

THE MORAL DEMANDS OF CLIMATE CHANGE

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It was 2:15 in the morning, July 29, and the Climate Action Coalition, a group of climate activists from Portland, Oregon, had a flotilla of kayaks ready to launch—they were trying to stop the Fennica, an icebreaker, from going down the Willamette River to the Columbia, headed for the Arctic, to aid Shell Oil in drilling. The 381-foot ship had been sent to a Portland shipyard for repairs, which had been completed. But the time-line for drilling was tight, and delay would be a big problem for Shell. They had to pass under the St. John's Bridge, and that's where we hoped to stop them.

Just as the “kayaktivists” were preparing to launch their tiny crafts—this was a real “David and Goliath” moment—they noticed lights appearing on the bridge. First one, then more, and finally 13 lights. Surprising local organizers, Greenpeace national, had put out a call for activists to come to Portland and stop the Fennica. Thirteen volunteers began rappelling themselves off the bridge, 200 feet above the river, dangling there in mid-air, in the darkness. The police arrived, but too late. For the next two days, the whole world watched, as the young volunteers hung there for 40 hours, much of the time in punishing heat, with their red and yellow banners blowing in the wind—blocking the Fennica. Shortly afterward, Shell announced that they were no longer planning to drill in the Arctic—for economic reasons. Yes, and because they were going to be countered by activists at every turn.

At a post-action celebration, I talked with one of the young men who had suspended himself from the bridge. He was tanned, hair bleached blond by the sun, with piercing blue eyes. He told me he lives in New York, but when he got a call from Greenpeace to get on a plane at once and come to Portland for a direct action against Shell, he didn't think twice. I was amazed, confounded. I said, “Why would you be willing to do this?” He looked at me, incredulous, and said, “We have to do something.”

We citizens of earth are facing the greatest challenge of our day—or one might argue, of any day: the warming of the planet, threatening all life forms. The good news is that we have done something: for the first time, all the nations of the world have agreed--climate change is

real, and people are causing it. The Paris agreement of last December ended with 195 countries adopting the first universal global climate agreement, the conference setting a goal of holding the rise in the global average temperature to 2 degrees Celsius, or 3.6 degrees Fahrenheit. But we have not done enough. Critics have pointed out that this goal is unenforceable—they say it's doubtful we will be able to hold the line. I wish I could say that I disagreed, but as a poet friend of mine said, "Humans are a very flawed species."

Holding the rise to 2 degrees Celsius of course will not prevent the damage that has already been done, damage that will continue to affect our earth for thousands of years. Climate has a long memory. We have already seen the punishing heat waves, the melting of the glaciers, the fierce storms. If we exceed the Paris target, we will see coastal cities go under water. We will see the increase of tribalism and armed conflict as suffering and frightened people vie for control of resources. We will see food and water shortages that will make the current migrant crisis seem simple to address. Why have so many books and films of late portrayed the apocalypse? Because art is prophetic of what is to come.

I am a minister, and hopeful by nature. However, I am also a realist, and I'm guessing that we're in for a pile of trouble. Emissions in China and India and other developing countries are rising. Population growth is expected to peak at about 9.5 billion by 2050, from the present 7 billion, straining the planet's resources further. We are in a global-wide crisis that is unprecedented. This is the first time in the history of the earth that a generation of people has held the fate of the earth in our hands.

Global warming is, of course, related to all the other justice issues: the poisoning of poor neighborhoods, financial recklessness by the banks, extreme economic disparity, the creation of an underclass that has no hope. The worm in the apple of our body politic is the domination of big money and the demise of democracy. In regard to climate issues, the fossil fuel corporations are the juggernaut we're facing.

What is to be done?

The fact is that we do have choices, and increasing viable ones, economically speaking. Nobel prize winning economist Paul Krugman says that achieving a drastic reduction in

emissions¹ is possible without involving huge economic sacrifices. He says technological progress in renewable energy has been remarkable, pointing out that the cost of electricity generated by wind power fell 61 percent from 2009 to 2015, and the cost of solar power fell 82 percent. A large-scale shift from fossil fuels to renewables can occur if we provide financial incentives: a price on carbon and tax credits for renewables. Another well-known economist, Yale University's William Nordhaus comes to a similar conclusion in his book *The Climate Casino*,² saying that our real problem is not economic feasibility, but rather political will.

We know that, in spite of the lobbying by corporations, ultimately if the people rise up and demand change, change will come. Then why aren't more citizens awake to the dangers the planet faces? Why are we not in the streets? People typically say, "Oh, I know climate change is a problem. I just don't know what to do about it." Understandably, the magnitude of the problem can make us feel impotent, turning away in fear, falling into despair.

