

**“RACHEL CARSON: ENTHRALLED BY LIFE,
SHE CHANGED THE WORLD”**

A Sermon by

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Call to Gather:

“If I had influence with the good fairy who is supposed to preside over the christening of all children, I should ask that her gift to each child in the world be a sense of wonder so indestructible that it would last throughout life.” ~ Rachel Carson

Readings:

How can you buy or sell the sky - the warmth of the land? The idea is strange to us.... we do not own the freshness of the air or the sparkle of the water. How can you buy them from us? ... Every part of this earth is sacred to my people. Every shining pine needle, every sandy shore, every mist in the dark woods, every clearing, and every humming insect is holy in the memory and experience of my people... All things are connected. Whatever befalls the earth befalls the sons of the earth.¹

~From Chief Seattle's Letter to All:

*Planting trees early in spring,
we make a place for birds to sing
in time to come. How do we know?
They are singing here now.
There is no other guarantee
that singing will ever be. ~ **For The Future**² by Wendell Berry*

Sermon:

It's been interesting to hear from the handful of people who have gotten fairly excited over this sermon as they saw it announced. Apparently, there exists a very quiet

¹ Available online from California State University Northridge <http://www.csun.edu/~vcpsy00h/seattle.htm>
Last accessed September 22, 2008.

² Berry, Wendell, *Collected Poems 1957 – 1982*, North Point Press, 1984, p. 216

Rachel Carson fan club in our society. Admittedly, it has mostly been women who have given enthusiastic recognition when they heard that I planned to pay tribute to this extraordinary writer. And that makes sense; we don't have ready access to a long list of feminine roll models whose courage and accomplishments actually steered the world in a whole new direction.

Now, I'm one who very much appreciates the sentiment of that bumper sticker that says "Well behaved women rarely make history!" It just seems so true when you think about it! And, yet Rachel Carson may be the exception that proves that rule. She was courageous and driven, to be sure; but always and unshakably within an aura of absolute composure and clarity.

Many of us have been deeply inspired by Rachel Carson's brilliance, her unwavering commitment, her tireless reaffirmation of the truth as she saw it, and her endless well of dignity **even** when those in power did not at all want to hear what she had to say; **even** when those same powers did all they could to denigrate her credentials and muffle the impact of her voice.

This woman's book, Silent Spring³, is said to have ignited a revolution. In its scope and long term impact on our nation's attitudes, the book it is most frequently compared to is Uncle Tom's Cabin. And it grew purely out of her unbounded love for the wonders and mysteries of our earth!!

So, as I said, a few folks have been excited pretty excited hear more about a true life hero like Rachel Carson ... but another few kind of looked at me vacantly saying with their eyes, "I know the name is familiar – but I just can't quite place who she is or what she did."

Well, if you're among that group, please don't feel badly. Until a couple of years ago, I was right there with you. And when I did dive into her life, I was blown away by the power of her personal story, by her extraordinary character and spirit. I was astounded to see the ramifications of her life's work. It really made me wonder about the stunning gap in my education (or perhaps memory!) that allowed such a luminous person to be overlooked.

But then I realized that her highest accomplishments occurred during the 1950's and early 1960's, at a time when I was growing up in the busy, concrete jungle of Los Angeles. Honestly, I didn't learn much about nature back then. We just weren't nature sort of folks. My family rarely even did anything like go camping! Maybe it was having six kids that made that prospect so uninviting for my parents; and who could blame them?

So throughout my growing up years, the most "natural" thing I can recall was chasing moths around the neighbors' marigolds in the summer time. Now this is embarrassing, but my lack of connectedness to nature was **so** bad, that when I experienced the very typical desire for a pony as a very young girl, the only context I had made me ask my parents to install a track in our backyard and get me a fiberglass Trigger

³ Carson, Rachel. *Silent Spring*. 104th ed. Mariner Books, 2002.

like the one out front of the grocery store. I couldn't understand why everyone thought that was so funny!

In stark contrast to that, Rachel Carson was absolutely immersed in the wonders of nature from her youngest days. She was born a century ago, the youngest of three children. Much of her early education came from her mother, whom she loved dearly. Her mother taught her about plant and animal life as the two of them walked the grounds of the 65 undeveloped acres her family owned outside of Pittsburgh.

Rachel's father had purchased this large plot as an investment, but that didn't quite work out and so that left the family quite "land poor." While her father traveled to earn their living, she and her mother and siblings were consigned to very simple lives on this relatively isolated plot. Yet, Rachel was uncomplaining because that allowed her to spend endless hours exploring, observing, and communing with all the wild, untended nature that surrounded her. She absolutely relished this life.

