**Environmental Crisis, Religious Education, and the Local Faith Community**

Rev. Dan Harper

Unitarian Universalist Church of Palo Alto

505 E. Charleston Ave., Palo Alto, CA 94306

danrharper@aol.com

**Abstract:**

As a religious educator based in a local faith community, I find sacred texts are not as important as might be expected in one post-Christian congregation. I argue that effective religious approaches to addressing the global environmental crisis are likely to be messy and embodied; and the perspectives of womanist and non-Western theologies can provide a useful theoretical framework for understanding this embodied religious education, as does theologian Bernard Loomer's conception of the “Web of Life.”

**\***Rev. Dan Harper is an ordained minister in fellowship with the Unitarian Universalist Association, and received his Master of Divinity degree from Meadville Lombard Theological School, Chicago. He currently serves as Associate Minister of Religious Education at the Unitarian Universalist Church of Palo Alto.

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**Introduction**

Since at least the 1970s and the birth of the modern environmental movement, theologians and scholars of religion have paid a good deal of attention to how religion can support environmentalism and environmental justice. An important part of this scholarly attention has been directed at interpreting sacred texts and narratives to support environmentalism and environmental justice.[[1]](#endnote-1) Both I, and the local faith community I serve, sometimes use this scholarly work to help inform and shape our response to the environmental crisis.

As much as I appreciate the scholarly work that has been done on this topic, I find a gap between this scholarly work and the work we do in our local congregation. Most people in our congregation have little time for reading sacred texts, let alone reading scholarly works. Our lives are filled with family and personal matters—raising children, going to school or working at jobs or coping with unemployment, caring for aging parents or declining spouses, etc. Many of us are also active in social justice work—our congregation is particularly concerned with homelessness and affordable housing, peacemaking, and managing the global environmental crisis, but we also are fighting racism, working to end modern slavery, dealing with the immigration problem, etc. As a minister of religious education, I myself have little time to read scholarly work, given the demands of teaching children’s classes, advising youth groups, managing volunteers, administering programs, fundraising, counseling people in crisis, etc.

Teaching, managing, administering, and counseling; caring, coping, working, and handling family responsibilities—these leave little time for reading or study. From one point of view, these mundane human relationships crowd out the divine. From another point of view, this is where the divine thrives, growing in the midst of mundane relationships. The poet Marge Piercy, in a poem we sometimes read in our worship services, says:

Weave real connections, create real nodes, build real houses.

Live a life you can endure: Make love that is loving.

Keep tangling and interweaving and taking more in,

a thicket and bramble wilderness to the outside but to us

interconnected with rabbit runs and burrows and lairs.[[2]](#endnote-2)

We could try to clear a straight path through the thickets and brambles of ordinary life, to cut through the thickets that lie between sacred text and our lives. As a religious educator, I have attempted to do just this in teaching children and teens: to try to develop straight-line connections between sacred texts and young people’s lives. But trying to make direct connections in religious education has never worked as well as “tangling and interweaving and taking more in.” With that in mind, I decided to document the existing “rabbit runs and burrows and lairs” of our congregation’s religious education program, with its interconnections spreading like tangled rhizomes of plants—to document how a real-world congregation resists “an artificial unity” and instead celebrates “the messiness of becoming.”[[3]](#endnote-3)

Those of us who do documentary work, as opposed to scholarly work, use language that is “too subjective” for scholarly articles; we write in the first person singular, not in the scholarly passive voice.[[4]](#endnote-4) As writers, photographers, and filmmakers, we attempt “to ascertain what is, what can be noted, recorded, pictured,” and we hope to “elicit the interest of others, and ... provide a context, so that an incident, for instance, is connected to the conditions that informed and prompted its occurrence.”[[5]](#endnote-5) Documentary work can be wordy, non-linear, and overly passionate; documentarians may avoid firm conclusions. By so doing, documentarians preserve the tangled messiness of what they have witnessed.

In documenting religious education programs in my congregation, I have changed names and personal details, and sometimes combined identities, to protect the privacy of those whom I document, except where I asked for permission to quote someone directly.

