

SILVER LININGS OF THE CLIMATE CRISIS

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On December 14th 2006, the island of Lohachara disappeared completely beneath the waves of the Indian Ocean. Its 10,000 inhabitants, arguably the world's first climate refugees, were resettled on a neighboring island. At least 20 inhabited islands in India alone, home to 70,000 people, are expected to submerge in the next decade as the sea rises in response to global warming. Later that same month, scientists reported that a forty-one square mile chunk of its 3000-year old ice shelf had broken off of a Canadian Island in the Arctic Circle. 2006 has the distinction of having been the hottest year on record in the United States, about 2 degrees warmer than the average of the last 100 years.

There is a human tragedy of biblical proportions looming. For years, we have heard warnings about the climate crisis; now there is consensus that it is upon us. The architects of this tragedy are us. In fact, one of our Unitarian Universalist hymns reminds us that "all are architects of fate." Interestingly, I discovered that song just after listening to a speech by William McDonough, the revolutionary green architect whom *Time Magazine* named a hero for the planet a few years ago. Mr. McDonough observes that humans by nature are creators and designers. If design is the first signal of intention, as he says, then what is our intention in the world today?

"If our goal is to destroy the world—to produce global warming and toxicity and endocrine disruption—we're doing great. But if the goal isn't global warming, [then] what is? I want to crank the wheel of industry in a different direction to produce a world of abundance and good design—a delightful, safe world that our children can play in.

"It's time for a new design assignment."

The 2006 General Assembly of the Unitarian Universalist Association issued a Statement of Conscience on Global Warming, outlining not only the scientific and ethical grounds for concern, but also specific responses for us as people who honor and celebrate the interconnected

web of life. Between that and the film *An Inconvenient Truth*, I'm going to assume that you are well aware of the bad news of the Climate Crisis. There's plenty of it. So I'm going to skip most of that and talk about the good news.

Studies published last year showed that Greenland's icecap is actually melting in response to rising temperatures at a rate far quicker than scientists had originally predicted. So, enterprising Greenlanders have now opened a beer brewery that uses the meltwater from Greenland's icecap. It's being marketed with the slogan "taste the purity of ancient ice." Now see, there's a silver lining!

But seriously, I imagine that many of you have experienced crises or difficulties that later turned out to be blessings, or at least had redeeming aspects. I have a story from seven years ago, when I became very ill. After nearly a week of being bed-ridden with high fever, agonizing aches, and mild hallucinations, I finally dragged myself to a doctor, which was very unusual for me, since I was extremely doctor-phobic at that time in my life. I was diagnosed with tick fever, and, after a round of antibiotics I was fine. But while I was there, the doctor looked over my records and, seeing that it had been years since my last physical, insisted that I make an appointment for a pap smear the following week. Well, it turns out I was a step away from metastasized cervical cancer, which was eventually successfully treated. Of course, if I'd never been so sick with tick fever I would not have had those pap smears, and who knows, I might not be here today. And so I acknowledge a debt of gratitude for the tick, the fever, and that overbearing doctor. Had I been able to see this possibility, it's probable that I would have made it to the doctor a little sooner! In my case that illness—painful as it was—was indeed a blessing.

So here's the good news: blessings await us as a result of this crisis. Global warming has at least four silver linings. I call them the Hammer, the Uniter, the Muse, and the Calling.

What if Global Warming is a Hammer?

A hammer is something that forces action. In legislation, there are "hammer clauses" that prescribe consequences if action is not taken. Global warming imposes serious consequences if action is not taken.

Once upon a time there was a small planet that had everything—abundant life, clear waters, verdant landscapes, beautiful sunsets, incredibly creative and resourceful wildlife, especially its humans, who had developed language, writing, and tools. However, unintended results of this creativity began to pop up everywhere. The streams weren't so clear anymore and neither was the air. Toxic pollution was widespread, and entire species of life were rapidly disappearing off the planet as a result of human endeavors. Informed people made a little progress in telling others how human activity was ultimately destroying itself by its disregard for the environment from which it grew. But, the vast majority of people either remained ignorant of the problems or were (sometimes understandably) more concerned with other things. It was hard for most people to have a real grasp of the gravity of the problems in the face of just trying to get through another day, the needs of their loved ones, and the urgencies of their own lives. But one day,

there came a problem that was so big, so seemingly intractable, and with potential effects so alarming that it got more and more people's attention. Many people noticed that summer was hotter and spring came earlier and fall came later. At first people were skeptical, and many denied that anything but natural forces were to blame. But slowly, as science corroborated and amassed more evidence, people realized that the consequences might actually be rapid and painful. Very painful. In fact, increasingly people began to see this problem as the most worrisome threat facing humanity, because a major warming of the climate boded deep and disparate consequences all over the globe. Nearly all of humanity's existing ills—not just environmental degradation, but hunger, disease, and war—stood to be made worse by this problem. And so at last, seeing no other option, the people got to work with a sense of zeal and urgency and did what needed to be done.

