The Gospel in Transition – A Year of Weekly Reflections on Facing Climate Change, Finding Hope, and the Alchemy of Christian Community. **Subscribe at www.davidrweiss.com**
David R. Weiss – December 3, 2018

It was just an innocent-looking list of years, but it turned my life upside down.

Sitting on the sofa or at the dining table, flipping through the newspaper, I'd seen plenty of headlines about climate change. I'd scan the stories. Catch an unsettling scenario here … a frightening-looking chart there. I suppose I *knew* just enough to know I didn't really *want* to know more.

Full disclosure: twenty-two years ago (in November 1996, to be exact) I actually made my *first* academic presentation[1] as a Ph.D. student—on the fragility of our eco-system. A year-and-a-half later (April 1998) I gave a public talk[2] at Notre Dame's Earth Day celebration in which I first addressed global warming. So climate change has been on my radar for a couple decades. However, alongside that interest, I was also finding my voice in support of a faith-based welcome to LGBTQ persons, and, in the Fall of 1998, a whole cascade of circumstances led me to focus—in my teaching, writing, and activism—on LGBTQ theology and welcome for nearly the next twenty years. Ecology was present in my personal ethics and climate change was there in the background of my awareness. But my best energy (fruitfully so) was invested elsewhere.

But about this list of years. Sparked by some news article in the spring of 2016 I googled "hottest years on record" and up popped a list that showed the 16 warmest years since 1880.[3] The list used 1880 as its starting point because that's the first year we had enough accurate temperate records from across the globe to calculate an accurate global surface temperature. And since then we've been keeping really precise records. They were listed—these sixteen hottest years—in order of heat, so they looked like a pretty random set of years.

But when I looked closer I saw that, from 1880-2015, out of the last 136 years—*all sixteen* of the hottest ones occurred *during my daughter's lifetime*—in fact, since she was just a toddler. Today she's 22, and *all eighteen* of the hottest years on record have been since she turned two. *She's growing up on an altogether different planet than I did*.

Now: not knowing … not acting … is NOT AN OPTION. Now Susanna's face—is the face of climate change for me. Susanna's future—is the shape of my work for the coming years. And I wrestle, like Jacob with the angel, determined that *I will not let go* until I receive a blessing of some sort that I can pass on … to help Susanna—and so many others—find a way forward on this strange new planet.

Hence, this blog. It's only one small piece of that work, but it's a place where I can offer others (that's you!) a weekly glimpse at my thinking as it unfolds.

Addressing climate change will require responses from multiple arenas. Science, technology, public policy, news media, industry-business, arts, local communities, individuals—acting as both consumers and citizens, and more. My particular entry point is theology. That might seem far removed from the dynamics of a warming planet, but I suggest otherwise. The way we think about God impacts—often decisively—the way we think about ourselves. It establishes the points on our moral compass and grounds our conviction in making hard choices. Theology (and faith) tethers us to Something Bigger than ourselves as we plumb the coming tumult.

Tumult. I do not choose the word lightly. As I have read more and more about climate change over the past three years my alarm has grown and my hope has been schooled in humility. The news

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[1] "Beyond Ecological Security: Intimacy and Risk. *Imago Dei* as a Theological Resource for a More Creative Encounter with the Earth," David R. Weiss. Presented at The Wisconsin Institute, Ripon College, November 1, 1996

[2] "Consuming the Earth In Search of Our Worth," David R. Weiss. Earth Day Talk at the University of Notre Dame, April 18, 1998

[3] https://www.ncdc.noaa.gov/sotc/global/201513

reports[4] this fall are perhaps most sobering because they represent "committee voices," which, by their nature tend to be moderate in their tone, and even these moderate voices now report predictions and conclusions that sit at the edge of panic.

We may well *survive* this tumult. *But we aren't going to escape it.* And the longer we focus on the most optimistic possibilities—as though we can still avert what *will* be the unmaking of the world as we know it, the more likely we are to be entirely unprepared when the worst of climate change hits. *I am not without hope*. But this blog and my work are rooted in my dawning awareness that only by acknowledging the depth of the crisis upon us can we take measure of the means that will serve us well in the days ahead.

For me, one source of hope is the Transition Town Movement.[5] Born a little over a decade ago in Ireland, Transition Towns use permaculture principles,[6] coupled with clear contextual commitment to dramatically reduce carbon emissions and simultaneously restore the strength of local communities: both economically and socially (and, I would add, spiritually). That's an overly broad sweep, but over the coming year I'll unpack these ideas further.

Right now it's sufficient to say **I find "gospel in transition"**—and moving in both directions. I believe there is "good news" for this present moment in the Transition Town Movement. But I also believe that a host of fundamental principles and practices of transition resonate deeply with of the roots of vital Christian community. In other words, there is also Gospel hiding, as it were, in transition. Which is why I want to use this blog as a place to explore these resonances.[7] If the church aspires to *be* the church—the called and faithful people of God—in the midst of climate change, then listening to, learning from, and *contributing toward* the Transition Town Movement is an exercise of discipleship.

Finally, alchemy. Climate change will require more character, more conviction, more courage than perhaps any other socio-historical event since the Black Death of medieval Europe and Asia. If we are not scared, we are foolish. BUT—by choosing to make a regular practice of intentional *communal* acts of practical kindness, self-education, skill-sharing, localized-rootedness, and resilience-building we *can* transform fear and isolation into courage and hope. That's the alchemy of Christian community. It is—absolutely—accessible in a host of other communities. It is *not* specifically Christian. But for those of us who express our faith through Christianity, there is an alchemy entirely ours. One that lifts up and embodies the best of Christian theology. And that's where we'll find hope.

My weekly blog posts will consider climate change, Transition, and faith—using biblical images, liturgical seasons, science, and theology, as conversation partners. Writing in a voice a bit too restless to call "devotional"; my aim is to be insightfully evocative and usefully provocative. I'd be delighted to have you join me on this journey. *In fact, I hope you'll subscribe*. See you next week!

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[4] www.nymag.com/intelligencer/amp/2018/10/un-says-climate-genocide-coming-but-its-worse-than-that.html

[5] http://transitionus.org/home

[6] https://permaculturepriciples.com

[7] My thinking will be plenty original, but these two texts have been a helpful entry point for me. *The Transition Movement for Churches: A Prophetic Imperative for Today*, Timothy Gorridge & Rosie Beckham. London: Canterbury Press Norwich, 2013. *Rising to the Challenge: The Transition Movement and People of Faith,* Ruah Swennerfelt. Quaker Institute for the Future, 2016.

Advent, Anticipation … and Climate Change

David R. Weiss – December 11, 2018
The Gospel in Transition #2 – **Subscribe at www.davidrweiss.com**

As a child Advent taught me the meaning of anticipation.

Yes, presents were part of that—though far from the whole of it. I remember the excitement that my siblings and I shared when the Sears and Penney's Christmas catalogs arrived. But more than this, Advent meant evening family devotions: with each child taking a turn reading the message, lighting the candles on our family Advent wreath, or extinguishing them afterwards. It meant Saturday practice for the Sunday school Christmas Eve pageant. Each year we went out to a local tree farm to find, then tag, our chosen Christmas tree, and—during Advent—we went back to cut it down, bring it home, and trim it with favorite ornaments, decorating the rest of the house as well.

I particularly recall Pastor Knappe explaining that, because several of the prayers of the day during Advent begin with the phrase "Stir up, O God …", these prayers always reminded him that Advent was time to stir up the batter for Christmas cookies. And, sure enough, my Advent *did* mean not just stirring the batter with my Mom but also smelling the Christmas cookies as they baked.

Years later in seminary—courtesy a talk by Jürgen Moltmann—I came to understand the full power intended in the word Advent: that *Christmas comes to us*. Although the calendar suggests *we* march toward Christmas, the theological truth of incarnation is that what happens in Christmas is not the sum of *our* actions but the sum of *God's*.

Thus, Advent is less "preparation" (as though our deeds "make" Christmas happen) than holy waiting, reverent anticipation of what comes to us from beyond our reach.

It's disorienting, counterintuitive, and uncomfortably insightful to consider climate change from the vantage of Advent. The climate change we're currently experiencing unquestionably *has* been made by our deeds. Beginning around 1850 and accelerating dramatically since 1950, we've been loading the atmosphere with carbon dioxide and other greenhouses gasses, largely through the use of fossil fuels. Unlike Christmas, then, the approach of climate change *IS* the direct result of human activity.

But, while the cause-effect link between human industrial activity, greenhouse gas emissions, and climate change is supremely clear at the scientific level, it's much less clear on the experiential level. Sure, we occasionally see factories belching smoke, but the exhaust coming out of my car is barely visible and yet adds to the 28% of emissions that come from transportation. The CD player filling my home with Christmas music, the LED Christmas lights on my tree, the street lights lining my street, and the brightly lit malls and skyscrapers give off no green houses gases at all … except that generating the electricity needed to power them all accounts for another 28% of emissions. Unlike cookie-baking, present-wrapping, or tree-decorating, there is no obvious and immediate link between our daily choices and our warming planet.

Moreover, the time lag between what we put in the atmosphere by way of emissions and when we experience those emissions *as* changing climate is large enough that it escapes our logic. How can gasses given off when I was a child be impacting the weather events I experience today? Perhaps most unsettling of all, we can barely imagine the cascading consequences as changing climate impacts multiply each other, creating feedback loops that drive both the speed and the extent of climate change. Admittedly, the models here are uncertain—testament to the complexity of these relationships, but not to the consensus that feedbacks loop will escalate the stakes considerably.

This is where we are today. An atmosphere recklessly and relentlessly loaded with carbon for more than a century. Wound up like a tightly coiled spring. The extreme weather events we notice

today—storms, heat waves, droughts, floods, wildfires—are noteworthy not because we have them, but because we're having them *so frequently and so fiercely*. But this is hardly "Christmas" yet as far as climate change goes. The full force of the carbon *already* loaded … *hasn't even begun to be felt*.

And this is where climate change becomes *too much* like Christmas. Because even if we stopped adding more emissions *tomorrow*—both a technological and political impossibility—there is very little we can do to unwind the spring. (Yes, there are nascent—not yet practical—technologies for pulling carbon out of the atmosphere, but to imagine they'll come on line in a cost effective way in time to significantly lessen the tension in a spring more tightly coiled each and every day, well, hopeful as that sounds, it'll be about as effective as Scrooge's "Bah Humbug" was in delaying the coming of Christmas.)

We are in Advent for climate change. There is indeed *plenty* we can do to "brace" ourselves, to increase our resilience: break habits, learn skills, link arms and weave the communal networks that can support us as climate change unravels many of the networks we've come to take for granted. Still, just like Christmas, there is *nothing* we can do to actually prevent its arrival.