**Documenting a Local Faith Community**

Most Sunday mornings, you will see me standing outside the door to the Main Hall on the campus of the Unitarian Universalist Church of Palo Alto (UUCPA), greeting families and individuals as they come up the covered walkway from the parking lot and the bike racks, or in the other direction from the front garden. On one particular Sunday morning, Reva, age 12, and her father wave at me as they walk up from their electric car. Reva is looking forward to “Pi Day,” March 14; she has memorized pi to over a hundred digits. When I comment that Pi Day is less fun this year than last, because last year was 3/14/15, Reva’s father points out that if you round up pi to four digits after the decimal point, you have 3.1416. Reva’s family is committed to fighting climate change, and they purchased an electric Nissan Leaf soon after it came on the market. This family is typical of many Silicon Valley families in the congregation: they celebrate Pi Day, the children are well-versed in STEM (science, technology, engineering, and math) learning, and they show their commitment to the global environmental crisis by embracing new technological solutions.

Inside the Main Hall, the senior minister, Amy Morgenstern, has started the service. Three sixth grade girls, Zoe, Becky, and Eva, say “Hi!” to me as they race through the door to take up their usual places in the back corner of the Main Hall. All our children and teens spend the first fifteen minutes of every service in the Main Hall before they go off to Sunday school. While some children prefer to sit with their parents and pay attention to the service, these sixth graders sit quietly in a corner and pay attention to each other.

I finish greeting latecomers, slipping into the Main Hall as Beverly, the lay worship associate, reads this week’s centering words. “With our centering words each week,” says Beverly, “we draw on the many sources of our living tradition.” She reads a short excerpt from a contemporary poem; then she rings a bell, inviting everyone “to follow the sound of the bell into silence.” I’m standing next to where Zoe, Becky, and Maria are sitting. They are still interacting through gestures and facial expressions, and though they are not making any noise I would not say that they are *spiritually* silent; and I’m pretty sure they didn’t heard the centering words Beverly just read.

Everybody stands to sing the first hymn together. Most of the children know this hymn by heart, a contemporary spiritual song called “Come Sing a Song with Me.” One fifth grader stands on her chair, holding on to a parent, leaning her head back, her whole body involved in singing this, her favorite song. Our congregation, a member congregation of the Unitarian Universalist Association (UUA), could be described as “post-Christian”: we do not affirm Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior; most people in our congregation are atheists, while others might call themselves humanists, Buddhists, pagans, Transcendentalists, etc. Yet to non-Christians, we look like Christians: we meet on Sunday mornings, and our religious services resemble standard U.S. Protestant Christian worship services, etc.

At the beginning of the last verse of “Come Sing a Song with Me,” I open the side door to the Main Hall, and forty or so children run pell-mell out the door and across the patio towards their Sunday school classrooms. Two generations ago, the children going off to Sunday school would have been almost entirely white, reflecting both a deep racial divide in American religious life, and the fact that the city of Palo Alto was over 90% white. Today, the city of Palo Alto is about 65% white while the surrounding county is now white-minority; nearly a third of the population of Palo Alto is foreign-born.[[6]](#endnote-6) On this Sunday, the children going off to Sunday school are about 75% white; the non-white children at UUCPA are mostly of East and South Asian descent, but also of African descent, Latino/a, Middle Eastern, etc.

While the children race each other to see who will be first in their classrooms (not necessarily because they love class; in some classrooms there are one or two couches, and the first ones in the classroom will get a seat on a couch), I reflect on the invisible economic differences between them. The median household income in Santa Clara County is close to $95,000, the highest median household income of any county in the U.S.; at the same time only 13.3% of households have an income in the range of $50,000-75,000, showing that “the middle class is being hollowed out.”[[7]](#endnote-7) Many of the families who are affiliated with UUCPA have annual household incomes well over $100,000, but others are struggling to get by, especially given the exceedingly high cost of housing in Silicon Valley.[[8]](#endnote-8) The majority of the regular attendees of UUCPA have incomes that place them in the middle class and upper middle class, but some regular attendees receive federal assistance for rental housing (so-called “Section 8 housing”).[[9]](#endnote-9)

When I arrive in the classroom, Lorraine, my co-teacher for the sixth grade Ecojustice class, is already there. Of the seven children present today, five are white and two are non-white; six are girls and one is a boy. I take attendance while Lorraine asks one of the children to light a candle in a chalice — a flaming chalice is a common symbol for Unitarian Universalism. The children all say our usual opening words together: “We light this chalice in honor of Unitarian Universalism, the church of the open minds, helping hands, and loving hearts,”[[10]](#endnote-10) and we all do the hand motions that go with each phrase. Next we have “check-in,” where everyone gets to tell about one good thing and one bad thing that happened to them in the past week. As usual, Becky doesn’t participate in check-in, but the rest of the children have a lot to say, and check-in lasts for seven or eight minutes. Then it is time for today’s activity.

