

Shifting Energy: From Fossil Fuels to Climate Action

A sermon for Earth Sunday 2015

By Matthew McHale



“Everything is energy, and that’s all there is to it,” said Albert Einstein... allegedly. That is what his famous equation, $E=MC^2$ tells us. Even the matter that appears to be as solid as the ground we stand upon is, in fact, just stored energy, waiting to be released. Perhaps we could say that if energy is everything, then God is energy. Although, then Einstein might reply, “This is not philosophy [or theology]. This is physics.” But this isn’t a physics lesson, nor is it a theological discussion, although both are relevant to this sermon.

Energy plays a vital role in our lives—it powers our lights and appliances, heats and cools our buildings, and powers our vehicles. And it’s also the life-blood that our global economic system runs on—the production of all of the *stuff* we build and consume, and the mass transporting of that *stuff* to every corner of the globe, even our industrial food system is dependent on energy.

The primary energy sources consumed across the planet are fossil fuels—coal, oil and natural gas. The relentless burning of which, plays a key role in fueling the converging crises of ecological destruction, rising inequality and, perhaps worst of all, global warming.

None of this is new to us. We’ve been aware of it for years now. But we don’t seem to be doing much about it; instead, most of have engaged in a sort of climate crisis denial. No, not the kind of global-warming-is-a-hoax denialism, but the kind where we look at the problem and quickly look away. And there are many strategies we use do deny it: we say it’s too complicated; we say climate change is in the future and I won’t have to deal with it; or we tell ourselves that some new scientific or technological breakthrough will save us.¹

But most of the time... we simply push it out of our consciousness, until we hear a particularly staggering piece of news that reminds us how dire the situation really is: an exceptionally devastating hurricane, wildfire, drought or flood; or news the West Antarctic Ice Sheet will inevitably collapse, which will cause the ocean to rise a likely ten to thirteen feet;² or that in just 40 years we lost over 50% of the world’s wildlife populations;³ or that fossil fuel companies have already discovered over five times as much oil, natural gas, and coal reserves as it would take to raise the temperature two degrees Celsius—five times the amount needed to cause disastrous global warming.⁴

But then shock of that news starts to fade, and we look away and settle back into our daily routines and go back to business as usual. It’s understandable—the scope of the problems we face is huge, and it’s easy to feel like there is nothing we can do to effect meaningful change. Sometimes it feels that there is no hope it will ever change.

After all, scientists have been warning us about global warming for years. In fact, in 1990, a quarter-century ago, our governments started meeting to commit to reduce carbon emissions, recognizing that something had to be done to stop global warming. But since then, annual carbon emissions have actually increased by 61%.⁵

Given all of these difficult facts, the question we are faced with is: If we know what the problem is and we know what the solutions are, why has it been getting worse?

In her incisive book, *This Changes Everything: Capitalism vs. The Climate*, award-winning author and journalist Naomi Klein suggest the answer lies in the fact that the 1990s was also when globalization and “free market” economics began its rapid spread, and “the liberation of world markets, a process powered by the liberation of unprecedented amounts of fossil fuels from the earth, has dramatically sped up the same process that is liberating Arctic ice from existence.” Klein compellingly asserts that our economic system is fundamentally at odds with our survival. Our economic model is dependent on continuous and endless consumption and growth, but we simply can’t keep growing forever on a planet with finite resources.⁶ That’s why we are now blowing up mountaintops for coal, and poisoning our drinking water for natural gas, and clear-cutting boreal forests and turning them into lifeless pits the size of metropolitan areas to get at tar sands oil, because we’ve essentially run out of the easily accessible sources of energy. We are now seeing the disastrous consequences of what happens when the need for more and more and more, pushes up against the edge of our planet’s limited resources.

Having neglected the needs of our planet for so long, we find ourselves at a precipice. We no longer have the option of looking away, or thinking that a full-scale transformation of our global economy is unnecessary, if we want to have a livable future

It’s this reality that scares so many of us, and so we respond alternately with numbness, denial, guilt, resignation, minimization, and paralyzing despair. And we end up going through our days with an indistinct but pervasive sense of unease, because we are living in a double reality—caught between carrying on with business as usual and the awareness that our way of life is totally unsustainable, and is leading us headlong toward a crisis which threatens most life on this earth.⁷

As the problems continue to worsen, our inability to look at things as they are, prevents us from envisioning alternative possibilities, and our inaction leads to an even greater sense of overwhelm and powerlessness. It’s a vicious cycle; and the only way to break the cycle is to take actions to help bring into being the world we want to live in. You see, once we start to act, once we begin to engage, to use our concern as a human fuel to act for a just transition, we can truly realize: we do have power and another world is possible.

