

DEALING WITH "AN INCONVENIENT TRUTH"

Service presented January 28, 2007 by the UUCWI Social Action Committee

Part I: Thoughts on Climate Change as an Inconvenient Truth

I've been an environmental alarmist most of my adult life. I still remember my reaction to first hearing about 30 years ago of the scientific hypothesis connecting fossil fuel burning with the evidence for climate change. It seemed to me it was the smoking gun to link unsustainable resource use and pollution to adverse consequences that we all shared and could not ignore. For me it seemed both timely and very convenient - a clear wake up call.

How naïve I was and also morally lazy. The message did move me to support more environmental organizations promoting culture change, but otherwise my own day to day behavior changed little. I fell into the common trap of letting my deep thinking and rhetoric be my only response. Collectively, most of us could and did ignore Climate Change for a long time and we are only having this conversation now, in part, because Al Gore's persistence has created a tipping point in the public consciousness, instilling "awareness" beyond the ranks of we "true believers".

I've been reflecting a lot on the meaning of the word "Truth" in this context and the "Beliefs" I hold about what could or should be done.

The Truth being asserted is just the scientific consensus that an abnormally rapid warning of the planet is occurring and that the causal factors are a number of specific detrimental behaviors by human beings. Accepting this to be a truth amounts to a belief in the integrity/veracity of the scientific community on this complex subject. For me that belief comes easily because it is bolstered by how well the theory fits with and supports the worldview I already hold. I make a point of this selective perception in our thought processes because it pervades all our attempts to speak with each other about what is likely to happen in the future, and what might we do about it, should we choose to do anything. From agreement about the Truth of the current moment, we quickly diverge into different imaginings of the future based on our world views.

Even if the phenomenon of human caused climate change is absolutely true, the projections of how it will unfold in the future under various scenarios are not “true” in any sense, they are only possibilities that are difficult to calibrate. Never the less, the scientists mostly seem to be alarmists in varying degrees, I hear them saying the matter is urgent... that we must let go of “business as usual” soon and in a significant way. Otherwise the prospects for our descendents will be more seriously compromised than they already are. What was new for me in the Gore film and in the study I have done recently is the consensus on the urgency of acting now and acting profoundly – no more procrastination.

It’s an extraordinary moral challenge. We are urged to change our current behavior to avert global consequences that will not fully manifest in our lifetimes. It is truly a case of that challenging religious/spiritual admonition to extend our love and care to all of creation- to step out of self centered, short term concern for our immediate families and communities. Curiously, this moral admonition also comes in that classical religious form- thou shalt not

- thou shalt not burn fossil fuels
- thou shalt not deforest the planet

We’ve had a lot of trouble with the biblical ten commandments , these two are a challenge of a different order.

We have built our industrial civilization for about 5 centuries by doing both of these on an exponentially expanding scale. If we believe the science, we have only 40-50 years to essentially cease both practices. Now, 30 years later, I can procrastinate no longer. If I do, if we do, the consequences appear to be ecological chaos and species extinctions comparable to the major dieoffs we find in the fossil record.

Reaching to the deep time history of planetary life for an analogy is not just a rhetorical flourish. The situation for our species and our civilization today is almost directly comparable to the evolutionary transition of early microbial life about 3 billion years ago, when they had to evolve to metabolize oxygen. The energetic metabolism of our civilization cannot be fossil sunshine (fossil fuels) any longer, we will have to sustain

ourselves in the future primarily from the daily energy flows from the sun- the mass media euphemism is renewable energy. What kind of civilization we can maintain on that basis is a huge debate and, not surprisingly, it even has deeply polarized extremes. There are the technological optimists (derisively labeled the Cornucopians) and the Doomers who see a future of diminished economic prosperity and a more local, simplified style of life. Neither extreme is “the truth”. One thing stands out to me in following this debate. Many of the doomers have technical or scientific backgrounds, have high regard for some of the technical possibilities, yet they still take the doomer perspective because they assume, with some evidence, that we will either do nothing or not enough, soon enough. Most of the climate scientists also seem to speak this way when asked what they think is likely to happen. One of the web posters in these debates always ends his comments with the rhetorical question: “are humans smarter than yeast?” a clear reference to the evolutionary transition analogy I spoke of earlier.

So the bottom line- why would I frame my primary social action work around this subject?

Regardless of where or how you find a basis for optimism and hope in this collective predicament, the science says the “doomers” are probably right by default if we don’t begin right now to implement individual behaviors and public policies that shift our societies toward a “low carbon diet”. And I think that all the other social equity and welfare objectives we have long held dear become even more remote if our civilization doesn’t make this transition with some grace.

