

*A Vision***A Message for All Faiths Unitarian Congregation****By The Rev. CJ McGregor****Delivered on June 19, 2022 by Joyce Ramay**

Our reading this morning was a poem by poet and environmental activist Wendell Berry. It is such a wonderful and relevant poem, it bears repeating:

If we will have the wisdom to survive,  
to stand like slow-growing trees  
on a ruined place, renewing, enriching it,  
if we will make our seasons welcome here,  
asking not too much of earth or heaven,  
then a long time after we are dead  
the lives our lives prepare will live  
there, their houses strongly placed  
upon the valley sides, fields and gardens  
rich in the windows. The river will run  
clear, as we will never know it,  
and over it, birdsong like a canopy.  
On the levels of the hills will be  
green meadows, stock bells in noon shade.  
On the steeps where greed and ignorance cut down  
the old forest, an old forest will stand,  
its rich leaf-fall drifting on its roots.  
The veins of forgotten springs will have opened.  
Families will be singing in the fields.  
In their voices they will hear a music  
risen out of the ground. They will take  
nothing from the ground they will not return,

whatever the grief at parting. Memory,  
native to this valley, will spread over it  
like a grove, and memory will grow  
into legend, legend into song, song  
into sacrament. The abundance of this place,  
the songs of its people and its birds,  
will be health and wisdom and indwelling  
light. This is no paradisaal dream.  
Its hardship is its possibility.

Berry reminds us that the hope of the nurturer, that's us, against the impermanence of mortal life lies in the mystical connection through the land with the generations gone and to come. What remains, permanent in its cycles, is the land itself, the natural order. Our work as nurturers is to create green sanctuary all around us. And so, we are challenged by the consequences of climate change. Climate change is already here, but we know that its worst impacts are waiting in the wings for future generations.

As we progress through the 21st century, the true contours and effects of climate change are coming into sharper focus. Seemingly on a daily basis we are bearing witness to one climate-related disaster after another, compounding human suffering and misery now and for years to come. But we know, too, that what we have witnessed thus far is only a prelude to what lies ahead in the face of continued inaction and foot-dragging. More frequent and more damaging impacts are highly likely in the decades to come. To put it a different way, future generations desperately need us to do something now in order to give them a chance when it's their turn.

Luckily, there is something we can do now. In fact, there are many different things that we—people alive today—can do to avoid or at least deflect the worst impacts of climate change on future generations. And not only can we do something: we have a responsibility to do so, to take concrete steps to ensure that this bleak future is prevented. The question is, how do we encourage people to take this responsibility seriously, or to even recognize it in the first place?

A growing body of research in the behavioral and social sciences can provide actionable insights. Over the past two decades, researchers have explored a wide variety of approaches to increasing people's recognition and acceptance of climate change as an issue of personal and collective responsibility and action. To name just a few, these include leveraging people's motivation to leave a positive legacy, encouraging them to reflect on the sacrifices made by previous generations on their behalf, and emphasizing awe-inspiring and unselfish values in environmental messaging.

But do perceptions of responsibility towards the future really matter? After all, we all know there are things we should do in our lives—eat better, exercise more, be more generous—but choose not to. In fact, recent data found that people who feel a personal responsibility to protect future generations are significantly more likely to worry about climate change, support pro-environmental policies, and believe that climate change represents a critical threat to humanity. The data found that this perception of responsibility was, for the most part, unrelated to news consumption, gender and racial identities, and income level. Perhaps more surprisingly, perceived responsibility was also not meaningfully related to political ideology, one of the strongest drivers of climate change public opinion. Perceptions of responsibility towards future generations are a robust mechanism that can be harnessed to promote pro-environmental action and policy support, regardless of individual and group differences previously shown to sow discord in the context of climate change.

Importantly, the effects of responsibility towards future generations could be linked to support for specific policy proposals and collective actions, including opposition to the construction of pipelines, opposition to the use of fracking as a drilling method, and support for enforcing stricter limits on the amount of carbon dioxide produced by societies. Increased perceptions of responsibility also predicted increased support for funding renewable energy initiatives. People who felt a strong responsibility to protect future generations also considered the protection of the environment as an important personal value. These people were also more likely to experience awe towards nature. Those who expressed increased perceived responsibility towards future others were also more likely to see climate change and global warming as a threat and an issue that demands more of our attention, and more likely to accept the science of climate change.

These findings are promising, as they suggest at least three important things:

- 1) People who consider themselves responsible for protecting future generations also express endorsement of values and beliefs associated with wanting to protect the natural world. These people express more support for pro-environmental policies, they see climate change for the threat that it is, they are more likely to accept scientific findings on the subject, and they endorse values that aim to protect the environment overall. Perceived responsibility towards the future can translate into concrete action to protect the environment for future generations.
- 2) Perceptions of responsibility towards future generation are, for the most part, independent of many socio-demographic variables previously identified as barriers to public engagement on climate change. This suggests that future efforts focused on increasing such perceptions may be able to circumvent or overcome established obstacles to pro-environmental action.
- 3) Most respondents in the survey I studied strongly endorsed a personal responsibility towards future generations. Nearly 50% considered such responsibility “extremely important” to themselves and another 38% said it was “very important.” Americans tend to disagree on many things, particularly across the political aisle, so finding such strong agreement suggests perceptions of responsibility towards the future may represent a powerful starting point for meaningful collective action on the major issues of our time.

Let's face it—dealing with the environmental challenges we face is tough, in no small part because to do so will require the present generation to take costly action to protect people who will be alive far in the future. We will need to leverage every resource available to encourage individuals, communities, organizations, businesses, and entire nations to do what is needed. This includes our psychological, social, cultural, and spiritual resources in addition to the political, economic, and technological ones we tend to look towards first. Widely shared perceptions of responsibility towards future generations represent an important and powerful tool for shifting behavior in a positive direction to confront the climate change challenge before us. Luckily, such perceptions of responsibility are already widely shared within American society. Now it's time to put them to work.

So, what needs to change to make change happen? Bringing future generations to the negotiating table could be a solution. It is time to pierce the alienating jargon around sustainability and think about our decisions from the point of view of children in 2050. It is their quality of life that should be the benchmark when debating environmental protection, youth unemployment, sustainable pension systems, the level of public debt, and so on. Some of us will still be alive to play with these children, and we have never had more knowledge and ability to ensure that that play takes place in a better world.

Our vision is not unlike that of Berry's. Climate action and climate justice call us to mitigate (reduce) climate change, along with better adaptation (coping) and increasing resilience (ability to adapt) to increasingly disastrous climate impacts. It calls us to balance urgency with open minds and hearts to learn and collaborate with communities most impacted. The result will be a difficult but creative and exciting transition to a clean renewable world with opportunity, survivability and justice for all, now and for future generations. It calls us to protect this place we call earth and to environmental justice if for the only reason is to offer future generations a full, healthy, and meaning lives.

May it be so.