I don't "celebrate" that. Not by a long shot. Nonetheless, it's time to embrace a long season of Advent for climate change. For there is a manner of anticipation that can seed hope in this unfamiliar season. Advent is a season that reminds us: we *know* (or we *used* to know—and can remember if we set ourselves to the task) what it is like to *prepare-by-waiting* for the arrival of something that comes unbidden to our world. And that posture—if we can reclaim it—may be a life-saving posture for ourselves and for our children.

The images coexist uneasily. Climate change as a type of Christmas? Advent as holy longing; now Advent as near-holy dread? On this one point they coalesce: central (for Christians) to both Christmas and climate change is the whispered presence of Emmanuel—***God with us.***

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Advent as Ending: Apocalypse as *Good* News

David R. Weiss – December 16, 2018
The Gospel in Transition #3 – **Subscribe at www.davidrweiss.com**

Advent typically begins with an image of ending. Each year of its three-year cycle churches following the Revised Common Lectionary find an apocalyptic Gospel text appointed for the first Sunday of Advent. These texts add an unabashed edge of apocalyptic energy to the too often domesticated pageantry of Christmas.

Climate change has its own apocalyptic energy—as looming world-crashing threat. Yet one of the paradoxes of the Transition Movement is its determination to *lean into* this impending crisis as opportunity to re-center ourselves on what really matters: living lightly on the earth, locally in community, and deeply in our humanity. It's a challenging paradox to sustain. Perhaps it's helpful to recall that in the Bible apocalyptic literature is actually rooted in *radical hope*. Such a perspective offers some discomforting but provocative connections.

Although there are a variety of biblical passages (like the Advent gospels readings) where an apocalyptic tone surfaces, there are two great instances of apocalyptic literature in the Bible: Daniel and Revelation. Both feature near-psychedelic imagery in which harrowing portraits of a collapsing world are presented. Reading them from our vantage point—and projecting their message into the future as a prediction of world-ending events—it's easy to find them unsettling. But, in fact, both books were written for people living in such a *harrowing present* that they were actually offered (and received!) as good news—*gospel*—breaking into this world in its most extreme moments.

In both cases the authors were writing for people living under harsh societal oppression and brutal persecution by imperial powers.[8] In this context, apocalyptic cataclysm—overwhelming as the imagery is—*was a message of radical hope*. The present insufferable world was about to be swept away. As it *needed* to be if there was to be a path forward.

The less all-out visionary but unmistakably apocalyptic tone of the Advent readings in the lectionary is a stark reminder to us that all three of the synoptic gospels (many scholars question whether these words go all the way back to Jesus himself) place an apocalyptic exclamation point on Jesus' ministry.[9] One way to read this is that the manner of life presented by Jesus—grounded I would argue in a radical praxis of inclusive compassion—unleashes its own world-transforming energy.

It's an energy we tend to keep boxed up in all manner of ways ranging from "right doctrine" to "personal piety" to "cute Christmas pageantry." Almost as though we want to ensure it *can't* effect world transformation. Mary's *Magnificat* (also appointed for the Advent lectionary) is more open in its longing. Trading apocalyptic imagery for straight forward social and political reversal, Mary's song suggests that somehow in the promised life of Jesus the proud will be scattered, the mighty cast down, the rich left empty, the lowly exalted, and the hungry fed. Taken seriously, her words intimate a gospel nothing less than apocalyptic in impact.[10]

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[8] The Book of Daniel, while fictionally set in sixth century BCE ("Before the Common Era"), was authored in the second century BCE under the reign of Antiochus IV Epiphanes, a Hellenistic Greek ruler who viciously attacked both Jewish faith and culture. The Book of Revelation was written near the end of the first century CE ("in the Common Era") under the reign of Emperor Domitian who demanded imperial idolatry from Christians under pain of death. In both contexts the community of the faithful found their faith pushed to the extreme, as though nothing less than the rending of one world and the appearance of another would open a way forward.

[9] The texts (for Years A, B, C) are: Matthew 24: 36-44; Mark 13:24-37; Luke 21:25-36. While Jesus himself was active in a context of significant multifaceted social-political-religious oppression, by the time the synoptic gospels themselves were authored (usually dated 40-60 years later), the stakes seemed even higher. The Jewish Revolt, the Fall of Jerusalem and the early years of Roman persecution of Christians all made the idea of Jesus' return a powerful source of radical hope.

[10] Luke 1:46-55. It's noteworthy that Mary's song of praise is *sparked* by the words her cousin Elizabeth uses to greet her by, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb." These are fighting words. Really. For Elizabeth and Mary, who surely knew their Jewish heroines, these words were *dangerously* evocative. In oral cultures,

If it's hard for *us* to feel radical hope in the face of cataclysmic change, that may have something to do with where we stand in the world today. Years ago, when teaching the story of the Exodus to college students I suggested "we would be wise to feel a bit of fear as we read these passages, in the uncomfortable honesty that we today stand closer to the Egyptians than the Hebrews. In a world where many live like slaves so that a relative few can live like kings, we are among those who wear purple."[11] The plagues—themselves a mini apocalyptic narrative—upend the worlds of *both* the Egyptians *and* the Hebrews, but that upending is *good news* for those who had been enslaved (although there is no lacking of murmuring among the Hebrews as they wander the wilderness in the coming years).

So where do we stand in the story of climate change? Well, most of us stand in places where the upending of the world as it is, *is not good news*. But the truth is that for most of the world's inhabitants—more viscerally acquainted than we are with the costs of our addiction to petroleum, our exploitation of animals and ecosystems, our racist objectification of our fellow humanity, and our unrelenting consumption of the planet—for most of the world's inhabitants *the continuation of the world as it is, is precisely the threat*. And the apocalyptic disruption of the status quo might well count as good news.

Unfortunately, because of how interconnected our world is, the level of disruption coming with climate change will take a steep toll on the entire web of creation. And, in many cases, the greatest toll will be exacted on those least responsible and least able to respond.

Nevertheless—and I'm being intentionally provocative here—the Transition Movement[12] dares to suggest that it's possible to *move into* the impending upending of the world that is … as a step *toward* good news. To choose to radically simplify our lives, to break our addictions to both fossil fuel and needless material stuff, to reclaim skills needed to live lightly on Earth, to dramatically localize our lives, and to deepen bonds of genuine community—all such choices, which we can begin to make *now*, are ways to embrace apocalypse—even as our lives are upended—as bearing good news.

This is *not* to make light of the damning losses that we have bartered for these past few decades (primarily by way of corporate agendas and political inaction, but also by personal indifference and unexamined habits of greed). The losses, already underway but to be fully revealed in the decades ahead, *will* be apocalyptic: world-rending. But it is to say that, if this present world—insufferable for so much of creation—is about to be swept away, as it *needs* to be if there is to be a path forward for the whole of humanity and for the health of creation, then there *is* in that apocalypse a very severe sort of good news.

And our capacity to make the changes needed in our lives may well hinge on our ability to imagine, within the tumult of apocalypse, a whisper of goods news. Not to domesticate its terror, but to taste the very real joy *that can yet be had* if we choose—in this Advent moment—to turn away (repent) from lives that trade almost entirely in death to prop up a façade of success that is coming quickly to its end.

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phrases matter. Only twice in the Hebrew Scripture were women told, "Blessed are you among women." You couldn't hear the words and not have the memory of Jael and Judith come rushing at you. Jael earned them (Judges 5:24) for driving a tent peg through the head of a general who was oppressing the early Israelites. Later Judith received them (Judith 13:18) after beheading a general whose troops had besieged an Israelite town. *This phrase heralded women whose cunning and courage proved crucial in toppling oppressive power*. As a song in response to *that* greeting, the *Magnificat* is no mere wistful verse. *It is poetry promising to upend the world*.

[11] The imagery in these words came to me in 1996 the first time I taught this story to first-year students at Notre Dame; I've used the phrase "the ones who wear purple" to frame our entry into to the Exodus tale ever since.

[12] http://transitionus.org/home

Christmas: The Most Important Four Ounces in the Manger

David R. Weiss – December 26, 2018
The Gospel in Transition #4 – **Subscribe at www.davidrweiss.com**

The most important four ounces in the manger are the ones we *never* talk about. I might argue that they've *always* been most important, but in the face of climate change—and the deep transformation required in how we view the world if we hope to bequeath any semblance of functioning society to our children—these four ounces are ones we absolutely need to grapple with today.

Before I get there, though, let me make clear where I'm coming from. I regard theology as more concerned with *evocative* claims than *metaphysical* claims. I recognize many Christians think otherwise. They see the doctrine of Incarnation as a *metaphysical* truth claim: in Jesus, God became human. I don't. I see it as an *evocative* truth claim: in Jesus we see one instance (and with striking clarity) of what God's presence in our midst looks like. That will, no doubt, trouble some of my readers, while heartening others. I'm not interested in arguing which claim is more "right"—something I don't think is provable in any case. Besides, the connection I want to make with these four ounces remains powerful whether you treat it evocatively or metaphysically. But it seems important—as my blog byline suggests—that I, at least, "err on the edge of honest."

So, these four ounces. They're microbes. Itsy bitsy creepy crawlies, if you like. Point is, *without them there is no incarnation*, metaphysical, evocative, or otherwise. And I'm betting they vastly outnumber the host of angels that serenaded the shepherds on that hillside on Christmas Eve. Science tells us the average adult human is home to about *100 trillion microbes* that are *essential to our being alive*. It's a package deal: there is no such thing as a human being whose "aliveness" is not fully interwoven with these trillion-fold tiny creatures. They aid in our digestion, play key roles in our immune system, and carry out other duties essential to keeping a person alive. Jesus could not have been fully human, fully alive, without these 100 trillion microbes. As an adult, these microbes constituted about six pounds of his body weight. As a newborn, they would've already numbered in the trillions and comprised about four ounces of his six pounds of holy babyness. [13]

Whether you prefer your incarnation metaphysical or evocative, this is a pretty astounding insight: whatever we mean when we say God became incarnate, *microbes are part of that*. Of course, the gospel writer John didn't know that science, but he captures it well when he writes: "And the Word became flesh …" (John 1:14) The Greek word here (*sarx*/flesh) means just that: the soft fleshly substance of a living body—*whether human or animal*. True, John is thinking specifically about Jesus, but his choice of *sarx*/flesh beckons us to hear God choosing an intimacy and solidarity that is much more radical than "merely" becoming human … more theologically evocative as well as more scientifically accurate.