Today we’re going to work on making nesting boxes for the Violet-green Swallows that fly over the creek that flows along the edge of the church campus. But first the children want to check on their worm composter and their “recycled container garden” which they made from a worn-out automobile tire and discarded wood pallets. On our way to the composter and the garden, we stop at the church kitchen to pick up some vegetable scraps that the worms would like. As the children dump the scraps into the composter, Lorraine reminds them that we should add dry plant waste to the composter. Two of the children drag over a large yard waste bin and add handfuls of dead leaves along with the vegetable scraps. Eva reaches into the composter and finds some worms, which she holds in her hand to show the others. Next we check the container garden, made of a discarded tire.[[11]](#endnote-11) The squirrels have dug holes in the dirt and disrupted the seeds we planted, so I promise to make a wire cage to keep out the squirrels.

The worm composter and the tire garden are right next to Adobe Creek, and some of the children look down to see how much water remains from the rain we had last week. Adobe Creek flows for about 14 miles from Black Mountain, a peak on the Monte Bello Ridge west of Palo Alto, to San Francisco Bay, draining about 10 square miles of land.[[12]](#endnote-12) The creek runs in a concrete channel for its last two miles, including the stretch past the church. The children stretch over the chain link fence that keeps people from falling in the ten foot deep channel to look. Water just covering the bottom of the creek flows quickly past. One of the children points at a pair of Mallards in the water.

Every time we visit the worm composter and the tire garden, we look in the creek, and we once made a special point of visiting Adobe Creek after a big rain storm so the children could video the turbid chocolate-brown waters rushing past. We are trying to make the children feel connected to our local watershed. Anabaptist theologian Ched Myers argues that too often environmentalists and eco-theologians tend to think in broad abstractions while neglecting their immediate ecological context, a tendency that can lead congregations to engage in environmental justice work that is merely “cosmetic.” Myers wants religious communities to engage in what he calls “watershed discipleship,” environmental justice centered on the bioregion of their local watershed, rooted in scripture, in the Bible, though he is careful to add that the natural world is a kind of scripture.[[13]](#endnote-13) Myers’s “watershed discipleship” is a little abstract for our sixth graders, and too Christian for our post-Christian congregation, but it helps explain why I and the other teachers insist on taking the children to see dirty water flowing through a concrete channel.

We head back to the covered patio to work on the half-finished nesting boxes. Before we start working, I bring up our conversation from the previous week, about House Sparrows, an invasive species, who sometimes take over nesting boxes, thus depriving native swallows of nesting habitat. Last week, I had told the children that ornithologists recommend removing and destroying House Sparrow nests in swallow nesting boxes. The children did not like the idea of destroying House Sparrow eggs, even if theses birds are a destructive invasive species. This week I admit that I probably couldn’t destroy a House Sparrow nest myself, and I ask what they think we should do. Zoe finally says she would be willing to remove a House Sparrow nest, though she wouldn’t destroy it, she would put it on the ground somewhere. “What if a cat gets the nest?” asks Toby. “Well, at least *we* didn’t kill it,” Zoe says.

This is our third week building nesting boxes. By now, most of the children know what to do. Catalina, who hadn’t worked on the nesting boxes before, is taken in hand by some of the other girls, who show her the plans, and some partially assembled nesting boxes. Soon Catalina is sitting on a board to hold it while Eva cuts it with the hand saw. I’m at the table where we drill pilot holes for nails. We have a system where one person holds the piece of wood, another person holds the handle of the hand drill, and a third person turns the crank handle. We keep working until the worship service ends. Frank, an older adult, happens to walk past us, and stops to see what we are doing, and soon he is working, too. The children want to keep on working, but both Lorraine and I have other commitments, so we have to end the class.

“OK, everyone stand in a circle and hold hands,” I say. “You, too, Frank.” When everyone is in a circle, and more or less holding hands, I ask everyone to say one thing that they learned, or that they’re taking away from today’s class. “Sawing is hard.” “I learned how to drill.” (Becky doesn’t say anything.) “Fun!” “Our worms are happy.” Finally we all say the unison benediction that the adults say at the end of each worship service:

Go out into the world in peace

Be of good courage

Hold fast to what is good

Return no one evil for evil

Strengthen the faint-hearted

Support the weak

Help the suffering

Rejoice in beauty

Speak love with word and deed

Honor all beings.

This benediction comes from 1 Thessalonians 5:13-15, 21-22,[[14]](#endnote-14) and was further adapted by our senior minister. The children have memorized it; their comments make it seem that they have thought about its meaning. I suspect that some of them would be displeased to learn that the benediction they like so well comes from the Bible.

