

Global Climate Change: The Threat and Response

The Rev. Duane H. Fickeisen and Gisela Roethke¹
Unitarian Universalists of the Cumberland Valley
May 1, 2011

Nature's message is remarkably simple:

*Cut carbon emissions quickly, globally, and dramatically,
or prepare for a future of environmental and economic disintegration.*

Russ Gelbspan (2002)

Opening Words²

Gisela Roethke

Today, Duane is going to speak on "Global Climate Change: The Threat and Response." Most of us have probably seen Al Gore's documentary, "An Inconvenient Truth," so that our awareness of this problem has been sharpened.

Coming from a country that has had an active Green Party since the early 1980s, I have been acutely aware of these issues for many years. And the influence of the Greens in Germany has grown and is widespread and visible.

Last year, when traveling in Germany, instead of renting a car, John and I took the trains.



¹The Rev. Duane H. Fickeisen is parish co-minister and Gisela Roethke is a lay Worship Associate of the Unitarian Universalists of the Cumberland Valley, PO Box 207, Boiling Springs PA 17007; 717/249-8944; www.uucv.net.

² ©2011 Gisela Roethke, Boiling Springs, PA

While traveling through the landscape, we noticed that many roof tops, whether on private houses or on factories and businesses, had mounted solar panels on them. We found out that the government is subsidizing these projects.

We also noticed that the landscape is dotted with wind parks. This will become all the more important now that a great part of the German public is clamoring to turn away from nuclear power altogether after the Fukushima Nuclear Plant disaster.

When exiting from the train stations, we found a wealth of choices of how to get on from there: most train stations have a bus terminal hub within a few steps, so that you can connect from the center to the outlying areas by public transportation. Also striking are large bicycle racks with roofs over them that can accommodate hundreds of bicycles used by commuters from home to the train stations. And it's not just kids riding their bikes; it's grandmas and grandpas, too, and all ages in between.

And then there are the cars. The cars are teensy in comparison to American cars, many of them of a size not bigger than a Mini-Cooper. My sister-in-law runs a whole fleet of Smart Cars for her employees who go to visit home-bound patients to provide home nursing care. It's a funny looking car, as if its rear end were chopped off, but it gets a terrific gas mileage.

So, when thinking about alternative energies, comparisons with other technologically advanced countries would serve us well. We don't need to reinvent the wheel; we can copy what some other places are already doing successfully.

Come, Let us worship together.

Reading

Archaischer Torso Apollos³

Rainer Maria Rilke

Wir kannten nicht sein unerhörtes Haupt,
darin die Augenäpfel reiften. Aber
sein Torso glüht noch wie ein Kandelaber,
in dem sein Schauen, nur zurückgeschraubt,

sich hält und glänzt. Sonst könnte nicht der Bug
der Brust dich blenden, und im leisen Drehen
der Lenden könnte nicht ein Lächeln gehen
zu jener Mitte, die die Zeugung trug.

Sonst stünde dieser Stein enstellt und kurz
unter der Shultern durchsichtigem Sturz
und flimmerte nicht so wie Raubtierfelle;

und bräche nicht aus allen seinen Rändern
aus wie ein Stern: denn da ist keine Stelle,
die dich nicht sieht. Du mußt dein Leben ändern.

Reading

Invitation⁴

Mary Oliver

³ An English translation by Stephen Mitchell may be found here:
<http://www.poets.org/viewmedia.php/prmMID/15814> It is omitted from this posting due to copyright restrictions.

⁴ The poem may be found here:
<http://yearsrisingmaryoliver.blogspot.com/2010/10/invitation.html>
It is omitted from this posting due to copyright restrictions.

Sermon⁵

Duane Fickeisen

The thunder sounds a warning. Let the forest be untainted. Let the streams be undefiled. Let the rivers run sweet. And let the air be pure and clean and free of soot with no more than 350 ppm carbon dioxide.

It is out of my frustration and despair over global climate change that I am talking with you one last time about it today. Climate change caused by human activity is no longer just a threat or an interesting hypothetical future event — it is a present reality.

Global climate change is an emergency of epic scale and it is an appropriate religious issue. The crisis threatens major harm to fellow human beings, extinction of species, and disruption of entire ecosystems. We human beings bear responsibility for creating the emergency, and thus we have a moral obligation to respond and do whatever we can in our powers to mitigate the impacts.

When I've talked about a response to climate change before, I've emphasized incremental changes you can make. Those matter, but they are not nearly enough. We need more extensive transformation. That demands political action and changes at the levels of global, national, and state and local leadership.

Perhaps like no other issue, this one merits our attention if we take seriously our congregation's mission to transform lives and to care for the world. We must change our lives in a transformational way, and we must care for the world and its interdependent web of existence.

