

## MOVING INTO THE FUTURE

Marilyn Sewell

I'd like to begin this morning by sharing with you a prophecy, a prophecy called the "Seven Fires Prophecy" and it's from the Ojibwe Indians. It goes like this:

The light-skinned race will be given a choice between two roads. If they choose the right road, the seventh fire will light the eighth and final (eternal) fire of peace, love, and brotherhood. If they make the wrong choice, the destruction they brought with them will come back to them, causing much suffering, death, and destruction.<sup>1</sup>

What strikes me about this prophetic statement is its truth about where we are as a people at this point in time—we Americans, I mean--the dominant conquering race, the builders of world empire. And we have been given a choice.

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<sup>1</sup>Philip H. Duran, "Eight Indigenous Prophecies," quoted by David Korten in *The Great Turning: from Empire to Earth Community*, San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, Inc., 2006.

We are at a significant crossroads in the development of our culture, a time of reckoning, the settling of a long-due account. There have been other such times in the past—those times when a people had to make a choice, or sometimes when a choice was thrust upon them by technology or war or natural disaster.

For example, there was the printing press, which gave the common person access to books. There was a renaissance of learning, and people no longer were bound to superstition and the authority of those few who had access to words—the clerics and the nobility. Luther nailed his theses on the door at Whittenberg, and Protestantism was born—the corruption of the Catholic church was challenged, and no longer did an individual have to depend upon a priest to intervene between him and his God.

In our country there was the American Revolution. The signers boldly penned their names on the Declaration of Independence, knowing, as one of them said, “We’d better all hang together, or we’ll all hang separately.” These founders declared something undeclared ever before in the history of the human race—they declared that each person has the right to life, to liberty, and to the pursuit of happiness, and that these rights belong

inherently to each one of us, that they are God-given rights and cannot be removed by any state or ruler. Of course, the founding fathers acted in the context of their times, and we have had to enlarge their notion of who all was to be included as citizens with rights.

The Civil War was another turning point. Much has been written about the sources of that conflict, and economic issues played a part, no doubt. But there was one basic question we had to confront: were we going to be two nations, one slave and one free—or one nation, where no person could be enslaved by another? We had to make a choice.

Once again we have come to a time of choice—face to face with a turning point, but this time there is a major difference: we're not looking at a cultural shift in a single part of the world; we're not looking at conflict in one country or between several countries. We have become one world, and the dangers that we face are those which affect not just ourselves, but which affect the whole earth; which endanger not just this generation, but generations to come. The challenge that we face just now is unique in the history of the world.

Change is occurring at an alarming rate. I think about the way I grew up. I was raised in a small town in North Louisiana. I remember when the first TV entered our home. Apparently there was something wrong with it, because I remember that my father put it out on the sidewalk in front of our house, with a big sign that said LEMON on it. I never left that little town, except to get on the bus a couple of summers and ride down to Baton Rouge, to visit my city cousins. No one in my neighborhood ever moved, ever, all the time I lived there. About the worst thing that happened in school was a student talking too much or chewing gum—oh, yes—and the one girl in my senior class who got pregnant and disappeared for 6 months, to have her baby and give it up for adoption. She was known as “the bad girl” because it was rumored that she had had sex with several different boys in our class—and the baby was called “illegitimate.” I never heard the word “racism” in my town, but the town was rigidly segregated, and we always had black women working in our home for a pittance. I went to college at an engineering school about 45 minutes from home, where I majored in English education. In those days, computers filled whole rooms. I flew on an airplane for the first time after I graduated from college, and not again for years later. I was a Southern Baptist and had never heard of that cult group called Unitarian Universalists.

Never in a million years would I have dreamed that I would live in England, study in Berkeley, CA, and become a female minister—especially the minister of a cult group—way up there in Portland, OR, or publish books, and travel literally all over the world, writing on my personal computer, called a notebook, that weighs a mere three pounds.

My two sons grew up quite differently from the way I did—the older made his first flight at the age of 6 weeks. In their junior year of high school, they visited various colleges and applied to several in different parts of the country. My younger son had a black roommate. My older son married a Korean American, and I have a bi-racial grandchild. Each son spent some time living in a foreign country, and they are quite comfortable with cultural differences; their generation is connected technologically in ways that astound me. I may be one of the last cell-phone hold-outs in the nation. Through the internet, we all have instantaneous communication with people and ideas from all over the world. My children are citizens of the world as I never was when I grew up.

On the other hand, the world that I'll be handing over to them before too long is one that troubles me greatly. There are some serious danger signs. Let me tell you what I mean.

The most serious of these signs is the danger to the earth itself—there is some question as to whether or not our living systems will be sustainable. Since 1950, the world population has more than doubled, from 2.6 billion to 6.4 billion. There are 10 times more motor vehicles than there were in 1950. Fossil fuel use is 5 times what it was then, and the need for fresh water has tripled. The non-renewable capital of the planet that we use up now will not be available for our children and grandchildren.

