

## “A SPIRITUAL APPROACH TO GLOBAL WARMING”

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Call to Gather from “Living in the Shadows” by Peter Abrahams

To live with the conscious knowledge of the shadow of uncertainty, with the knowledge that disaster or tragedy could strike at any time; to be afraid and to know and acknowledge your fear, and still to live creatively and with unstinting love: that is to live with grace.

Reading Mark 6:30-44

The apostles returned to Jesus, and told him all that they had done and taught. And he said to them, “Come away by yourselves to a lonely place, and rest a while.” For many were coming and going, and they had no leisure even to eat. And they went away in the boat to a lonely place by themselves. Now many saw them going, and knew them, and they ran there on foot from all the towns, and got there ahead of them. As he landed he saw a great throng, and he had compassion on them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd; and he began to teach them many things. And when it grew late, his disciples came to him and said, “This is a lonely place, and the hour is now late; send them away, to go into the country and villages round about and buy themselves something to eat.” But he answered them, “You give them something to eat.” And they said to him, “Shall we go and buy two hundred denarii worth of bread, and give it to them to eat?” And he said to them, “How many loaves have you? Go and see.” And when they had found out, they said, “Five, and two fish.” Then he commanded them all to sit down by companies upon the green grass. So they sat down in groups, by hundreds and by fifties. And taking the five loaves and the two fish he looked up to heaven, and blessed, and broke the loaves, and gave them to the disciples to set before the people; and he divided the two fish among them all. And they ate and were satisfied. And they took up twelve baskets full of the broken pieces and of the fish. And those who ate the loaves were five thousand people.<sup>1</sup>

Sermon

I do not find it difficult intellectually to understand the threat of global warming. Heaping tons of carbon dioxide—buried deep in the earth for millions of years—into the

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<sup>1</sup> Version from Parker Palmer, *The Active Life: A Spirituality of Work, Creativity, and Caring* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1990), pp. 121-122.

earth's fragile and vital atmosphere: I can see how this could cause serious problems. It makes sense to me intellectually.

But it's hard for me to picture the threat of global warming. The impact of global warming is mostly so gradual, and we don't yet know all the ways it might affect our planet. It's a lot easier for me to picture the affects of clear-cutting a forest or the extinction of a particular species than this pervasive yet slow and diffuse thing called global warming (or, more accurately: global climate change).

Two years ago I found my picture. In 1971 I first visited the glaciers of the Columbia Icefield located near the boundary between Banff and Jasper National Parks in western Canada. I returned in 1993, and again in 2005. The Park service has marked the mighty Athabasca Glacier's retreat year by year with signs. The pace of the glacier's recession has greatly accelerated in the past forty years. I didn't walk that far between the 1890 sign and 1962 (when I was born) and even my first visit in 1971. Then I walked an astonishingly long way to get to the 1993 sign, and from there to the edge of the glacier. I couldn't believe it! Here is a very vivid and powerful picture of global warming. According to NASA, the Athabasca Glacier has in fact lost half of its volume and receded more than 1.5 kilometers since 1880.<sup>2</sup>

Glaciers advance and recede. This is nothing new. The significant thing about the Athabasca Glacier's retreat is its dramatically quickened pace. And it's not just the Athabasca Glacier that is receding at a much faster rate: the same thing is happening to glaciers all over the world. The glaciers at Glacier National Park—glaciers I also first saw as a kid—will likely be gone by 2030. The famous glaciers on Kilimanjaro are going even more quickly: they have lost eighty-two percent of their volume since 1912, and may well be completely gone by 2020.<sup>3</sup> And of course enormous chunks of polar ice have collapsed into the sea. One of the most compelling parts of Al Gore's documentary "An Inconvenient Truth" is the sequence picturing the retreat of glaciers around the world.

