

## **What's Possible?**

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Our spiritual ancestors and fore-bearers used their imaginations and creativity to move forward into a world swirling before them obstacles and negative forces. They chose to take paths of positive actions, hoping to affect the future. And often they did. They believed in the possibility of positive outcomes. They dreamed of a future where their beliefs would come into fruition.

One of these was John Chapman, born on this day, September 26<sup>th</sup> in 1774. A gentle person, a conservationist long before we knew of such a label, John introduced apple trees to Pennsylvania, Ohio, Illinois, Ontario, and Virginia. He became a legend even within his own lifetime ---as Johnny Appleseed. He was a Christian who followed the teachings of Emmanuel Swedenborg, whose metaphysical writings also inspired William Blake and Ralph Waldo Emerson. Swedenborg's writings influenced eighteenth century spiritualists who attempted to integrate both Eastern wisdom and Western Gnosticism.

John Chapman, as a follower of Swedenborg, consciously led a life of poverty, was a vegetarian and considered all life sacred. Here is one of many stories about Johnny Appleseed, this one recorded in 1830 by Henry Howe, historian: "One cool autumnal night, while lying by his camp-fire in the woods, he observed that the mosquitoes flew in the blaze and were burned. Johnny, who wore on his head a tin utensil which answered both as a cap and a mush pot, filled it with water and quenched the fire, and afterwards remarked,

"God forbid that I should build a fire for my comfort,  
that should be the means of destroying any of His creatures."

This and other stories about this deeply Christian man reminds me  
of other profoundly spiritual sages, across time and cultures,  
who hold that **all of life is sacred**.

In sharp contrast is the value system today of those in our world  
who primarily view the earth as a resource to be mined and exploited.  
Thus, creating a huge separation between themselves and nature.  
This current dominant worldview  
has contributed to the world's gaping inequalities,  
as well as our failure to respond rapidly to the current climate crisis.

What is possible here is for the world to wake up to the reality  
that the resources of our earth, including all living beings, are limited.  
Right now we humans are consuming the earth's resources at a rate of 40%<sup>1</sup>  
faster than these resources can be replenished.  
If we humans continue on this course,  
if this madness persists, the inevitable outcome  
will be disastrous for much of our planet.  
We already know that much of the world's biodiversity is at risk  
due to human consumption and other human activities that disturb  
or destroy natural habitats  
Unless there is dramatic change in our human ways,  
scientists are predicting that about half of all species will be wiped out  
within the next century.

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<sup>1</sup> Jeremy Lent. Envisioning an Ecological Civilization. In *The New Possible Visions of our World Beyond Crisis* Kindle edition, p. 4..

What is possible here?

Like Johnny Appleseed, we as humans today can decide to turn away from a consumer mentality.

We can determine that is it possible to embrace for example, a new value system that affirms the well-being of all, affirming the quality of life, rather than whatever can be materially gained.

Environmentalists and visionaries today are calling for us to enter into what they label *an ecological civilization*, where we move from wealth accumulation to one based on the health of living systems.<sup>2</sup>

Such *an ecological civilization would be based on core principles that sustain living systems in natural ecologies*<sup>3</sup>.

*From the microscopic, intracellular structures to the entire Earth system, nature uses a fractal design. Coherent self-organized entities are embedded within larger systems: cells are part of an organism. In all cases the health of the system as a whole requires the flourishing of each part. Each system is interdependent on the vitality of all the other systems. This universal precept leads to the ultimate objective of an ecological civilization: to create the conditions for humans to flourish as part of a thriving, living Earth*<sup>4</sup>.

As Unitarian Universalists we truly believe in this interdependent web of all existence, and we know that if we do nothing right now, the great imbalance today of what many religions, and science as well, term the four basic elements of life:

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<sup>2</sup> Jeremy Lent. P. 5.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

earth, water, air, and fire-

- the imbalance of these elements -

may lead to a total collapse of our current way of life

as humans and other living beings:

- imbalances in water polluted by plastic and chemical run offs,

- imbalances in our earth's soil, damaged by chemicals, and over-extraction of resources,

- air quality diminishing how well we can breathe

- and out of control wildfires scorching our forests, lands, and life.

What's possible here?

One possible answer is a new way of looking at our earth and its resources.

A new way of emphasizing the quality of life over the quantity of goods accrued.

Our UU principal of justice, equity and compassion would help guide us

towards distributing the earth's resources in ways that support life for everyone,

not only those who are currently wealthy.

Education could focus on preparing students to value a lifetime focused

on the wellbeing of themselves, the wellbeing of their communities

and the wellbeing of nature.

This possibility would involve as well

a new way of dealing with our economy.

Economic principles would be based on the idea

that wellbeing, compassion, and love

are admirable goals for an economy.

The word economy, (*oikonomia*) coming from Greek,

refers to wise management (*nomia*) of the household (*oikos*).

