

# **Wake Now, My Senses: The Religious Imperative for Earth Stewardship**

A Sermon by the Rev. Fred Small

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One of my favorite cartoonists is Roz Chast, whose squiggly nerdish people manage to be simultaneously weird and charming—just like most people in real life. Probably my favorite of all Chast cartoons bears the caption, "The Ecologically Minded Meets the Pathologically Frugal" It pictures a woman hanging rinsed Saran Wrap on her clothesline to dry and be reused. "I've been doing this for years!" she says brightly.

Now I'm pretty ecologically minded, and according to my wife I have been known to exhibit pathological frugality. I think the reason I find the cartoon achingly funny is that it shows the sublime lengths to which good-hearted people will go to make a positive difference in the world, and the ridiculous futility of individual action taken to its logical extreme.

Certainly the world needs all the help it can get.

The weather is going haywire, with global climate change the most likely culprit. Freak storms, floods, wildfires, freezes, heat waves, and drought leave thousands homeless and hungry. The city of New Orleans, where our brave Patriots will do battle this evening, is itself battling termite infestation for want of a killing frost. In fifty years there will no glaciers in Glacier National Park, and the fabled snows of Kilimanjaro will be fable, not fact. Many wildlife biologists believe that polar bears are already doomed to extinction. Spring now arrives a full week earlier to the Northern Hemisphere than it did just twenty years ago.

A report commissioned by Congress and released last fall (just in time to be ignored in the wake of September 11) concludes that if nothing is done, in a hundred years Boston will have the climate of Richmond or Atlanta, our coastal communities will be awash, and New England's

maple-sugaring and brilliant fall foliage will be only a memory. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, a UN-sponsored panel of hundreds of the world's top climate scientists, predicts that global temperature will soar as much as ten degrees Fahrenheit in this century, far more than earlier anticipated. To stabilize the climate, the IPCC concludes that we must reduce global carbon emissions by a daunting seventy percent.

Of course, climate change is just one environmental hazard among many.

Throughout the world, poor and working people, and especially people of color, are pollution's first victims. Their air, water, soil, and shelter are more contaminated, they toil in more hazardous workplaces, and they are more vulnerable to environmental catastrophes. Invasive development threatens the health, religious traditions, and social fabric of indigenous peoples.

"We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality," wrote Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., "tied in a single garment of destiny." Every religious tradition teaches us to hold sacred the wonders of creation, yet wantonly we desecrate them. Every religious tradition cautions us to temper our cravings for sensation and material things, yet we pursue them addictively, vainly hoping to fill our spiritual emptiness. Every religious tradition forbids theft, yet every day we live unsustainably we steal from our children and our children's children.

Just as Unitarian Universalists of earlier eras worked for the abolition of slavery and for women's rights, prison and education reform, peace, and civil rights, I believe we have a religious responsibility to protect the environment. If we do not, I fear our children and their children, if they survive, will ask us incredulously how, knowing what we knew, we could have failed to act.

In the 1960s and 1970s, a popular groundswell forced tough new laws regulating air and water pollution. By the 1990s, however, it was apparent that the global environment was continuing to degrade. This time, citizens were told that each one of us had the power to save the earth by doing "fifty simple things" like recycling, buying organic produce, and taking public transportation.

Now, I believe in personal responsibility. I recycle, I buy organic produce, and I take public transportation, although the bus doesn't stop quite as near my house as it did when I lived in Cambridge. As a consumer I try to choose less polluting products and services. If every person in the United States did all fifty simple things to save the earth, by golly, I think the earth would be well on its way to being saved. But we haven't, we don't, and it doesn't look like we're about to any time soon.

We've become accustomed to the convenience of disposable packaging and fast food, the comfort of year-round heating and air-conditioning, the cheap thrills of high-tech entertainment, and the flexibility and independence of automotive travel. As any recycler or organic shopper can tell you, it's almost always more expensive in time, money, or both to do the ecologically right thing. And because the chassis of capitalism is built on the engine of consumption, the most sophisticated propaganda machine in the history of the world, that is to say, advertising, works round-the-clock to persuade us to buy vast amounts of things we don't need.

But these are not insuperable obstacles. The insuperable obstacle to effective individual environmental action is this: its success depends upon millions of other individuals doing the same thing. We don't see them do it and have no reason to think they will. Indeed, while we're hanging up Saran Wrap on the clothesline, the mass media show everyone else racing around on snowmobiles and jet-skis.