We liberals often fall into the guilt trap—we say ***we have met the enemy, and he is us***. We just have to change our lifestyles, we say. Recently I was taking part in a demonstration in which a Native American woman gave her testimony. A striking figure, dressed in her tribal regalia, she spoke slowly, strongly, with spiritual clarity—except when she stopped to apologize for driving to the demonstration, calling herself "a hypocrite." Not so. The fossil fuel industry would like us to believe that we have no moral authority to speak against them, because after all, don't we all drive and use plastics? We should understand that the industry works hard to be sure that we don't develop sustainable energy sources, continuing to limit our choices and keep us dependent upon their products. They lobby against green energy, they fund think tanks and organizations that spread skepticism about climate change, they support elected officials who are deniers. As ethicist Kathleen Dean Moore puts it, "It's the ultimate triumph of the <fossil fuel> industry that even as it is externalizing its environmental costs, it is also externalizing it shame."³

¹Paul Krugman, "Wind, Sun and Fire," *New York Times*, February 1, 2016.

²William Nordhaus, *The Climate Casino: Risk, Uncertainty, and Economics for a Warming World*, Yale University Press, 2013.

³Kathleen Dean Moore, "Executive Deception: Four Fallacies About Divestment, and One Big Mistake," *Chronicle of Higher Education*, October 18, 2015.

Unitarian Universalists try so hard to be good—after all, we are descended from Calvinists. We avoid using paper cups for coffee hour after the service; we become “green sanctuaries.” At home, we change our light bulbs, forego bottled water, and maybe buy a Prius. The fact is that none of this matters, practically speaking: the only thing that will save the planet is policy change—and that will come only with political activism, when the people of our endangered earth speak out and confront their governments. Cities and states are good places to start, because they are more amenable to the changes demanded by citizens. The nation will follow, when enough of us act locally. So, yes, make lifestyle changes, for these act as a moral witness—but we can’t stop there.

Some people tell themselves, ***Technology will save us—hasn’t it always, in the past?*** We should explore and consider all avenues, but there is no magic bullet, like sequestering our carbon in the ocean or sending it to outer space. Nuclear energy has serious environmental consequences and it is hugely expensive to create. If some ingenious idea comes along, well and good, but we can’t count on it.

Still others say, ***It doesn’t matter what we do in this country—the problem is global. What about China and India?*** The United States is still the most powerful nation of our world and should act as a moral leader. An energy revolution in America could produce a tipping point, so that others will follow.

Then there is the excuse, ***I don’t have time—let those activists handle the problem.*** I know when I talk to my grown sons, they say, “Mom, you don’t know how busy I am!” I understand—our young people are raising children, pushed at work. But if your house is on fire, do you say, hey, let somebody else act—I don’t have time to deal with this? Every citizen has the obligation to be part of the solution to global warming. I think of the words of Martin Luther King, Jr., speaking about civil rights: “History will have to record that the greatest tragedy of this period of social transition was not the strident clamor of the bad people, but the appalling silence of the good people.” Like it or not, history has put this issue on our plate. To live with integrity, we can’t walk away from it.

But we say, ***I’m just one person, I can’t do anything.*** We all have power. We all have spheres of influence, whether we are a corporate executive or a homemaker, a minister or a

gym instructor. Some of the most moving testimonies given at hearings have come from school children. They know their future is at stake.

When we act alone, it is true that we feel powerless. Our strength and courage, though, shine out when we join with a group of others, all with the same values, working for the same cause. In my Climate Action Coalition, there are students, political operatives, ministers, retired scientists and teachers, lawyers, two doctors who have given up their medical practices to work in the climate movement. We also have the Raging Grannies, a group of older women who are not afraid to wear outrageous hats and make up satirical songs to sing at rallies. Everybody can't do everything, but each of us contributes to the whole, and we keep one another strong.

How will change come about? The history of progressive social movements tells us that the impetus for change comes not from the government or from business, not from the establishment, but from what is known as the "third sector": schools, non-profits, unions, churches. In other words, it comes from the grassroots, from a small number of committed individuals who awaken the conscience of the country. Consider child labor laws, abolition, women's suffrage, the anti-war movement, civil rights, fair wages—all these movements came from the bottom up.

What is the role of the church? It is significant, because in changing consciousness, moral arguments always trump economic and scientific facts. Unfortunately, fundamentalist and mainline Protestant churches have for the most part emphasized personal sins—garden variety sins like lying, sloth, and adultery—rather than systemic sins like economic inequity, racism, domestic abuse, or environmental sins which wound the earth and sicken people. A church should offer a prophetic alternative. It must ask, "What gives health? What give life? What gives hope?" And always, we must ask, "And how are the children?"

