

**ON BECOMING STEWARDS OF THE EARTH: A MORAL RESPONSIBILITY**  
**A Background Paper on Climate Change and the Environment**  
**For Interfaith Impact of New York State — by Richard S. Gilbert, President**  
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"Nature sustains itself through three precious principles, which one does well to embrace and follow. These are gentleness, frugality and humility."

Lao Tzu

"Treat the earth well. It was not given to you by your parents. It was lent to you by your children."

Kenyan proverb

"We behave as if we were the last generation to inhabit the planet."

Biologist Rene Dubos

"We are using up the world."

Poet Wendell Berry

"We can't claim ignorance. We have thought the earth 'too big to fail,' but that is not true.... We are in danger, but we have hit a 'sweet spot' where we can still change our behavior and save our planetary home. How lucky we are. This is an opportunity that may never come again."

Marine biologist Sylvia Earle

**GOD'S OWN JUNKYARD: STATE OF THE ARK 2017**

In 1989 Dr. James E. Hansen, then of the National Aeronautics and Space Administration's Goddard Institute for Space Studies, issued a stern warning on the danger of global climate change. However, the White House Office of Management and Budget rewrote Hansen's scientific conclusions, contending humanity's contribution to the greenhouse effect "remains scientifically unknown." It was evidently feared such information would harm the economy. Subsequent studies by NASA and the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, among many other scientific organizations, have resulted in an overwhelming consensus that (1) global climate change is occurring; (2) the earth is warming; (3) human activity is substantially responsible, and (4) this process has deleterious impact on humanity's planetary home, especially on the poor and powerless.

Climate change is not merely an environmental or political or economic problem. It is a moral problem. It is the obligation of people of faith to speak and act to save humanity from itself - to protect our global home. We underscore the urgency of the papal encyclical *Laudato Si*, in which Pope Francis discussed the grave implications of climate change and called on all people, not just Catholics, to protect the earth — "the common inheritance of all." We face a global ecological calamity which has been importantly addressed by world leaders as they signed the Paris climate change accord April 22, 2016, at United Nations headquarters in New York.

As two Catholic bishops, the Most Reverend Oscar Cantu and the Most Reverend Broderick Pabillon — from North and South — put it: "We try to ensure that the powerless are heard and the powerful are engaged." We echo their words: "Confronting climate change is our moral obligation." They state: "Climate change threatens all life - and the life cycle of the earth itself. Climate change attacks the human dignity of those most affected, with the least fortunate bearing a disproportionate burden from its impacts. What the scientific consensus tells us, and what real observations and experiences around the world have shown us, is that humanity's current reliance on fossil fuels is altering the atmosphere. Warmer oceans and higher temperatures are already being connected with increased sea levels, storm surges, rainfall intensities and droughts, as well as disruptions in growing seasons and migratory patterns."

In *Laudato Si*, Pope Francis noted the role of human technology in creating an earth-circling crisis: "Technology based on the use of highly polluting fossil fuels - especially coal, but also oil and, to a lesser degree, gas - needs to be progressively replaced without delay." Our civilization has become so dependent on fossil fuels that we face a painful transition to renewable energy. The task will not become easier by delay. It is literally a matter of life and death.

Clearly we who live in the global north are disproportionately responsible for carbon pollution. Our way of life has been based on fossil fuels, to which we have become addicted. We have a moral obligation to reduce carbon pollution, to protect people from climate impacts and to safeguard human health and public welfare. This

predicament calls upon us to practice human solidarity in which the common good of all transcends the narrow self-interest of the few. Pope Francis calls this practice repaying an "ecological debt."

We have reached an environmental milestone — of which we should not be proud: there are now over 400 parts per million of carbon dioxide in earth's atmosphere, a point not reached for three million years in the Pliocene epoch when the earth was unbearably hot and sea levels as much as 60 or 80 feet higher; it was 280 parts two centuries ago and we add to it every time we turn on a switch. We are reminded of our predicament in the wake of a record-shattering, oppressively hot, dry year: 2015 was the hottest on record — the first few months of 2016 exceed the prior year's record. Creation groaned. The earth speaks back. We may overheat the globe to extinction.