A basic psychological principle called social proof says we'll do things we think other people are doing. Why should I sacrifice time, money, convenience, and pleasure for a speculative environmental payoff that assumes the cooperation of millions of strangers? Even if a vast simplicity movement succeeded in reducing demand for nonrenewable resources, without other intervention the price of these resources would decline, further stimulating the appetite of those consumers still trapped in thrall of thingdom.

Personal responsibility is essential. But it is not sufficient. In and of itself, it fails to challenge the entrenched interests of corporations and the governmental agencies that pander to them.

For this reason, business and government are both enthusiastic supporters of environmental voluntarism: the notion that if each of us just does our part, recycles a little more, pollutes a little less, we won't need to enact any more bothersome laws or regulations. It's a comforting thought, but not a realistic one.

Just as the individual acts of conscience of slaveholders who freed their own slaves would never alone have brought an end to slavery, our individual lifestyle and consumer choices will not alone solve our environmental problems. We need strong international treaties and tough state and federal laws that put all of us on the same playing field with the same rules. We need to pay a price for goods and services that reflects their actual cost to the environment, not merely that of production. This cannot be done without some form of regulation.

And by an unfortunate coincidence, we need bold legislation and courageous political leadership at the precise moment when our political and legislative system is more beholden to capital and corporate interests than at any time in the last century. Whether by inclination, ideology, or the inducements of Enron and its ilk, our congress and our president have fled every possible opportunity to face up to global climate change.

There's a huge gap between the environmental values of the public, confirmed in poll after poll, and the drill-and-burn policies of the present administration, a gap made vast by the powerlessness and isolation and alienation from the political process most Americans feel. However attached we may be to price, pleasure, and convenience, I believe that Americans would respond to an appeal to their patriotism, their decency, and their responsibility to future generations. Would our political leaders express about global climate change a tiny fraction of the outrage they display about terrorism, we could be well on our way to solving the problem.

How do we bridge the gap between what must be done and what is politically realistic? How can we give people a sense of hope and purpose and power to safeguard the future? How do we move from personal, local, and institutional efforts—vital as they are—to global transformation?

I'm just old enough to remember the early civil rights movement, when massive nonviolent demonstrations led directly to passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and Voting Rights Act of 1965 and changed forever the political and moral landscape of the United States.

I remember news photos of black and white clergy, ministers and rabbis and nuns and seminary students, arms linked, dignified and implacable, marching and praying and singing in Selma and Montgomery and Nashville and Washington, DC. Even as a child I understood how these images seized the conscience of the nation. The whole movement was fired with religion, incubated in the southern black churches, propagated through the churches and synagogues of the North, infused with religious idealism and passion and song and story. If religious people could be enrolled in defense of the environment, if our participation were constant and courageous and visible, the environmental movement would gain a moral authority and strategic strength that could tip the balance of power.

Last February I co-founded Religious Witness for the Earth, an interfaith network dedicated to bearing public witness on critical environmental issues, especially global climate change. Our first action was a service of prayer and witness outside the Department of Energy in Washington, DC, last May, after which twenty-two of us, including Bob Luoma and Ernie Huber, were arrested as we prayed in front of the entrance. I'm sure they'd be happy to regale you with tales of the DC jail.

This act of civil disobedience has had ripple effects within and without religious communities that are still being felt. It will not be our last. We're gathering a week from tomorrow in Northampton to plan our next steps. Whether or not you can be with us in Northampton, I invite you to join Religious Witness for the Earth and help us do what we can and what we must to protect future generations from the depredations of ours, whether by writing to our state representative or going to jail.

I cannot promise that we will prevail. I cannot promise even that the human race will endure. The future is not ours to decide. All we can do in the face of violence and greed and hatred is to answer with courage, compassion, and love, and leave the rest to God.

250 million years ago, at the end of the Permian period, for reasons no one knows, ninety percent of the earth's species became extinct. Since then, there have been five more periods of massive extinction, including the present one. Each time, nature has somehow rebounded in astonishing abundance, diversity, and beauty. No doubt it will again.

Whether the human species will be part of the picture is uncertain. Perhaps the mantle of intelligence, creativity, and productivity will be passed to another species that will be kinder, wiser, and more farsighted than our own. In the long run, the earth will be just fine, and when its time, too, finally passes, surely other worlds will carry on the great adventure of consciousness.

But we cannot stand by as the human race destroys itself, its habitat, and countless other species. To stem our slide toward extinction, the easy and comfortable measures are no longer adequate. Fifty simple things are not enough. It's time to do the harder thing, the longer reach, the greater sacrifice to defend the earth and the sweet imperiled experiment called humanity.

Amen.

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