And, even as a young child, the power of the pen called urgently to her. Rachel was 10 years old when her first piece was published. It was in a children's magazine but, even then, she knew this was only the beginning. There was never a moment in her childhood that she entertained making her living in any other fashion.

Her mother's tutelage at home carried her through most of her lower level. She did attend the public school but had frequent absences. And when it was time for her to go off to college at the Pennsylvania College for Women, well, let us say that her mother, Maria, remained **very** invested in her success. So much so, that some of Rachel's fellow students wondered aloud if perhaps Maria ought to pay tuition herself since she was by her daughter's side on campus so frequently.

Rachel was well respected in college, but was not considered popular. Many misunderstood her single-minded devotion to her studies to be a sign of unfriendliness.

She excelled, both in her writing courses and in her science courses. And as she pursued more advanced work, she finally found she had to choose between the two. With some reluctance on her part and great disappointment on her literature professor's part, Rachel chose science; for it was the study of science that had given her the tools to begin understanding **some** of the mysteries and wonders that had so enthralled her since her youngest days.

Rachel graduated magna cum laude and went on to gain her master's degree in zoology from Johns Hopkins.

She taught for a short time and was soon employed by the Federal Bureau of Fisheries. There, she was asked to write a brochure about marine life and her undeniable flair for writing made such an impression on her superiors that she quickly became the editor-in-chief of all their publications.

She was elated! She had succeeded in finding a profession that combined her passions for writing and science. She had a particular gift, it seemed, for making scientific truths understandable and intriguing for the non-scientific mind. Her various articles began to gain her national attention. She eventually wrote three popular books about marine life: Under the Sea-Wind, The Sea Around Us, and The Edge of the Sea.

These gained her notoriety and through these books, people all over the country, even the world, people of all ages were sharing in her pure delight of nature. Her written words allowed them to experience the amazing vitality of our undersea universe.

Now, if her career had ended there, Rachel would have gone into history as an exceptionally talented woman with a keen gift for scientific observation, and a magnificent ability to translate her observations for popular understanding.

But history had something else in mind for her because an old friend sent Rachel a letter in 1958 expressing both anger and great fear over the alarming deaths of large numbers of birds and insects on her private bird sanctuary near Cape Cod. Suspiciously, this occurred after an aerial spraying of DDT for mosquito control.

The friend asked Rachel to gain the ear of friends in Washington to take a look at the possible causes of this; and Rachel tried but could get no one to take the concern seriously.

Of course, in all her work, Rachel had certainly come to take appreciative note of how life forms impact one another, how they are connected to one another. And as she began to look into her friend's problem, and to understand the massive implications, she was truly alarmed. Given that no one else was willing or able to take up the cause, she dove in herself.

It took her over four years to investigate why such a shocking thing might be happening. Her research was exhaustive and impeccable. Despite publisher's deadlines and pressure from her literary agent, Rachel addressed this project knowing that **no** corners could be cut in gathering accurate data. The further she got into this, the greater she understood the magnitude of the opponents she was challenging. She held no naïve belief that they or the government would receive her news gladly. She understood full well that taking on the chemical industry in this way would truly be a David & Goliath story. Great amounts of money were at stake, so she knew that commensurate counterattacks were absolutely inevitable.

Her stamina over those years was astonishing. She worked long, lonely hours researching and writing while supporting and caring for the several family members who were dependent on her. Throughout, she was unyielding to either discouragement or fatigue.

It's quite remarkable to us from today's vantage point – but Rachel was the **first** person who was able to draw popular attention within the scientific arena to any concern for the interdependent web of life. Somehow, in that post World War II era, when the chemical manufacturers needed to find a new use for their lethal mixtures, they had been able to convince the public – and those responsible to protect the public - that unlimited spraying of crops to kill potentially harmful bugs would have no ill effects on the humans who were doing the spraying, or who were living nearby, or who were eating the produce grown there, or eating the animals who were fed that produce.

DDT was hailed as a savior for the farmer! Monsanto had the world believing that this chemical was the newfound guarantee that no one in the world would ever have to go hungry.

The substance was poison, of course, and it was used pretty much without caution or concern. In fact, the public was repeatedly assured by the manufacturer - and the government - that its safety was well documented. And the public believed them ...until Rachel made her prophet's voice heard.

She was quite smart in her approach. She knew that in order to hold the attention of the general population, she needed to make her writing accessible as she had done before; but she also knew that her scientific case had to be well substantiated.

Her solution was to begin with an opening chapter describing a fictitious town in which the birds and many other forms of life had vanished (hence, her title, Silent Spring). That portion was fiction, yes, but it was actually a compilation of true scenarios that she had gathered from around the country as she did her research. The subsequent chapters gave her eloquent arguments and explanations with plenty of end notes.

And her literary vehicle was immediately effective. Her book got the public's ear like nothing else, and they responded quickly demanding government action.