Many of these children are from families in the middle of what political scientists Robert D. Putnam and David E. Campbell call “a gaping chasm between those who are highly religious and those who are highly secular.”[[15]](#endnote-15) They fall in the middle because they’re both secular and religious at the same time. I have learned from listening to and talking with the children and teens that most of them think of “religious” persons as intolerant; in this, their views correspond to the views Putnam and Campbell have found in highly secular Americans.[[16]](#endnote-16) For further confirmation of the congregation’s “secularity,” I have learned from listening to and talking with the children and teens that most of them think of “religious” persons as intolerant; in this, their views correspond to the views Putnam and Campbell have found in highly secular Americans.[[17]](#endnote-17) Yet the sixth graders in this class are “religious” if we measure religiosity, not by belief in God or prayer, but by regular attendance in a local faith community. Some of them are aware of their awkward status as both religious and secular, and sometimes they’ll say that they don’t like telling their friends they go to church because it’s hard to explain that their church doesn’t make them believe in God.

After the closing circle, several children volunteer, without being asked, to stay and help put away tools and materials. Several of them, almost half the class members, walk back and forth between the covered patio and my office, carrying half-finished projects, supplies, and tools. It takes fifteen minutes to get everything put away, and some of the children linger, ready to stay longer if there is something to do; but I have to get ready for the Coming of Age class, so they drift away. These sixth graders show no resistance to the religious bioregionalism of Ecojustice class; exactly the opposite: they like to know how they are connected to Violet-green Swallows and House Sparrows, to worms and compost, to Adobe Creek.

**Analysis**

Why do the children like this class so much? Late last year, I overheard a conversation that helps explain why. A seventh grader told a fifth grader, “You have to take the Ecojustice class. You actually get to *do* things.” When he said “You get to *do* things,” that seventh grader—who happens to be a non-praying atheist—did not mean his friend would get to pray or read sacred texts. He had grasped in an intuitive way that the curriculum of Ecojustice class is based on a progressive educational philosophy where “the learning experience is a part of life, not a separated preparation for life.”[[18]](#endnote-18) While we aim to inculcate religious literacy and the core values of our religious tradition, including familiarity with sacred texts, these things cannot be taught separately from the lives we are in the midst of living.

Our progressive educational philosophy cause us to look with alarm at the seeming inability of local faith communities to address the global environmental crisis. We all know people of faith have to address the global environmental crisis, yet in spite of this apparent consensus “that religion must play a central role in building a more environmentally sustainable society, religious organizations and individuals have achieved few tangible results.”[[19]](#endnote-19) Religions have done pretty well at linking their sacred texts and traditions to abstract thinking about environmental justice, but this does not seem to have had much effect in the real world. The specific conditions of the global environmental crisis require a new approach to ecological theology, just as the conditions of Latin America required the new approach of liberation theology;[[20]](#endnote-20) sacred texts and theology cannot be treated separately from the immediate reality of our lives. To put this more directly: when I asked a group of elders at UUCPA about sacred texts and environmental ethics, one replied, “You don’t get your ethics by reading,… you get your ethics by living.”[[21]](#endnote-21)

That seventh grader who urged his friend to do the Ecojustice class knew that words—whether spoken or written words—are not the most important teaching tool. In U.S. culture, we often equate teaching with explaining, which “makes teaching a talkative affair” where we assume that “to teach is to tell.” But this assumption is not accurate, because most teaching is actually nonverbal teaching. Example and experiences will always prove more powerful than speech: “No amount of talk can substitute for the well-placed gesture of the human body.”[[22]](#endnote-22)

The teaching that takes place in the Ecojustice class is always connected with bodily movement and gesture. Before the class even begins, the children take part in the worship service, sitting near to other people of all different ages, standing up to sing, running out the door to their classes. When we arrive in the classroom, we sit in a circle so that we are aware of each other’s faces and bodies. When we say opening words together, we have hand motions to go with them. The children run to get food scraps and dead leaves to put into the composter; they pick up worms in their hands; they peer over a fence to look in the creek; they saw wood, hammer nails, and help hold things that other children are hammering and sawing; they pick up tools and materials and put them away. Of course I and the other teachers explain things with words, but those words are linked to specific bodily actions: hold the hammer like this, don’t forget to put a little water in the worm composter, etc. When we had the ethical discussion of removing House Sparrow eggs from the nesting box, this was not an abstract discussion, we were talking about a living organism that might cause a problem that we had to face with hands and hearts. At the end of class, when we say together “Hold fast to what is good” (based on words from a sacred text), we hold each other’s physical hands.