There are visionary economists<sup>5</sup> who are presenting a possible economic framework based not on gross domestic product (GDP) but based on wellbeing. Economist Mark Anielski for one believes in *an economy of wellbeing based on mimicking nature and grounded on Indigenous natural laws.*<sup>6</sup> Within Anielski's economic vision, *an asset is anything, tangible or intangible that contributes to the wellbeing of an individual, an organization, the community, nation, and natural ecosystems.*<sup>7</sup>

Indigenous communities as well offer us possible new ways to re-organize as human beings. Within the sacred circle, the Medicine Wheel, every person and the whole community are considered sacred. Just imagine how our world would change if we viewed each person we encounter as sacred, and our community, as well as our nation, as sacred? Often within Indigenous cultures wealth is shared – such as at an annual ceremony called a potlatch where wealth within a particular family is shared with other families, *as a reflection of the abundance witnessed in nature*<sup>8</sup>.

Indigenous laws are often *similar to natural laws within Western economies* - And these Indigenous laws *guide decision-making and determine what assets are vital for to a good life (or wellbeing)*<sup>9</sup>. Everything in creation, from an Indigenous perspective is derived from the Creator or God. Stewardship of the wealth of a particular community or nation

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<sup>5</sup> Mark Anielski. Building an Economy of Wellbeing and Indigenomics. The New Possible Visions of our World Beyond Crisis. Kindle, p. 109

<sup>6</sup> Mark Anielski. P. 108

<sup>7</sup> Ibid, p. 109

<sup>8</sup> Ibid p. 116

<sup>9</sup> Ibid p. 116

is viewed as essentially being in harmony  
with nature and the whole of the earth.

Both Johnny Appleseed and the Indigenous ways of connecting to nature  
are messages for us today of other possibilities,  
especially if we are caught in the current patterns of disconnect from nature,  
and accumulation of individual wealth.

We can glean from these ancestors and their relatives new possible ways  
of living with the earth, each other, and all sentient beings.

Another of our ancestors that has helped to show us  
how following a different path  
can create a new positive possibility in our world  
is Rev. John Murray, founder of Universalism in America.  
In July 1770 Rev. Murray emigrated from England  
in hopes of starting his life over,  
after losing his wife and child, both of whom tragically died.  
John was next imprisoned for not being able to pay his debts.

When he was released from prison,  
John decided to sail for America, to start his life over.  
He was a religious man all of his life.  
In England, he was converted from Methodism  
to Universalism by James Rely,  
whose pamphlet *Union*, began Murray's turn to Universalism.

Rev. Murry wasn't planning on preaching Universalism in America.  
He was just trying to start his life over in a new place.  
But what happened was perhaps one of our rare UU miracles.  
Believing in a universalist God,

Thomas Potter, a farmer, had built a chapel  
on Good Luck Point, off the Jersey coast.

Potter built his chapel believing that a preacher would arrive  
and preach universal salvation for all.

John Murray's ship had gotten stuck on a sandbar  
off the New Jersey coast near Potter's chapel.

John came ashore, looking for supplies for the ship, and ran into Thomas Potter.

Was this divine guidance? Each of us will have to decide for ourselves.

Thomas Potter, learning that John Murray was a Universalist preacher,  
begged John Murray to preach in his chapel.

Murray refused, saying that he had given up preaching.

Potter then struck a deal with Murray -if the winds did not change,  
and the ship remained stuck on the sandbar,  
then in Potter's mind, Murray was the preacher that God had sent.

If the winds changed, then Murray could go on his way.

Murray waited for two more days, and then Sunday arrived.

Believing as well that God had called him to do so,

Murray preached his first sermon on Universalism in the Potter chapel  
on September 30, 1770,

Universalism had come to America.

Today we can visit one of our UU camp and conference centers  
called Murray Grove,

and go inside a replica of the original chapel where Murray preached.

I encourage each of us to do so, as part of our faith journey as UUs.

September 26<sup>th</sup>, today, is also John Murray's birthday.

He didn't stop teaching what he believed was true and possible for all of humanity.

A God that loved everyone unconditionally  
and salvation was available for everyone.

Murray didn't stop even though he faced intense criticisms and even threats to his life,  
from the more orthodox Christians of his time, who believed that only  
certain people were chosen for salvation.

Murray believed in the possibility of a universal loving God,  
and he chose to believe that it was possible for others to also believe this as well.

Today's world is drastically different from Rev. Murray's, and yet I believe  
we continue to need his message of universal love.

We are faced with an uncertain future,  
with our world mired in racism, environmental destruction,  
warfare, global injustices,  
in the midst of the current world-wide pandemic.

Through the past almost two years of mounting loss and illness,  
there have been however cracks in the façade of normalcy –  
allowing us to better see the suffering around us.

Hopefully we can better understand now people calling out for justice  
against structural and systemic problems,  
and wanting an end to cycles of violence.

