

# **SLOW VIOLENCE:** What Climate Change Really Is

Robert Keim  
March 2015

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Naturalist-author Diane Ackerman relates the potential fate of the Yup'ik people of Newtok, on the western coast of Alaska. **“Any day now the whole village and neighboring indigenous communities could begin sinking into the melting permafrost, as if it were white quicksand.”**<sup>1</sup> Their options? Well, U.S. and international laws define refugees as only those **“...fleeing violence, war or persecution,”** while federal disaster relief programs only grant money to repair infrastructure and damage in place, not to relieve personal suffering.<sup>2</sup> Compounding this predicament are historical state policies. In 1958 the government of Alaska mandated that, in order to build a school – a state requirement of all tribes – the Yup'ik had to choose a site at **“the farthest point upriver that a Bureau of Indian Affairs barge could navigate.”**<sup>3</sup>

Now the Yup'ik have to find somewhere to go and only emerging assistance in building a new community, as the Alaska Department of Community and Economic Development, after nine years of research, begins to work with the tribe. Otherwise, as Ackerman writes, they would **“join the realm of polar bears and narwhals in rich seams of Eskimo lore,”**<sup>4</sup> absorbed into towns and cities, economically disenfranchised, facing traumatic cultural and environmental adjustment.

And the winters of 2014 and 2015 have largely brought unseasonable warmth to Alaska, the ice forming later and likely to melt earlier. Yup'ik fishing and hunting may be very lean again this year.

Ackerman's story of slow, insurmountable loss brought to mind an image from University of Wisconsin's Dr. Rob Nixon, told in his work *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*:

**“Slow violence – a violence that occurs gradually and out of sight, a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space,**

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**an attritional violence typically not viewed as violence at all. It shapes our inattention to calamities that are slow and long lasting, calamities that patiently dispense their devastation while remaining outside our flickering attention spans – and outside the purview of a spectacle-driven corporate media.”<sup>5</sup>**

Or, in this case, Climate Change.

The world can be brightly lit and still, we will not see what looms around us. We already deal, every day, with moments of Ecological Justice – intersections of human and natural communities grounded in place – the world we are shaping in “the human age.” Meanwhile, we’re lurching down one of two paths: those continuing to hurtle through such intersections and those caught in the middle – people, plants and animals “**...who have done the least to contribute to our climate crisis, facing the most threatening consequences.**”<sup>6</sup>

On the edge of sleep tonight; listen carefully. You will hear *slow violence* creeping among us. Recognizing its step, witnessing its effects, and engaging it, are to me at the very heart of being Unitarian Universalist.

**Yes**, it can be complicated and challenging. As news stories flicker daily on my computer screen about change unfolding in Earth’s environment – ice sheets melting in Antarctica, melting permafrost and spreading methane potholes in Siberia, watching atmospheric CO<sup>2</sup> climb from 350 in 1986 to over 400<sup>7</sup> today, and on and on – I stop and ponder: what sort of world are we slouching towards?

To begin to understand where we are, and fashion some responses to what’s happening, let me unpack how I understand *slow violence*.

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First, climate change involves outsourcing violence on a vast scale – temporal and geographical. It's the ultimate form of incremental violence as it shreds our planet's life-sustaining envelope, and it can be mitigated only through a commitment – ethical, political and imaginative commitment – to safeguarding people and other life forms that are remote from us in both space and time. And understand: this cause requires that we learn to value life thirty, fifty, one hundred, even one thousand years from now. Truly countering slow violence means reimagining and accepting responsibility over considerable time frames.

Second, what does it mean to re-vision humanity as not merely an historical agent but a force powerful enough to transform Earth's very strata? How might asking that question reframe our understanding of human agency and responsibility not only towards our own species, but the whole planet? Given the layered forms of slow violence happening, climate change is a critical indicator of our alarming, often reckless morphological powers.

Third, this incubus has been haunting us for over a generation as our so-called leaders run the other way. That this is so is surely because to confront the sources of climate change is tantamount to confronting the foundations of modern industrial society itself. But, climate change is clearly the most urgent of a host of environmental crises now underway – species extinctions, collapsing fisheries, soil desertification, dying coral reefs, depleted groundwater, dead zones in the ocean, etc. How might we reshape the Anthropocene era to begin to reimagine and restore this fragile planet?

Fourth, it is generally customary to speak about problems with “the environment” and economic inequality as if they were something “out there” as abstract policy issues separate from us. But these problems are rooted deeply inside of us – in how

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we relate to the non-human world, to each other, and how we structure our institutions – all notes rumbling through our 7<sup>th</sup> Principle.

Fifth, environmental stresses will sharpen as food prices rise and production falters – added challenges given existing widespread hunger on Earth – much of it due to systems of distribution. And current climate model projections are not encouraging.

And, sixth and last, from what we've seen in global markets, my suspicion is that some will revolt in the coming future against the same things they have revolted against in the past: injustices in the system. And, personally there are those who probably should – while others work to make sure it is recognized that violence is not where true power lies. One of the events prompting the French Revolution was the failure of the 1788 wheat crop, which made bread prices skyrocket and the poor go hungry. Responses to such events often focus on more authoritarianism and threats against the poor, but those are only attempts to keep a lid on what's already boiling over. The more humane answer would be to find ways to begin to turn down the heat. As *Tampa Bay Times* editorialist Bill Maxwell puts it: **“To start, we must care about one another.”**<sup>8</sup>

In the Introduction to his book, *Reclaiming Prophetic Witness*, Unitarian Universalist theologian Paul Rasor writes, **“...religious liberals have been influential advocates for social reform at least since the abolition and suffrage movements of the early nineteenth century.”**<sup>9</sup> Knowing that the world we are – and will be – facing must be addressed, we should acknowledge that, to use Rasor's language, we are called to be influential advocates, that each of us is urged to step into the public square in this matter.