What these sixth graders, and us adult teachers, experience in the worship service and throughout the class can be understood metaphorically as a form of dance; not high-art dance done as a performance by professionals (e.g., ballet, modern dance, etc.), but participatory social dance done as a community. Even though our congregation rarely includes dance in our formal worship services (as is true of most religious groups stemming from the Christian tradition), you can find elements of informal social dance throughout the worship service, and in the liturgical elements interspersed through the class time: a time to stand and to sit, a time to greet each other in worship; a time to run pell-mell, a time to pick up worms; gestures and movements that express who we are and how we are interconnected. If we did not have these elements of dance, if we did not respect the bodies of all those in our congregation, it is likely that the children would be much less willing to be part of our congregation: “If children are screaming, they might just be having a bad day or else they might be doing what many of the adults feel like doing.”[[23]](#endnote-23) Not that we always manage to respect the bodies of those in our congregation, but at our best, children, teens, and adults embody our values through dance-like moves.

Carla Walter, a dancer and scholar in our congregation, describes a womanist spirituality, drawing on African spirituality, that helps me understand what our post-Christian congregation aspires to. A womanist spirituality, says Walter, incorporating elements like dance, music, oral tradition, direct perception of spiritual matters, and relationships with other people, “draws on ancient knowledge of power in our spirits and communities to move us as it remembers the past, and on today’s hegemonically valued groups to work against intra- and intergroup hatred to build social sustainable structures. Spiritual wholeness is what is sought, in interconnectivity.…” [[24]](#endnote-24) This is what we are trying to do with our children and teens: make socially sustainable structures, seek spiritual wholeness. Womanist spirituality, a “struggle spirituality” that was never subject to Cartesian dualism and “the Adam and Eve mythos that informs Western religion,”[[25]](#endnote-25) helps us dance through the resistance to Western religion; rather than correct interpretation of sacred texts to solve environmental problems, it nurtures spiritual wholeness and liberation through interconnectivity.

I don’t mean to suggest that scholars should give up re-interpreting sacred texts, like the Adam and Eve mythos in Genesis 2, to help solve environmental problems. And I appreciate the attempts to describe a straightforward connection from sacred texts to “ecological lived practices that continue to reshape an ecologically conscious social imaginary.”[[26]](#endnote-26) But as a religious educator in a post-Christian congregation in the San Francisco Bay Area, I have found this approach is more likely to lead to restless children and resistant teens, and not a few restless and resistant adults.

Dance— “the earliest art form” which “allows expression that can’t approximate rational thought”[[27]](#endnote-27) —lies closer to the embodied experience of young people than sacred texts. And while dance may not be prominent in sacred texts, it is there in the texts; in addition to re-interpreting Genesis 2, we might pay attention to texts like Exodus 15:20, where Miriam led women in celebratory dance,[[28]](#endnote-28) as well as many other sacred texts that describe the relationship of human beings, other beings, and the divine in terms of processional dance, ecstatic dance, dances of praise and worship, etc. When we move out of the spheres of Western-style religion, and Westernized scholarship, we may find that dance is valued more highly. Professor Hyun Kyung Chung of Ewha Women’s University in Seoul gave an unusual presentation to the Seventh General Assembly of the World Council of Churches in 1991:

Chung entered from the rear of the hall. She was accompanied by nineteen Korean dancers with bells, candles, drums, gongs, and clap sticks…[and] two Australian Aboriginal dancers dressed only in loincloths and body paint.… When they had all reached the stage, Chung and her companions stepped through a synchronized pattern [of dance] which combined Aboriginal movement with traditional Korean folk dance.[[29]](#endnote-29)

Some of those present experienced Chung’s presentation “electrifying, powerful, evocative,” while for others it was an “abject surrender of Christianity to a pagan environment.”[[30]](#endnote-30) Why the mixed response? Most of us in the West, including many scholars, operate under the assumption that hierarchies, orthodoxies, and standardized rituals define religion. Yet for the majority of Christians now live in the global South, where religion is not shaped exclusively by Western-style religious practices, Christianity is no longer defined by hierarchies, creeds, and standardized rituals.[[31]](#endnote-31) This should cause us Westerners to rethink how we define religion. We should remember that before Constantine’s deployment of Christianity in service of empire, Christianity “meant a dynamic lifestyle sustained by fellowships that were guided by both men and women and that reflected hope for the coming Reign of God.”[[32]](#endnote-32)