⁵ ©2011 Duane H. Fickeisen, Boiling Springs, PA

No one can say with certainty that the destructive storms last week and the record rainfall for April are the direct result of global climate change, but they are exactly consistent with models of the effects of more energy in the atmosphere, and they are but a sample of what is sure to come.

Don't be surprised by record snowfall and blizzards nor by extended summer draught. Records for heat, cold, and precipitation will fall. There will be more tornados, more floods, more heat spells, and more cold snaps. Of that I am certain.

The images of tornado damage in the South and the consequent loss of nearly 350 lives ought to awaken us, but alas we have given more attention to the gown and the pomp at a foreign wedding this week.

I could recite the statistics again, and add some new ones, to demonstrate the reality of climate change and the stunning magnitude of the changes already well underway. I could go on for a hour or more about the sources and effects of climate change. I could remind you that it is the poorest and least powerful populations of the world who have contributed the least to the problem, yet who will bear the heaviest burden.

But you can find all of that almost without looking. It's all around us. Be skeptical and consider the motives of those who insist that it is not a real problem or that it is impossible to effect change *and* enjoy a thriving economy. Some analyses suggest that for a cost of around 3% of GNP we could comply with a cap on carbon emissions and get a return benefit of around 10% of GNP. I'm not an economist and can't evaluate those claims, but a three-fold return on investment ain't bad.

I am, however, a good enough scientist and analyst to understand at least the basics of the underlying chemistry, physics, and mechanisms to impact the oceans and disturb ecological balances. I know there are challenges inherent in modeling

long-term climate conditions on a fine geographic scale.

I have a good enough imagination to know that the devastating effects of climate change will have a major impact on global politics and security, even though I'm unable to picture exactly how — beyond understanding that displaced, hungry, and thirsty people will be angry and susceptible to political manipulation by powerful leaders.

I trust that it is not news to you that we face a crisis. Nor are you unfamiliar with changes you can make to reduce your personal carbon footprint. Google “carbon footprint” if you want to find a calculator to estimate yours and to see some ways to reduce it.

The problem is that even though some of us have made personal changes, we have avoided doing much of anything very effective to reduce our collective carbon release. Incremental change is not enough, we need a transformative change and we need it as soon as possible.

It is already too late to avoid impacts, but we may still have a small window of opportunity to slow down the changes and to reduce their ultimate magnitude.

I've argued before from this pulpit that we should each take individual action to reduce our carbon use. Individual actions still make awfully good sense to me. Reducing your own use of fossil fuels is absolutely necessary.

But let's face it. Those are incremental changes. They are necessary, but they are not sufficient.

So far our politicians have lacked the will to effect the kinds of change we so desperately need — must have — to begin to effectively respond to the climate emergency.

We are way past the point that voluntary individual ac-

tions will solve the problem. We lack a meaningful national and global strategy that has specific goals for reduced greenhouse gas emissions. The United States has helped block international agreements with even modest and voluntary goals.

In the absence of an effective strategic plan, our governments at all levels continue to promote systems and actions that rely on burning fossil fuels.

We subsidize fossil fuels and keep them relatively cheap. (Despite the increasing price of fuel, and our complaining about it, it is still cheap). I sure don't want to pay \$5 a gallon for gasoline after being spoiled by much lower prices, but much of the rest of the world already pays that or more. If you consider the portion of your taxes that subsidize gasoline, I'll bet the cost is already well over \$5. We keep market prices low through tax systems, infrastructure construction and maintenance, military intervention, regulatory rules, research and development, and other means. Even in a fairly competitive market, the major energy suppliers don't seem to have any trouble posting huge profits and paying their executives seven- or eight-digit compensation packages.

On the night of his nomination, speaking to a huge outdoor Chicago rally in June 2008, Mr. Obama promised to make the global climate crisis a high priority in his administration. Alas, the results show otherwise.

Where is the national leadership and conversation about this? What significant policy changes have been undertaken? What legislation has been passed? Almost none. Almost none.

The administration let cap and trade legislation, which was a major potential carbon emission reduction opportunity, die with little support. We continue the policies of the previous administration to shun meaningful international cooperation on the issue.

We must have a cap on greenhouse gas emissions, starting with carbon dioxide. A carbon cap must be set that will not only stop the growth in carbon emissions, but reverse it and reduce emissions. It must be a cap with a commitment to meet it — it's got to be enforceable.

A cap alone won't do it, though. We need a heroic strategy — one with a commitment like that of the Apollo Program to put a human being on the moon. Or that the nation made to support the war effort during World War II.

