

With Fresh Eyes, Insistent on Beauty

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Reading: Krista Tippett

Host of *Speaking of Faith* National Public Radio program

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Majora Carter...is not a religious activist. But her work drives at the deep interaction between social ethics, economic injustice, and ecological hazard. The South Bronx, where she grew up, is one of New York City's poorest neighborhoods and historically, perhaps, its most environmentally toxic...

Growing up in the 1970s and 80s when the South Bronx was literally burning, Majora Carter felt she had no option but to flee. She went to Wesleyan University and trained as a visual artist. She moved home again almost by accident, out of money and heading to grad school. But her study of art brought her back to a ravaged, demoralized community with fresh eyes, insistent on beauty.

For Carter, environmentalism is organically about people knowing there is beauty within themselves and expecting to see that beauty reflected in the world around them. This knowledge, she says, is especially hard for poor people in a beleaguered — and polluted — community to grasp. But by way of the remarkable organization she founded, Sustainable South Bronx, it is taking visible hold in the form of "cool roofs" and a restored riverfront and the creation of "green collar" jobs.

Majora Carter's work truly breaks the bounds of environmentalism defined by recycling and driving cleaner — and often more expensive — cars. In her neighborhood, she says, recycling has long been a way of life because of scarcity, and many people don't own cars. Her kind of grassroots "social justice environmentalism" is about meeting people where they are.

In broad perspective a better ecology in the South Bronx will be good for the rainforest in Brazil, Majora Carter knows. But her work must begin with ecologically bound issues that touch the people around her in the here and now, such as asthma and obesity and unemployment. These realities are intimately linked with environmentalism in its most comprehensive, sustainable sense.

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Martin Luther King, Jr., in his 1963 *Letter from a Birmingham Jail*, wrote, “I am cognizant of the interrelatedness of all communities and states. I cannot sit idly by in Atlanta and not be concerned about what happens in Birmingham. Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny.”

Though this beautiful and powerful writing was in reference to the issues of race relations and civil rights of his time, it is an easy task of the imagination to expand Dr. King’s notion of the “inescapable network of mutuality” to include the human connection with planet earth. As we engage global warming, it is important to remember we are not individual incarnations of Sisyphus eternally rolling a rock uphill, but that we are addressing the network of mutuality between two large and intertwined organisms: the human species and the planetary ecosystem.

When I contemplated speaking about global warming, my first reaction was that I could not speak to this. This was a task for Scott, my older brother, an environmental scientist. He has worked specifically on the issue of global warming for over 15 years. You may recall about a year ago that the United States Supreme Court made a legal ruling forcing the Environmental Protection Agency to regulate automobile emissions. Well, Scott was the scientist who organized other environmental scientists to write an *amici curiae* brief (a “friend of the court” brief) for that legal case – a case his wife, Kirsten Engel, an environmental lawyer, in collaboration with other environmental lawyers, brought to the Supreme Court in the first place. So, if there is such a thing as fame and honor by association, I hope that I am basking in the glory right now!

The task I set for myself today, however, is to articulate what might be described as a faithful Unitarian Universalist response to global warming. This challenge is central to and in alignment with what is central to the role of the church and minister: we both have an ancient obligation to the larger world, to the despised, to the excluded, to the marginalized. In the context of our modern behaviors, Gaia – mother earth – has become a despised outcast and an excluded alien. As people of faith, we are called to engage in healing and atonement for our human separation from nature and our acts of planetary defilement.

My sense is that I do not need to convince any of you that global warming is real, or that action needs to be taken. But if we take action simply because we think it is “right,” then – though the action may be entirely worthwhile – we may as well join the Sierra Club and not describe our work as a faith-based initiative. My interest then is primarily around the source of or the foundation for our social and justice work – that is, when we take action, how may we ground our action in our unique history and faith tradition?

In my efforts to approach global warming from a faith perspective, I use as my first source of authority my own experience. As a white male, I discovered support and empowerment for this approach from womanist theology, a theology originated and articulated by Black women. Womanist theology emerged from a book by Alice Walker called, *In Search of our Mother’s Gardens*. In that book, Walker describes a “womanist” as a woman committed to an integrated analysis of race, gender and class. This theology arises from black women dissatisfied with the feminist movement because it did not take into account unique

circumstances of black women, and from a dissatisfaction with much of Black theology because that movement did not take into account unique circumstances of gender.

