

Climate Change and Human Flourishing

A sermon by Rev Steven Epperson

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Recently, when I told someone I trust that I was going to be speaking about climate change today, she sagely advised me not to torture you; “they’re well-informed people,” she said, “why don’t you start with some good news?” I tend to listen to her, so, the good news:

On Thursday, the birthday of Mohandas Gandhi, the government of India submitted its climate change plan to the UN in advance of the international conference on global warming that will be taking place in Paris this coming December. In its plan, the government of India has formally pledged to source 40% of its electricity from renewable and other low-carbon sources by 2030 and to embark on a massive reforestation effort across the country. Even environment groups and thinktanks have hailed India’s pledge as significant, noting that it would have enormously positive impacts on global warming.

India’s goals, strongly backed by its Prime Minister, have entered the realm of the possible thanks, in large measure, to advances in solar engineering that have seen the price of solar panels fall 75% just in the last six years. “They’re now cheap enough,” notes Bill McKibben, “that a vast effort, rooted in pragmatic physics, could ensure before the decade is out that there could hardly be a hut or hovel that lacked access to clean energy—something that the fossil fuel status quo has failed to achieve in the two hundred years.” (see Adam Vaughn, “India unveils climate change plan, *Guardian*, October 2, 2015; and Bill McKibben, “The Pope and the Planet,” *NYRB*, August 13, 2015)

And yet, still, we know well that we are not out of the woods by any means. Let me start with a personal story: About a dozen years ago, a member of this congregation came into my office, and showed me an article about global warming, the melting of the ice in Canada’s arctic,

stark projections of the course of climate change, with a photo of a polar bear stranded on scrap of ice floating in the sea. In my memory, this parent asked me: “What am I going to say about this to my children?”

Have you ever been struck dumb, rendered mute by your ignorance, and your own sense of helplessness and dread? Well, there I was a dozen years ago; I felt like I was supposed to say something, but was utterly stuck. All I could do in that brief encounter was to witness, in solidarity, this person’s distress.

2500 years ago, Hippocrates, the legendary founder of Western medicine, began his treatise *On Airs, Waters and Places* by emphasizing the need for physicians to inform themselves about the physical properties of a locale in which they were working and the effects these elements had on local inhabitants. Here’s an abbreviated extract:

Whoever wishes to investigate medicine properly, should proceed thus: in the first place to consider the seasons of the year and what effect each of them produces...then the winds, the hot and the cold...We must also consider the qualities of the waters...In the same manner, when one comes into a city to which one is a stranger, he ought to consider its situation....These things one ought to consider most attentively...the waters of the inhabitants...the ground, whether it be naked and deficient...or wooded and well-watered...as well as the mode in which the inhabitants live and what are their pursuits. (<http://classics.mit.edu/Hippocrates/airwatpl.mb.txt>)

The Hippocratic tradition spoke of the elements, the environment and us, understanding each to stand in a natural correspondence with one another, a correspondence that also implied a cause-and-effect relationship with serious consequences for our health and well-being.

It is hard to look at a paper, newscast, magazine and blog these days without seeing an article dealing with climate change. The scale, swiftness and nature of changes taking place in our environment entail dire consequences for the world’s ecosystems and us. In the past year, the Center for Disease Control (CDC) and the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change

(IPCC) warned that the health effects of the disruptions brought about by climate change range from increased respiratory and cardiovascular disease to premature deaths, from changes in the prevalence of food-and water borne illnesses and other infectious diseases to threats to mental health. (see http://www.ipcc.ch/pdf/assessment-report/ar5/wg2/WGIIAR5-Chap11_FINAL.pdf; see Marlene Cimons, “The Hidden Mental Health Impacts of Climate Change,” <http://thinkprogress.org/climate/2015/06/23/3672909/mental-health-impacts-climate-change/>)

These kinds of reports project of how climate change can and will negatively impact our physical health. Increasingly, they are beginning to come to grips with the fact as we are physically affected by climate change, so too, the suffering from the emotional fallout of what has and will happen will only increase. Steven Shapiro, chair of the program on climate change for Psychologists for Social Responsibility, has gone so far as to say: “When you have environmental insult, the burden of mental anguish and emotional distress is far greater even than the physical....If we don’t develop effective [individual] and collective means to deter these harmful processes...we are in deep trouble.” (see Cimons, op cit.; also www.psyr.org/about/programs/climate/mentalhealth.php)