The strategy must be backed up by resources, regulations, and compelling vision and encouragement. It's got to become a guiding principle in decision making and allocation of resources.

We must have the commitment to sacrifice if necessary. But the truth is that the best strategies will improve the quality of our lives, strengthen our communities, and make us more secure.

It ought to be easier to put up solar panels than to get a permit to drill and frack shale for gas and then dump the barely treated waste into our rivers. Our governor should not promote increased use of natural gas as a patriotic thing to do. We ought not expect to fund the operation of state parks and higher education by drilling through campuses and picnic grounds to extract gas. We should not be giving access to shale, to coal, or to offshore oil at bargain prices, and we ought to enforce strict environmental protections that help us recognize the real cost of fossil fuels.

Our land use policies should consider mass transit options and we should not allow our county commissioners to continue to block future commuter rail systems. It is time to stop planning only for the short term and to recognize that infrastructure and land use decisions made today have impacts

over many generations.

Public policy ought to support energy conservation. The cheapest energy we can get is energy we don't use. We can do more with less — with more efficient transportation, buildings, and appliances.

Since voluntary reductions are not working nearly well enough, we should seriously consider a hefty carbon tax to support research and development on alternative, renewable sources of energy and to subsidize their use.

We have got to remove the opportunity for special interests to buy elections and then expect to be paid back in lax regulation and a free-ride to pillage natural resources without even paying modest extraction taxes.

We must insist that our elected leaders at all levels develop *and implement* strategies for transformation of our collective energy use that take seriously the goal of making a U-turn on greenhouse gas emissions by 2015 and that they make a real effort to get global cooperation on a firm commitment to the goal of 350 ppm carbon dioxide in the air by 2050. (It was 315 ppm in 1960 and is now nearly 390 ppm.)

UUPLAN and similar legislative advocacy groups in other states are vehicles to make our collective voices heard in the legislatures and the administrations. I support UUPLAN's two major focus areas for the current year: Marcellus shale and GLBT issues. In addition, they are taking on campaign finance reform and health care as ad hoc issues. But I wish they would add climate change as a high priority on their agenda.

If our leaders refuse to act on a significant cap on carbon emissions, we should declare an emergency, start a revolution, remove them from office by recall if necessary, and elect leaders who will stand with us on the side of love, work on the

earth's behalf, and effect change.

Not since the late 1960s have I felt such outrage at our government's actions and inactions. Perhaps it is because I expected far more from the current Presidency. I can't help but wonder if it will take the equivalent of urban race riots and campus demonstrations against the Vietnam War to get the attention of our leaders, and yet somehow I don't think we are mad enough yet for that.

I feel angst and deep sadness — despair — at the seriousness of this issue and the lack of significant action. As I weigh what I know about climate change, its likely impacts, and the lack of effective response, I feel angry, frustrated, and afraid for the future. I worry about the world my grandchildren will inherit and wonder if and how I can change that for the better.

Like many of you, I often feel that the little bit I can do to help is a mere drop in the bucket. It is so discouraging that sometimes I wonder if it is even worth the effort to try to make a difference.

Of course it is. Even if success seems nearly impossible, reducing our carbon footprints is the right thing to do. It makes sense to do what we can. It is imperative if we really mean it when we espouse the values represented by our principles.

If we don't change our direction, we'll be like Henry in the children's story — imprisoned with only images of mountains and streams to climb and to play in and on and with — to wonder at and to experience first hand our connections with the web of existence.

There is so much in our world that is wonderful — luminous torsos of virile Gods, goldfinches and cardinals singing in competition for the sheer enjoyment of it, creativity and

love and relationships to name a very few — that if we pause long enough to pay attention, we simply *must* respond and seek to make it better.

Our lives are changed by our relationships with beauty, with the natural world, and with the created works of art around us. Our lives are changed and we must change the way we live them — to commit to the larger good, to engage in the politics of transformation, to embrace the reality of the interdependent web, to give ourselves to love and to stand for what makes sense because it is the right thing to do. For that's where our hope lies and in it the path out of our despair.

It may be too late to save the polar bears, the arctic ice cap, and the lowest lying Pacific islands. It is already too late to prevent more violent storms and the inevitable deaths they will cause or to keep the oceans from flooding south Asia's river deltas. It is probably too late to prevent massive loss and desertification of vital agricultural lands.

But it is never too late to respond, to transform ourselves, and to care for our one and only, fragile and oh-so-beautiful world. Can I get an "Amen?"

May it be so.

Image: Eisbär. Polar bear on ice floe in Wager Bay (Ukkusiksalik National Park, Nunavut, Canada), 23 July 1996, photo by Ansgar Walk. Permission granted for use.