

Science, Religion, Climate Change

Joe Cleveland

UU Wakefield, March 17, 2013

PRELUDE

WELCOME AND ANNOUNCEMENTS

OPENING WORDS #417 by Barbara Pescan

For the beauty of the earth,
This spinning blue green ball, yes!
Gaia, mother of everything
We walk gently across your back
To come together again
In this place
To remember how we can live
To remember who we are
To create how we will be.

OPENING HYMN #163 For the Earth Forever Turning

LIGHTING OF THE CHALICE

Love is the doctrine of this church
The quest of truth is its sacrament,
And service is its prayer.
This is our covenant –
To dwell together in peace,
To seek knowledge in freedom,
To serve humanity in fellowship,
To the end that all souls shall grow into
harmony with the Divine --

MUSICAL RESPONSE

From all that dwell below the skies
Let songs of faith and hope arise;
Let peace, goodwill on earth be sung
Through every land, by every tongue

STORY FOR ALL AGES

Stuck by Oliver Jeffers

[Watch <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hipx6HJs4XQ>> for an abbreviated version.]

CHILDREN’S EXIT SONG: “Go Now in Peace” #413

ANTHEM “Now Is the Cool of the Day” by Jean Ritchie

Performed by Joe Cleveland

CANDLES OF JOY AND CONCERN

PRAYER/MEDITATION OR READING

By Black Elk

Hear me, four quarters of the world.

A relative I am!

Give me strength to walk the soft earth. Give me the eyes to see and the strength to understand.

Look upon these faces of children without number,

That they may face the winds and walk the good road to the day of quiet.

This is my prayer; hear me.

SHORT MUSICAL PIECE

OFFERING AND OFFERTORY ANTHEM

READING “God’s Grandeur” by Gerard Manley Hopkins

The world is charged with the grandeur of God.

It will flame out, like shining from shook foil;

It gathers to a greatness, like the ooze of oil

Crushed. Why do men then now not reckon his rod?

Generations have trod, have trod, have trod;

And all is seared with trade; bleared, smeared with toil;

And wears man’s smudge and shares man’s smell: the soil

Is bare now, nor can foot feel, being shod.

And for all this, nature is never spent;

There lives the dearest freshness deep down things;

And though the last lights off the black West went

Oh, morning, at the brown brink eastward, springs—

Because the Holy Ghost over the bent

World broods with warm breast and with ah! bright wings.

SERMON HYMN: #21 For the Beauty of the Earth

SERMON "Science, Religion, Climate Change"

In February, the Kansas House Education Committee introduced a bill that requires teachers to question the scientific consensus on climate change and global warming.

My first response is that this feels akin to so-called Christians preaching against teaching evolution in science classes. It makes me want to throw religion bath water, baby, and all right out the window. It is simply immoral to misinform people about what's happening to our home, and if religion is a source of the resistance to facing up to the reality of climate change and the science that is taking an honest look at what's going on, then religion has to go.

But this is a knee jerk response. It's not clear that it is religion, in fact, that is behind this. When I actually look into it, I find that what's behind the effort to deny climate science is money.

The Kansas bill is based on legislation written by the American Legislative Exchange Council, an organization that seems to specialize in writing legislation supportive of corporate and moneyed interests. The American Legislative Exchange Council, or ALEC for short, gets its funding almost entirely from corporations and lots of those corporations are in the fossil fuel industry or are foundations based in fossil fuel money like the Charles G. Koch Foundation.¹

So it's money that is at fault. Or, it's a system that has monetary profit as its main goal that is causing the problem -- at least the problem of denying science. There has been a lot of money pumped into denying climate science, and it is working.

According to one poll, in 2007, "71 percent of Americans believed that climate change was real, [and] that it was human caused. [By 2011] that number went down to 44 percent."²

I have experienced this myself. Recently, I was talking with some acquaintances and I mentioned my frustration at people denying the science of climate change and the consensus of scientific opinion on climate change. And one of the people I was chatting with said, "There is no consensus."

¹ http://www.alecexposed.org/wiki/what_is_ALEC%3F#Who_funds_ALEC.3F/

² Naomi Klein, interviewed by Bill Moyers. <http://billmoyers.com/segment/Naomi-Klein-on-capitalism-and-climate-change/>

I admit that I let it go. At that moment, the best discussion possible seemed to be "Yes, there is." "No, there isn't." "Yes, there is!"