As if air pollution, acid rain, soil contamination, and species extinction weren't enough in themselves, along comes global warming to confound these and add to our many social ills. It's downright inconvenient. But here is a silver lining: those same actions that are needed to combat global warming will also mitigate if not solve most of our other environmental problems, since so many are linked to the mining, transport, and combustion of fossil fuels. When we move to a society based on efficiency and renewable energy, we will no longer have an asthma epidemic. People living in the mountains of West Virginia will no longer see the land literally blown up around them to recover the coal lying beneath. We will once again be able to eat fish species that today are contaminated with mercury as a result of power plants. In my hometown of Asheville, we will be able to see our beautiful mountains every day.

A hammer can be a very useful thing, in the hands of the right people.

What if Global Warming is the Great Uniter?

We are all in this together! The very fact that global warming is a global problem means that everyone is responsible. Those of us in the industrialized world, and especially in the United States, owe the world leadership and commitment since we have contributed so much to the current atmospheric concentrations of air pollutants. Even if we don't all share equally in responsibility, we clearly have high common interest in solving the problem. Like nearly any other societal problem you can name, the poor stand to suffer more from global warming. But all of us around the globe stand to be affected, perhaps are already being affected, by higher temperatures, increased incidence of tropical diseases, higher intensity storms, species extinction, agricultural disruption.... But it is precisely the global dimension of global warming that may be the redemption here. We all stand to win or lose together on this one like never before. They say that there is nothing like a common enemy to unite people.

And thanks to our 21st century communications systems, we have a marvelous ability to create team spirit around this issue. People around the world can share, inspire, create, and reflect on the best strategies and methods. We can be aware of the constraints we face in our various societies and work together to neutralize them.

To be successful in overcoming this challenge, we will learn that we can no longer afford blame (“if only those **other** people would stop being so wasteful”), irresponsibility (“I’m not causing this problem by myself”) or despair (“there’s nothing we can do about it”). Combating global warming calls for operationalizing the Unitarian Universalist principles of human worth and dignity, social justice, acceptance, and compassion. For it is not just in our actions, but in our being, that our hopes for one world community can truly become reality.

So I believe global warming is a force that will bring people together. Indeed it already is. Every day new and surprising partners in this crusade appear: this past fall California Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger signed a bill putting the most extensive carbon dioxide caps in the nation into effect.

Rev. Richard Cizik is the vice-president for political affairs of the American Evangelical Association; he had been a strong supporter of President Bush until breaking with the administration in 2005, and has gone on to become one of Washington’s strongest supporters of an aggressive policy to deal with global warming. He says,

“The climate change crisis that we believe is occurring is not something we can wait ten years, five years, even a year, to address. Climate change is real and human induced. It calls for action soon. And to deplete our resources, to harm our world by environmental degradation, is an offense against God. That’s what the Scriptures say. Therefore, if we are to be obedient to the Scriptures, there is no time to wait, no time to stall, no time to deliberate.”

Rev. Dr. Gerald L. Durley is the Sr. Pastor at the Providence Missionary Baptist Church in Atlanta. He writes:

“So, what does all of this mean to an African-American pastor in Atlanta, Georgia, who is concerned every day with the elimination of poverty; curtailing homelessness; improving health care; decreasing unemployment; lessening teenage pregnancy; curbing violence; eliminating racism; and trying to assist people through another day?

“It became crystal clear to me... that environmental concerns must become an integrated, active part of the life-sustaining messages in the African-American community. These essential messages must be mandatory teachings throughout all faith traditions, if we are to survive.”

Working to solve the climate crisis can only be a catalyst for creating unity. What are the possibilities for peace, cooperation, appreciation and tolerance that will emerge as we work shoulder to shoulder on this great challenge? Global warming could just be the Uniter of Humanity we’ve been waiting for.

What if Global Warming is a Muse?

They say that necessity is the Mother of Invention. Global warming is at once a technical and social challenge. What new heights of creativity will we achieve by solving this problem? And not just of generating energy, but of planning, building, governing, living? It's clear that as we grapple with the challenge of global warming, we will be doing some major redesign work on ourselves.

In 1969, early in the Apollo 13 mission to the moon, an explosion occurred, crippling the spacecraft and ending its hopes of a lunar landing. Instead the mission became to get the 3 astronauts safely back to earth. To save power, the crew went into the lunar module part of the craft while they continued the trajectory around the moon, which, it was hoped would give them enough of a boost to get them back to earth. On the ground, it was realized that carbon dioxide levels inside the Aquarius were building up to dangerous levels as the scrubbing filters exhausted their capacity, which was meant to be for 2 people for 2 days, not 3 people for 4 days. There were other carbon dioxide filters on board the command module, but of course they were square, and the assemblage on the lunar module called for round ones. On the ground, this design assignment was given to a team of engineers: "figure out how to get this (the square filter) into this (the round apparatus). Here's a box with everything available on board the spacecraft. You have fifteen minutes." Not one of those engineers said "we can't do it." Not one of them said, "there isn't enough time." Not one of them said, "that's a shame, it's too bad."