In a post-Christian congregation such as the one I serve, children, teens, and their parents are rightly wary of religion that serves imperial ambitions; rightly suspicious of Western-style religion imposing its hierarchies and standardization on us. As we move away from standardized texts, then contemporary poems, like the one Beverly read at the beginning of the worship service I described, may serve as sacred texts. As we move away from standardized practices, we may listen when an elder in our congregation vigorously asserts that “you don’t get your ethics by reading, you get your ethics by living,” we may notice the persons in our congregation who are preliterate children, and we may conclude that reading sacred texts isn’t as important as it has been in Western-style religion. Our bioregion and cultural context may also influences us: here in the San Francisco Bay watershed, an urban area on the Pacific Rim with a large East Asian population, we may find ourselves influenced by Asian religions, where religion serves as “a matter of seasonal rituals, ethical insights, and narratives handed down from generation to generation.”[[33]](#endnote-33)

The fact that we no longer have a centralized, standardized definition of what constitutes religion leads to uncertainty in how we conduct religious education here in the United States. The disestablishment of Protestantism in the U.S., which occurred half a century ago, challenged mainline congregations—and post-Christian congregations like ours—to embrace “religious, racial, and cultural pluralism”; since then, we have been uncertain what religious education is supposed to accomplish, and who should do the educating.[[34]](#endnote-34) This uncertainty within religious education, and the uncertainty with Western-style religion, is only magnified by the existential uncertainty of the global environmental crisis.

As we re-imagine religious education within our congregation, I find the image of the Web of Life helps to make sense out of the many and varied dance moves we engage in. Bernard Loomer, a theologian affiliated with both mainline Protestant and post-Christian congregations, described the Web of Life as “an indefinitely extended complex of interrelated, inter-dependent events or units of reality,” a complex which includes “the human and non-human, the organic and inorganic levels of life and existence”; what Jesus called the Kingdom of God was also the Web of Life, although this insight of Jesus’s was “covered over because we have surrounded Jesus with religiosity.”[[35]](#endnote-35) In the Web of Life, humans and non-humans and the inorganic are all bound together in a web of relationships; reworking more traditional Christian terms, Loomer says that sin is when we act against this web of relationships, while forgiveness “is a restoration to those relationships.”[[36]](#endnote-36) Loomer adds that as human civilization advances—as we achieve greater freedoms for minority groups, better understand the dignity of the other, etc.—we create the need “for adopting disciplines that are more complex and requiring virtues beyond anything the human spirit has known.” When Loomer said this in 1985, he remained uncertain whether we humans would be able to respond adequately to this challenge: “If the response is inadequate the human organism may turn out to be a dead end.”[[37]](#endnote-37)

Facing this uncertainty, I am sometimes tempted to fall back on old educational models which impose certainty. I could make children and teens find spiritual certainty in a standardized body of sacred texts from which we extract truth. Or—something my congregation would feel more comfortable with—I could have children and teens find scientific certainty in technological fixes to the global environmental crisis. Yet the best efforts of both science and Western religion have not decreased the probability of global environmental disaster, nor the probability that we humans will turn out to be a “dead end.” I’m not ready to abandon either science or Western religion, but they seem to me to be insufficient for making new “virtues beyond anything the human spirit has known.”

**Conclusion**

Imagine religion as a dance: imagine it as a dance that restores us to the relationships of the Web of Life. In this dance, we are interconnected with other persons as embodied beings bound in a web of relationships. Those relationships begin in the immediate human community where we are dancing; the relationships extend further into the immediate bioregion of the local watershed; and then still further into the relationships of the whole of the Web of Life. The relationships in the Web of Life are not neat and tidy; rather the Web of Life is a thicket and bramble wilderness filled with the messiness of becoming. In this dance, we communicate the reality of the Web of Life through gestures rather than through words or texts, through the interaction of the whole selves of embodied human beings.

If religion is a dance restoring us to the relationships of the Web of Life, then religious education can be where we learn to dance. The spiritual practices associated with womanist spirituality, including dance, music, narratives and oral tradition, direct perception of spiritual matters, relationships with other beings—spiritual practices that treat human beings as fully embodied beings—help connect children and teens (and adults too) to a spiritual wholeness within the Web of Life.

Our embodied approach to religious education can offer some helpful insights in how to mobilize religion to address the global environmental crisis. First, the children and teens in our post-Christian congregation are resistant to Western-style religion, associating it with intolerance and bigotry—associations that seem related to the imperial history of Western Christianity. Second, we see that the children and teens in our Pacific Rim congregation willingly and joyfully participate in dance-like embodied religious education—an educational approach that appears related to changes in global Christianity, and that can be conceptualized through womanist spirituality. Third, an accurate description of what I see in this post-Christian congregation does not lead to neat and tidy conclusions; instead I find myself in a thicket-and-bramble wilderness, where nothing about the messiness of becoming is clear and obvious.