But I'm not going to let it go now. Instead I'll direct you to the *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, the official journal of the United States National Academy of Sciences, and an article published there in June 2010 called "Expert Credibility in Climate Change" written by scientists from Stanford and the University of Toronto. Their research told them two things. First, "97-98% of the climate researchers most actively publishing in the field support the tenets of [human caused climate change]." And second, "The relative climate expertise and scientific prominence of the researchers unconvinced of [human caused climate change] are substantially below that of the convinced researchers."³

We need to know what is going on. We need science and technology if we hope to address issues of climate change.

I love science. When I entered college, it was as a physics major and math minor. I loved discovering the systems of relation and being able to describe those relationships with math. And you can see I love the gadgets that science and technology can create! [Show iPad!] How many of you have smart phones or DS's?

But love of technology and science could be part of the problem when it comes to climate change and global warming.

Science alone is not enough. It's not as if BP or TransCanada, the corporation that wants to build the Keystone XL pipeline,⁴ lack for science or scientists. Or ALEC, for that matter. Science alone is not enough.

What we need is to change our way of life. If it's just science that we cling to, I'm afraid that we're headed to a future that looks like the Jetsons. Remember the Jetsons? I was thinking of that cartoon the other day and it occurred to me that there were all these nifty gadgets -- *everything* is a gadget! -- but you never see the ground, do you? There are flying cars zipping from building to building and the buildings themselves are all just sort of floating around. They have stems, but I can't remember seeing that they are rooted in anything. There's no *earth*.

We need to change our way of life.

³ <http://pnas.org/content/early/2010/06/04/1003187107.full.pdf/>

⁴ <http://grist.org/article/state-department-keystone-xl-report-actually-written-by-transcanada-contractor/>

Part of what we need to do is to ally ourselves with those people who are already feeling the effects of climate change. The effects of climate change fall inequally to the poor. One of the things I did to prepare for this sermon was to watch a documentary called *The Hungry Tide* which is about the Pacific island nation of Kiribati, called “Kiribas” by the indigenous people who live there. The land of this nation is an average of two meters above sea level, and the effects of stronger storms and rising seas are already drowning their home. It has inspired desperation in their people to lift their voice to try to get the world to listen to their plight and take it seriously. In the film, you watch as they go to the Kyoto global conference on climate change and struggle to get people to listen to them. But so far, their plea has fallen on deaf ears. Their president has been negotiating with Australia an exit strategy for his people where the people will be able to become permanent refugees in Australia as their own land is claimed by the sea. I learned recently that they are contemplating buying land in Fiji for farming and resettlement.⁵

The Kiribati people have limited resources and they need our help. But they don’t need our pity and charity as much as they need us to change our way of living.

I have been supporting as I can the efforts of 350.org against the Keystone pipeline project—the pipeline proposed to snake from Canada to the gulf coast and bring tar sands oil to refineries, there to be largely prepared for export. As important as it is, however, to shake our fists and raise our voices against the fossil fuel industry determined to invest in the earth’s destruction, we need to do more than this.

We need to change the way we live. Curtis White, the author of *The Barbaric Heart: Faith, Money, and the Crisis of Nature*, puts it this way:

Responding to environmental destruction requires not only the overcoming of corporate evildoers but “self-overcoming,” a transformation in the way we live. A more adequate response to our true problems requires that we cease to be a society that believes that wealth is the accumulation of money (no matter how much of it we’re planning on “giving back” to nature), and begin to be a society that understands that “the only wealth is life,” as John Ruskin put it.⁶

We need to change our way of living.

I like to think of myself as someone who welcomes change, someone who is flexible and can go with the flow. But then again, whenever my wife, Kristin, suggests moving a chair to some different place in our apartment, my response is invariably “it’s fine right where it is.” So she has learned to stop asking me and just changes stuff around. And then I walk in and it’s new and I invariably say, “oh, that’s better.” I often lack the ability to see beyond the way things are now. I get stuck— stuck in a system that I am not even really aware of.

⁵ “Kiribati mulls Fiji land purchase in battle against sea.” BBC, 8 March 2012. <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-17295862>

⁶ Curtis White. *The Barbaric Heart: Faith, Money, and the Crisis of Nature*. Sausalito, CA: PoliPointPress, 2009. 57.