And what is the difference between our assignment and theirs? We have not a box, but a whole globe of resources to use as we develop strategies and solutions to reduce carbon dioxide and global warming. But, even more importantly, we have a planet full of talented, creative humans to work on it.

There is already evidence of a new creativity being spawned: hybrid cars, fuel cells, the world café, compact fluorescents, green development. Bill McDonough, the architect I referred to earlier, has been contracted by China to design seven new ecologically sustaining cities. My husband's company recently installed one of the largest solar hot water systems in America on the roof of a North Carolina hotel. In my hometown, citizens are negotiating directly with the power company to reduce the community's electricity consumption and thereby avoid construction of a new generating plant.

Global warming could be a muse that inspires incredible ingenuity.

What if Global Warming presents a Monumental Calling?

Who is called, who will be called, to accept this "new design assignment"?

Perhaps the problem that threatens humanity more than global warming is a lack of vocation in the human soul. I believe it is because of this yearning that in the West we consume such inordinate amounts of the Earth's abundance and yet, it seems so many of our people are struggling materially, spiritually, and emotionally. We have brothers and sisters who believe their lives to be without purpose or value, and who are easy prey to addictions and self- or other

abuse. The rise of religious extremism, the recruitment of youth into armies, the profusion of youth gangs are some of the more extreme examples of the way that our urgent need to find purpose to shape our lives is manifested today.

And while there are so many needs in this world, so many demands for transformative action, there are still so many, able-bodied and well-off, who remain unengaged. Albert Schweitzer said, “the only ones among you who will be really happy are those who have sought and found how to serve.” But until you are motivated, until you find a cause and have faith in your ability to contribute to it, there is no engagement. Global warming calls us into sure and noble service for the web of all life. It is a purpose that can put fire in our eyes and joy in our hearts.

Last spring I had the privilege of teaching introductory environmental science to inmates at Western Youth Institute in Morganton. These 18 to 21 year olds, unsurprisingly, had almost no knowledge of environmental issues at the outset of the class. As you might imagine, these kids come from pretty unencouraging backgrounds. Justin was one of the brightest of the bunch, smarty-alecky and confrontational. After initial skepticism of the science I was sharing, he easily became despairing, saying, “nobody knows about this stuff—it doesn’t matter what we do—we are doomed.” He polled 70 of his fellow inmates about their knowledge of global warming, finding that only 15 % had heard the term. He was scheduled for release the day after the class ended. The last thing he told me was, “I’m going to Florida to start over. I hope to find work in the solar energy industry there.”

Over the course of that class I saw in every one of those young men the potential to be a crusader. I only had a short time with them. I don’t know where their lives will take them. But even in that short time, they heard the calling. You see, it is precisely the huge scale of this climate crisis that makes it so alluring to the hero in each one of us: a cause big enough to devote one’s life to. Every person, every action, every solution, is needed. Whatever scale you are called to work at—whether it be individual lifestyle changes, policy advocacy, innovating technologies, or planning sustainable community structures—humanity and indeed much of life on earth is imperiled. Heroes for the planet, report! We need six billion of you.

This beloved community is called to greatness by global warming. To those of you who have been called to this work for years, even decades, I acknowledge you and remind you that your work has not been in vain. More and more of us are joining you. Pollsters found that 58% of those voting in the most recent elections said global warming was an important factor in who they voted for. Those of you who are more recently learning about global warming: now is the time. A grand and heroic cause beckons—engage if you hear the calling.

None of this is to say that there aren’t also grim possibilities of suffering, destruction, and harm to life on our planet posed by global warming. But equally real are the responsive, creative forces at work in nature and ourselves. I suggest this is our unique contribution as people of religious faith. Let this then be our mission: not to stoke the fires of fear, but to create irresistible engagement with a vision of a world shaped by this powerful Hammer, Uniter, Muse, this Calling. Or whatever silver linings you envision. These possibilities and more await.

Our Unitarian Universalist 2006 Statement of Conscience closes thus: *“Given our human capacity to reflect and act upon our own lives as well as the condition of the world, we accept with humility and determination our responsibility to remedy and mitigate global warming/climate change through innovation, cooperation, and self-discipline. We undertake this work for the preservation of life on Earth.”*

We are called by our denomination, our principles, our common sense, and by our love to create a world that works for everyone. We did not ask for the challenge of this climate crisis, but here it is. We are the ones who get to respond.

The lead flight director of Apollo 13 was an amazing human being, a man named Gene Kranz, who tirelessly led the team of hundreds of technicians on the ground trying to bring the crew home. At six days after the launch, the astronauts have survived limited food, water, heat and the carbon dioxide crisis, but there is still great uncertainty as to whether the capsule has been too damaged to survive reentry into the atmosphere. A NASA official, ruminating on the political fallout of the abandoned mission, laments, “This could be the worst disaster NASA’s ever faced!” To this, [Gene Kranz](#) replied:

“With all due respect, sir, I believe this is going to be our finest hour.”

Amen.