The urgency of the scientists is often met with indifference by the citizenry and denial by the politicians. That response denies the inconvenient truth that human activity exacerbates global warming and in time will produce disastrous consequences. While it is easy to label those who warn of environmental calamity "Cassandras," it is tempting to take the easy path and do nothing. This tendency to minimize environmental damage is hedging our global bets. It is a dangerous gamble.

### THE BIBLICAL CONTEXT

In a fascinating article in the May 10, 1967 issue of *Science*, Lynn White of U.C.L.A. contended that our present state of ecological backlash is mounting feverishly. He traced the human tendency to exploit nature back to the Jewish and Christian conceptions of creation in which God creates all living things to serve humanity. White contended that this theology began to have practical results several generations ago with the fusion of science and technology — a marriage of the theoretical and the empirical. Thus humanity was able to control its environment to an unprecedented degree. Humanity became increasingly divorced from nature, which was compelled to do its bidding. Humanity was the master, nature the slave.

White cast his eyes on the story of creation in which humans named the animals and established its dominion over them. Creation had only one purpose - to serve human beings. Christianity, according to White, was the most anthropocentric religion in the world and therefore the most activist one. Eastern religions, he contended, were contemplative, nature oriented and quiescent. As a result, he believed that "despite Darwin, we are not, in our hearts, part of the natural process. We are superior to nature, contemptuous of it, willing to *use* it for our slightest whim."

In Genesis we read: "And God blessed them, and God said to them, 'Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and *subdue* it, and have dominion over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth ....' And God saw everything that he had made, and behold, it was very good." (*Revised Standard Bible*)

Judaism and early Christianity represent a transition from pagan earth-centered traditions to the so-called high religions. That transition is seen in the prophet Isaiah: "For ye shall go out with joy, and be led forth with peace. The mountains and the hills shall break forth before you into singing and the trees of the field shall clap their hands," a clearly animistic text, attributing human gestures to non-human organisms. And in the Book of Job, the Lord's voice out of the whirlwind is a reminder of humanity's basic humility in the great scheme of things. "Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth?" Indeed, where were we? Who do we think we are, anyway? Whereas pagan religion was non-violent toward the earth, the western religious tradition, emboldened by Genesis, too often thought of the earth as a mine to be exploited rather than a garden to be cultivated.

The central sin of this tradition was to see humanity as distinct from nature - above nature - and not an integral part of it. This was in direct contrast to the paganism which Christianity replaced in its rise to power — a paganism which for all its superstition saw divinity in all living things. To quote Professor White at this point: "Before one cut a tree, mined a mountain, or damned a brook, it was important to placate the spirit in charge of that particular situation, and to keep it placated. By destroying pagan animism, Christianity made it possible to exploit nature in a mood of indifference to natural objects."

The Christian God was transcendent - above and beyond, but not really in nature. Creation was seen as a revelation of the divine mentality, and knowledge about that creation was a way of deducing what God said to humanity. In the 13th century this natural theology took a dramatic new turn as humanity sought to know the divine mind by discovering how his creation operated. The faint stirrings of the scientific revolution were being felt. Scientists expressed hope of being able to "think God's thoughts after him." It was not until the late 18th century, as White pointed out, that scientists were able to do without the God hypothesis.

But the groundwork had been laid for exploiting the environment. Assuming that the earth was here to serve humanity, humankind began to exploit its abundance for its own comfort. The scientific revolution was wedded to technical skills, and the technological revolution was underway with its unthinking and unfeeling exploitation of nature.

The 16<sup>th</sup> century saw the rise of what has become known as "the Protestant work ethic," now secularized as simply the work ethic. Detailed by sociologist of religion Max Weber,<sup>1</sup> the theological and ethical meaning can be summarized as follows: Theologian John Calvin elaborated the idea of pre-destination; that is, at birth people are pre-destined by God to go to Heaven or Hell. How is one to know one's eternal destination? God blesses the virtuous with material success; God punishes the less than virtuous with material poverty. Thus, motivation to succeed, to produce economically, was not only a material incentive but a theological one. The rapid rise of industrialization can be in part traced to this strong religious motivation, along with a near-total disregard for the fate of the earth environmentally.