When it was proposed in 2008, the Keystone XL pipeline, which would transport tar sands from Canada to the Gulf Coast, seemed like a done deal. But then NASA scientist James Hansen said its construction would be “game over” for the climate. Soon protesters were being arrested in front of the White House, and attorneys were fighting it in court, and a grass-roots movement grew—an unlikely coalition that included climate scientists, Indigenous tribes, and conservative ranchers—that elevated the pipeline to a national political issue and brought the project to a halt. Seven years later it still hasn’t been approved and there is a significant possibility that it will be permanently blocked. Moreover, this campaign has prevented other companies from moving forward with similar developments, because they are afraid of losing money should they face similar opposition.

Tim DeChristopher, a Unitarian Universalist activist, became a hero in the environmental movement after he successfully prevented over 100,000 acres of federal land from being leased for oil and gas drilling. He had originally intended to protest the auction of land leases, which had been challenged for not adhering to environmental regulations. But in the moment, he decided to join the auction and ended up derailing the auction by outbidding his competitors, although he had no money to support his bids. Despite the whole auction being later declared unlawful and therefore invalid, Tim was arrested and spent two years in prison

for his act of civil disobedience. At his sentencing hearing Tim said, “At this point of unimaginable threats on the horizon, this is what hope looks like. In these times of a morally bankrupt government that has sold out its principles, this is what patriotism looks like. With countless lives on the line, this is what love looks like, and it will only grow.” Tim’s spontaneous act not only saved that land and inspired countless others, but it also transformed him. As he said, “principled action is the salvation of the soul. I may have to go to prison, but every day since that auction, I walk a little taller, and I feel a little more free.” Tim is currently a student at Harvard Divinity School, studying to be a UU minister.⁸

In 2012 four Canadian women started a campaign led by Indigenous women called Idle No More, to protest a law passed by parliament that would undermine Indigenous sovereignty and remove protections for lands and waters. In a few months, Idle No More captured the national spotlight and became a full on movement, spreading across Canada and the United States, and throughout the world. Mobilizing in numerous struggles for sovereignty and against environmental destruction and global warming, Idle No More has become the biggest movement of Indigenous people in decades.⁹

Once we take action, the realm of what’s possible actually starts to change. This is how our hope for the future arises. As Naomi Klein and many others have articulated: a massive shift in our economy is not only possible, but it can also be done in a way that is equitable, and that protects those who are most vulnerable, and puts the burden on those who are most responsible.¹⁰

This is the vision we must keep in our minds. Too often, when we think about the climate crisis and the world that is coming into being, we focus on what will be lost—and there will certainly be luxuries we have to give up. But there is so much about the current system that we would be glad to see change.

Our world is marked by staggering inequality, both nationally and globally, with the super-rich manipulating the political and economic system for their gain. Wars are fought and untold lives are destroyed, in search of ever more wealth, resources and power. Our culture almost pathologically glorifies individualism, at the expense of relationships and community. Despite our increasingly “connected” world, we are increasingly disconnected from one another. And we have become disconnected from the ecological systems that sustain our lives and all life on the planet. In so doing, we have caused irreparable harm to our beloved Earth.

As we think about the changes that will be coming, let us remember all those things we would gladly leave behind, and work towards a world that—despite the challenges ahead—is filled with more love—more beauty—more compassion—more peace— and more justice than we have today!

Let it be that vision— that vision for our future that guides us— guides us as we shift our energy away from a system that relies on burning fossil fuels, and dominating and exploiting people and the planet in the relentless pursuit of profit and growth. Let that vision guide us as we shift our energy toward a low-carbon future, and ultimately a life-sustaining society—a shift which Joanna Macy, the Eco-philosopher, Buddhist and activist, calls “The Great Turning.”¹¹

We have a choice about where we choose to spend our energy, not the energy of fossil fuels, but the energy of individual and collective action. How we use our energy is everything. We can either keep putting our energy into continuing business as usual; or we can choose to use our energy to support the Great Turning, and help bring about a better future.

This is not to say that such a shift will be easy, it’s certainly not. And it’s not certain that we will even be successful. But at some level it doesn’t matter what the outcome is. As Joanna Macy teaches: it doesn’t

matter whether we are here to serve as hospice workers to a dying world or we are midwives to a new chapter of life on Earth—the work is the same.¹²

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But we have to act!

There is no more important cause. Confronting climate change is perhaps the biggest struggle that human beings have faced in our two-hundred-thousand-years on this planet. We are in a fight for our lives, and for the lives of future generations and the majority of life on this planet.