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Our first step was voiced by Jeffrey Lockwood, Professor of Philosophy at the University of Wyoming, in his article, *Less More, Please*, at [uuworld.org](http://uuworld.org), where he writes “...environmental problems are usually vast and complicated – and particularly this one. But, if the challenges are tangled and messy, the solutions are almost invariably based on a simple concept...some version of the modern panacea: *More...Virtually everything that’s wrong could be fixed if only we had more something.*”<sup>10</sup> But critically, Lockwood embraces a different tactic: “Solutions to the world’s environmental problems may not require more of us, but less. We may be required to ask deeper questions rather than to seek wider answers...but maybe there is more of one thing that could solve many problems – humility.”<sup>11</sup>

So once we’ve acknowledged our contrition, what might we do?

Well, as Rev. Earl Koteen quips, “**We can run around with our hair on fire,**” or we can begin to ground ourselves in work such as the Green Sanctuary movement or Unitarian Universalist Ministry for Earth’s calling to envision a world “**in which reverence, gratitude, and care for the living Earth are central to the lives of all people.**”<sup>12</sup> In other words, affirming our commitment to Earth, speaking truth to power for the entirety of the “**interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part.**”<sup>13</sup>

While we start by remembering that matters of the environment and social justice are bound together at the core of our being, we do this work best when we shift our perspectives from a sense of despair, if that is where we may be, to a spirit of active hope; when we focus less on the enormity of the challenge and more on embracing and creating opportunities for tangible steps towards a better world. Let us begin thinking globally and acting locally, making and keeping significant commitments in

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areas of reduced consumption, energy efficiency and community resilience, all while working towards broader, more systemic changes such as renewable energy sources.

At the same time, we can step towards furthering practical changes in our communities by working to influence policy and planning for the future. And remember: we best take responsible action where we live by building alliances and coalitions with diverse stakeholders to help create conditions of possibility that fit our unique challenges. Mindful of the obstacles, we can discover in both ourselves and our faith communities the strength and courage to resist and begin dismantling the structural elements, practices and vested interests perpetuating damages to our world. Bit by bit, and relationship by relationship, we can work to put in place the building blocks of a new future, and start transforming our communities into more just and sustainable places.

As Unitarian Universalists, let us not forget our *2006 Statement of Conscience on The Threat of Global Warming/Climate Change*, which called us to **“...join with others to halt practices that fuel global warming/climate change, to instigate sustainable alternatives, and to mitigate the impending effects of global warming with just and ethical responses.”**<sup>14</sup> May that calling guide our work with the Green Sanctuary program, UU Ministry For Earth, UU Animal Ministry and UU Justice Florida, and other movements as they ask us to work both within the congregation and the larger world, furthering a sustainable life for all beings for generations to come.

Our calling to engagement has helped create an emerging, unprecedented coalition. The most diverse array of Unitarian Universalist groups ever brought to one table has come together in an alliance known as *Commit2Respond* – **“People of faith and conscience taking action for Climate Justice.”**<sup>15</sup> Launched at the People's Climate

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March in New York City this past September 21<sup>st</sup>, *Commit2Respond* unites many efforts in multi-year work. Together we will expand partnerships and deepen collective impact. We recognize the central role inequality plays in current crises, where marginalized communities – low-income, people of color, Native, and/or non-industrialized, and species who were here long before us – are often first to experience the effects of climate change and environmental degradation. But never forget: none will be untouched. As British social critic Raymond Williams put it: **“To be truly radical is to make hope possible rather than despair convincing.”**<sup>16</sup> This, then, addresses our real challenge: to overcome cynicism and hopelessness, and to quicken many possible alternatives awaiting our creativity.

We can survive what Diane Ackerman would call **“understanding our rude evolutionary infancy,”**<sup>17</sup> growing into responsible, caring adults without losing our innocence, playfulness, or sense of wonder. But first we need to recognize that we are a very young species, blessed and cursed by our prowess. Truly empowering this understanding requires we see with the widest vision, recognizing that every human step forward is rooted in the ground beneath our feet – that we and Earth are one, this is our home, and to continue to destroy this world digs our own grave. Rather than filling our days with *slow violence*, plundering and stomping Earth, we must begin to re-establish our natural place, working together to restore and hand forward a living, breathing planet – restoring a fuller, more diverse, more complete home amongst the stars.

This is truly holy work. It is who we are called to be. May we stand together as one, our faces feeling the wind, bringing healing to a bruised and hurting world?

Amen and Blessed Be.

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## Footnotes

1. Diane Ackerman, *The Human Age*, W.W. Norton & Company, 2014, p. 48
2. Ibid, p. 48
3. Bureau of Indian Affairs, *Alaskan Educational Affairs Program*, 1958, p. 53
4. Ackerman, p. 48
5. Rob Nixon, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*, Harvard University Press, 2011, p. 2
6. Ibid, p. 7
7. [www.co2now.org](http://www.co2now.org)
8. *Tampa Bay Times*, April 16, 2013
9. Paul Rasor, *Reclaiming Prophetic Witness*, Skinner House, 2012, p. xvii
10. Jeffrey Lockwood, "Less More, Please", [www.uuworld.org](http://www.uuworld.org), February 9, 2015
11. Ibid
12. [http://uuministryforearth.org/about\\_uumfe](http://uuministryforearth.org/about_uumfe)
13. <http://www.uua.org/beliefs/what-we-believe/principles/7th>
14. <http://www.uua.org/statements/threat-global-warmingclimate-change>
15. <http://www.commit2respond.org/about>
16. Raymond Williams, "Art," 1976
17. Ackerman, p. 308