Today there is a general consensus in the scientific community that global warming is a reality, and that humanity's pollution is the primary cause of it. This was most notably affirmed recently by the UN's Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC). It's important to note that the IPCC is not by any stretch of the imagination a radically green or a fast-moving body. Composed of 2000 scientists from around the world, its pronouncements come after extensive research, discussion and painstaking compromise.<sup>4</sup> Even the Bush/Cheney administration—well, Bush anyway—is finally acknowledging that global warming does unfortunately seem to be a reality. There remains disagreement about what to do about global warming, but the days of debating whether it exists and whether humans are causing it at long last seem to be waning.

So here in a nutshell is what is happening scientifically: a relatively steady amount of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere over the past 400,000 years has rapidly become a greatly escalated amount of carbon, an amount which will double from pre-

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<sup>2</sup> For good picture of the Athabasca Glacier's retreat, see <http://ipy.nasa.gov/multimedia/m000000/m000000/m000033/index.html> and <http://www.flickr.com/photos/hughrocks/35342787/>.

<sup>3</sup> [http://news.nationalgeographic.com/news/2003/09/0923\\_030923\\_kilimanjaroglaciers.html](http://news.nationalgeographic.com/news/2003/09/0923_030923_kilimanjaroglaciers.html).

<sup>4</sup> Tim Flannery, *The Weather Makers* (New York: Grove Press, 2005), p. 245; Thomas Friedman, "The Power of Green," *New York Times Magazine*, April 15, 2007, p. 44.

Industrial Revolution levels by 2050. This massive amount of extra carbon in the air is impacting the global temperature regulating system and is generally causing temperatures to rise. The source of the extra carbon in the air is fossil fuel: prior to excavation, the carbon was harmlessly stored deep in the earth in the form of oil and coal. When we burn it as fuel, the carbon is released into the atmosphere. The glaciers' retreat mirrors the escalation in carbon emissions: half of the energy generated by oil and coal since the Industrial Revolution has been generated in the last twenty years.<sup>5</sup>

It would have been lovely in so many ways if we could just go on merrily pouring tons of carbon dioxide into the air without any consequences, but the evidence overwhelmingly suggests that we are not so lucky. And the bill for global warming is beginning to come due. How will it come due? Well, most likely in a multitude of both predictable and unpredictable ways. The predictable ways include the melting of polar ice sheets and a resulting rise in sea levels that will threaten millions of people who live near the sea from Bangladesh to China to the Netherlands to Egypt to New York City, San Francisco and Florida. Habitats and migration patterns will be significantly altered as well, resulting in the extinction of perhaps one in five species. The rise in sea temperatures will create ever more frequent and severe violent storms. While some of the world's farmland may benefit from longer growing seasons (like in Russia and Canada), most farmland will likely suffer from the effects of climate change-triggered high temperatures and drought. Because of these and other effects, global warming truly has the potential to destroy civilization as we know it.<sup>6</sup>

All of which begs a big question: What should we do about global warming? Well, the emerging scientific consensus tells us that we need to reduce our carbon emissions by at least seventy percent by 2050. A cut of this degree wouldn't stop all the negative effects of global warming, but there's a good chance it would stop some of the more catastrophic impact. Such a cutback could in fact restore in climate stabilization by around 2150. Note that there is a long time-lag between our dramatically cutting emissions and climate stabilization.<sup>7</sup>

And how do we quickly achieve a seventy percent reduction in carbon emissions? Since global warming is the result of both personal and collective actions, I think the solution will need to come both at the personal and the collective levels. In other words, we will need to do a lot of (relatively) little things as individuals, and as whole societies and even as a whole world we will need to do some very big things. It's going to take both the big and the little, both the individual and the collective, both the relatively easy and the massively hard to have a chance at succeeding.

What can we do as individuals? Most of us are aware of the litany of actions we can take, but it won't hurt to repeat highlights from that list here. I know I need reminding because I haven't done all of these things. The list includes: switching to fluorescent light bulbs, buying more energy efficient appliances, driving less often and driving more fuel-efficient cars when we do drive, signing up for green options at our utility (something I need to do), and getting more of our energy at home from renewable energy like solar power. It would be relatively easy (if not necessarily cheap) in our personal lives for each of us to cut our emissions by seventy percent. Just switching from

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<sup>5</sup> Flannery, p. 167.