Those who stood to lose if the use of DDT was curbed also wasted no time. Some railed against Carson calling her (among other things) the “the nun of nature” “cat lover” “fish lover” or “priestess of nature.” (It's a testament to her success that some of those names sound pretty good to us today!)

Here are a couple things said by some of the “experts” of her day:

- Monsanto's president charged that Carson was not a scientist, but a “fanatical defender of the cult of the balance of nature.”⁴
- The misogyny in many of the assaults was only thinly veiled. Very regularly, her scientist's credentials were glossed over and she was described as an “unmarried female” with hints of hysteria.
- In some cases, this tack wasn't veiled at all - as when the former Secretary of Agriculture asked publicly, “why [would] a spinster with no children [be] so concerned with genetics?”⁵
- The National Agricultural Chemicals Association published a brochure saying her writings were “more poisonous than the pesticides she condemned.”⁶

But she knew better than to allow the avalanche of derogatory remarks to silence her. Rachel's years of **cherishing** the web of life gave her unwavering assurance that no one – not Monsanto, not the Department of Agriculture, not the National Agricultural Chemicals Association – no one could isolate where poisons sprayed without limitations would land. No one could control which nervous systems and cell structures would be damaged or destroyed by toxic vapors, even after those vapors were no longer visible to the human eye.

Today, this is hard to imagine, but many of my generation remember playing gleefully in the streets as the mosquito spraying trucks came rolling through the neighborhood. Children, small, growing children, with their rapidly reproducing cells, running, laughing unwittingly inhaling poison with every breath.

Rachel knew – and she pretty much single handedly pried open the door for the general public to see too.

⁴ Hawken, Paul. *Blessed Unrest: How the Largest Movement in the World Came into Being and Why No One Saw It Coming* Viking, 2007, p. 54.

⁵ *Ibid*, p. 55

⁶ *Ibid*

She also knew that this method wasn't even effective. She knew that if one uses poisonous spray against a particular insect, you can end up actually strengthening that population's ability to endure. In other words, under the survival of the fittest, after such a spraying the only surviving insects are those with a constitutional resistance to that chemical.

So, as those survivor-insects bred similarly resistant offspring, the poisons became less and less effective. The corporate "experts" just pushed for stronger, more frequent applications of those poisons making no connection to the fact that in that unwinnable war, they were in fact damaging, destroying countless other forms of life." Collateral damage," I suppose they might have said.

The interdependent web of existence, which an astonishingly large number of experts failed to comprehend before Rachel Carson's great work, was being destroyed without reason. Rachel forced us all to see that no life form could remain unharmed by the uncontrolled spraying of those lethal chemicals.

It's funny that nearly a hundred years before she did her work, Chief Seattle tried to tell us. In that opening reading, he was quite clear: *All things are connected. Whatever befalls the earth befalls the sons [and daughters] of the earth.*

Now, as she fought this uphill battle for justice, Rachel did have some supporters too. Among them was her dearest friend, Dorothy Freeman. There are hundreds of surviving letters between them, and those letters leave the full extent of their relationship up for discussion. But there is no doubt that they viewed one another as soul mates with an intense emotional intimacy that sustained them both through these difficult years.

Dorothy, while exceedingly supportive of Rachel, also expressed concern for the toll of this battle would take on her. But Rachel was not diverted or discouraged even by that. Once she understood, she knew there was no turning back. And it is a very good thing because Silent Spring is universally considered to be the match that lit the fire we now refer to as the Environmental Movement. Without a doubt, Rachel Carson changed our world.

One of the supreme ironies of all this is that while Rachel was working so feverishly on this book, she became ill. At first, her doctors did not give her the full picture, even though it later became apparent that they knew early on that she was dealing with cancer. They withheld that information from her. (It was customary to give that kind of news to a woman's husband. Since Rachel had no husband, the doctors made a decision to protect her from the truth.) You can imagine the frustration she felt over their unwarranted paternalism when the truth came out.

Despite her growing debilitation from the spreading cancer, and the increasing impact of related heart disease, Rachel pressed on and made each of her public appearances with grace and total presence. She must have been in great pain, but she was unwilling to have her message diverted into false pity. When she was unable to walk, she explained her use of a wheelchair by politely indicating she had a touch of arthritis.

So, all of this is fascinating stuff, evidence of an exceptionally brilliant, tenacious and courageous woman. But I think that beyond honoring the story of a woman who died over 40 years ago, Rachel Carson has powerful lessons to teach us today as we each take our own stand for justice.

I previously used the term “prophet” for her. Let me explain that by that I do not mean someone who has any direct connection to hear a voice of God and then foretell the future. Instead, I see the term prophet to mean someone who can see with such clarity that she or he can read the signs of the times **today** – see those signs accurately and then have the courage to speak up about the implications of what is seen.

