, and resource depletion.

Maybe the role of the church...of this church...is to become a new kind of sanctuary in these troubled times...a center for resilience and survival. A place for the bringing together of people, and for the strengthening of community. A place where people can learn old skills from one another for the facing of new challenges. A place where we can once again learn to rely on one another as if our lives depended on it...because they do.

This week I read an article in Yes! Magazine about how ancient wisdom can help us to survive today’s crises. “Some cultures have stories about change that occurred long ago,” the author said. For instance, the Inupiat people of Alaska have an oral history that goes back 350,000 years...back through “the 7 ice ages.” These stories “explain how communities got through this hardship and change.” According to one member of that community,

Our world was green and then it snowed. It was warm and then it got cold. The few who didn’t die worked together. Snow and ice taught us to be human and think beyond our individual selves. In our legends and our history, snow and ice made us better people and led us to use our minds.

Our stories tell us that we didn’t become real human beings until we became communities, until the welfare of the whole became more important than the welfare of the individual.

We learned from the animals, such as the wolves, to see how they took care of each other.⁶

⁶ Khanna, Sanjay, “Stories that Light up the Dark,” Yes!, Issue 55, Fall 2010.

As human beings, we have a lot to learn...and a lot to relearn. First and foremost that our lives do depend on other lives and that other lives – both human and non-human - depend on ours. Many of us today act as if we don't know that...act as if it isn't really true.

If Unitarian Universalists share a common theology, it seems to me that it is – or ought to be – based on this fact of interdependence. The time is here for us to make that faith manifest in our lives. The time is here for us to live that faith and to share that faith with everyone we meet. For that is where our salvation, and the salvation of the world – literally – will one day lie.

So it is and so it will be.

Amen.