Ironically, then, John's prologue (John 1:1-18) not only provides some of the key theological infrastructure for the highest reaches of the doctrine of Incarnation, identifying Jesus with the pre-existent Word and that pre-existent Word with God,[14] it *also* opens up to the most expansive—the

[13] I'm guessing, of course. Here's the basic calculation per evolutionary biologist Lynn Margulis: 10% of the *dry* body weight of humans is comprised of microbes. Adjusting for differences in water weight by sex (adult males are 60% water; adult females are 55% water), 4% male body weight is microbial; 4.5% female body weight is microbial. I'm presuming an adult Jesus weighed about 150 pounds and a newborn about six, but the exactness of those figures is irrelevant to the point I'm making. Rob Dunn, *Every Living Thing* (New York: Collins Books, 2009), pp. 138-143, cited in Larry L. Rasmussen, *Earth-Honoring Faith: Religious Ethics in a New Key* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), pp. 20-21.

[14] "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being." (John 1:1-3)

lowest and earthiest notion of incarnation. Later John writes, in perhaps the most well known verse in the New Testament, "For God so loved the *world* …" (John 3:16). The Greek word is *kosmos*, from which we get our word, cosmos. It means just that: the cosmos, the universe, or, more casually, the earth and its inhabitants. In explaining the motive behind Incarnation, John says, God loved it *all*. And, if we allow our theology to converse with our science, Incarnation becomes the truth claim that God embraces *all creation* so thoroughly as to enlist even microbes in revealing God's love.

I think this offers several salutary insights as we try to imagine how to reposition ourselves within the world in a more harmonious and sustainable way. First, it reminds us that the scope of God's incarnating love includes critters we don't even think about … and surely the many that we do. We won't work hard to save what we don't love, and recognizing the reach of God's love may help lengthen the reach of our own.

Second, if incarnation itself blurs the lines between the human and the non-human world, it challenges one of the fundamental binaries that has allowed us to recklessly and dangerously exploit the rest of creation. If divinity takes on not just human life but microbial life—in the service of love—then truly the entire "world is charged with the grandeur of God" (Gerard Manley Hopkins) in ways we had never quite imagined. Indeed, our transition away from a way of life that presumes to use the world *up* as a matter of convenience hinges on breaking down the falsehood that we're somehow set off from the non-human creation. Recognizing that Jesus—whether evocatively or metaphysically—embodies *both* is one place to start.

Third, what's true of Jesus in his incarnate mystery is equally true of us in our more mundane humanity. (But don't get me started, because I think the lines between incarnate mystery and mundane humanity blur—not just in Jesus, but in us, too!) In any case, this is *good news*. There are a multitude of ecosystems that we desperately need to find—feel, enact—our *deep* connection with, but we can begin right here: by acknowledging that *each of us is our own ecosystem*.

Those four ounces in the manger say something profound about God, Jesus, creation, and our place in all of it: *interwoven*. It's high time we see that as both sacred and mundane truth.

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Christmas and the Holy Innocents: On Shouting "Fire" in Church

David R. Weiss – January 2, 2019
The Gospel in Transition #5 – **Subscribe at www.davidrweiss.com**

Maybe your church, like mine, seized on the Sunday following Christmas to sing an extra dose of Christmas carols, sort of a communal self-reward for having delayed our gratification throughout the season of Advent. I appreciated the chance to air out my holiday lungs on some favorite (and a couple new-to-me) songs as much as the next person. But I did have to hold back on the impulse to stand up and holler, "Fire!" in the sanctuary. I succeeded. But I'm not sure that was the right choice.

The Feast of the Holy Innocents, which recalls the infant boys slaughtered by King Herod in his paranoid—and failed—attempt to remove the threat he believed Jesus posed to imperial power,[15] falls on December 28, meaning it's almost always elided by our preference for Christmas cheer. I consider this an instance of *systemic liturgical injustice*: an important feast gets squeezed out of our awareness because we've been so impatient (all Advent) to celebrate Christmas, and now we have only twelve days to do our celebrating (in song, sermon, liturgy) before the liturgical calendar rushes us on into Epiphany. This year, in fact, we only get ONE Christmas Sunday—how dare we spend it contemplating the Holy Innocents.

Perhaps there was a time past when church was so much part of our daily life that we could sufficiently celebrate Christmas on the other eleven days and set aside the fourth day to pause and contemplate the lives taken in effort to suppress Christmas itself. But today, between Christmas, New Year's Eve, New Year's Day, and then "getting back to work," we have no time to pause for lives lost. Which is why I was so tempted to holler, "Fire!" Because pause we must.

In Matthew's Gospel the Holy Innocents are those targeted by empire in an attempt to protect imperial power and to prevent the rise of any person who might propose a different way of being in the world. The story makes Herod the villain (and I'm hardly defending him!), but the truth in Matthew's tale is that the slaughter of innocents is, in fact, *business as usual for empire*. We see it today—most poignantly on our southern border, but no less in the way that mass incarceration targets black communities or the way that low-intensity warfare targets civilians around the globe. And on and on. Empire today (think multinational corporations as well as political leaders) hesitates no more than Herod at protecting its power and quashing even potential threats. There are a multitude of holy innocents in our world.

But in a season of climate change, no one is more innocent than the creatures whose fate it has been to share the planet … with us. The animal kingdom has always taken its chances on continents drifting, climate shifting, and such. Even apart from human impact, no animal species is guaranteed a free ride. But between the speed to which we've accelerated climate change and the extent to which we've remade the planet to better consume it, animals are under threat today *as never before*. So much so that we Christians ought to be rising in our pews and hollering, "Fire!" in one holy chorus of anguish and alarm.

Consider the reports coming in from across the globe. In just the last 44 years (1970-2014) the worldwide population of animals plummeted by nearly 60%; in tropical regions the population loss reached almost 90%. During the same time period, freshwater fish populations fell by 83%.[16] Another study found flying insects down by 76% in German nature preserves over 27 years.[17] Another one charted a recent 10-year period in New Mexico during which bird populations fell by 73%. And

[15] Matthew 2:1-18. Many question the historicity of the slaughter; there is no independent record of it outside this single biblical passage. It's possible Matthew fashioned the tale as one strategy among others to show Jesus as a "new Moses" (compare Exodus 1:15-2:10). However, the *symbolic importance* of the Holy Innocents does not hinge on their historicity but on their place in Matthew's gospel narrative.
[16] www.worldwildlife.org/pages/living-planet-report-2018.
[17] www.theguardian.com/environment/2017/oct/18/warning-of-ecological-armageddon-after-dramatic-plunge-in-insect-numbers.

another reported a 98%(!) loss of bugs in the Puerto Rican rainforest over 40 years.[18] Some suggest we are perched precipitously at the beginning of "the Sixth Extinction"[19]—although this one would be the first to have human agency as the driving factor. But regardless of whether whole species go extinct or merely find themselves genetically maimed by sheer loss of numbers and diversity, it is minimally honest to speak of a wave of 'biological annihilation"[20] sweeping the planet. Almost all of it due to human impacts (consumption, land use, climate change, pollution, etc.).

Still, on December 26, nearly every news source cheerfully reported U.S. holiday spending *up* by 5.1% in 2018[21] If that doesn't shout, "Joy to the World," I don't know what does. Except, on a finite planet, already stretched *past* the breaking point that *isn't* good news. It's the *bleak* affirmation that the slaughter of holy innocents—driven by a commitment to preserve one way of life at the expense of countless others—continues undeterred and on a scale even Herod could not hope to achieve. *We are empire*.

Those who see this, need to start crying "Fire!" in the sanctuary. We need to do *more*, of course. *But we cannot do less*. And the longer we insist on keeping our good decorum during worship the longer we render ourselves incapable of the deeper changes that are necessary if we wish even to blunt the brute force of climate change and planetary collapse now just decades away.

Lest we presume this is "on us" as individual consumers, the truth is that the changes most urgently needed to stop this slaughter of holy innocents are at the level of industrial agriculture, corporate boardrooms, and national and international politics. But change in those arenas can—and must—come rushing upward from below. And that upward rush will only come if and when we take charge of our own lives—personally and communally as Transition Movement thinking suggests.[22] AND—as we lay claim to the emotional-psychic-spiritual energy that owns the depth of loss burgeoning around us … even during the Christmas season—perhaps especially during the Christmas season.

I'm not taking cheap shots at Christmas. Before long the apocalyptic character of climate change will capture so much of our attention that any worship at all that does not acknowledge it will be simply irrelevant. It's time that we look at every liturgical season, every lectionary text, every familiar worship theme and image, and ask ourselves how it might nurture the imagination to weep for creation, or to defend it, or to alter our lives so as live more nearly in balance, or to face down the powers and principalities that sell slaughter these days. And I simply think the Feast of the Holy Innocents is too powerful a moment to pass over in silence because we'd rather sing carols.

Earth's creatures are dying. At an unfathomable rate. Because of human sin. And their deaths foreshadow the world we are preparing for our grandchildren. That world is *rushing at us*, starting yesterday. The very least we can do is holler, "Fire!" And we may be surprised at what more we're capable of, once that word crosses our lips.

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[18] https://truthout.org/articles/from-insects-to-starfish-were-edging-toward-biological-annihilation.
[19] *The Sixth Extinction: An Unnatural History* by Elizabeth Kolbert. www.pulitzer.org/winners/elizabeth-kolbert.
[20] The phrase appears to have been coined by Paul Ehrlich. www.pnas.org/content/pnas/114/30/E6089.full.pdf.
[21] https://newsroom.mastercard.com/press-releases/mastercard-spendingpulse-u-s-retail-sales-grew-5-1-percent-this-holiday-season.
[22] https://transitionnetwork.org/about-the-movement/what-is-transition.

After Epiphany: Home by Another Route

David R. Weiss – January 9, 2019
The Gospel in Transition #6 – **Subscribe at www.davidrweiss.com**

We celebrated Epiphany this past Sunday. You know, the journey of the magi, the star in the sky, the three gifts. And, of course, the palace encounter with King Herod who feigns reverence for this rumored child-king in hopes of tricking the magi to come back and reveal the infant's whereabouts. The tale is perhaps apocryphal: the resulting slaughter of the holy innocents is attested nowhere outside Matthew's Gospel. Indeed, it may be an evangelical fiction crafted by Matthew to evoke the memory of Moses' birth story in his Jewish readers. Either way, the account meshes with Herod's well-known paranoia. He routinely killed anyone he saw as a political rival—he ordered the political execution of *hundreds of persons*, including a brother-in-law, a mother-in-law, his second wife, and three of his own children. Whether his well-attested ruthless paranoia was, in fact, turned on Jesus, the tale is of a piece with Herod's character.[23]

For a moment, then, Jesus' young life hangs in the balance. Thankfully the magi, having been warned by God in a dream not to return to Herod, *journeyed home by another route*. There are a thousand points on which history turns. In Matthew's Gospel the magi's decision to go home by another route is one of those points. *For us, too.* Which is why I'm spending the year thinking, writing, talking about climate change and Christian faith. Following any of the familiar routes forward will end catastrophically … if not for us, then for generations to come and for countless companion creatures on the planet. *History will turn on the route we choose.* I think the Transition Movement[24] offers a promising way to go "home by another route"—and one in deep alignment with core Christian values.