In the introduction to a collection of womanist essays, editor Emilie Townes writes that womanist thought, “seeks to debunk the notions of universals and absolutes. [It] is intentionally and unapologetically biased. Its bias is for a diverse and faithful community of witnesses. These witnesses are an active force for love and justice in the midst of oppression and fallenness...” Townes goes on to say that “the anchor for womanist thought is the African-American church [which] is not only religious, but social...Life in the church – from preacher’s admonitions to choir crescendos to board meetings and power struggles – are all resources and guardians of communal memory and accountability.”

In addition to theological discourse, an intrinsic ingredient of womanist theology is the power and authority of personal narrative in the context of communal memory and accountability. This is a powerful – and empowering – twist on traditional Western thought that attempts to separate the mind and body, thoughts and feelings, as two separate and unrelated entities.

In my life, emotion has always been a core part of my being – as has theater, dance, drawing, painting, writing, and music. And though I read a lot of books as an English major and as a seminary student, I tend to find more relevant truth in my own feelings and experience, and am more drawn toward engagement with people. Yet in the context of being the younger brother of a guy who excelled in math and science and physics, who was heaped with praise, time and attention from teachers, family, friends, relatives, and later from news outlets and prestigious science organizations, it has, at times, been difficult for me to honor my own endeavors. So when I discover resources that give credence and grant legitimacy to emotion and personal experience, I feel more whole and more empowered. Personal experience is not the entirety of a theological approach to the work of justice, but it is a place where we – and certainly I – may find a source of empowerment, wisdom and creativity as we engage the world.

Part of my story includes a deep experiential love for the natural world. I grew up playing outdoors a lot. Our family lived on a dead-end street next to a natural flowing creek along a parkway in the city of Milwaukee, and my brother and I played there extensively. Our family also took many camping trips. I did not know until I was older that our camping was the result of being poor – that our parents could take us to see the world if they could do it cheaply. But to me, I just knew we camped a lot, and I loved it! After high school, I went off to college in Idaho, where I loved the mountains and got into them as often as I could. For many years after college, I spent my summers working with foster kids as a Trail Leader on a Work Program in the wilderness areas of Idaho. Whenever I engage in theological work or social action related to the natural environment, I cannot ignore this love of the outdoors, these resources and my personal experience.

Our Unitarian and Universalist faith traditions also have long, rich, and legitimate histories. Though we encompass people from a variety of theological positions – including theists, atheists, humanists and pagans – it is also true that our Unitarian Universalist tradition is deeply rooted in the Christian tradition, which itself is deeply rooted in the Jewish tradition. As a people of faith, we may draw on authoritative and ancient resources and experience as we address the issue of global warming today. I believe that one of the most powerful aspects of our Unitarian Universalist faith – both historic and present with us today – is the belief in continuing revelation.

Unitarian theology – the belief in only one God (not a trinity) – has existed since the very origin of Christianity. Though Unitarians always believed Jesus was human and not divine, they also believed Jesus taught the remainder of humanity to discover the fire he had – the fire of God, the fire of the eternal, the fire of the universe – within each person. As I interpret Christian Scriptures, Jesus does not tell us what to think or believe, he teaches us how to go about engaging a life that helps us discover our connections to each other, and our connection to the forces that form us and bind us all together.

For Unitarians, this interpretation of Jesus opens the door to a divine truth: it is the truth that revelation was not conveyed in completeness when Jesus spoke, and that revelation was not sealed when the Biblical canon was printed in a book. This divine truth – and also a truth of science – is that revelation continues, each day, in each life, in each moment. The truth of continuing revelation is the truth of imagination. We see religious stories not as inerrant historical records, but as powerful sources of imagination, metaphor and meaning.

As I prepared this talk, I was delighted to discover relevant commentary in my Harper Collins Study Bible (the Bible I used in seminary) regarding the first two chapters of Genesis. The editors write:

[1:1 – 2:3] The creation story serves as a preface not just to Genesis but to the entire Hebrew Bible. Recounting the origin of the cosmos and its glorious centerpiece, earth, it shows God masterfully orchestrating the events of creation. Each phase follows more or less the same basic pattern established on day one: divine command, result, divine approval, enumeration of the day. But the effect is anything but monotonous. Like a musical theme with variations, the story shows the world gradually becoming more mobile and complex, until, by the sixth day, it is ready for self-perpetuation through procreation...Remarkably, the story's order of life-forms resembles that of our modern theory of evolution: vegetation, swarming creatures, fish, birds, animals (mammals), and human beings.