As the late Roman Catholic scholar Thomas Merton wrote: "The elementary Christian duty of the Puritan settler was to combat, reduce, destroy and transform the wilderness. This was God's work.... American capitalist culture is firmly rooted in a secularized Christian myth and mystique of struggle with nature. The basic article of faith in this mystique is that you prove your worth by overcoming and dominating the natural world by transforming nature into wealth."

And so from the beginning of this heritage Western humanity was the dominant creature; saw itself as the center of the universe and all its processes in history. Humanity did subdue the earth — but now faces an ecological backlash; affluence has been transformed into effluence; humanity was fruitful, did multiply and now threatens to overpopulate itself into oblivion. As biologist Rene Dubos said: "We behave as if we were the last generation to inhabit the earth."

Of course, there are alternative views of biblical creation. Poet and environmentalist Wendell Berry points out that there is another translation of biblical creation stories. In the earlier *King James Bible* we read, "Be fruitful, and multiply, and *replenish* the earth, and subdue it." There is still sanction for the population explosion, still we are admonished to subdue the earth, but there is that divine caveat - we are to *replenish* the earth — to be good stewards. The earth is not so much a mine which will one day run out, but a garden which continually replenishes itself — with a little help from the gardener.

Berry resurrects the concept of "Usufruct," the right of temporary possession, use, or enjoyment of the advantages of property belonging to another without causing damage or harm. In this case the property really belongs to Nature, the earth, or God. He concludes that "It is our present principled and elaborately rationalized rape and plunder of the natural world that is a new thing under the sun." He calls for a new sense of a biblical ecology.

Lynn White singled out Francis of Assisi as one who believed in the virtue of humility - not merely for the individual but for humanity as a species. And, of course, Francis' hymn to the sun and moon and stars suggested humanity's oneness with nature. White called upon his readers to reject the "Christian axiom that nature has no reason for existence save to serve humanity." If we rid ourselves of that arrogance, he believed, we can begin to solve our ecologic crisis.

## TOWARD A THEOLOGY OF ECOLOGY

A theology of ecology begins with the earth as a sacred garden to be tended, not a mine to be exploited. The earth is viewed as a holy treasure which it is our human responsibility to protect, as well as our privilege to enjoy. This theology of ecology leads to an environmental ethic that states the earth has moral rights. Interfaith Impact believes that individuals and groups must adopt this theology and take such an ethic seriously.

People of faith need a positive doctrine of creation as sacred. Primitive humanity held nature sacred as they saw the divine in every living thing. Judaism celebrates the earth. Christianity sees creation as sacred because of a transcendent Creator God. Those who may have jettisoned a transcendent God need not throw out the idea of the sacred at the same time. A view of reality which encompasses the dynamic evolving and naturalistic forces of the universe ought to embody the sacred fully as much. Humanity's sense of awe and wonder at the cosmos is enhanced, not diminished, by its understanding of the creative thrust of the universe operating within a framework of natural laws. Every living creature becomes, then, a manifestation of this noble process.

We are compelled to humility. The earth we stride is part of the cosmic divinity in which we live. The globe on which we live is sacred to its very core. The animals with which we share the air and water and space do delight us, yet they are not here just for our pleasure. They are something of value in and of themselves. As is the earth which we co-habit.

A theology of ecology views humanity as a part of nature, a creature subject to its inexorable laws like any creature, not a God-chosen creature for whom this creation exists. This will require the sparsely distributed virtue of humility. It will require understanding creation as a community of living creatures and non-living things. One cannot, then, speak of humanity *and* nature, but of humanity *in* nature.

Albert Schweitzer suggests this credo when he writes: "The great fault of all ethics hitherto has been that they believed themselves to have to deal only with the relation of humanity to humanity." Theologically and ethically, people of faith do well to adopt Schweitzer's "reverence for life" as a core ethical concept. He suggests this moral feeling comes, not deductively from belief in God, but inductively, intuitively from human beings. We experience a will to live; being like others, we may infer they experience that same will to live - a will which should be honored. Common sense and observation tells us that other animals have a will to live - that, too, should be honored.