I fear that a lot of us are stuck because here's the rub: global warming and climate change aren't happening just because a few people have made some bad decisions. It's the actions of good people acting on values that we share, values like hard work and innovation, good people caught up in a society structured around rewarding acquisitiveness and consumerism that created the environmental crisis. We are stuck in a system that causes problems even as it purports to solve problems.

We are not in a climate crisis because we don't have values. We are in a climate crisis because of what we value.

We have put ourselves out of right relationship with the land and have built a society, a system, that attempts to thrive at the expense of the land.

Here's an illustration of the system I think we're stuck in by way of writer and activist Derrick Jensen. Someone who was hosting a talk by Jensen gave Jensen a tour of the last six acres of prairie left in a rural county of 360,000 acres in northwestern Illinois. All but those six acres have come under the plow. That evening, Jensen said, "I think the plow is the most destructive artifact humans have ever created." One of the members of the farming community he was speaking to "gave a grim smile, then said, 'Those plows paid for our houses.'

"[Jensen] nodded, smiled just as grimly, and responded, 'That's precisely the problem, isn't it?'"⁷

It was the environmental crisis that convinced me after I had thought I'd left religion behind that I needed religion. Or, rather, it was when I became increasingly aware that individuals changing their minds and behaviors wasn't going to be enough, that what we need and what the world needs is systemic change in order to survive — that's when I knew that I needed religion. I don't think that fundamental change, changing the system of relations in which we are caught up, is possible without institutional support. There need to be institutions that organize themselves in ways guided by values like justice and beloved community, institutions inspired, sustained, and emboldened by practices like gratitude and reverence. To me, it sounds like we need religion.

As much as I love science, it is not enough. From a distance, I am supporting as I can the efforts of New Yorkers Against Fracking, efforts that the activist and biologist Sandra Steingraber has been involved in. She has been frustrated by the lack of protest against

⁷ Derrick Jensen. "Culture of Plunder: When living the dream means others will die." January/February 2013 *Orion Magazine*. 11.

fracking raised by the scientists who've done the research and who know the risks. Steingraber writes that "I'm working on pulling together Biologists Against Fracking but am having a tough time of it. Even the scientists whose own research shows the harm from drilling and fracking operations are hesitant to speak out. Some fear loss of grant money. Some believe their objectivity will be questioned—as though objectivity and neutrality were the same thing. Some are just so, so busy. And some believe fracking is inevitable. The result is political silence, a stunning position for physicians under oath and other medical professionals studying things such as cancer-causing chemicals."⁸ In the space left by this silence, she has seen religious faith leaders step up and put their bodies on the line, practicing civil disobedience against the fracking industry. She talks about the 72-year-old Methodist minister Gary Judson getting convicted for trespassing and those assembled in the courtroom clamoring to pay his fine for him. He chained himself to the fence of a compressor station.

Steingraber concludes: "As I watch scientists with evidence position themselves above the fray while faith leaders quote from their data while chained to fences, I wonder if I might not be saved by religion after all."⁹

Rev. Gary Judson was and is inspired and emboldened by his faith to seek a new world. It isn't just that we who care about the environment need to try to persuade people of faith to join in and become environmentalists. It's that addressing the climate crisis requires faith.

The environmental problem is not primarily a technical problem. Building a renewable energy infrastructure is important and necessary, but the answers science and gadgetry can provide are not enough. Lots of that gadgetry, like the machinery of hydrofracking, will create more problems than it claims to fix. The climate crisis is a problem of our being out of relationship with nature, with others, and with ourselves.

I believe that a sense of reverence is crucial to building right relationships, and reverence is a religious insight.

The writer Erik Reece argues that, "To begin to see the natural world as a sacred place, an unroofed church, is the first way—and perhaps the only way—to convince Americans we must stop destroying it."¹⁰ Reece wants to combine this religious insight with science. He sees science without a sense of the sacred as insufficient. And teaching religion as science à la Creationism gets us into problems, too. He proposes a "New Creationism" that would "teach

⁸ Sandra Steingraber. "The Silence of Science: and the eloquent activism of people of faith." *Orion Magazine* January/February 2013. 16

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Erik Reece. "The New Creationism." *Orion Magazine* January/February 2013.

biology as religion” and would “look to nature as a scripture wherein we can read miracle after miracle.”¹¹

The ecologist William R. Jordan, III, also proposes a process that understands science as a *ritual* way to build relationship with the natural world.¹² Science as religion.