Global warming is a reality which no responsible person can any longer deny. The polar ice cap has thinned by 46 percent over the last twenty years. Even small increases in temperature can have major effects on climate. Think about the severe weather events we've had recently. During the 1950's, there were 13 such events worldwide. In the first 9 years of the 1990's, we've had 72 such events.

Global oil production will peak soon—the most optimistic estimates say in 35 years, others say 2005 may have been the year. We're feeling it at the gas pump. There is a growing demand from countries like India and China, and there will be the inevitable conflict over who gets the oil. If we continue to create empire so that we might use the resources of other countries to support our untenable lifestyle, we are walking into big trouble. Right now we are bogged down in two unwinnable wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, wars that are sapping money we need for our crumbling infrastructure here at home. Our massive military might simply will not protect us against terrorist attack and guerilla warfare. We are overreaching ourselves. Read your history. This is how empires fall.

The other concern on the horizon is that of the economy. There is a serious question about our long-term economic strategy if we continue to consume and spend on borrowed money, while running a serious trade deficit, as we specialize in consuming the products produced by sweatshop labor in other countries, while at the same time keeping wages low here.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 70. I am deeply indebted to David Korten for his analysis in this sermon, and also for the figures and statistics I have quoted, which have come from *The Great Turning*.

So the apocalypse that our Fundamentalist friends have been warning us about for the past 15 years or so may be coming after all—I keep hearing liberal thinkers use that term, including most recently, a theologian, an environmentalist, and now David Korten, in his new book *The Great Turning*—but the End Times will not be the “rapture,” with the Fundamentalists swept up into the heaven, while the unwashed Unitarians and other non-believers languish here on earth. We’ll all be here, languishing. Trying to exist amidst the shards.

The question is, will there be a massive catastrophe? Will there be a meltdown, with wars over oil and water; will the earth lose its capacity to cope with our garbage; and will economic collapse come--or will we repent as a nation and turn to ways of health and healing? Will we begin to use our formidable power to exercise moral leadership?

The question is—what to do? Can we move in another direction? Who will make this happen? Are you ready for the positive part of the sermon?

Yes, we can move in another direction. It just takes enough of us to tip the balance. Think about it this way. There was a time when just about everybody smoked—and now almost nobody I know smokes. There was a time when women could get jobs only as secretaries, school teachers and nurses—and only then, if they were not married. That's changed. Unthinkable, you say? There are people still alive who went through that. There are people still alive whose direct relatives were slaves. Things change.

Now what would a changed world look like? In this brave new world, human well-being would be the measure of success, not GNP (gross national product). We would measure the health of our people--in particular, that of our children; we would measure the health of our earth, and ensure sustainability—that is, everything we used from the environment, we would put back, and more; we would put a premium on education and learning, for there is no such thing as a democracy without an educated populace; we would greatly reduce the Department of Defense and establish a flourishing Department of Peace; our justice system would be there to restore, not just punish; locally owned businesses would be favored over corporate enterprises, and local food systems based on independent family farms

would be our main source of food once again. We would not sacrifice our families and our health and well-being to work way too many hours at a job to create more wealth for people who are already wealthy. We would just say “no” and create alternatives, even if it meant living on less. Instead of living in isolated nuclear families or as single people, we would form communities where people of all ages would be mutually supportive. And because we would be proactive citizens, first and foremost at the local level, we would insist on a way of living that is in keeping with our values.

And how will these changes come about? I think we have to become convinced at how sick this culture really is before we will change, and I think that time is just about upon us. When we come to that consciousness, that itself will push us to spiritual contemplation, and to a search for a new way. That very searching becomes a prayer, an on-going prayer, to find a better way for ourselves and for our children. Our seeking of new life pushes us to action.

We have to understand that the story we’ve been living by is defunct. And I don’t mean the creation story, or the Bible. Mainline churches have been so subsumed into our capitalist corporate culture that their stories,

which once held power for many, seem quaint and child-like. You can go into a fancy jewelry store and buy a cross full of diamonds for \$5,000—that's how debased that symbol has become. No, the true cultural story for the middle-class American is this: get into a good pre-school, even if it costs a lot of money; then a good elementary school, then a good high school, followed by the best college you can get into; get a high paying job; get married; work hard; have some children that you don't see too often; buy a nice house or two and some toys to play with, like boats and cars; consume, consume, consume; get old and die. That's it. That's the American dream. This is not a dream worthy of our lives.