<sup>6</sup> Ross Gelbspan, *Boiling Point* (New York: Basic Books, 2004), pp. 6, 36, 143, 183, 209; Flannery, p. 287.

<sup>7</sup> Gelbspan, p. xi; Flannery, pp. 6, 291.

a larger SUV to a smaller hybrid reduces auto emissions by seventy percent. Because Americans produce twenty-five percent of the world's emissions in spite of being just five percent of world population, I think we have a special burden do our part—regardless of whether our government decides to do anything meaningful about global warming.<sup>8</sup>

We are also going to need to take some big, collective actions in order to have any chance of avoiding a catastrophic impact. Nationally, we're going to need to put the kind of resources we put into the Manhattan Project into the development of alternative, renewable fuel sources. Making alternative fuels competitive in cost with oil and coal is going to take a lot of intervention and inspiration from the government. This is what happened in Texas under Governor George Bush. In 1999, the then Governor Bush signed legislation mandating power companies to produce 2000 megawatts of power from renewable energy sources by 2009. The state met the target by 2005, and is now as a result the biggest wind-energy producing state in the nation. It's too bad this kind of approach disappeared when Governor Bush became President Bush.

There is a lot government can do to help avert climate change disaster. One intriguing idea I've run into more than once is for government to help the Big Oil companies retool so they can take a lead in alternative energy. A few like BP are already doing this. Dramatically increasing fossil fuel taxes is another approach that has great merit: with such taxes, people would really pay the full cost for these fuels, including their impact on the planet. This would help make alternative energy economically competitive. Our national government also should mandate dramatically higher fossil fuel efficiency rates, as do many other countries and a few states like California.<sup>9</sup>

Worldwide, there's going to need to be a lot more cooperation and collaboration between *all* nations if we're to have any chance of cutting emissions by seventy percent. We will need binding global regulation of both the energy and the transportation industries. We're going to need binding agreements limiting emissions that are exponentially more stringent than the Kyoto Accord. We in wealthier nations are going to need to help fund the development of renewable fuels in poorer countries. We're going to have to find fair, equitable and enticing ways to bring newly-industrialized nations like China and India into compliance. We're going to have to choose whether a high degree of national sovereignty or global survival is more important to us.<sup>10</sup>

I am also convinced that spirituality is an important part of the solution. At least it is for me. More than anything else, I need a sense of possibility and hope. For me personally, one of the biggest barriers to addressing global warming meaningfully is the doom-and-gloom message of some environmentalists. You know: those who say that it's already too late, that man, we're already fated to fry our planet and ourselves. My problem with this approach isn't that it's necessarily wrong. Tragically the prophets of doom might be right. It is entirely possible that it is too late, that we've been fiddling with Monica Lewinsky and O.J. Simpson and Iraq while global warming slowly singses our civilization to the point of irreversible conflagration.

But dwelling on doom doesn't really inspire me to action. I cannot do what I need to do from a starting position of hopelessness. Yeah, it might be too late. But it

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<sup>8</sup> Flannery, pp. 6, 280, 303-306; Geldspan, p. 176.

<sup>9</sup> Geldspan, pp. 4, 190-191; Flannery, p. 169; Friedman, p. 71.

<sup>10</sup> Geldspan, pp. 168, 186, 201; Flannery, pp. 220-221; Friedman, pp. 48-49.

might be, too. It's possible that humanity has what it takes to save ourselves and our planet. I choose this for my starting point rather than a sense of impending doom.

This brings me to the reading today. I suspect that many of you have struggled with this text at some point in your life. I know I have. The source of my struggle has been approaching the text literally. It's a text that should not be taken literally. Like all good mythology, it is a lie that tells a truth. The truth it reveals through its fiction has to do with community and abundance. This is the wonderful interpretation that the educator and religious writer Parker Palmer applies to it.

In the story, Jesus looks at his weary disciples and tells them to take a break. But their break evaporates as a throng of people follows them. The story tells us that there are 5000 people, which is Bible-speak for "a lot" of people. After Jesus (like the good rabbi he is) teaches the throng for awhile, the disciples start clambering for the break Jesus prescribed. "Send these people away!" they tell Jesus. "Tell them to go find some supper."