There is no better time. As Washington’s Governor Jay Inslee says, “we are the first generation to feel the sting of climate change, and we are the last generation that can do something about it.”¹³

And there is perhaps no religious community better suited to respond to these global crises and help bring about the world we want to create than Unitarian Universalists. We have a long and profound legacy of justice work to ground and inspire us. We have theologies that uphold our interconnectedness with all of creation. We have the ability to work effectively in multi-religious and secular settings. And, crucially, we have community in which begin to model the type of the future we want to create.

Indeed if Unitarian Universalism is to be relevant in the world that is rapidly coming into being, our congregations need to be engaging in the work of building sustainable and resilient communities.

Recognizing the dire need for action, leaders and organizations from across Unitarian Universalism have joined together in an unprecedented way in support of Commit2Respond, a Climate Justice initiative inspiring individuals and congregations across the continent to take collective action to change the world.¹⁴ We commit to take sustained action on ending global warming, by shifting to a low-carbon future, advancing the human rights of affected communities, and growing the climate justice movement.

What that looks like will be different for each congregation:

- Install solar panels on the building, and hire a worker-owned co-op, or a company that employs people of color, to install it.
- Host a weekly vegan potluck or start a community garden or a food forest that donates some—or all—of its food to a local soup kitchen.
- Organize protests against plans to drill for oil in the arctic, or join a local frontline community in a campaign against a proposed power plant, waste facility, or fracking well located next to a poor community or community of color.
- Become the hub for an alternative economic system, like a community currency or a time bank, or start a tool lending library for the community.
- Hold a “This Changes Everything” book discussion group, or host a non-violent direct action training for climate justice activists.
- Install bike racks or organize carpools for those who can’t ride a bike.
- Develop a disaster preparedness plan for your community, or support a frontline community that’s been hit by a devastating storm.
- [Add your own examples of what your congregation might do. What bold actions might you take? What will be most meaningful to your congregation and the community you live in?]

There are countless possibilities. But this isn't just another opportunity to simply *think* about all of the things we could be doing—we need to start putting these ideas into action! And then putting more of them into action! If we're not putting our energy behind the transformation to a life-sustaining society, we are continuing to put our energy behind business as usual. So how will we commit to respond?

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The problems we face are so daunting, and the path to a life-sustaining society is still unclear. In order to sustain us, what we need more than anything is a sense of vision and hope—vision for a livable future and hope that we can make it manifest. But vision and hope don't just happen. Vision arises out of taking an honest look at the world around us—at all of its brokenness and its promise. And hope is choosing to take action, however small.

None of us can know what that future will look like, but we can begin to see it in all of the small actions we take to heal and bless the world. And as those actions come together, like tiles in beautiful mosaic, we start to see glimpses of the just and sustainable world we are creating.

Ashe. May it be so.

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Notes

¹ Thanks to Naomi Klein, who articulated this way of thinking about denying climate change, and for inspiring a significant part of this sermon with her book *This Changes Everything: Capitalism vs. the Climate*. Simon and Schuster, 2014.

² Suzanne Goldenberg, “Western Antarctic ice sheet collapse has already begun, scientists warn.” *The Guardian*. 12 May 2014. www.theguardian.com/environment/2014/may/12/western-antarctic-ice-sheet-collapse-has-already-begun-scientists-warn

³ World Wildlife Fund, *Living Planet Report*. 2014. <http://www.worldwildlife.org/LPR>

⁴ Bill McKibben, “Global Warming's Terrifying New Math.” *Rolling Stone*. 19 July 2012. www.rollingstone.com/politics/news/global-warmings-terrifying-new-math-20120719

⁵ Global Carbon Project, *2014 Global Carbon Budget*. 21 September 2014. www.globalcarbonproject.org/carbonbudget/14/hl-full.htm

⁶ Klein, p. 20-21.

⁷ Thanks to Joanna Macy, whose “Work That Reconnects” has been a groundbreaking resource for the emotional and spiritual transformation work among activists. More can be found at www.joannamacy.net, and in her books, *Active Hope*, co-authored with Chris Johnstone, and *Coming Back to Life*, co-authored with Molly Young Brown.

⁸ Peaceful Uprising, “Tim’s Story” <http://www.peacefuluprising.org/tim-dechristopher/tims-story>. For more information about Tim watch the documentary film *Bidder 70*.

⁹ Idle No More. www.idlenomore.ca

¹⁰ Klein, p. 21.

¹¹ Macy, “The Great Turning.” www.joannamacy.net/thegreatturning.html

¹² Macy, Letter. 7 September 2005. www.joannamacy.net/joannasletters/145-september72005.html

¹³ Quoted in Jason Dearden, “West Coast states and BC to link climate policies.” *AP*. 28 October 2013. bigstory.ap.org/article/west-coast-states-and-bc-link-climate-policies

¹⁴ For more information, visit www.commit2respond.org