The editors comment that the word “good” (as in, “And God saw that it was good”) suggests both, “viable” and “intrinsically good.” They say “the purpose of every creation is good and for the benefit of all.” Finally, the editors write:

[2:4 – 3:24] The Garden of Eden story recounts the beginning of human life and culture as well as the first human transgression and its punishment. In presenting our present reality as an “exile” from a prior perfection, it portrays allegorically the origin of the awareness, in every lifetime, of life's difficulties and the need for human interdependence. By the end of the story [in the third chapter], the groundwork for civilized life has been laid.

As the character of God in the story of Genesis creates, so we are made in the image of that God. We also create. We also participate in and imagine things that never used to exist, and then we create them and make them real. And often we too say of our creations, especially our offspring, “It is good.” At the same time, we Unitarian Universalists are also aware of life's difficulties and understand the need for human interdependence. This is one factor that led, in the 1980s, to the inclusion in our seven principles the statement that we covenant to affirm and promote “the interdependent web of existence, of which we are a part.”

This principle of interdependency is a core component of our Unitarian Universalist faith, it is an element in the myriad stories of human origins in world religions, and it is an established theory in science. This captivating theory is known as Systems Theory, and may well be a paradigm shift in science.

A leading proponent of Systems Theory is Fritjof Capra, a physicist who uses the metaphor of ecology to describe life and existence. Twenty-five years ago he wrote a book called, *The Turning Point*. In that book, Capra writes that, “A living organism is a self-organizing system...The two principal dynamic phenomena of self-organization are self-renewal – the ability of living systems continuously to renew and recycle their components while maintaining the integrity of their overall structure – and self-transcendence – the ability to reach out creatively beyond physical and mental boundaries in the processes of learning, development, and evolution.”

As a minister with the heart of a poet – and as a lover of music, art, theater and the Idaho wilderness – I am struck most in this scientific description by the awareness of and need for transcendence and creativity. Though I know so little about science, it seems that the more I learn, the more I hear scientists use words like “beauty” and “creativity” to describe their work and their observations. These are also words I find essential to my work as a minister.

Recently I listened to Krista Tippett on her National Public Radio show called “Speaking of Faith.” In the episode called “Discovering Where We Live,” Tippet interviews Majora Carter, a woman who grew up in the South Bronx, but then escaped to college. Tippet says, “When she went away, Majora Carter trained as an artist, not an environmentalist. But looking back now, she says her study of art helped her come back to a ravaged, demoralized community with fresh eyes insistent on beauty.” Later, during the interview, Carter says:

I think originally I looked at the arts as a way to kind of insulate myself against...the horrible things that I had to see in my daily life when I was young...it was a way to become somebody else or see things in a different way, but I do think that it really did help support...the work that I do right now because it helps me see things, again, in a way that I didn't before. So when I looked at our waterfront...I didn't necessarily see only the industry that was there. I didn't only see...some of the garbage that was floating in the river. I saw possibilities. I was like, this place can be transformed. And that is, I think, what inspires me...[M]ost people are not going to go to school for environmental studies or anything like that, but they do have essential understanding of what is true and what is beautiful and what is going to help make their lives whole.”

As I understand it, this is a primary task of religion – to help us understand what is true and beautiful, and to help make our lives whole. It follows then in our work to address the issue of global warming, that one of our most powerful Unitarian Universalist theological resources is our belief in continuing revelation. It is a belief in the power of imagination. Dr. Martin Luther King used creativity to counter brutality. Black women articulated their creativity to counter oppression. Majora Carter used her creativity to imagine possibilities and eliminate pollution. As we Unitarian Universalists engage the issue of global warming, I can only imagine what we may do with our creativity!

I am not so much issuing a call to action today as I am attempting to incite creative and healthy use of imagination. To create a cleaner world, we have to first imagine it, and then we need to imagine ways to get there.

On the website of the Minnesota Unitarian Universalist Social Justice Association, I read that one goal of that organization is to “Prepare UUs to do powerful social change work, using a *reflection, action, collaboration* approach.” This is precisely the direction to take. The alternative is cynicism and apathy. One role of religion, and an inherent quality of faith, is to provide a creative vision of hope to melt cynicism and apathy. As someone who has often worked with groups, I know creativity – and cohesion – only increases the more that people are empowered and unified by an inspiring vision. A unified vision is most powerful when it is the result of collaborating systems. Collaborating systems, the ones that exhibit self-renewal and self-transcendence, the ones that create fish and fowl and everything that creeps upon the earth, the ones that create male and female, are the systems that see, create, and inspire beauty. Imagination creates beauty. And we see that it is very good.