Ours is a time of great imbalance  
not only of our natural elements of earth, water, air and fire,  
but also, of a great imbalance between our human heads and hearts,  
between our intellects and our emotions.

What is called for today is what Rev. Murray called for long ago.  
The cultivation of our human hearts that is all inclusive.  
Today for many there is a huge gap that needs to be bridged



between our hearts and minds.

I found the following quote in a recent article by Buddhist teacher, Jack Kornfield.

“Omar Bradley, Chairman of Joint Chiefs of Staff, spoke of this huge division when he said:”

*“Our knowledge of science has clearly outstripped our capacity to control it. We have grasped the mystery of the atom and rejected the Sermon on the Mount. We have achieved brilliance without wisdom, power without conscience. Ours is a world of nuclear giants and ethical infants.”<sup>10</sup>*

We best learn how to heal our hearts  
and work then for justice and wellbeing from a place of wisdom  
and love for all of the world and its creatures.  
Do we want to continue to have a world based on greed,  
hatred, disrespect, confusion, and untruths?  
Or can we see the possibilities of working towards a new world,  
centered on respect for the inherent worth and dignity of every person,  
on justice, compassion, and equity for everyone,  
and on living lives filled with generosity, love, and even wisdom?<sup>11</sup>  
We can choose the possibility of a way of life  
that lessens suffering and leads to wellbeing.

To do this, I believe we best turn inward,  
and develop within each of us  
spaces of compassion, love, kindness, wisdom towards all and our earth.  
This isn't easily done. It is spiritually hard work. But it is possible.

Through opening our hearts,

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<sup>10</sup> Jack Kornfield. Open Hearts, Open Minds. In *The New Possible Visions of our World Beyond Crisis*. P. 198

<sup>11</sup> Jack Kornfield. P. 202

we can better work to end the suffering around us, in small and large ways,  
where suffering is lessened, and the goodness of life prevails.

We face the choice of deciding how we can respond today.

Will we stay frozen in fear, and not respond?

Or will we be like Johnny Appleseed and Rev. John Murray,  
seizing what our time in this life offers to us –  
a path to help ease the sufferings of the world.

May we be ever so very grateful for those around us now  
who have opened their hearts and are responding in love –  
through their care of the sick and dying,  
and the unheralded ones, doing whatever they can to help our hurting world.

One thing this pandemic has taught many of us is that  
our seventh UU Principle of the interdependent web of all existence  
is so very, very true.

Whatever we do has an effect.

Whenever we ask, “what is possible,” to do in a particular situation  
and then we strive to achieve whatever that is,  
we will be working towards a world of wellbeing.

Perhaps planting trees. Or weatherizing our religious home. Or  
looking out for folks in our larger community unable to deal with  
the climate crisis ahead.

Opening our hearts and learning to take the time to sit quietly with ourselves,  
Perhaps praying, perhaps meditating, or just being quiet,  
and observing what arises. Helping each of us to discover what is possible,  
and how we might best act to lessen the cries of our world.

Peace and love to you.

## **Reading: A Sermon Excerpt by Rev. Sara LaWall**

Now when I say this line, "Ask what's possible, not what's wrong," is a mantra,

I mean that I use it in the truest form that mantras operate in our lives.

I repeat it nearly every day, sometimes several times and I still fall short.

Admitting my full humanity,

I can dwell in the swirl of what's wrong in the world,

in my life, in your lives . . . in the pain of despair,

and the weight of bleak pessimism.

I can cling to my certainty about things SHOULD go, to my righteousness,

and to my own resistance to change.

I am also really good, like so many of us are, at playing the shame game.

Shaming myself (and blaming myself) for all the perceived failures in my life,

for not being the best parent, the best spouse, the best minister,

the best daughter, sister and friend; for not being the most responsible,

organized, gracious, invitational person I can be.

Oh, and I am certain everyone else can be those things so much better than I.

Perhaps some of you hear your own voice speaking those same words?

Perhaps some of you see yourself in the same struggle?

Those are precisely the moments when a mantra is a helpful tool.

We say it aloud again and again, speaking it into truth,

hearing ourselves into speech.

Ask what's possible, not what's wrong.

## Reading by Howard Zinn

To be hopeful in bad times is not just foolishly romantic.

It is based on the fact that human history is a history not only of cruelty, but also of compassion, sacrifice, courage, kindness.

What we choose to emphasize in this complex history will determine our lives.

If we see only the worst, it destroys our capacity to do something.

If we remember those times and places—and there are so many—where people have behaved magnificently, this gives us the energy to act, and at least the possibility of sending

this spinning top of a world in a different direction.

And if we do act, in however small a way,

we don't have to wait for some grand utopian future.

The future is an infinite succession of presents,

and to live now as we think human beings should live,

in defiance of all that is bad around us, is itself a marvelous victory.