A story. Let me tell you how a small band of determined activists turned around a city's mayor and stopped their city from being a conduit for fossil fuel. Mayor Charlie Hales of Portland, Oregon, invited Pembina, a propane company from Canada, to build \$500 million facility for propane exports in Portland. He called the project "great news." But local environmental groups would have none of it. They created satirical posters of Hales, labeling him "Fossil Fuel Charlie," and flooded the city with them. Activists dogged him, showing up at

public gatherings with the posters. They disrupted City Council meetings. They testified at the misnamed Planning and Sustainability Commission. They leafleted churches and public events, asking people to write to Hales and to the five City Council members. Hales got over 3,000 letters and e-mails against the Pembina project, and 3 for it—and he reversed his decision. He explained, “It was a case of there go the people, I’d better follow them.” Now he has become a climate warrior, introducing a resolution to block all new energy-export projects like Pembina, which the City Council unanimously approved. Subsequently, Hales was invited with several other mayors to a climate conference with President Obama. He was also invited to the Vatican to visit with the Pope, and had a role in the Paris Environmental Accord last December. Yes, the people spoke, and the politicians listened. Yes, we can change the world.

We need a new narrative, a new story that defines us and guides us. From the earliest settlements, America has seen herself as the promised land, “the city on a hill,”⁴ establishing a new and superior social order. That new order has to do with freedom and equality under the law—and it also has to do with domination of other lands and resources, under the guise of “saving” them. These beliefs constitute a quasi-religion—not our professed theology, but in fact our *functional* theology, determined by what we actually hold sacred. And what do we hold sacred in this country? The market. Our civil religion has now put its faith in post-industrial capitalism. We continue to exploit developing countries for their raw products and labor. We live to buy and accumulate stuff, unconnected from the source of our riches, the earth. In fact, the earth itself is seen as a commodity. This is not a system of values that is sustainable, either economically or spiritually.

So if we are to imagine a new narrative, a healing story, what are the values that will of necessity ground us? First and foremost, ***we must become radically relational***. Because global warming is a phenomenon shared by all peoples in all places, we no longer can think of ourselves as independent agents, either as individuals or as countries. What touches one, touches all.

This is a perspective that encourages us to take responsibility for the “commons.” Our morality must not be constrained by skin color, religious persuasion, language, ethnic or class

⁴John Winthrop, preaching to the Massachusetts Bay colonists before departing from their ship.

background. It's not enough to say "my children," "my neighborhood," "my town." Our connectedness to all people everywhere will become more and more apparent, as will our dependency upon one another.

And what is a new challenge for change agents, we must consider not just the suffering of those alive now, but the needs of future generations. In other words, ***we must develop a consciousness of generational justice***. I remember being moved by Robert Flaherty's *Nanook of the North*, a film that is often referred to as the first documentary. The protagonist, Nanook, moves through the wilderness of Northern Canada, hunting, fishing, building an igloo. I recall the courage and humanity of this Inuit who considers the next hunter or fisherman who may happen by, and leaves each shelter or site more hospitable than when he found it. He sees himself as responsible for those unknown ones who will come. Our ethic of stewardship must extend to those nameless ones who will follow us, those who will be born and live and love and die largely dependent upon our care for the earth they happen into.

And last, ***we must become foolishly, irrationally hopeful***, because we do not have the luxury of despair. What is the source of this imprudent hope? It is grounded in the life force itself, and from the faith that is called forth when we face impossible odds, odds that would make any halfway reasonable person admit defeat. It is the hope of the children of Israel wandering lost, forsaken, in a barren land. It is the hope of the shepherd boy David as he chooses a stone for his sling and trembling, looks up at Goliath. It is the preposterous hope of Jesus, as he prays in the garden of Gethsemane. We are called simply to be faithful. We cannot count on the fruits of our labor. We do what is right solely because it is right. Our faith stands in contrast to all that which takes, devours, destroys. It is sustained by love, for the earth and all living things.

Someone has said that this is a good time in history to be alive. I think I understand that sentiment. The climate crisis has given our generation a great deal of clarity about moral purpose. We have challenges that can bring out the best in us, fostering a great outpouring of creativity and compassion. We are facing destruction, almost beyond imagination, and that demands a kind of faithfulness like no other we have known. We are called forth, to be bigger than we are. Yes, it is a good time to be alive.

I am reminded of when I was a young woman, and so joyfully pregnant. I had no question about the meaning of my life. I gave myself away to a purpose larger than my own pleasure, my own safety, even. I knew that a life depended on me, that I was a container, a protector of life. I still am. So are all of us.

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