



The CommUUnicator

**Newsletter of the Unitarian Universalist
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Earth Day 2025

By George F. Thompson

It is hard to imagine a more beautiful place on Earth than during springtime in the Shenandoah Valley. Especially now as the redbuds and dogwoods and cherry and crabapple trees display their beautiful lavender-pink, pink, and white blossoms. And every time I open the door and step outside, I am greeted by birdsong that feels like a symphonic rendering of many intricate songs. Of course, this view of the world may differ for those who suffer from allergies at this time of year when it literally is raining pollen, but even they can find delight in springtime light and the magic of growth and renewal.

I was fourteen years old and already enamored by and active in what we now call the “modern environmental movement” with its emphasis on clean air, clean water, healthy soils, and public health when the entire world was given an extraordinary gift, what photographer Galen Rowell described as “the most beautiful environmental photograph ever taken”: Apollo 8 astronaut William Anders’s “Earthrise.”



Apollo 8 was the first crewed mission to orbit the Moon, and that color photo of our home planet suspended in black space with the Moon’s barren lunar surface in the foreground, taken on Christmas Eve 1968, literally changed the way all of us saw the world. As Anders proclaimed: “Oh, my God! Look at that picture over there! There’s the Earth coming up. Wow, that’s pretty.” That photo became the cover image for the Spring 1969 issue of the *WHOLE EARTH CATALOG*, one of the most memorable covers in modern publishing history.

Photography, since its invention in 1826, has always been the great avatar and guiding light in conveying a sense of place, of land and life on Earth, but “Earthrise” allowed all of us to see, for the first time, how incredibly rare our planet Earth is and how truly fortunate we are to call it home. But Earthrise also showed how fragile our planet is, making real the responsibility of us all to be better stewards of our “earthly paradise.” The photo also inspired many people in many faith traditions to proclaim the need for a “green church”; that is, to honor the Creator and take tender loving care of Creation, the great gift to us all.

Fifty-five years ago, on April 22, 1970, the world’s awareness of Mother Earth also changed with the inaugural celebration of Earth Day. Gaylord Nelson (1916-2005), then U.S. Senator from Wisconsin, was inspired by the nationwide anti-Vietnam War teach-ins and believed that a similar strategy could mobilize awareness of environmental issues and lend support for environmental activism and legislation in order

to tend to the many environmental problems that faced not only Americans, but citizens throughout the world. As he proclaimed, "The economy is a wholly owned subsidiary of the environment, not the other way around." (Note: Senator Nelson, earlier in 1963, convinced President John F. Kennedy to conduct a national speaking tour to discuss conservation issues.)

Approximately twenty million people (that is, one in ten Americans) attended inaugural events at tens of thousands of sites around the nation, including elementary and secondary schools. Many historians proclaim that Earth Day led to the establishment of the Environmental Protection Agency in 1970 by President Richard Nixon and new bi-partisan legislation, including the Clean Air Act of 1970, Clean Water Act of 1972, and Soil and Water Resources Conservation Act of 1977. Such legislation undeniably led to cleaner air, cleaner water, and healthier soils, but it also led to the revitalization of American cities, large and small. For example, Chattanooga, Tennessee, a longstanding stronghold of political conservatism, was one of the most polluted cities in the U.S., yet its city leaders realized that, due to the new federal legislation, to survive economically it had to change course environmentally. Today, Chattanooga is one of the most popular and livable cities in the U.S. Countless other cities, including nearby Richmond, Pittsburgh, and Raleigh, followed suit in their own ways.

Given the current pushback from the White House and GOP against science and these and other foundational laws and agencies, what are we to do? Perhaps think globally and act locally? Most certainly to embrace ecological design and planning into everything we do. Just look at our own UUFW, where dedicated members of our beloved community for two decades now have

transformed the buildings and grounds to be more energy-efficient and native in its plantings. And new plans are underway to eliminate even more non-native plantings and to create a more diverse and healthy natural environment on our grounds.

I conclude with a passage I wrote in the introduction to the book, *Nature and Cities: The Ecological Imperative in Urban Design and Planning* (2016): "As the world becomes more urban, and even for those who remain tied to rural land, there is the need for 'ecological design and planning' to be integrated into our collective being, into our everyday lives, in fundamental ways—just as a 'sense of place' has so quickly taken hold during the preceding generation. Even as landscape architecture, urban planning and design, and architecture can continue to advance a 'green' vision of a better world through specific projects, both great and small, public and private, it will require a move toward the vernacular, toward the common person, toward the common place, for that vision to be expressed, appreciated, accepted, and embraced more fully: to the point where ecological design and planning becomes an afterthought and, thus, an essential player in providing a healthy and healthful life for human beings and our compatriot life-forms. To heal Earth, our home ground, is to heal ourselves."



Attendance at Sunday's Flower Service was 78!