So what would a different story be? What would your story be? I think in order to escape the ever-present messages of this culture to work, buy, and consume, we need a spiritual revival—a third Great Awakening. The other two earlier in our history told people they were going to hell if they didn't change their ways—I'm saying that we are making our own hell, and we need to change our ways in order to survive—emotionally, spiritually, and even physically.

Actually I know that many of you see the needs that I speak of, and are on the road to change. You belong to that group of people that Paul Ray and Sherry Anderson refer to as “cultural creatives,” a growing segment of the U.S. population—approximately 26%, they say—who embrace a new culture that values diversity, stewardship of the environment, economic justice, and civil rights for all. They say that roughly half this number combine these beliefs with some form of spiritual practice. They call these people the “Core Cultural Creatives.” It is from these folks—folks like you—that the new story will emerge. I’m not sure which exact words you will choose, and how you will put them together in your story, but some words that might be: love, service, kindness, joy, presence, peace, integrity, stewardship, covenant. These are religious terms, and this is the Beloved Community that we are building.

Our church will be growing—that seems clear. With our new building, with our third minister, we will be moving to a new place of service and a new place of witnessing in this community. I see us supporting our people in living out of new and life-giving stories of their own choosing; I see us inviting others into this community of love and support; I see us educating ourselves and others in new possibilities; I see us

living more in harmony with the earth; I see us experimenting with our work lives to make them more compatible with family concerns; I see us making political change, from the bottom up, by becoming the change we wish to see.

Is there hope? Oh, yes indeed! Consider this: recent polls show that 83 percent of Americans believe that we need to rebuild our neighborhoods and small communities and fear that family life is declining; 93 percent agree that we are too focused on working and making money and not focused enough on family and community; 86 percent agree that we are too focused on getting what we want now and not focused enough on the needs of future generations.<sup>3</sup>

It's not that people don't understand that we have a problem—it's that people have had their imaginations drained out of them by the constant barrage of messages they receive about consuming, and they have had their energies drained by jobs that have longer and longer hours but less and less meaning. They need a new vision, and leadership. They need to understand

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<sup>3</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 331. Korten uses as his source the Center for a New American Dream, "Public Opinion Poll," conducted July 2004 by Widmeyer Research and Polling (Takoma Park, MD: Center for a New American Dream, 2004).

that what *is*, is not a given, but comes from human choices, and other choices can be made.

That's where we come in. This church is a place where people come to hear about a new way, and to try out new ideas and new ways of being, and then to share those with their friends and acquaintances. The church is a place where we stand together, whether it's by the side of someone who is ill, or whether it's in a march for peace. And every time we act, every time we speak, we are witnessing, and more and more people will turn to listen, and will say, "Oh, how about that? Things can be different. I want to be a part of making that happen." And that's how the new story will be written. So be it. Amen.

## PRAYER

Spirit of Life, it is so easy to become discouraged and to lose hope. Stir our hearts, and stir our imaginations. Give us courage in these difficult days, and help us to make time for laughter and play and dance, and all those

things that keep us so keenly human and so keenly alive. Help us to find a new story, one filled with life and promise. Amen.

### BENEDICTION

As you go through this week, ask yourself when you find yourself grumpy and tired, why am I this way? Do I have to be this way? What would I have to do to change? Go in love, and go in peace. Amen

### ANNUAL MEETING

This has been one of the most exciting and productive years in the history of this church!

--We have put a governance system in place that works for a large church, and I've seen this fine Board become truly visionary, for the first time.

--We are on a sound financial footing, going considerably over our annual fund goal, and raising the level of our giving almost \$200 a pledge unit.

--We have hired a third minister, who will make possible a ministry to our young adults, as well as other ways of deepening and broadening the ministry of our church. Tom and I have been spread too thin for far too long.

--We have engaged two consultants from Alban Institute, a highly respected think-tank for churches, who have each told us what a strong, good institution this is, and who have helped us plan and staff for the future—we hope to be more proactive and less reactive—

--And then of course, we have funded over 80% of our new building, and are beginning construction—demolition starts tomorrow!

--We are moving into a whole new era of this church's life—this is the next stage that we have been preparing for—and what will it look like? I'm expecting a new phase of growth, for sure, as people see this building go up—and then of course our General Assembly will be held here in Portland in June of next year, and 4,000-5,000 UU's will be in town—and the city of Portland will be very much aware of our presence. I hope most of you will plan to go to G.A.,

--Our Communications Committee has been working hard, and we want to get our liberal religious message out there in a bigger way than ever before—

--We'll move toward an alternative worship service of some kind, because our two Sunday morning services are really filled. More about this later, as we flesh out our ideas.

--This is a great year of celebration, a great year of achievement, truly a high point in the history of this institution.

## CALL TO WORSHIP

Good morning!

We come together again

in this place

to remember who we are,

to remember how we want to live,

to imagine new and life-giving ways to live.

Come now, and let us worship together!