The Transition Movement begins by acknowledging three daunting problems we face. (1) Our lives—our desires-expectations-cultural worldview—presume an unsustainable rate of consumption of a finite resource, fossil fuel. Whether because we'll eventually exhaust the resource itself, or exhaust the easily accessible sources, leading to *steep* increases in cost, our fossil fuel-fed lives are about to become fossils themselves. (2) Even if oil weren't finite, the atmosphere's capacity to preserve a livable planet for us *is*. Climate change is the result of industrial, transportation-heavy, convenience-and-consumption-driven lives that ignore the impact of our choices on the planet. (3) Our lives are also entangled in a global financial system that banks on unending growth (excluding the environmental costs of doing business on a finite planet from its market calculus). It trades on an increasingly "magical" notion of money—even as it heightens the gap between rich and poor. All three of these out-of-balance relationships are evidence of human indifference to finitude—and they are about to have a catastrophic collision with reality.

These crises are interwoven and together they "make sense" as manifestations of human sin: our readiness to break relationship with God, others, world, and self in pursuit of a false notion of reality in which we are "godlike": disconnected from each other and the world, able to pursue "abundance" for ourselves (or our in-groups) without need of others.[25] Moreover each crisis now runs on a decidedly

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[23] Matthew 2:1-18. For one view of how this tale fits into Herod's larger story (and a view sympathetic to its plausible historicity) see here: www.biblearchaeology.org/post/2009/12/08/The-Slaughter-of-the-Innocents-Historical-Fact-or-Legendary-Fiction.aspx.

[24] My discussion of Transition here is drawn primarily from the Transition U.S. website. See the links to peak oil, climate change, and the economic crisis here: www.transitionus.org/why-transition and the description of its Guiding Principles here: www.transitionus.org/initiatives/7-principles. Also, Timothy Gorridge & Rosie Beckham, *The Transition Movement for Churches: A Prophetic Imperative for Today*, London: Canterbury Press Norwich, 2013, pp. 1-13; and Ruah Swennerfelt, *Rising to the Challenge: The Transition Movement and People of Faith,* Quaker Institute for the Future, 2016, pp. 45-49.

[25] I mean "godlike" in an entirely wrong-headed and wrong-hearted way, imaging "god" on our terms, rather than God's. Similarly, any pursuit of "abundance" in isolation from the web of being—from genuine relationships with fellow humans-creatures-ecosystems—is "abundance" only in an illusory and ultimately self-contradicting manner.

structural inertia that requires little more than passive human complicity to keep churning away. In this sense each crisis is now upheld by what Paul referred to as "powers and principalities" (Eph. 6:12)—not supernatural demonic forces, but rather the mundane, social-systemic, supra-human forces that get embedded in social arrangements, cultures, industrialized systems and so forth.[26]

The Transition Movement's response is also in line with Christian convictions—albeit ones that have often atrophied for lack of exercise in our Christian lives, both personally and communally. Recognizing that the three-fold crisis noted above *demands* our transition to a life that uses far less energy, depends far less on an extractive economy, and is resilient enough to adapt to the rapidly changing conditions on a climate-changed planet, Transition invites us, as it were, *to be of good cheer*. It asserts:

(1) Since these transitions are really non-negotiable on a finite planet, let's embrace them thoughtfully rather than ignore them until they're thrust upon us by crashing systems. Transition holds that a different world *is* possible—and that there are tangible, practical steps that can begin the journey there.

(2) Let's fashion more resilient communities—specifically working to establish systems/services that can withstand the inevitable shock of planetary systems that *will* be rocked by rapid change in the decades ahead. Such changes will include weather patterns, growing seasons, land use, and population movements. Globalized/centralized systems will be less able to respond than localized systems that are cooperatively networked together. Thus, resilience includes re-localizing our economy whenever possible, building deeper relationships with those who produce the goods we need, and sharing skills that can empower us to live simpler and more sustainable lives. (Re-localizing also involves re-localizing our sources of fun/entertainment.)

(3) Most fundamentally, Transition says, *pursuing these goals will lead to lives that are richer in both meaning and joy*. Lives that reflect what Jesus promises as "life abundant." (John 10:10) Some of this happens "naturally": the by-product of community-building activities. Some of it involves an "Inner Transition": intentionally re-fashioning a worldview in which we are AT HOME on a finite planet, joyfully knit into community across diversity, and happy to pursue meaning and purpose through art, knowledge, and relationship rather than material consumption. Given that our inner worldview is the terrain in question, this re-fashioning is minimally psychological-philosophical in nature, though I think it is most effectively accomplished on a spiritual level. Not that it must be Christian or even explicitly religious, but such a transformation in worldview—as needed for sustained and abundant life on a finite planet—*requires roots in awe and wonder*. And those roots grow deep in psychic soil that is fluent in a sense of the sacred.

"Tomorrow" is the country to which we (and our children's children) are heading home. We have long needed (for numerous generations!) a path forward far different than the one we've been on. Transition can take us home by another route. It's time we begin that journey.

PS: I've set up a Patreon site to help fund my work in this area. I hope you'll invest in my thinking and writing. You can learn more about how to support me here: www.patreon.com/fullfrontalfaith

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[26] Paul declares that in our struggle to be faithful, we contend not merely with flesh and blood—the frailties and temptations of our own humanity and the obstructions of others—but against "principalities and powers." Though his words were originally read to reflect a worldview that saw human activity beset by demonic influences, a number of twentieth century scholars (Jaques Ellul, William Stringfellow, John Howard Yoder, and Walter Wink) argued Paul was making a much more sophisticated and insightful observation: calling out our capacity to set up empires, societies, cultures, that establish whole systems with an inertia that is greater than any individual person—an inertia that *seemingly takes on a life of its own*. Not a consciousness, per se, but an *institutionalized energy* that can *will* forward a set of assumptions that carry destructive consequences.

After Epiphany: Baptismal Waters *as* Boundary Waters

David R. Weiss – January 14, 2019
The Gospel in Transition #7 – **Subscribe at www.davidrweiss.com**

I have *too much* on my mind this week. Where to start? Maybe with baptism, since we recall Jesus' baptism on the second Sunday of Epiphany. The water in the River Jordan in which Jesus was immersed is (more or less) *the same water* that fills the baptismal fonts in our churches today. Earth's water, formed almost contemporaneously with the planet itself and circulating non-stop through cycles of ice-water-vapor and salty-fresh ever since, is a pretty fixed amount. Who's to say where the water molecules that covered Jesus that day have been since then?

Water is one. The water in our baptismal fonts is one tiny part of that same grand seamless cycle that nourishes, sustains, renews, and sanctifies creation across the globe (and across many different religious traditions). In our tradition, baptismal waters are *boundary waters*. Even for Jesus (whose baptism is perhaps not quite identical to ours), when he came up out of the waters, *everything changed*. The story goes that a Voice from heaven affirms Jesus as chosen by God. It's likely that the inner journey that prepared Jesus for his ministry commenced long before that day at the Jordan, nonetheless on the far side of those waters and that Voice lay … *everything else*.

While we won't read the passage about it until the first week of Lent, the gospels tell us that *immediately* after his baptism Jesus went out into the wilderness to be tempted. And from there he began his public ministry. So baptism truly is the doorway into everything. If you think about the common wisdom, "look before you leap," that day, as Jesus approached John standing in the River Jordan, *that* was Jesus' look. And baptism was his leap.

For us, too, baptismal waters are boundary waters. Not at all (if you ask me) that before we're baptized we're unsaved. Rather, baptism marks the moment when the truth of who we have *always* been—beloved child of God—is publicly affirmed by the community gathered around us and on our behalf. Something *does* change with baptism: the reference point of our whole lives. From here on out, whether as infant (with the help of family and sponsors), youth, or adult, we join the community of those who are "walking wet": who now encounter the whole of creation bathed in grace. Sadly, for most of us these boundary waters "evaporate" almost immediately beneath the drying winds of our dominant culture (winds often felt even *within* the Christian tradition). We learn to meet the world under the tutelage of forces far more pervasive than our faith. That's simply honest. It's also tragic. And if it doesn't change, we're lost. Nonetheless the headwaters of our faith *are* boundary waters and deep within our tradition there remain bubbling springs of radical grace capable of re-wetting the whole of our lives.

Water is one. (Part Two.) It's one thing—perhaps evocative, alluring, and inspiring—to acknowledge the kinship between the water in our fonts and the River Jordan that Jesus stepped into. And that affinity is both hydrologically and theologically real. But move in another (equally real!) direction and the kinship is more sobering. For at least the past decade the Jordan River itself has been so polluted that tourist-pilgrims are actually warned against getting baptized in its now dangerously fouled waters.[27] And the Jordan's fate is echoed in rivers, lakes, wetlands, and seas around the globe; in acidifying oceans and melting glaciers as well. Water is one and it bears witness against us for having thought ourselves—our dys-connected* desires and interests—as having more value than the rest of creation in which (no less than in Christ! Cf. Acts 17:28) we live and move and have our being.

*By "dys-connected" I mean to convey that we *cannot* in truth be disconnected from the rest of creation. We *are* connected: either well-connected or dys-connected. We may have been existentially dys-connected at least since the rise of patriarchy, but since the scientific and industrial revolutions we've been dys-connected … with a devastating vengeance.

[27] www.seeker.com/jordan-river-too-polluted-for-baptisms-1765079616.html.

From this perspective the water we christen as holy in our fonts cries out to God like Abel's blood, while we stammer in reply, "Are *we* the water's keeper?" (Gen. 4:9-10) Our Native American siblings know that *YES, we are*. Perhaps when we dip our fingers in the font to trace a wet cross on our foreheads or cup our hand to catch water to splash on the head of an infant, we'd do well to imagine this holy water reminding us, "whatsoever you do to the least of the water on the planet you do also to me." *Really, how do we dare invoke God's presence in our baptismal water while we quite literally damn it in countless toxic ways at other places where it is only momentarily outside the sanctuary of our fonts?!*

That last haunting question is why the hairs on the back of my neck bristle in alarm when I hear Governor Tim Walz offer tacit support to copper mining initiatives in northern Minnesota or suggest there's more science yet to review around the Line 3 pipeline that would bring more of the *worst type* of fossil fuel through fragile wetlands to market in a world where the only life-giving direction for energy production is anything-but-fossil-fuel.[28] Should either mining project or the pipeline run awry they'll irreparably harm the already beleaguered waters of Minnesota. And both the mines and the pipeline echo the assumption that the only healthy economy with an extractive relationship to the earth. I say if we can protect Minnesota's water as though it were (it is!) the water with which we baptize our children, we will insist on better options for a thriving future in our state.