One of the hallowed tenets of our Unitarian Universalist faith is the celebration of the “prophethood of all believers.” James Luther Adams taught us that. By the definition I just gave, by our faith, we know that you and I – all of us - are capable of being prophets. Capable is one thing; willing is another. Rachel Carson accurately read the signs of her times and she responded to a higher calling to speak her truth bravely and persistently.

And this facet of her story really made me take notice. For me personally, this was the greatest lesson. In her prophesying, Rachel Carson did not ever, as far as I can tell, divert her efforts into demonizing her enemies. Even with Monsanto’s unfair tactics against her. She unflinchingly stayed on message – She never wavered from her truth.

- She was called a spinster *and she spoke her truth.*
- Some of the highest governmental scientists accused her of excessive drama *and she repeated her truth.*
- They mocked her and tried to cast doubt on her credentials as a scientist *and she directly, calmly, determinedly told her truth yet again.*

It occurs to me that as we each engage in our own fight for justice, we sometimes allow ourselves to get sucked into personal attacks on others. Our attention and our energies get diverted away from the **point** of our cause, if we fall into demonizing those who **oppose** that cause.

One of the reasons Rachel Carson was able to change the world was the grounded, calm, unwavering responses she offered. She knew her truth, she had done the work to be certain she was dealing with facts, and she would not allow herself to be brow beaten. She didn’t holler or succumb to name-calling. She just evenly repeated her truth, always supported by well-reasoned evidence. She did not falter.

There’s one more final note about her life story I want to share. Her health issues did take her life in 1964, only two years after Silent Spring was published.

In the last few years, she’d become close friends with a Unitarian Minister, Rev. Duncan Howlett. They grew so close, in fact, that she gave him her instructions for the simple memorial service she wanted him to lead after her death. He prepared a sermon for that purpose but at the last minute, Rachel’s troubled brother returned to the scene and demanded a different location with a great deal of pomp and circumstance.

Rev. Howlett later delivered the sermon he’d prepared for his congregation, All Souls Unitarian in Washington, DC. It was so moving, apparently, that it was later entered into the official Congressional Record as a tribute to Carson.

Certainly, and not surprisingly, by her express wish to have her memorial service at All Souls (even though that wish was not ultimately honored) Rachel viewed herself as Unitarian in those final, eventful years of her life.

The general historical consensus is that this great woman’s work saved countless lives as the public and then the government in the person of John F. Kennedy demanded that the chemical companies acknowledge and deal with the very real hazards of DDT. It

cost her years of toil, but I have no doubt that she counted it a small price for the outcome.

We know that it takes great patience to do the work of justice.

The impossible may take a while, they say!

Theodore Parker, one of our Unitarian ancestors who fought a similarly impossible battle against slavery wrote of his personal belief that the moral arc of the universe is long, but that it ultimately bends toward justice⁷. Martin Luther King, Jr. later quoted Parker in his own work. And this is a saying that I have pondered a great deal lately.

The image is such a powerful one. It brings to mind the St. Louis arch. I see this long, long, LONG arc, and although I have a great fondness for sentiment expressed, I know that sometimes my own heart feels discouraged when it seems like the forces of **I**njustice are winning. I wonder sometimes if I have total and complete trust that the landing point of that arc will be in the promised land of equity, justice and compassion.

But then I am reminded that with or without that absolute assurance, **my** job – Rachel Carson’s job – your job – is for each of us to do our part to tug on that arc to pull the curve down toward justice.

The end is far away, too far for us to see clearly. But what we know is that now, on this day, we must each do the work that lends our weight, our power, our talents – whatever they may be – toward speaking and acting for justice, even and perhaps especially in the face of powerful opposition. We are each called to honor the interdependent web of all life, to fearlessly exercise our own voice in truth-telling. **That** is part of the “tugging on the arc” that we can all do, for we are **all** prophets.

Rachel Carson believed the more she could help us focus on the marvels of our universe, the more we’d be inspired to preserve it and do that which sustains rather than destroys it. Enthralled with the exquisite intricacies of the web of life, Rachel Carson changed the world. Motivated by love, she did it with graciousness and integrity.

To me, she is an absolute hero.

May we each go on to do **our** part in tugging that curving arc down toward its ultimate landing place of justice!

⁷ Theodore Parker’s full quote was “*I do not pretend to understand the moral universe; the arc is a long one, my eye reaches but little ways; I cannot calculate the curve and complete the figure by the experience of sight; I can divine it by conscience. And from what I see I am sure it bends towards justice.*” “Of Justice and Conscience,” in *Ten Sermons of Religion*, (Boston: Crosby, Nichols, & Company, 1853).