I know a lot of Unitarian Universalists who are embarrassed by religion and religiosity. I confess that I have been one of them.

But we can't be embarrassed at being religious when it comes to nature or the environment or finding reasons to care for the earth and its people. Our arguments for nature shouldn't be confined to the vocabularies of science or economics. The writer Curtis White notes that

[. . .] we are often seduced by the economic and scientific appeals to efficiency, sustainability, and prosperity, in spite of the fact that we suspect that these appeals are actually part of the problem. But in our heart of hearts we are not fooled. What we want is the beautiful. We say it with a smile on our faces when we go for a hike, or when we visit an “eco-friendly” town full of bike paths and locally owned shops with a mountain vista in the background. We do not say of such places, “I'm grooving on this system's ecological balance.” Or, “The Green Economy is working well.” We say, “It's so beautiful here!” And yet when we set out to make our most public arguments for Nature, we seem almost embarrassed to say that what convinces us is the argument of the beautiful. [. . .] In fact, I'm embarrassed right now!¹³

White is concerned that we don't have a broadly shared language for understanding our relationship to nature and its beauty in spiritual terms.¹⁴ But I don't think he's right about that. Perhaps it's not as broadly shared as we might like, but it seems to me that religion, and perhaps especially a religion informed by science, provides us with that language. It isn't unusual to speak of the earth as sacred or beautiful. We must claim that language, that religious insight.

An awareness of wonder, mystery, beauty, and a sense of reverence can, I believe, help us to insist, in the words of another environmental writer, “to insist that nature has a value beyond utility.”¹⁵

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² William R. Jordan, III. *The Sunflower Forest: Ecological Restoration and the New Communion with Nature*. University of California Press, 2003.

¹³ Curtis White. *The Barbaric Heart*. 19.

¹⁴ Curtis White. *The Barbaric Heart*. 51.

¹⁵ Paul Kingsnorth. “Dark Ecology: Searching for Truth in a Post-Green World” *Orion Magazine*. January/February 2013. 28. Also on-line at <<http://www.orionmagazine.org/index.php/articles/article/7277/>>.

Religious insight can help us get unstuck from the world as it is. Our Unitarian Universalist faith at its best starts with the world as it is, but in order to better envision the world as it could be, a world that, by our faith, we aspire to. The earth and its people need people of faith, people who are inspired and emboldened by the practice of reverence, seeing this world and this life as holy. It is that reverence that inspires us to work for justice and begin realizing now the beloved community we can build with one another and with nature.

It is our faith, this faith we craft together, this faith that calls us to ally with one another and the earth and gives us to see with reverent eyes glimmers of what the beloved community might look like — it is in this *faith* that we will find the resources we need to inspire, sustain, and embolden us to join in the joyous beauty of creating a new world home based in harmony, peace, and reverence.

Look at our world. It is so beautiful! There lives the dearest freshness deep down things. The world is charged with the grandeur of God. It flashes out from the new buds just now forming on the trees, from the dull brown dirt through which the daffodils are popping up, from the moist eye of the person next to you. It is all, we are all, of a piece. Knowing this in our mind and heart and in our bones, we seek, reverently, a way of life that will nurture this world and us, its people.

To be embarrassed by such language is to resist the change necessary to save not just the earth, but ourselves.

Amen.

Now, I want you to make a small but meaningful gesture. I have brought along a short but earnest petition for you to sign. It's provided by the religious environmental group Interfaith Power and Light. They ask you to declare that, *as a person of faith*, you urge President Obama to address climate change. I will send it to him.

MUSIC REFLECTION

EXTINGUISH CHALICE

We extinguish this flame but not the light of truth,
the warmth of community, or the fire of commitment.
These we carry in our hearts until we are together again.

CLOSING HYMN #207 Earth Was Given As A Garden

CLOSING WORDS

#682 *from the Navajo Indians of North America, who call themselves "Dine," meaning "the people."*

Beauty is before me, and
Beauty is behind me,
above and below me
hovers the beautiful.
I am surrounded by it,
I am immersed in it.
In my youth, I am aware of it,
and, in old age,
I shall walk quietly the beautiful trail.
In beauty, it is begun.
In beauty, it is ended.