Water is one. (Part Three.) One final thought, since seeing baptismal waters *as* boundary waters signifies *transition*. The Transition Movement intentionally focuses on positive tangible steps; it wants to invest energy in being "for" rather than "against." It says life guided by Transition is more meaningful and rewarding than life as we've known it. *I say, YES: this is gospel truth*. But there is a quieter theme in Transition as well, and with the governor's decisions likely to be a lightning rod for environmentalist hopes in the months ahead, I'm going to say it a bit louder than Transition usually does. *Transition recognizes that the likelihood of political will—whether by leaders or by voters—coalescing in time to stem climate disaster … is not high.* It is, in fact, more likely that even well-meaning governors committed to "progressive values" will find their political choices twisted by industry forces until they make peace with policy decisions that promulgate war on the narrowing path to a livable future.

Thus, part of Transition's emphasis on localizing energy, resources, and skills within smaller communities is in line with the recognition that *we are presently maintaining course on a path that threatens to collapse every centralized system on which we depend*. Holding a quiet skepticism about the capacity of our politics to turn back from that calamity, Transition principles[29] offer a way to move forward even if/when industry and politicians betray us. That isn't defeatism. It is the hard wisdom that the only force that *may* persuade the governor (or any political leader) to do the right thing is that held by people who empower themselves and their communities to survive even if betrayed, whose political pressure is not hope pinned on the actions of someone else, but the force of truth already being birthed in our midst.

Baptism, boundary water, Transition: *they change everything*. Nothing less will be enough.

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[28] www.cbs3duluth.com/news/eye-on-mining/2019/01/08/eye-on-mining-gov-walz-talks-copper-nickel-mining. www.minnpost.com/environment/2019/01/walz-administration-reconsidering-lawsuit-against-enbridge-pipeline-project/.

[29] www.transitionus.org/initiatives/7-principles.

MLK Holiday: A Deeper Shade of Green

David R. Weiss – January 20, 2019
The Gospel in Transition #8 – **Subscribe at www.davidrweiss.com**

"… as purple is to lavender." So Alice Walker described womanism in relationship to feminism: more vivid, more nuanced, more demanding, more inclusive, and more liberating. When Christopher Carter coined the phrase "a deeper shade of green" for seminar he led last July at the Methodist Theological School in Ohio (MTSO) he wanted to evoke Alice Walker's metaphorical palette. What happens when ("green") eco-theology and ethics intersect with Black theology and womanist theology? You get a decidedly "deeper shade of green." *An earth ethic that's more vivid, more nuanced, more demanding, more inclusive, and more liberating*.

One guiding principle of Transition is "Inclusion and Openness," reaching across "the broad diversity of society" and transcending "them and us" thinking.[30] Yes, but until we acknowledge the extent to which us-them thinking is not merely a distraction from our ecological work, but represents the *primal cause* of our current crisis, the *central threat* globally to communities of color, and the *absolute core* of the inner transition that must occur—until then, we have not yet known that deeper shade of green. And we must. Here's a bit of what I wrestled with in that seminar—and what continue to *wrestle with me*. (This deserves *much more* than a 1000-word essay. I'll be offering more reflections from it in the future!)

Twenty years ago James Cone (1936-2018), the father of black liberation theology, asserted that environmental activists who are not also engaged "in a disciplined and sustained fight against white supremacy are racists." Period. (He also calls anti-racist activists who fail to champion the earth "anti-ecological," but it hardly has the same sting as " racist.") But for Cone the jarring label is merited because he sees the same logic driving both white supremacy/racism and earth exploitation. Not parallel logics operating side-by-side. Cone sees the *exact same* "mechanistic and instrumental" logic responsible for reducing creatures, eco-systems, and whole categories of people to resources—then rendered morally available to be used, abused, sold, sacrificed, or worse at the whim of whiteness.[31]

Several sociologists/race theorists we read affirmed Cone's claim, showing how race and racism have been the (im)moral infrastructure of the modern world. As categories without any scientific basis created by human societies, race functions as a way of "making up people," but inevitably serves—except in the case of whiteness—to make them up … *in order to put them down*. Bluntly put: *race has no practical existence apart from racism*. As the animating force of "white colonial logic" it drew lines between humanity and animality in order to justify the dehumanizing exploitation of colonized peoples across the globe.[32]

But here's where these readings in theory hit me hardest and left me feeling—with an anguished sense that my entire life to this moment has been complicit in a lie—*as though modernity itself has always and only ever(!) rested upon wreaking havoc on other-ed lives and lands*. Omi and Winant argue (113), "Modern capitalism could not have come into being without this grand infusion of stolen wealth [i.e., the "discovery" of the "New World]." They go on to say that this plundering (seizure of territories … slavery … native labor … genocide) "all presupposed a worldview which distinguished Europeans … from 'others.'"

But did these economic-activities-moral-atrocities *presuppose* that worldview—or did they INVENT it? I suspect race/racism, as it unfolded with European expansion, is an instance of *knowledge*

[30] www.transitionus.org/initiatives/7-principles.
[31] James H. Cone, "Whose Earth Is It Anyway?," *Cross Currents*, Spring/Summer 2000.
[32] Michael Omi and Howard Winant, *Racial Formation in the United States* (New York: Routledge, 2015, 3rd ed., orig. 1986), pp. 105-136; Joe R. Feagin, *The White Racial Frame: Centuries of Racioal Framing and Counter-Framing* (New York: Routledge, 2010, 2nd ed., orig. 2009), pp. 1-22.

misshapen by greed. If modern capitalism was "birthed" by stolen wealth, *capitalism required racism as its midwife*. While the discovery of such "different" peoples (i.e., in terms of outward appearance, culture, etc.) required an accounting—both scientifically and religiously—*the shape of that accounting was given by the need to justify how horrifically we treated them*. (Did the Hebrews "hear" God tell them to exterminate the Canaanites *before* or *after* they did so? I suspect their hands were dripping with blood before they "heard" anything.)

There is a *fundamental mutual entanglement* between racism and the exploitation of nature. This *un-thou-ing of the wondrous world* (reducing it in all direction from its God-given "thou-ness" to mere "it-ness," to use Martin Buber's terms) is so much part of the all-encompassing worldview we're born into that (like the earth's spin, for instance) we're entirely oblivious to it … as it perniciously shapes our perspectives, the bounds of our moral community, the choices we make, and even the limits of our imagination. Modern capitalism *demands* this relentless un-thou-ing for its ongoing expansion. Especially in its unbridled neoliberal globalized expression, capitalism will consume everything it can until entire economies, societies, species, or the livable ecosystem itself collapses. And capitalism runs on racism and ecocide.

Humanity has always been a precarious project. Vulnerable to outside threats and just as often undone by its own worst impulses, no era of human civilization has been without instances of barbarism. But under modernity something has qualitatively shifted. Economies, science-technology, globalized finance, and the way markets have colonized the human mind—these forces (I'd name them "principalities and powers" per Eph. 6:12; see Essay #6: "Home by Another Route") now hold inertia over the very destiny of our species. To think we can "invent" or "legislate" our way to survival is foolhardy. Not that science, innovation, and public policy have no role to play—they do. But the elemental forces that conspire against us … lie *within us* and *between us*. In how we understand ourselves, others, and our place as humans in the larger world.

This is the work of *Inner Transition*, and it, too, needs to embrace a deeper shade of green. The fracture between racial justice and environmental concern runs right through communities poisoned by runaway capitalism's toxic wake (most often those of color) and nations/communities most imperiled by and least responsible for global warming (again, most often those of color). To presume we can address systemic racism without taking up environmental violence is to pretend that we've simply (and unforgivably!) mis-measured the humanity of our kin without reckoning as well the extent to which we have *weaponized the environment against their flourishing*. Similarly, to imagine we can teach care for creation by taking the edge of capitalism's appetite misses not only the reach of that appetite into our souls, but the way it has *always* been entangled with an impulse toward othering our fellow humans.

As King wrote from the Birmingham jail, "All life is inter-related. We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny." The route toward Inner Transition for the sake of Earth and humanity cannot sidestep race or relegate it to a second-order concern. These are not separate or even complimentary struggles—*they are wholly interwoven*. The *only* sustainable future in front of us will necessarily be a Beloved Community—one reflecting the liberatory wisdom of a decidedly deeper shade of green.

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Epiphany: Bitter Cold while the House is on Fire

David R. Weiss – February 5, 2019
The Gospel in Transition #9 – **Subscribe at www.davidrweiss.com**

The Feast of Epiphany commemorates the arrival of the Magi to see the baby Jesus. It marks the end (the Twelfth Day) of Christmas and ushers in the beginning of the season of Epiphany, which runs until the start of Lent on Ash Wednesday. Because the visit of the Magi is usually seen as representing the revelation (i.e., the "epiphany," the "showing") of the Christ child to the nations, during the rest of the season in the church year we consider other ways Jesus is revealed from baptism to transfiguration.

But right now I'm thinking and writing about climate change and how it's being "revealed" in this season as well. Right after Christmas I wrote about "shouting 'Fire' in church."[33] Then just last week 16 year-old climate activist, Greta Thunberg, in a powerful speech delivered to some of the world's wealthiest at the World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland, declared, "I want you to act as you would in a crisis. I want you to act as if our house is on fire. Because it is."[34] I couldn't agree more.

And yet, as the memes on my Facebook page and the headlines in multiple news stories announce, it will be colder in many places here in the Midwest these next few days than in Antarctica. Not surprisingly, President Trump weighed in on this via Twitter: "In the beautiful Midwest, wind chill temperatures are reaching minus 60 degrees, the coldest ever recorded. In coming days, expected to get even colder. People can't last outside even for minutes. What the hell is going on with Global Warming [*sic*]? Please come back fast, we need you!"