"You feed them," Jesus responds, annoyingly.

You can imagine the disciples sighing audibly. "Okay, we'll give them some money so they can go eat."

"Too easy," Jesus replies. "You need to do more than throw some money at them and send them on their way. Feed them your food."

So the disciples inventory their food: five loaves of bread and two fish. The disciples typically aren't very bright, but at least Matthew's math is good enough (he was a former tax collector after all) to conclude that this won't really feed 5000 people.

Jesus tells them to break the throng into groups. Parker Palmer calls this the key moment in the story. Before this the crowd is focused on Jesus. Sure, they're sitting or standing next to each other, but their attention is not on each other. It's on Jesus. They're not a community. With this instruction, the people in the crowd now turn to each other and actively engage with each other. They become a community. The same thing happens here when during Congregational Response we turn from the speaker to our fellow congregants.

I've been in plenty of large groups focusing on a speaker and then have been asked to circle into smaller groups to discuss what we've been hearing. Jesus must have taken a class in how to engage large groups of people more deeply in the material: the secret is to have them engage with each other. So now these folks are looking into each other's eyes rather than staring passively at the speaker.

And then they share in eating what seemed at first to be a pitifully meager amount of food. Somehow they are all satisfied. The story doesn't say their stomachs are bloated as if they'd just pigged out at the Golden Corral. It doesn't say they "And then they were so engorged that they reached for Pepcid to quell their heartburn." It just says they are satisfied.

Parker Palmer suggests that maybe it was the feeling of community that helped them feel like the food they were eating was enough. Maybe the miracle of the loaves and fishes happened when people saw the disciples share their food and realized they could share their own food as well. Maybe that's how the food multiplied. Maybe the miracle wasn't some Jesus hocus-pocus where the five loaves turned into 500 loaves but

instead was the much more commonplace—and much more powerful—miracle of community.<sup>11</sup>

And just maybe part of the answer to the profound challenge of global warming is community. Maybe we need to figure out how in this world crowded with six billion people we can truly connect with other people. Maybe we need to turn to the people around us and get to know them. Maybe we need to realize we're in this together. And not just the people right around us we've turned to, but even the people way on the other side of the world. Experiencing connectedness with those around us is only significant if we also understand that the connectedness goes far beyond our small circle. Maybe with a deeper sense of community we'll realize that we have enough. We don't need more cars, more electronic gadgets, more this, more that to be happy—especially when we realize that all too often our “more” is the direct result of other people's “less.”<sup>12</sup>

I think that if we realize that we're in this together, and realize our connectedness, we will discover that we human beings actually have an abundance of resources to meet the challenge of global warming. Each individual resource may seem pathetically small by itself, but together they add up.

We have an abundance of renewable energy resources like wind and geothermal and solar power. And maybe even more importantly, we have an abundance of human creativity and ingenuity to address this challenge. We have what it takes to repent and change our course.

Changing our course may or may not work. I'm choosing to live with the hope that it might work. I'm choosing to believe that we can lower our carbon emissions by seventy percent in the next forty years. I'm choosing to believe that doing so might be enough to turn around global climate change. I'm choosing to believe that the world might even become a considerably better, more equitable and peaceful place because we all pulled together to face the challenge of global warming. I'm choosing to believe, as the columnist Thomas Friedman writes, that global warming is “a series of great opportunities disguised as insoluble problems.”<sup>13</sup>

Another writer suggests that “we are the generation fated to live in the most interesting of times, for we are now the weather makers, and the future of biodiversity and civilization hangs on our actions.”<sup>14</sup> The choices that you and I and people in Detroit and Shanghai and Delhi make matter, now more than ever. And they're going to make a difference—for good or for ill—for a very long time.

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<sup>11</sup> Palmer, pp. 121-138.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 127-128, 137.

<sup>13</sup> Friedman, especially p. 72.

<sup>14</sup> Flannery, p. 306.