The late social critic Norman Cousins said it well: "Reverence for life is more than solicitude or sensitivity for life. It is a sense of the whole, a capacity for wonder, a respect for the intricate universe of individual life. It is the supreme awareness of awareness itself. It is pride in being."

Environmentalist Aldo Leopold laid down a basic ecological ethic when he wrote: "A thing is right when it tends to preserve the integrity, stability and beauty of the biotic community. It is wrong when it tends otherwise."

It is an old problem - hubris - the sin of pride - the sense of self as the center of the cosmos. Humanity has always struggled to build cooperative community in the competitive jungle. Now the stakes are higher than they have ever been — humanity's survival as a species. The environmental crisis has taught us - cooperate or die. It will not be enough to say with Pogo: "We have met the enemy and he is us." Saving the environment is not only an individual, but also a social problem.

Who owns the earth? Clearly, we do not own the earth. We are merely its trustees, its stewards. Religiously speaking, the planet is our parish.

But does the *earth* have moral rights? University of Southern California law professor Christopher Stone's seminal book *Do Trees Have Standing?* narrates the 1969 story of the Sierra Club taking Walt Disney Productions to court over its intended \$35 million commercial development of Mineral King Valley, a wilderness area in the Sierra Nevada Mountains. The judge dismissed the case because the Sierra Club lacked legal "standing," none of its members would be directly and adversely affected by the proposed development. The case was appealed to the U.S. Supreme Court. Stone hastily wrote a bold manuscript claiming that natural objects like trees ought to have some kind of legal standing - after all, their very existence was jeopardized. Stone worked with an editor friend who slipped the essay into a law review issue on the environment for which Justice William O. Douglas was to write an introductory essay. This outdoors enthusiast would have to read the essay before he penned the preface. The Sierra Club lost the case, but in his dissenting opinion, Douglas made reference to Stone's essay, entering into legal discourse the idea that natural objects have legal standing. We might take the issue one step thither, moving beyond legality to morality, and more broadly put asking, does the earth itself have moral rights?

While we agree persons have rights, do birds and bees and trees and rivers and mountains have a right to exist on their own? Are they here solely for our pleasure or do they have intrinsic worth, so we must use them conservatively? When we see a redwood, do we think picnic table? When we see a field of flowers, do we think housing development?

We are nature. We are part of the earth family. When we wantonly and needlessly take non-renewable resources from the earth we are guilty of ecocide. Actions have consequences.

Ecology, the science of planetary housekeeping, as ecologist Barry Commoner defines it, has four basic laws. First, everything is connected to everything else on this thin skin of air, water, soil and sunlight. This reminds one of the poet Francis Thompson's couplet: "Thou canst not stir a flower, without troubling of a star." Commoner, using somewhat less poetic imagery, likens the inter-relationship of all that is to the role of the helm, compass,

rudder and ship. All must work in concert if the course is to be kept straight. One malfunction by any part, throws the whole ship off course.

Secondly, everything must go somewhere, which is a layman's way of stating a basic law of physics - matter is indestructible. In such a system there is no such thing as waste. What we know as waste must be put somewhere or changed into something else. It will not go away. One end result of our failure to realize this law was the *de facto* "death" of Lake Erie by the pollutants humans have introduced into her once blue waters. Lake Erie, happily, has substantially recovered due to an environmental ethic. Adirondack lakes have been "targets" of air pollution from Midwestern power plant smokestacks. Remedial action has been taken. However, these episodes remind us that as residents of one earth, "we all live downstream."

A third law states: nature knows best. Any human-made change in the environment has the potential of being detrimental. We discover the 'nth of this through the work of the United Nations ..... which has documented with irrefutable evidence the reality of climate change — global warming in particular. It has also demonstrated beyond a reasonable doubt that human activity plays a major role in this problem. We do well to learn the ecological laws of nature and abide by them.