Well, what gives? On one level this is simply a matter of confusing *weather* (immediate, short-term atmospheric conditions) with *climate* (weather considered as a pattern over a long period of time). A short spell of intense cold weather does not cancel global warming any more than one cloudburst undoes a months long drought. Weather will *always* show much more variability than climate. And certainly, our perceptions register weather far more easily than climate, but to confuse the two as our president likes to do, becomes increasingly inexcusable as the stakes of climate change escalate. The man tweets the way Nero fiddled while Rome burned. (Irony: while the tale of Nero fiddling as his capital city went up in flames is almost certainly fictional, the image aptly describes *exactly what our president is—in fact—doing.*)

But there's more than mere misunderstanding at work here. This bitter cold spell is quite likely related to global warming.[35] It provides all the more evidence that, as Greta puts it, "our house is on fire." The polar vortex is the more or less disc-shaped swirl of cold air that typically sits atop the arctic. The polar vortex *always* demonstrates variability in both its strength and position; the stronger it is, the more it remains centered above the pole. When it weakens, it allows the cold air gathered at the top of the planet to roll southward in a *much* colder than usual blast of winter air. And the accelerating loss of arctic sea ice—and the general warming of arctic land and water—weakens the polar vortex. The result is that cold arctic air is held much less "secure" at the pole … and is much more likely to be drawn down into the Midwest—exactly as we're experiencing this week.

So, while we shiver under dangerously cold temperatures this week (although just for several days) the planet overall continues to *warm*—dangerously and unabated. Indeed much of the rest of

[33] www.davidrweiss.com/2019/01/03/christmas-and-the-holy-innocents-on-shouting-fire-in-church
[34] www.theguardian.com/environment/2019/jan/25/our-house-is-on-fire-greta-thunberg16-urges-leaders-to-act-on-climate
[35] www.blog.ucsusa.org/brenda-ekwurzel/winter-storm-jayden-the-polar-vortex-and-climate-change-3-factors-that-matter

the world is rather wilting as we alternately boast-bemoan our January temperature plunge. Some parts of the arctic have warmed so much overall that there are places on Baffin Island in northern Canada where the ground is now exposed—free of ice—for the first time *in at least 40,000 years (over 100,000 years by some estimates)*.[36] And since the arctic is warming at a rate two to three times the rest of the planet, it's quite possible that as we lurch toward a *much* hotter future, we'll also be visited more frequently by the frigid air of a polar vortex knocked off balance on a warming planet.

As a recent piece in the Atlantic reported, "2018 was hotter than any year in the 19th century. It was hotter than any year in the 20th century. It was hotter than any year in the first decade of this century. In fact, with only three exceptions, it was the hottest year on Earth since 1850. Those three exceptions: 2018 was slightly cooler than 2015, 2016, and 2017. The past four years, in other words, have been the four hottest years ever reliably measured."[37] Let that sink in. Of the past 168 years, *the four hottest have just happened. Right in a row*. And—because our current polar vortex spill across the Midwest is little more than a blip on a big planet across an entire year—odds are good (read: bad) that 2019 will make it five in a row. How's that for an epiphany?

We like to see an epiphany as the revelation of something good, as a cause for hope. But sometimes epiphany signals a truth that must be grasped—even when it shatters the world you prefer. Greta Thunberg, prophet of a climate epiphany and kindred spirit to my restless soul, concluded her comments at the World Economic Forum like this: "Adults keep saying: 'We owe it to the young people to give them hope.' But I don't want your hope. I don't want you to be hopeful. I want you to panic. I want you to feel the fear I feel every day. And then I want you to act."

For those committed to denial—whether because of economic interests, the lure of first world comforts (read: developing world theft), or the sheer enormity of cataclysm aimed our way—fear and panic are going to hit at some point. But the Transition Movement is about reckoning with the reality of climate change without waiting for politicians or the wealthy to reach the point of fear and panic. It's about choosing a different path, as individuals and (more importantly) as local communities right now. Not because that different path will "save" us. No. Rather, because that different path may allow us to build a bridge forward into a future altogether different than any of us dreamed of.

I'm convinced there is joy to be had both in making this transition and in the life that awaits us beyond it. But it's epiphany right now. And both the bitter cold and the burning house are trying to show us something. I suggest we stop and see.

PS: I've set up a Patreon site to help fund my work in this area. I hope you'll invest in my thinking and writing. You can learn more about how to support me here: www.patreon.com/fullfrontalfaith

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[36] www.grist.org/article/the-melting-arctic-is-revealing-caveman-era-landscapes
[37] www.theatlantic.com/science/archive/2019/01/nasa-noaa-shutdown-2018-warmest-climate-record/581221

Epiphany: Ice Out on the Himalayas

David R. Weiss – February 5, 2019
The Gospel in Transition #10 – **Subscribe at www.davidrweiss.com**

As I noted last week, Epiphany, the feast that marks the arrival of the Magi, is about "Aha!" moments of insight. For the Magi, their epiphany was evident both in the faith that led them to follow the star and in finding the Christ child; their tale symbolic of the universal reach of God. The season of Epiphany lifts up other "Aha!" moments for Jesus leading up to his transfiguration, a classic mountaintop epiphany. This week's news offered another mountaintop epiphany, which is my focus today.

Sometimes referred to as Earth's "third pole" because more ice is found here than anywhere else on the planet except for the Arctic and Antarctic, the Hindu Kush Himalaya (HKH) mountain region spans eight countries. Moving roughly west to east these glacier-capped peaks are found in Afghanistan, Pakistan, China, Nepal, Bhutan, India, Bangladesh, and Myanmar. The fresh water in these mountains—rainfall, but especially the water stored in ice and snowpack—feeds ten major rivers, including the Indus and the Ganges. And this region is headed for "ice out."[38]

According to a report just released (February 4, 2019) by the International Center for Integrated Mountain Development (ICIMOD), *even under a best case scenario* (one researcher refers to it as the "miracle" scenario) in which we actually stop global warming at the "ideal" 1.5^0C, more than a third of the region's ice and snow will be gone by 2100. Fully half of it will be lost if we only manage the more realistic (but still increasingly difficult) target of 2^0C in warming. And if we go on pumping carbon into the system at present rates, over two-thirds of the HKH region's ice will be gone in less than a century.

Writing from Minnesota's mid-winter deep freeze, with streets and sidewalks coated with ice—ice now covered with several inches of fresh snow (and more on the way), maybe ice-out isn't such a bad idea. *But it is.* The glaciers in these mountains store water and release it seasonally. Besides being essential to the immediate ecosystem—home to 240 million people and a range of wildlife—the water that flows down from these mountains is critical for the agriculture, energy, sanitation, and water needs of close to two billion people.

The ICIMOD report hardly represents an extreme view. It was five years in the making, with more than 200 scientists representing 22 countries contributing research, and another 125 peer reviewers cross-checking it. It offers very much a "middle-of-the-road" consensus *epiphany*. And it is alarming—and unforgiving: climate change is driving temperature rise faster at higher elevation—and the impacts in the report are *already* "loaded" into the system.

If this is a facet of the climate crisis you haven't heard of yet, that's partly economic. 80 million of the region's inhabitants live on less than $750 *per year*. Nearly all of the impacted areas would be considered parts of "developing" regions, thus rarely worth screen time or print space in our news cycle. Especially because right now it's merely a *dawning* disaster. But wait until the dawn hits.

As the glaciers melt—which is a matter of *when*, not *if*—the melt will first dramatically increase river flows and threaten mountain lakes to overflow their banks in never-before-seen floods. But eventually—and that's not a geological "eventually" spread over eons, that's a generational "eventually" that will play out within single lifetimes—the decreased water levels will leave lakes and springs and

[38] All the background data in this essay comes from these three news reports:
www.theguardian.com/environment/2019/feb/04/a-third-of-himalayan-ice-cap-doomed-finds-shocking-report
www.commondreams.org/news/2019/02/04/climate-crisis-you-havent-heard-even-if-carbon-emissions-fall-third-himalayan-ice
www.nationalgeographic.com/environment/2019/02/himalaya-mountain-climate-change-report
This YouTube video offers a very brief overview as well: https://youtu.be/8bPFAEdRp8o

streams starved for water. And along the way the only thing truly predictable about the lurch between flooding and barren rivers will be the ensuing chaos. Drinking water, hydro-electric power, agricultural production, human sanitation, and all the natural flora and fauna in the region will be upended. Of course, the people living in this area are among those least driving climate change, yet also among those most vulnerable to its effects. It's an unfortunate and unjust double-membership that will be common in the coming decades.

Ultimately, when ice-out hits—whether one-third, one-half, or more—the ripple effects will reach well beyond the HKH region producing inevitable waves of migration and rounds of conflict. By then the waning of the world's "third pole" will be rippling toward all of us.

How does this hard icy-cold, then rushing-wet, then parched-dry epiphany *shape us*? I suggest its primary meaning for us as individuals—as persons with limited political-corporate power—and as communities of faith is as a *summons to grief*. The most significant aspect of the consequences related by this study is their inevitability. We don't know just how bad it will get, but the adjectives will range from terrible to devastating, from catastrophic to unimaginable. *There is no near-miss happy ending available*.

I do believe "hope" has a role to play in our response to climate change, but it is hope in a stark form that we are rarely comfortable with. Hope in the form that Václav Havel describes as "the certainty that something is worth doing no matter how it turns out." It is hope in the form that remembers that the Jesus who says to us, "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest." (Matthew 11:28) is the same Jesus who ends up crucified and is pointedly clear that following him involves a cross of our own. *That form of hope*.

Whatever we do to lessen the impact of climate change at this point—and there is *much*, both personally and politically that must be done—it should be done "hope-free," so to speak.[39] Not because we imagine ourselves heroes at the last minute (after decades of denial), but because we are determined to move toward tomorrow, whatever it brings, with more integrity than we had yesterday.

And this is the least popular and most important word of wisdom I carry: *we need to tap into grief to find that form of hope*. The Transition Movement is paradoxical in extreme—like Luther's theology of the cross, which asserts that the clearest vision is that which peers *through suffering* not around it. In a world determined to look ever on the bright side of things (even when it's the *false* side) or, at worst, to distract itself from that which we'd rather not see—in *that* world, *the capacity to see suffering, to grieve loss (and not simply our own, but that of others—and of Earth itself), to give voice to lament—these capacities will be existentially essential*. We will not survive without grief.

It need not have the last word, but like a sustained note, it will need to color all the other notes we sing for a long, long time. And so long as we avoid the soul-deep lament that the world asks of us, we are not yet singing the song that must be sung. And that's today's epiphany.