This should come as no surprise. As we’ve already noted, ancient Greek medicine was predicated on the recognition of the correlation, the entanglement, of the environment with human health and well-being. As well, the current state of the biology of consciousness asserts that the location of:

“consciousness is the dynamic life of the whole, environmentally plugged-in person....Human experience is a dance that unfolds in the world and with others. You are not your brain. We are not locked up in a prison of our own ideas and sensations. The phenomenon of consciousness, like that of life itself, is a world-involving dynamic process....

This is one reason, certainly, why radical changes to one’s environment...are enormous, maybe even devastating personal challenges. The loss of a feature of the environment with which one’s

daily activities are intimately interwoven is the loss of a part of oneself.” (Alva Noe, *Out of Our Heads: Why You Are Not Your Brain, and Other Lessons from the Biology of Consciousness*, 2009, xiii, 51)

Devastating personal challenges. Loss of a part of oneself. Mental anguish and chronic distress, Vulnerable populations. Dread and anxiety. Feelings of desolation, helplessness and of being powerless to do anything about the radical, accumulating changes to our environment.

Overwhelmed?

And yes, I know that Naomi Klein wrote a book called *This Changes Everything*, and that a documentary film’s just been made about it; and that a clutch of prominent Canadian authors, artists, national leaders and activists last month issued: “The Leap Manifesto: A Call for a Canada Based on Caring for the Earth and One Another,” as they should, and good on them; but I’m not talking to the world, or to Canada right now; I’m speaking to you, to us.

Feeling overwhelmed by it all?

And where to begin? Can I respond beyond mute solidarity to that UCV parent in anguish over global warming? Sorry it’s taken a dozen years; but some things just need to ripen...

“It begins with gratitude,” some of you have told me. But wait, before we go there, I think the place where we must begin, for the sake of any chance of flourishing in this time of need—it must begin with me saying, as strongly as I can: We’re not weak. We’re not sick. Our head’s not just a sludgy vat of neuro-chemicals and synapses gone awry. We are embodied, soulful beings situated in an environment under duress, We are extraordinarily sensitive, thoughtful creatures dynamically attuned and interacting with objects, people and situations in the context of profound and mysterious inter-relation and interdependence. We are women, children and men with histories stretching back and out through space/time, out through the great

interwoven fabric of being, of life both animate and inanimate, from the ethereally radiant fields of energy at the root of matter itself out to the astonishingly vast reaches of the body of our home in the universe.

We're passionate, emotional, thoughtful and sensitive people. That's where we really begin. But what we're up against, close to home, within our own skin, what most imperils our world is the problem of debilitating fatalism. The greatest danger of our times, as we stand face-to-face with climate change, is the deadening of our response. When the dread and anger, the despair, helplessness and anxiety become too much to bear, we lose hope, start feeling that we're a lost cause in the fast lane inevitably destined for devastation. "What's the point in doing anything, if it won't change what we're heading for? I'm only one person, and the problem's just too much."

But then the question comes back and takes my breath away: "What am I going to say about this to my children?" And I don't want to b.s. them, or you. Back in the 1850s, in a different setting, but in words as important now, I think, as then, the Universalist minister Thomas Starr King said: "Give them hope not hell."

Well there are all kind of meanings to the word "hope." But I want to double down on what Joanna Macy and Chris Johnstone have called "active hope," and the moments and movement they've identified that could lift us up from our learned helplessness and dread to something that could promote real hope and human flourishing.

They begin by saying that hope is not a passive quality we either have or don't possess; rather, it is a practice borne from our values. It involves identifying outcomes we hope for and playing a dedicated, deliberate role, as best we can, in bringing them about. We don't wait until

we're sure of success. We don't wait for external agencies—like the variable political calculation of governments or a skyhook god—to come down from out there or above to clean up the mess; we start from our own desire, our own vision of a future for ourselves and the world we long for so much it makes us hurt. And it's here we begin the journey.