A scholar of religion who walked into one of our classes and saw a bunch of sixth graders building birdhouses might be forgiven for thinking this class didn’t involve religion. Where are the texts, the beliefs, the prayers that define U.S. and Western religiosity? Yet our post-Christian faith community might also be forgiven for thinking that organized religion has, so far, not been very effective in dealing with environmental crisis. It may not look like it on the surface, but our children and teens are dancing their way towards socially sustainable structures of spiritual wholeness. The poet Marge Piercy says:

Connections are made slowly, sometimes they grow underground.

You cannot tell always by looking what is happening.[[38]](#endnote-38)

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1. **Notes**

   One notable example: Mary Evelyn Tucker and John Grim, series ed., *Religions of the World and Ecology Series,* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1998-2004). Our congregation has the complete ten volume series in our library, though it appears to be little used. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Marge Piercy, “The Seven of Pentacles,” *Circles on the Water: Selected Poems* (New York: Knopf, 1982), 128. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Michael Mikulak, “The Rhizomatics of Domination: From Darwin to Biotechnology,” *Rhizomes: Cultural Studies in Emerging Knowledge* 15: Deleuze and Guattarri's Ecophilosophy (2007): 17, accessed April 1, 2016 http://www.rhizomes.net/issue15/mikulak.html. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Robert Coles, *Doing Documentary Work* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 28-30. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Ibid., 20. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. The U.S. Census Bureau provides the following data for the city of Palo Alto on “Race and Hispanic Origin” from the 2010 Census (as of April 1, 2020): White alone, 64.2%; Black of African American alone, 1.9%; American Indian and Alaska Native alone, 0.2%; Asian alone, 27.1%; Native Hawaiian and Other Pacific Islander alone, 0.2%; Two or More Races, 4.2%; Hispanic or Latino, 6.2%; White alone, not Hispanic or Latino, 60.6%. 32.3% of the population in Palo Alto in 2010 was foreign-born. United States Census Bureau, QuickFacts, Palo Alto city, California, accessed March 26, 2016, http://www.census.gov/quickfacts/table/PST045215/0655282

   The immediate neighborhood of the Unitarian Universalist Church of Palo Alto (UUCPA) is slightly more diverse than the city as a whole. The racial and ethnic composition of census tract 510803, where UUCPA is located: 59% White, 1% Black, 5% Hispanic, 32% Asian, 2% Other. Neighboring census tract 5107 is white minority, at 47% white. “Mapping America: Every City, Every Block,” *New York Times,* accessed March 26, 2016, http://projects.nytimes.com/census/2010/explorer. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Data are from a 2014 study prepared by IHS Economics, and reported by George Avalos, “Santa Clara County has highest median household income in nation, but wealth gap widens,” *San Jose Mercury News,* August 11, 2014, accessed March 19, 2016, http://www.mercurynews.com/business/ci\_26312024/ santa-clara-county-has-highest-median-household-income. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. The 2010 U.S. Census found the median household income in Palo Alto, 2010-2014 (in 2014 dollars), was $126,771; the per capita income in the same period was $75,257; and the poverty rate was 5.3%. United States Census Bureau, QuickFacts, Palo Alto city, California, accessed March 26, 2016, http://www.census.gov/quickfacts/table/PST045215/0655282.