Finally, there is no such thing as free lunch. Every gain in the environment will be made only at some cost. That cost can be delayed but not allayed. While we squander mineral resources, we must recognize they are non-renewable. What took nature centuries to create cannot be replicated by humanity except with severe environmental consequences. The transition from a fossil-fuel based economy to a green economy will come at a high cost. But is there any alternative? Mere gestures will not do, nor will powerful rhetoric.

A green economy, built upon a theology of ecology and an environmental ethic, will require two things: (1) a radical change in individual life-styles as we shift from wasteful use of resources to those that are renewable; and (2) a systemic change in how political and economic systems use natural resources and deal creatively with environmental waste. A useful theme in moving toward a green economy comes from Buddhist Economics which urges us to "obtain the maximum of well-being with the minimum of consumption."

The affluent will need to celebrate a theology of relinquishment — voluntarily acting against their self-interest, lowering a dangerously luxurious standard of living so that resources might be distributed more equitably. The difficulty of the trade-off between economic growth and ecological stewardship is illustrated in a *Wall Street Journal* article which pointed out that "We can save as much as 75% of our electricity, but may never do so because business requires paybacks of less than 3 years." Our ecological ethic must think in terms, not of years, but of generations.

Jean Mayer, former President of Tufts University and an expert on hunger, some years ago warned, "It's the rich — in a relative sense, the people less likely to starve — who wreck the environment. Rich people occupy much more space, consume more of each natural resource, disturb the ecology more, litter the landscape with bottles and paper, and pollute more land, air and water with chemical, thermal and radioactive waste.. . It might be bad in China with 700 million poor people, but 700 million very rich Chinese would wreck China in no time. It's the spread of wealth that threatens the environment."

A theology of ecology must give birth to an eco-ethic and sensitize an ecological conscience. It must provide guidance and direction for stewardship of the earth. A new commandment is required: "Thou shalt not pollute the earth." This commandment must be understood in both an individual and a corporate sense. Individually, it must mean that individuals take upon themselves the responsibility for the stewardship of the earth. From the simple admonition not to litter to the more complicated decisions as to the purchase of an automobile with its potential for pollution, people daily make dozens of decisions which affect the environment. This ethic must recognize that freedom is not unlimited. Economic and political entities enact sweeping policies that have deep repercussions. These actions may well place some limits on individual freedom for the good of the whole. As conservative author George Will asks: "Do the rights of man include driving a Buick?" In other words, individual rights are not infinite when the public welfare is at stake.

We are part of an interdependent web of existence. That is the Seventh Principle of the Unitarian Universalist Association Covenant, celebrating our integral connection with an earth over which we are not lords, but in which we hold citizenship. The web metaphor recognizes, in the words of Sierra Club founder John Muir, "When we try to pick out anything by itself, we find it hitched to everything else in the universe." The web is a thing of beauty. It recognizes that life is a delicate blessing - tough only in that we all contribute to its strength. The web sustains us

and we help sustain the web - in the words of Chief Seattle, "What we do to the web we do to ourselves."

## ECO-JUSTICE AND THE EIGHTH DAY OF CREATION

Two millennia ago a group of rabbis came together to debate a single issue: should humanity have been created or not? They debated and then took a surprising vote: No, by majority vote. We should not have been created since we appear to be incorrigibly evil. But because we have been created, they added, let us assiduously examine our ways, our lives, so that we won't self-destruct and destroy everything with us. Let us engage relentlessly in *tikkun olam*: repairing or mending our world.

Eco-justice is both an ethical and a religious issue. A few years ago at a Moscow meeting of scientific, religious and political leaders, the eminent astronomer Carl Sagan, speaking for 23 scientists, said that "efforts to save the environment need to be infused with a vision of the sacred."

Eco-justice is the term used to describe an equitable and sustainable economic system which at the same time protects the environment. This view is summed up by theologian Jurgen Moltmann, who calls for an ethic of "class betrayal." Such betrayal requires the world's "haves" to be advocates, not for the prosperous, for they can advocate for themselves and do. The role of people of faith is derived from the Biblical prophets, from Amos through Jesus, to advocate for those who cannot do so for themselves, the casualties of our system.