With that I invite you to a moment of silence.

Part II: A 15 Billion year Perspective

Has our own local climate gotten your attention? How have you been dealing with the power outages, the cold, the snow, the range of temperatures? Did you handle the last power outage differently than the first one? What emotions did you experience through all of that? I know that at different times I felt denial, fear, isolation, frustration,

dependence, anger, and concern about the future. I learned a bit about being prepared and also glimpsed the beginning of more community. I thought during the last one that if there were a rule that all power outages could last no more than 24 hours, I'd do OK. I've been hearing and reading lots of comments and questions about whether this is the result of global warming. I think about that myself. If it is, I wonder what we're in for in the next months and years. And if it isn't then probably down the road it will be. As with every challenge or inconvenient truth, this one also presents opportunities. Opportunities to face the challenge and create a different, and hopefully better, future.

Change has happened before in the larger 15 billion year evolutionary process that we're part of.

There have been several crises during this vast time when it was clear that the same old same old wouldn't work. The seeming dead ends became evolutionary drivers for new ways to emerge. Major steps in this process include the formation of the earth, the beginning of life, bacterial life learning to metabolize oxygen when the atmosphere became toxic, the jump to multicellular life, the emergence of humanity, and now our chance to evolve again - some think into a phase of global consciousness and conscious evolution. From the journal *Kosmos*, "A global movement of evolutionary proportions is unfolding in every field of endeavor on the planet."

This 15 billion year story affected me deeply when I first heard it. It was about 1975 and I was in a period of transition. I had left my marriage, moved from Guyana, South America to Staten Island, New York, and was looking for what would give meaning and purpose to my life. I was attending a meeting of the World Future Society in New York City and there was futurist and author, Barbara Marx Hubbard, presenting what she called the Evolutionary Spiral. I was so taken by this I nearly fell off my chair. I had been in a strong agnostic - even atheistic - phase, and suddenly I was overwhelmed with a Universe that had meaning that I was part of! Since then I've become familiar with the work of Thomas Berry, Brian Swimme, Michael Dowd, and Miriam MacGillis, all working hard to tell this story of the Universe.

Also in the middle '70s, I heard author and teacher Jean Houston describe us as “the people in the parentheses” meaning that the stories and myths which had shaped our lives and given meaning were no longer effective and that the new stories and the new myths had not yet taken hold. People throughout history have had stories to live by; without them life loses context and meaning. For me, the Universe Story was the new story.

What's important here is the process of change and how we deal with inconvenient truths. We've probably all experienced inconvenient truths in our own lives. Maybe health issues, or relationship struggles, or career changes, or family problems, etc. Although there are no guarantees, often facing into these leads to emergence from a dark time with more skills, or more compassion, or feeling more whole.

Part III: UUCWI Workshop and Community Response

IIIA: Outline of Congregational Workshop for February 24

The movie screenings and this service by the Social Action Committee are the stage setting for the congregational workshop we have scheduled for Saturday morning the 24th of February. Our purpose in the workshop is to determine if we can co-create one or more projects or activities in the church that can engage us all in beginning to respond meaningfully to climate change. The meeting is planned to last about 3 hours. We'll use the first hour to check in with each other, express how we feel about the issues, answer any factual or tactical questions that others in the congregation may be able to help clarify. Then we will move into an “open space” process that many of you may have experienced before.

- 1) First will be the “marketplace” where any of us may propose an activity or project that we would like to see the church rally around. If you have an idea, you should be prepared to give a 2 or 3 minute description of your idea/proposal. The social action committee has already crafted several proposals that we like. They are available today in a handout in the social hall.- please take one and reflect on it

over the coming month. They are offered now to stimulate your thinking and to save time on workshop day- so that the marketplace time can be devoted to introducing your new ideas.

- 2) When all the ideas are present- then we break up into groups to elaborate a plan or proposal for each one. The intent is that we vote for what interests us most by which idea we gravitate to at this stage. The proposer convenes the group and works with the others to develop the idea. A key question in the group is to identify who is willing to take the lead in organizing the activity if the congregation chooses to embrace that idea. The proposed activity and plan will be recorded on flip chart paper that we can post on the wall. This should take 45min to 1 hour.
- 3) The last stage will be report out to the whole group on the proposal for each activity. When all groups have given their report- we will vote by posting stickies on projects that we would be willing to support with our participation. When we see the results of the support expressed by the stickies hopefully we will see a convergence on several that will allow us to move forward in a meaningful way.
- 4) The Social Action committee will undertake to writeup a report of the workshop to be distributed to the whole congregation – such that those not present in the workshop will be able choose how they will join in with whatever the plan turns out to be.