   The poverty rate of 5.3% may include a higher proportion of families with children. For example, at Gunn High School, one of the two high schools in Palo Alto, 158 students, or 8.2% of students, received federally-funded free and reduced price meals in the 2010-2011 school year, the latest year for which I could find information. Palo Alto Unified School District, Henry M. Gunn High School Midterm Progress Report (Date of Midterm Visit March 22, 2012), Accrediting Commission for Schools, Western Association of Schools and Colleges, 8, accessed March 26, 2016, http://www.gunn.pausd.org/sites/default/files/%202012%20WASC%20Mid%20Term%20Report%20Final%20March%2022\_1.pdf. To put this into perspective, a household with four persons would qualify for subsidized meals if the household income is $44,863 or less. Palo Alto Unified School District School Nutrition Program Pricing Letter to Household (June, 2015), 2, accessed March 26, 2016, http://pausd-web.pausd.org/parents/services/MealPlans/downloads/FormFreeReduceMeaPlan.pdf. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. According to Fred Buelow, Treasurer of UUCPA, the congregation appears to have representation in each of the five quintiles of income distribution, with the smallest number in the lowest quintile. Personal communication, March 28, 2016. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. Words by Rev. Ginger Luke, a Unitarian Universalist minister of religious education. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. Haiti's Papaye Peasant Movement (MPP) developed tire gardens to promote food security: “The concept of personal home gardens—in the city and in the countryside—carries great significance in a country where food security is hard to find." Jessica L. Atcheson, "Ending Food Insecurity, One Urban Tire Garden at a time," *Rights Now: The Newsletter of the Unitarian Universalist Service Committee* (Summer/Fall, 2013), 6-8. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. Chris D. Pilson, “Urban creek restoration, Adobe Creek, Santa Clara County, California” (Master's thesis, San Jose State University, 2009), 10, 13. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. Ched Myers, “From ‘Creation Care’ to ‘Watershed Discipleship’: Re-Placing Ecological Theology and Practice,” *The Conrad Grebel Review* 32, no.3 (2014), 257, accessed March 31, 2016, https://uwaterloo.ca/grebel/sites/ca.grebel/files/uploads/files/cgr\_fall\_14\_250-275\_myers.pdf. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. Versions of this benediction, used widely in U.S. mainline congregations, may be found in the Anglican *Book of Common Prayer* and in the Presbyterian *Book of Common Worship.* [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. Robert D. Putnam and David E. Campbell, *American Grace: How Religion Divides and Unites Us* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2010), 494 [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. Putnam and Campbell measure religiosity by asking “How frequently do you attend religious services? How frequently do you pray outside of religious services? How important is religion in your daily life? How important is your religion to your sense of who you are? Are you a strong believer in your religion? How strong is your belief in God?” (Putnam and Campbell, 18). Since half these questions involve belief and prayer, atheists who don’t pray will not be scored as highly religious. Putnam and Campbell admit there might possibly be some bias in these questions (ibid., 20). [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. Putnam and Campbell, 499-501. [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
18. This description of progressive educational philosophy is from Robert Pazmiño, *Foundational Issues in Christian Education* 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Academic, 2008), p. 120. [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
19. Anna L. Peterson, “Talking the Walk: A Practice-based Environmental Ethic as Grounds for Hope,” in *Ecospirit: Religions and Philosophies for the Earth,* ed. Laurel Kearns and Catherine Kellar (New York: Fordham University Press, 2007), 46. [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
20. Peterson, 58. [↑](#endnote-ref-20)
21. Cecil Bridges, February 23, 2016. Cecil gave me permission to quote his words. [↑](#endnote-ref-21)
22. Gabriel Moran, *Fashioning Me a People Today: The Educational Insights of Maria Harris* (New London, Conn..: Twenty-Third Publications, 2007), 51. [↑](#endnote-ref-22)
23. Ibid., 81. [↑](#endnote-ref-23)
24. Carla S. Walter, *Dance, Consumerism, and Spirituality* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 49. [↑](#endnote-ref-24)
25. Ibid., 48. [↑](#endnote-ref-25)
26. Anne Marie Dalton and Henry C. Simmons, *Ecotheology and the Practice of Hope* (Albany, N.Y.: State University of New York Press, 2010), 105. [↑](#endnote-ref-26)
27. Walter, 86. [↑](#endnote-ref-27)
28. Ibid., 88. [↑](#endnote-ref-28)
29. Harvey Cox, *Fire from Heaven: The Rise of Pentecostal Spirituality and the Reshaping of Religion in the Twenty-First Century* (Cambridge, Mass.: Da Capo Press, 1995/2001), 213. [↑](#endnote-ref-29)
30. Ibid., 217. [↑](#endnote-ref-30)
31. Harvey Cox, *The Future of Faith* (New York: HarperOne, 2009), 174. [↑](#endnote-ref-31)
32. Ibid., 174, 179. [↑](#endnote-ref-32)
33. Ibid., 221. [↑](#endnote-ref-33)
34. Charles R. Foster, “Educating American Protestant Religious Educators,” *Religious Education*, 110 (2015), 548-550. [↑](#endnote-ref-34)
35. Bernard C. Loomer, *Unfoldings: Conversations from the Sunday Morning Seminars of Bernie Loomer* (Berkeley, Calif.: First Unitarian Church, 1985), 1-2. [↑](#endnote-ref-35)
36. Ibid., 3. [↑](#endnote-ref-36)
37. Ibid., 19. [↑](#endnote-ref-37)
38. Piercy, 128. [↑](#endnote-ref-38)