If people of faith are to exhibit more than righteous indignation and life-style modification, they will need to avoid romanticizing the earth and the eco-justice movement. Romantic talk of the earth as Gaia - the Greek goddess of earth - may well inspire spiritually, but it will not change one single environmental or economic policy. They will need to be as gentle as doves, but as wise as serpents, and as persistent as crab grass in the spring.

Essentially, ecological and environmental problems are more systemic than personal. Life-style changes will be important spiritually, as people learn to live in harmony with the earth. But part of that life-style change will be to become militant shepherds of being who realize the need for policy change throughout society. And those policy changes may not always suit peoples' self-interest. The fate of the earth is in very human hands.

In the words of E.F. Schumacher of *Small Is Beautiful* fame, who rejoiced in being called a crank, "I don't mind at all. A crank is a low-cost, low-capital tool. It can be used on a small scale. It is non-violent. And it makes revolutions." Our politics ought to be based, not on economic self-interest but on a common good which may well fly in the face of our own class interests in the short run. In the long run the whole community will benefit from the creation of a just community.

Human beings tend to believe that they are the apex of evolution — what God had in mind all this long time. But as one zoologist wrote, "The direction of evolution ... has not been oriented toward (us). (We were) not planned. Nature chanced to discover (us) in her somewhat random search for better models."

Rene Dubois sets the tone for an ecological and economic revolution when he said "Humanity is the only part of the living world which emphasizes fitness in terms of the individual person as the significant biological unit. The most impressive aspect of the law of the jungle is not ruthless competition and destruction but rather interdependence and coexistence."

We cannot completely resolve these contentious issues — the tension between spirituality and ethics; between our religious sense of the earth as sacred and our ethical weighing of its uses for human purposes.

We can only suggest earth is a mystery we try to reduce to ownership at our peril. In making the earth merely a mine for our exploitation, we not only ravage and pollute our global home, but we lose that sense of reverence toward creation which separates us from the beasts of the field and the birds of the air; which enriches our brief sojourn on this earth so it means more than daily getting and spending.

A metaphor from the Boy Scouts is instructive here. Scouts are taught to leave their campsite in as good or better condition than they found it. All their trash is to be properly disposed of. The campfire should be safely extinguished. Kindling wood should be left for the next camper. Does this same ethic apply to human beings inhabiting planet earth? Are we morally responsible for the campsite on which we spend our short years of life? This is not an idle question. It is an issue increasingly raised as industrial development clashes head-on with environmental limits. These

are not inconsequential issues.

As one wit said: "We are living beyond our means and the Earth Bank is not federally insured."

We are citizens of the planet who have a responsibility to save its future. That task requires the expertise of scientists who comprehend our eco-system and the compassion of religionists who experience the earth as sacred. As one clergyperson put it: "We live in the shade of trees we did not plant; we drink from wells we did not dig; we build on foundations we did not lay." <sup>7</sup> They must be cherished, not only for this generation, but for those who follow.

There is a modern parable in the story of Hiroyuki Kohno, a 44-year-old plant worker at the quake-damaged Fukushima Daiichi nuclear complex in Japan. Kohno and the so-called "Fukushima Fifty" risked their lives to disable that plant with a minimum of radiation damage. "To be honest, no one wants to go," he said.... "I know that when I go this time, I will return with a body no longer capable of work at a nuclear plant." In explaining why he risked his life for his nation, he said, "There's a Japanese expression: 'We eat from the same bowl.' These are friends I shared pain and laughter with. That's why I'm going." "We all eat from the same bowl."

If we think of earth's development and human evolution in mythical terms of the "seven days of creation," then we are compelled to consider what we will make of our global home — as the eighth day of creation. We are compelled to urgency: As once scientist said, "I feel like the time to do something was yesterday." Humanity needs what William James called a "moral equivalent for war," a transcendent goal to take the psychological place of war with its call to commitment and sacrifice. We need a concerted global effort to save our battered and beleaguered earth. That will require a decline in our wasteful and extravagant life styles - "be fruitful and multiply and subdue the earth" can no longer be our motto. We must become responsible stewards; we must befriend the earth, not subdue it. We must become born-again pantheists in passionate love with the earth which is our one and only home.