According to Macy and Johnstone, the first port of call in this process is "*gratitude*." Think of the words and feelings that arise when you start the following sentence: "For supporting me to live, I give thanks to..." If we took the time to think, write, and speak our thanksgiving, if we opened the door and welcomed gratitude into our lives, we may feel the obdurate barriers that keep us stuck in isolated dread and hopelessness begin to give way, and from within a desire wells forth to give back to the world, in turn, with thanks. Gratitude may arise from acknowledging the fulsome beauty of a landscape, a cherished personal relationship, and the unique story of our place in the successive generations of our family. With gratitude, we may find renewed motivation to act for the sake of ourselves, others and the world.

The second step in the journey to active hope is to *honour our pain for the world*. Oh, it's real enough, that pain. Try this as an open sentence and go on to complete it in your mind: "Looking into the future we're heading into, concerns I truly have include..." The essential thing here is to not deaden the pain or to panic when it arises. We're in the midst of an epidemic of addictive, pain-killing drug use in North America because we don't want to hurt. Instead of working through the physical pain and taking the time that accompanies effective physio-therapy for an injury, millions of people are masking the pain with vicodin and oxycontin; they become addicted to the drugs and their injury never heals.

Pain, physical and emotional, can be a valued and welcome teacher—a wake-up call that alerts us to danger. Try not to panic when the anguish arises—your own pain and that expressed by others. Be as compassionate, patient, and accepting of your hurt and that of others as it gives mangled, keening voice to pain. In a culture that relentlessly exhorts us to think positively, to be normal and to fit in, we are schooled to think of mental and emotional distress as a disease and a pestilence. When in fact, it can be a testimony to how deeply we love the world.

Coming from gratitude; honouring our pain...the next step to active hope is *seeing with new eyes*. What words arise in your minds with a sentence that begins: “something that inspires me is....” And here that question from a dozen years ago: “what can I say about this—about climate change and global warming—what can I say to my children?” comes to especially to my mind; as do the words of Thomas Starr King: “give them hope, not hell.” From gratitude, to honouring our pain, here, with clear eyes, we foreground concrete facts and stories that develop a wider sense of self in community with others who share our vision for the world and who are doing what they can to achieve it.

Something that inspires me is having learned just weeks ago that after a centuries in the steady decline in the Earth’s biomass—of living plants essential to absorbing carbon dioxide and replacing it with oxygen—that decline has stopped, and that there has been an overall gain in the world’s living green matter in the past twenty years due primarily to massive reforestation efforts in Brazil, China, Africa, Russia and Indonesia. For example, Amazon deforestation in Brazil will drop to zero in the next fifteen years. It’s an incredible story, and one, as yet, largely untold. (see Doug Saunders, “Green surprise: why the world’s forests are growing back, *Globe and Mail*, Aug. 29, 2015)

Something that inspires me is the fact that in the Pope Francis’s 180 page environmental and economic justice letter to the world—*Laudato Si*—he singled out and praised the “countless

array of organizations which work to promote the common good and to defend the environment.” Their work, their statements, their spirituality even, he says “have offered valuable reflection and enriched the Church’s thinking.” Imagine a huge ship, the billion plus members of the Catholic church, and an array of tugboats (the countless groups and organizations) pushing, nudging that monstrous vessel bit by bit, to the point that it has fundamentally changed course, and has now set out on a radically different voyage. That is what has happened, and it’s breathtaking. The timing of that encyclical and his advocacy for the environment may be a game changer in the upcoming Climate Change conference in Paris later this year. Gratitude. Pain. Inspiration. These are way stations on the journey to generating active hope.

The final movement isn’t a port of call—it’s a setting out, a *going forth*. See what words follow this: “something I’d love to do to make a difference...the step towards this I will make in the next seven days is...

Does a concrete picture arise in your mind; practical steps we can take this week that may help us become and stayed inspired with an active hope for the future?

Know that when others see us taking steps beyond and through our pain, they’re more likely to take them too; and in so doing, we could open the flow of a more active hope by inviting it to happen through us. It is a choice; a practice; a path to human flourishing in the face of it all; it is a vote of our selves, and we can cast it every day.

The answer to the question: “what can I say about [climate change] to my children,” is another question, and the way, step-by-step, that we answer it: “What can I *do* about this for the sake of our children?”

(on Macy and Johnstone, see *Active Hope: How to Face the Mess We’re in without Going Crazy*, and www.activehope.info)