PS: I've set up a Patreon site to help fund my work in this area. I hope you'll invest in my thinking and writing. You can learn more about how to support me here: www.patreon.com/fullfrontalfaith

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[39] The phrase is Dahr Jamail's (who also references the Václav Havel quote) in an excerpt from his book, *The End of Ice: Bearing Witness and Finding Meaning in the Path of Climate Destruction*. https://truthout.org/articles/in-facing-mass-extinction-we-dont-need-hope-we-need-to-grieve

Epiphany: Extinguishing the Alphabet … of Bens and Bugs

David R. Weiss – February 15, 2019
The Gospel in Transition #11 – **Subscribe at www.davidrweiss.com**

I encountered the Jewish legend decades ago in a book by Gail Ramshaw, *Letters for God's Name*. The tale goes that a Jewish peasant is hurrying to finish his fieldwork to make it to the Passover service. But the sun sets, he cannot travel, and so he must spend the holy night in the field. Unable even to remember the words to the prayers, he decides in serene desperation to simply recite the alphabet and trust God to arrange the letters into their proper places.[40]

The image is one of faith and grace. Faith, that even our most meager efforts might somehow be sufficient—and grace, that God will not fail to work with what we sincerely offer. I affirm this as truth. And yet I want to push the story one bit further. *What if the alphabet itself could not be found? What then?* And before we rush forward to claim grace even in that extreme, I want to dwell for a moment in the terror … of an extinguished alphabet.

Because that's what we're facing ecologically. This past week, in the first global scientific review of the health of insects worldwide, we learned their precipitous decline is nothing short of damning.[41] Based on 73 different studies assessing insect populations, the review found that one third of all insects are now endangered. They're presently going extinct *eight times faster* than mammals, birds, and reptiles (none of whom are exactly thriving!). We've lost 2.5% of the total biomass of insects *each year* for the past 25-30 years. With no recovery. Sit down and sit with that for a long quiet moment: compared to 1990, the year my now 31 year-old son turned three—over the course of his still young life—*we've lost 80% of the total biomass of insects across the globe.*

In words particularly strident in a peer-reviewed scientific paper (meaning that the phrasing had to pass by the watchful eyes of scientific peers not connected to the review itself) the study declares the very real possibility that "insects as a whole will go down the path of extinction in a few decades. The repercussions this will have for the planet's ecosysyems are catastrophic to say the least." *To say the least*.

As Professor Dave Goulson at the University of Sussex in the UK explains, "Insects are at the heart of every food web, they pollinate the large majority of plant species, keep the soil healthy, recycle nutrients, control pests, and much more." When the Psalmist says, "Let all creation praise the Lord," (Psalm 148 and elsewhere)—well, in earth's praise, *insects are the alphabet*. And we're extinguishing the alphabet.

The cause is not a mystery. Broadly speaking it is the direct result of agricultural intensification coupled with the use of pesticides. "Intensification" describes the practice of eliminating all "wild areas" around farm fields: every bit of land is either left entirely bare or is treated with synthetic fertilizers and pesticides. Together these forces have turned insects into a largely unseen population of refugees in their own lands—and have unleashed a planetary-scale genocide of these least of God's creatures … with cascading consequences that threaten not only our survival, but the well-being of the rest of creation. In Germany, for instance, insect losses of 75% were recorded even in protected nature reserves. The web of being does not follow the boundaries we set for field and nation. And the holes we rip in that web run far afield.

Light pollution and urbanization add to the assault on insects, encroaching on the land and darkness that are essential for insect habitat. For its part, climate change is an "entangled" factor. In some places where industrial agriculture has not yet remade landscapes and farming practices

[40] Gail Ramshaw, *Letters for God's Name*, Seabury Press, 1984, p. i.
[41] All the background data in this essay comes from:
www.theguardian.com/environment/2019/feb/10/plummeting-insect-numbers-threaten-collapse-of-nature

climate change is still clearly taking a toll on insect populations. But even apart from this, the rise of fossil-fuel intensive agriculture (which is what industrial agriculture is) has been a primary contributor to climate change. The warming climate and the approaching end of insects are both linked to the oil that drips through the way we eat, from farmland to grocery store to kitchen table.

Is there no way forward? Which is really to ask, is there any way *backward*? Because backward is the direction we need to move. There *are* less oily ways to eat. But they presume skills, tastes, patience, and priorities that have been crowded out of our customs and character by the twin idols of "cheap" and "convenient. The stark imperative is to change the ways we grow, deliver, process, and consume food. These are daunting systemic changes. But they are probably the only changes that can save the bugs … and the world into which they are wholly (and graciously!) interwoven. There are, as well, small scale ways to harness empowerment through the pursuit of personal accountability and integrity.

For instance, organic farms continue to "host" far more insects, even as their farmers battle the worst plant pests in ways that protect produce without devastating entire insect populations. So now we know that *buying organic is perhaps an essential spiritual practice*, one that aims to honor the place of bugs in God's creation choir. Similarly, ending our love affair with the grassy lawn may prove to be a revolutionary act. On The Rachel Carson Center's blog one post invites us to "Make Meadows not Lawns."[42] In so doing, we not only reclaim the ground around our homes as a sacred sanctuary space, we might also come to *love* our tiniest and most necessary fellow earthlings. (The word "love" is not gross overstatement; it actually hearkens to E.O. Wilson's notion of *biophilia*, the demonstrable psychic and emotional benefits that accrue in a deep relationship with the natural world.) We might even remember that in our own mythic origins we were christened "humus beings"—fashioned from dirt and beckoned to tend the ground beneath our feet.

Re-thinking—re-making—our food choices and our yard choices also provides opportunities to build community (share ideas, trade/teach skills) within churches and neighborhoods. In fact, the alchemy of honest grief, passionate conviction, imaginative sharing, and communal bonding may be the only combination that carries us *backward* in a way that can also carry us forward. If God is to arrange the remaining letters of the alphabet into a prayer that might still heal the earth, we will need to embrace insects before they are lost.

The hard data in the scientific review is hard even for me (and I have a pretty close kinship with melancholy most days). Unless we make dramatic changes, of the 20% (of the 1990) insect biomass remaining from my son Benjamin's childhood, only 10% will be left by the time he reaches eighty. By the time my grandson, who turns three *this* year and is also named Benjamin, reaches *his* eightieth birthday … insects may well be a memory. If they are, the odds of my grandson making it to eighty aren't much better.

Climate change is not finally about reason or profit. It is about grief and love. And, right now, dammit, it's also about the bugs.

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[42] www.seeingthewoods.org/2018/12/20/make-meadows-not-lawns

Not Even Kansas …

David R. Weiss – February 21, 2019
The Gospel in Transition #12 – **Subscribe at www.davidrweiss.com**

Never mind about Toto or Dorothy, before long *not even Kansas will be in Kansas anymore*. According to a recent report in the journal *Nature Communications* (2/12/2019) one result of climate change is that Minnesota's climate will eventually* feel like Kansas.[43]

*It's the "eventually" that the problem. We're not talking a couple hundred years. We're talking several decades. At the current rate of climate change, for instance, in *just three or four decades* the southern Minnesota city of Faribault will have a climate that matches areas in Kansas—500 miles to the south. To put that in even starker perspective, it's as though the city's climate is moving south at 315 feet *per day*.

There's nothing wrong with Kansas. Still, as University of Minnesota forest ecologist, Lee Frelich, recently remarked in testimony at a state legislative hearing, "I don't know about you, but I *didn't* move to Kansas for a reason." Frelich's bias, no doubt a matter of both preference and profession, is bound up with the absence of *forest* in Kansas. An absence looming for Minnesota as well.

As a Kansas climate creeps northward into Minnesota we may keep our 10,000 lakes, but in other ways our landscape will get an extreme makeover. The temperate broadleaf forests that now shade large swaths of central and southern Minnesota will give way to savannah grassland. Minnesota's boreal forest—the two million acres of pine and spruce in our northern reaches—will be overtaken by maple and other deciduous trees as the evergreens "retreat" to Canada. That's a polite way of saying they'll die off because they can't adapt to the damn heat. When my grandchildren reach my age (fifty years out), from the headwaters of the Mississippi across to the scenic North Shore they'll more likely be met with sprawling prairie than towering pines.

Multiply those effects across all of Minnesota's flora and fauna and the impact becomes staggering. We'll lose up to a third of our native species. Moose, lynx, walleye, and Minnesota's magical bird, the loon—all gone. Ticks and mosquitos? Not so much. Their range will *expand*, as will the range of various agriculture pests (in part because their late fall eggs will have a better chance of surviving warmer winters and then replenishing populations earlier in the spring). From withering drought to torrential downpour, from unrelenting heat to catastrophic flood, extreme weather, so called because it's outside the norm, will become … almost normal. But no less extreme in the mark it makes on Minnesotans themselves.

Asthma, allergies, heat-related illnesses, and insect-borne diseases will all see a boom. Because of the way that poor air quality intersects with poor neighborhoods—and the way race intersects with both—communities of color will be hit hardest. The general upheaval wrought by climate change, plus the specific disasters it will unleash—will mean an uptick in mental health issues ranging from anxiety and depression to post traumatic stress and suicide.

Remember, the key word is "eventually," and the problem is that, with climate change, Kansas is coming to Minnesota (so to speak) *way too quickly*. When "eventually" is compressed into a single generation there's simply no time for ecosystems, animals, farmland, cities, or people to adapt. I support the Green New Deal. I'm all for Minnesota setting out a pathway to 100% renewable energy. These are good—even critical goals. But the carbon *already* loaded (and still loading!) into our atmosphere means that a Kansas climate has *already* packed its bags for Minnesota. Whether it arrives in two decades or ten, and whether it reaches all the way to the Arrowhead or slows down mid-state, these are variables. But whether Kansas comes? *That ticket is already bought and paid for*.

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[43] The information in this essay comes from these three news stories: Minnesota Public Radio News, February 12, 2019, City Pages, February 20, 2019, and Rochester Post-Bulletin, January 18, 2019.

Which brings me to resilience. As we're *getting* that extreme makeover courtesy of climate change—and that "getting" will stretch on for decades; Kansas won't show up overnight but over years and years; its arrival will be at once far too fast for our comfort and yet also interminably slow until it finally settles in—during that "getting," what we will need more than anything else is *resilience*.

Rob Hopkins, co-founder of the Transition movement, describes resilience as "the ability of a system, such as a local economy or community, to withstand shock and then adapt to that shock. It's the ability to flex, adapt and to change, and think on its feet in any given situation." Resilience will be a real virtue while Kansas seems to be clobbering us from south to north. But Hopkins goes on to say, "The twist which we try to put on resilience in the Transition Network is that the ability to react to those threats shouldn't just be a process to avoid the worst possible outcome, but should be seen as an opportunity to engage … in a positive and creative way. Resilience is *an opportunity and a step forward* [my emphasis], rather than purely a disaster avoidance strategy."[44]

You hear an inkling of (perhaps begrudging) resilience when Lee Frelich—the *forest* ecologist—says of his beloved boreal forest, "We'll just have to make sure it's the best savannah it can be. Not a bunch of invasive species. We'll have to move some of the plants from our little tiny savannah remnants in southern Minnesota up there. We'll just have to do the best we can."