As we think about activities/projects to propose, the Social Action committee suggests we be thinking about several layers of objectives that might be embodied in what we choose to do;

- a. How do we craft a project that brings us personally into greater alignment with our UU values , strengthens the bonds of our church community and is fun to do together?

- b. How do we craft a project that can engage us, as a group, in the larger Whidbey Island community's response to Climate Change and sustainability? How can we raise our presence in the community through these activities?
- c. How can we be of service to others, less advantaged than we, by what we do here?

You will see that a couple of the ideas proposed in our handout are attempting to address all three of these objectives.

We hope that all of you are feeling an urgency and anticipation to come together around this great challenge of our time and that you will reserve the morning of the 24th to help determine how we proceed.

IIIB: Potential Action Projects

Premise of the “Climate Change” Church Community Action Projects:

The more challenging actions we could/should do to lower our carbon footprint are difficult precisely because they seem to be counter cultural to our current way of life. To do these things is going against the flow, we feel alone when we try, our own actions seem too small. Apparently the best way to overcome these inhibitors is to join in community with others that share the values and goals – to work on them together, to reinforce each others’ continued focus, to make these projects learning opportunities and fun for all. The goal is to create a local culture where new ways of living are reinforced, not inhibited. Isn't that notion just what our UU values and principles have been calling us to do all along?

Potential Project 1: Home energy audits

On average 17% of our personal energy consumption is electricity and heating fuels consumed in our homes. A home energy audit identifies the level of energy consumption related to the features and equipment of a home and how the owners

manage the home. A potential action list, and their leverage in saving energy and greenhouse gases can be developed.

- a. Several members of the congregation would choose to become skilled auditors and advisors on this subject. (some instruments may need to be purchased)
- b. Home auditing would be offered as a service to the congregation
- c. Feedback to the congregation would be provided on actions adopted to celebrate success.
- d. After practicing on ourselves, this service could be offered to others, for example through Hearts and Hammers. Then H&H might be able to organize home improvement projects that address the identified needs.

Potential Project 2: Local Food-Community Pea Patches

It is estimated that 17% of the fossil fuel energy to support the American lifestyle is consumed in the industrialized food system that we support through our supermarket purchases. This mode of bodily sustenance is not compatible with a goal of greatly reduced carbon emissions in the future. With the access to land and the favorable climate we enjoy on Whidbey Island, growing and consuming locally produced food may be the highest leverage opportunity we have to reduce the energy demands of our material needs.

- a. Organize our current and “could be” gardeners in a collective effort to grow a broad array of fruits and vegetables throughout the growing season. (several sites exist for us to establish community p-patches where we can work together in an organized way)
- b. Learn and study together how to do this in the most productive and low labor input methods.
- c. Share our production with each other (our own Sunday swap market), such that everyone has variety at all seasons, but doesn't need to grow all of those things themselves.
- d. For those that don't want to grow anything, lead them into CSA opportunities available here.

- e. Assuming there should be “surplus food” in this system- we would donate surpluses on a regular basis to the Food Banks
- f. This project lends itself to the involvement and education of our young people (interest in doing so has already been expressed)

**Potential Project 3: Sustainable Lifestyle Support Group-
(initial emphasis-Low Carbon Diet)**

Those of us who are seriously trying to reduce carbon emissions are faced daily with seemingly impossible choices. Some measures are relatively easy – we can switch to compact fluorescent light bulbs, recycle, and vote Green with very little effort, but the changes that require self-discipline and personal sacrifice come harder. Should we forego vacations and convenience trips that require burning fossil fuels? Should we boycott the automobile altogether, and always walk, bicycle, or use public transit? Should we stop chauffeuring our children to after-school activities? Should we only buy non-packaged and locally-produced foods? Should we go into debt to replace our reliable gas-guzzler with a new Prius? Should we move to an industrial center to be closer to work so we won't have to idle our cars in a ferry line?

Often these are the kinds of questions that make most people stop trying to make a difference. We might greatly appreciate the opportunity to wrestle with these issues in the company of others. We could create a support group, something like Weight Watchers or AA, to help us study the lifestyle issues, define realistic goals, and check at regular intervals to make sure personal progress is being made.

Tom B. has ordered copies of a new book titled “Low Carbon Diet: A 30 Day Program to Lose 5,000 Pounds”, by David Gershon, which could provide a structure for such a group. It is organized in workbook format, with checklists and

illustrations, to help people change their energy-consumption patterns. Such a workbook, used in the context of an ongoing support group, could be an effective tool for making real changes in our lives rather than just paying lip-service to unreachable ideals."

Potential Project 4 : Your Ideas