The first thing I want to observe is that being invited here to celebrate the 20th anniversary of Faith in Place with you makes my heart very glad. It also makes me feel a little old.

There are some wonderfully familiar faces here who celebrate with you. If I start to name them, I’ll forget someone really important, but I do want to call out Steve Perkins, co-conspirator in chief, who schemed this thing up at the Center for Neighborhood Technology, more than 20 years ago, and then hired me to give it a whirl.

I think this all started the way good things do, with a question. What if we brought people of faith into this conversation about the role of humans in the larger living world, in a way that called out their connection to faith, instead of just capitalizing on the fact that they were already gathered in congregations.

That there was a connection between religious teachings and values and practices of environmental sustainability wasn’t obvious 20 years ago, the way it might be now.

If there was any magic in this in the beginning (and it definitely seemed to me that there was), it was in the ability to live as if the world we want were this world. As if the world we dream about were latently present, waiting to be born into, this troubled world. In the world we want anyone can go anywhere and be made welcome. Anyone of any faith greets someone of another faith as cousin, and with respectful curiosity. We look for commonalities, and work together for the common good. That was definitely my experience of this effort from the beginning and pretty much without exception.
And when all this started back in the 1990’s, we had just seen the fall of the Berlin Wall. We had seen the Solidarity Movement in Poland, where the men of the Gdansk shipyards decided, because they had no resources other than sheer force of will and imagination, to live as if the world were already the way they wanted it to be. They decided to live as if they were free. And then, for a moment, they were.

We had some notions that were theological, and some that were poetic, which is much the same, and we didn’t have a whole lot else. So we decided to live as if it weren’t already too late, and as if we couldn’t fail.

We didn’t have to live as if the world were beautiful, and a continuing creative gift, because that is the actual, present state of things. We did have to conform our behavior to the gift. So we started at the personal level, to understand our relationship to the planet in very interior ways.

We sought out local, organic food. Along the way we started, and then ended, a halal meat coop. It was an adventure in bad business judgment and County Health Department inspections (our landlady loved those).

While it was active it took us to a farmers’ porch for lunch, where prayers were said in Hebrew and Arabic and English, and the conversation turned to how grandmothers saw to it that everyone was fed.

We put in those awful compact florescent light bulbs, and biked places. One of us was biking to a class she was teaching with me when she had a terrible accident and blew out her knee. I had to
teach the class myself, but I did get to stand on Michigan Avenue downtown while a firetruck pulled up and a fireman delivered her supplies for the class to me, and I could hear the ambulance, a few blocks away, taking her to the emergency room.

I remember a foundation director I totally like and respect saying to me once that sometimes they fund organizations because they they’re the only one doing something that they think is important, even though they don’t do it very well.

Nancy, if you’re here, I was pretty sure at the time you meant us. Thank you for funding us anyway.

There is such a freedom in living as if. You don’t have to bow to reality, and you can interact daily with all your sources for hope. Mine are surprisingly scriptural for a Unitarian, but mostly relational. I met so many kind people during my years with Faith in Place, some of whom are still my very dearest people, and one of whom is my husband, going on 20 years now.

Living as if the world were the one you most want it to be is something that people of color in America have been doing for centuries, of course. Though I don’t think I understood that myself 20 years ago. I had the privilege of not understanding it, as I have since learned. The searing love we hold for each other is a way of living as if – as if we were free to hold that love. As if we were kin. And of course we must love each other, and we are kin.

We worked on pulling those theological strings, the stories of the traditions, the understanding that we protect what we love, and we love creation because it is good. And we translated that
into practices that were personal. We did that stuff because we’re humans and humans learn from the specific to the general.

The personal practices are important. They educate by the way that they are hard to make consistent. A recycling system that is easily damaged by small inconsistencies is a weak system and deserves review. Automating what is essential is key, and that takes legislation. We all learned that lesson together, and largely because of the contribution that Faith in Place has made to it over the years, the annual Illinois Environmental Lobby Day is an authentic rally now. Hundreds of people. The first year we went, it was what, six? Nine? But we ate the marzipan sweets for the spring Zoroastrian holiday on the way down, and it was wonderful.

There was a lot of driving around. People gave me access to their churches for meetings. I had a strangely broad knowledge of where the light switches were in a surprisingly large number of buildings. One meeting on a very snowy day was attended only by me. But just one.

People showed up. We dreamed up projects we could do together. There was a garden at the Sisters of St. Joseph in LaGrange Park, where the idea was that we’d put out a call to gardeners to divide their native-type perennials, and bring us some. I thought this was ridiculous. No way it could work. But being dependable, if nothing else, I was out there at a very godly hour waiting to see what would happen. A car showed up with a few hostas in the trunk. Then another. Then someone’s prize Iris. Then, well, you get it. That garden was beautiful for a long time before it wasn’t. Sr. Pat, I’m still sorry about the wasps.
While I was a part of this, I learned a lot of things about the ecological condition of the planet which were to my sorrow, and I had to figure out how to live with that knowledge, which was handy because that was exactly the situation that anyone we were going to invite to join us was in. We were asking people to take time and energy to learn something that was going to make them unhappy, fearful about the future. Faith communities are designed to be containers for that kind of knowledge, and it was helpful that we were working within them. We start with your source for hope. Then the bad news.

And in a lot of ways the situation looks more dire now than it did then. We live in a world where children drown in the Rio Grande, and where environmental refugees drown in the Mediterranean Sea. We live in a world of regular category 5 hurricanes, where the decision to rebuild a low-lying island becomes hugely charged. We live in a world in which heat bakes crops, and rain floods them, and farmers choose bankruptcy, or worse, because they see no way out. This is not some future condition. It’s happening right now, to people who are our kin and whom we must hold in searing love even as it breaks our hearts.

The environmental movement, when it is a movement of white privilege, has far too little to say about any of that. It makes judgments about what kind of car people drive, or virtue signals with cloth grocery bags. It celebrates composting the peel of a cucumber. But the environmental movement needs to understand the world it is living in. If you are going to speak in a world in which children drown you had better have something to say that is not a scandal in the face of such things – a scandal through its smallness against such great injustices.
This, too, is why policy advocacy must be the end goal. The change is not in the way each of us lives our little life, but in how we all live our lives together.

And by pushing for that change in an interfaith context, insisting that every faith be heard and counted, we create a context of love. We know the end is policy. The means are lovingkindness.

I trust the people who do the work of Faith in Place now with my whole heart. I’m so proud of all of you, and I love you in very specific and not abstract ways. I believe you will succeed, and I’m grateful to you for picking things up and carrying them into the future that someday will include you but not me.

Human ingenuity has pulled us back from the brink more than once throughout history, and so I would tend to be hopeful about the likelihood of success. We won’t like it. It will involve more terraforming of the planet, and there will be more unforeseen and negative consequences, which will then have to be solved, because that is what humans do. It’s the kind of animal we are. But I’d be hopeful. Why not?

I find myself wishing James Baldwin were here more now than ever, and I will leave you with his thoughts from his 1964 essay “Nothing Personal:” For nothing is fixed, forever and forever and forever, it is not fixed; the earth is always shifting, the light is always changing, the sea does not cease to grind down rock. Generations do not cease to be born, and we are responsible to them because we are the only witnesses they have.
The sea rises, the light fails, lovers cling to each other, and children cling to us. The moment we cease to hold each other, the moment we break faith with one another, the sea engulfs us and the light goes out.”

Stay in those larger conversations. Don’t dwell on small annoyances where there is real suffering. Work hard, delight in the world, hold to one another. Be a blessing to the life around you and carry on this good work. Thank you.