I happen to think Christian communities have unique resources to foster resilience, although I certainly *don't* claim resilience as a uniquely Christian virtue. Jews, Muslims, Buddhists, Hindus, heck, even—maybe *especially*—Pagans and atheists have their own unique resources for resilience (and that's hardly an exhaustive list). But I'm writing for Christians right now and my message is that *we* have largely untapped resources for resilience in our tradition. And in the face of climate change *that's good news*. Maybe not exactly of the sort we'd hoped for, but precisely the sort we need. I'll unpack that more in my next post, but here's a short teaser.

Within the Transition movement resilience is not a top-down program of specified responses. Among its core insights are these: we need to enliven imagination in a political-economic-cultural system designed to shut it down; we need to tap into deep agency, both as individuals and as local communities; we need to reclaim and share the very earthbound skills required in this moment; and we need to do these things without waiting for permission from the "governing" (political, corporate, and cultural) forces around us.[45]

There are surprising resonances between these Transition insights and the Jesus story and the early church as glimpsed in Acts and Paul's epistles. Surprising, because as a whole from Constantine onward the church has sought to be *entwined* with political-economic power and dominant cultures rather than to challenge (even subvert) them for the sake of the Gospel. But there are hints we were redeemed … for resilience. Next week we'll start there.

PS: I've set up a Patreon site to help fund my work in this area. I hope you'll invest in my thinking and writing. You can learn more about how to support me here: www.patreon.com/fullfrontalfaith

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The Gospel in Transition by David R. Weiss is a year of reflections on facing our climate crisis, finding hope, and the alchemy of Christian community. My weekly essays consider climate change, Transition, and faith—using biblical images, liturgical seasons, science, and theology, as conversation partners. Writing in a voice a bit too restless to call "devotional," I aim to be insightfully evocative and usefully provocative. I'd be delighted to have you join me on this journey. **Subscribe at www.davidrweiss.com.** Thanks for reading and see you next week! **drw59mn@gmail.com**

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[44] www.transitionnetwork.org/news-and-blog/building-resilience

[45] These insights are called out by Rob Hopkins and Sarah McAdams in "The Transition Movement: Past, Present, and Future," a keynote roundtable discussion during the 2018 Transition US Tenth Anniversary Online Summit: www.transitiongathering.org/videos.

Redeemed for Resilience

David R. Weiss – March 2, 2019
The Gospel in Transition #13 – **Subscribe at www.davidrweiss.com**

This week's post further introduces the notion of being "redeemed for resilience," but before we turn to that I need explain a bit about why both parts of that claim might catch many who identify with the Christian tradition off guard. I ended my last post asserting that there are surprising resonances between key insights of the Transition movement and the Jesus story and the early church as glimpsed in Acts and Paul's epistles. I called these touch points "surprising" because the church that nearly all of us know is on *this side* of Constantine.

Although Constantine's "conversion" to Christianity and the subsequent "conversion" of Christianity to the imperial religion of the Roman Empire makes for a complicated tale, the basic shift is pretty clear. Over the course of the fourth century, Christianity transformed itself from a faith that lived at the edges of society—and quite set off from political power (at times persecuted by it)—to a religion at ease with … and entangled with the dominant political power … and invested in its preservation and expansion.

It's hard to overstate this shift. Both the initial pitch and dynamic of the gospel message are aimed at those who live—and die—at the edge of power. In the wake of Jesus' historical ministry, the early church, while clearly beset by its own internal struggles over the role of women, the embrace of the Gentiles, and a host of other topics, nevertheless distinguished itself as a Spirit-driven movement. From Constantine onward the Spirit was increasingly domesticated—*hobbled* would be accurate.

Those with political power typically regard religion as an asset to be used to their benefit. And from Emperor Constantine to President Trump this has most often meant using "Christianity" to unite nations and baptize patriotism (often alongside colonizing or otherwise suppressing "others"). The unity and the patriotism are shaped by the values of the dominant powers of the day and rarely reflect the gospel values of Jesus. And the more thoroughly such "Christianity" is interwoven with the dominant culture that supports that dominant political power, the more we all become … docile. And while you likely won't find "docile" listed as an antonym to "resilient" in your thesaurus (I checked mine), it's close enough. If resilience is what we need, docility is what we can't afford.

This isn't to say that threads of the initial Jesus' movement haven't found their way forward past Constantine. They have. But post-Constantine the most authentic expressions of the gospel dynamic are often relegated to the exceptional. Reserved for the domain of personal piety, "radical" communities (whether convent, monastery, commune, or even cult), or, in moderation, congregations.

But what if we were *redeemed … for resilience?* What if the commission to carry the gospel to the ends of the Earth was less (*or not at all!*) about savings souls for Jesus and more (*or entirely!*) about helping to unleash the power of the gospel to humanize societies and to harmonize them with ecosystems around the globe? Hint: that's where I'm putting all my chips.

Redeemed. Christian vocabulary is loaded with land mines. And while the twin attics of Christian history and theology display remarkable diversity, common understandings are often unhelpfully narrow. I *don't* mean, "redeemed from our sins"—especially not where "sins" is reduced to rule-breaking that buys us a one-way ticket to damnation unless we're somehow "redeemed." No. When I say, "redeemed," I mean something much less and much more.

Much less in that I'm not talking about some supernatural transaction that plays out across the scope of eternity; I'm talking about having our worldview "bought back," re-directed at the rather mundane level of daily life. *Much more* in that I actually believe *THIS* is what Jesus intended: a "re-purchasing" of our imagination and our actions such that we honor the image of God in our neighbors

and the dignity of creation all around us. *Much more* in that this is redemption that bears fruit here and now, which happens to be not only where we most need it, but also where God most desires it.

Resilience. Recall that Rob Hopkins, co-founder of the Transition movement, describes resilience as the capacity "to withstand shock and then adapt … to think on one's feet in any given situation." But he adds that even more than this, resilience is able to meet shock/threat "as an opportunity to step forward and engage … in a positive and creative way."[46]

I have sometimes described "faith" to my students as NOT the set of beliefs we hold but the internal-intuitive *posture* (trusting, fearful, cynical, judgmental, etc.) *with which we lean into life*. That faith/posture is both birthed and fostered by the beliefs, practices, biases, and experiences at play around us. In this sense, *resilience is a faith/posture cultivated to meet the world in the midst of its acknowledged threats nonetheless grounded in trust*. Not a naïve trust that everything will just somehow work out, but a more gritty trust that somehow—as a community of people (beginning at the most local levels) we can make choices that move us in the direction of living harmoniously on a finite planet. That's resilience.

And at its authentic heart, Christianity is a story with the power to redeem us for resilience, to reshape our worldview decisively—*redemptively*—such that (among other things) we turn from living *off* the world to living *in/with* the world. And we make this "turn" with such vitality and joy that words like "born again" (John 3:1-8) or "new creation" (2 Corinthians 5:16-20) are legitimate hyperbole.

Last fall, on the tenth anniversary of its arrival in the U.S., two Transition movement leaders identified several of its core insights as these: (1) to enliven imagination in a political-economic-cultural system designed to shut it down; (2) to tap into deep agency, both as individuals and as local communities; (3) to reclaim and share the very earthbound skills required in this moment; and (4) to do these things without waiting for permission from the "governing" (political, corporate, and cultural) forces around us.[47]

In the coming weeks I'll explore each insight as it has echoes in Christianity. I'll argue that not only Jesus' parables and teaching but also the early church's use of language, imagery, and ritual are precisely efforts *to enliven imagination in a political-economic-cultural system designed to shut it down*. I'll assert that Jesus' commissioning of disciples and Paul's call to exercise "bold speech" on behalf of the gospel both seek *to tap into deep agency, both as individuals and as local communities*. I'll suggest that Jesus' teaching about "the least of these" (among others) as well as the portrait of the early church found in both Acts and Paul's letters in a certain sense anticipate *the need to reclaim and share the very earthbound skills required in this moment*. And I'll propose that both Jesus' ministry and Paul's vision for the church are rife with invitations *to do these things without waiting for permission from the "governing" (political, corporate, and cultural) forces around us*.

Next week we begin by looking at Jesus and the early church as an exercise in enlivening our imagination. I hope you'll be back.

PS: I've set up a Patreon site to help fund my work in this area. I hope you'll invest in my thinking and writing. You can learn more about how to support me here: www.patreon.com/fullfrontalfaith

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[46] www.transitionnetwork.org/news-and-blog/building-resilience

[47] Rob Hopkins and Sarah McAdams in "The Transition Movement: Past, Present, and Future," roundtable discussion, 2018 Transition US Tenth Anniversary Online Summit: www.transitiongathering.org/videos.

Resilience – as Imagination

David R. Weiss – March 15, 2019
The Gospel in Transition #14 – **Subscribe at www.davidrweiss.com**

The Transition movement is grounded a two-fold recognition.[48] First, fossil fuel is finite and, at some point in the not too distant future, production *will* begin to decline, leading to cost increases that will *require* us to transition to other energy sources. That's not about preference or convenience, it's about (initially) economic necessity and (eventually) material necessity when oil and gas become not simply costly but downright scarce. Second, we now know—and have known for decades!—that using fossil fuels is slow-cooking the planet. It's altering the atmosphere in ways that will have repercussions on Earth's climate for decades even after we stop using them.

Ultimately this isn't a matter of political debate or a lifestyle preference. It's about a fast approaching collision between past (and present!) choices, scientific fact, and basic math. And sadly, primarily because of corporate and political and even religious resistance (add in some personal human stubbornness as well, but this is *small* compared to the other driving forces) this is going to be an ugly collision.

So Transition takes it for granted that we NEED to transition away from an economic life (and a culinary life and a cultural life and a transportation life and a recreational life …) that depends on fossil fuel. In that sense, transition itself isn't so much a choice the transition movement argues for, as it is simply the shape of the future it foresees. *We will transition*. What makes Transition distinctive, though, is that it has no interest in going into that fossil fuel-less world kicking and screaming, nor even with somber resignation. No, it's *eager* to pursue transition because the Transition movement sees a host of *good things* coming our way. More on that later, but in short it sees the our transition away from fossil fuel as offering the opportunity to renew communities in vibrant, localized way that will deepen our humanity, our health, and our joy.

BUT—that doesn't mean the aforementioned collision is going to be anything other than ugly. Which is where resilience comes in. More than merely the capacity to bounce back after a hard shock, in Transition, resilience includes the inner confidence that as communities we can, indeed, withstand the coming shock, and can move forward beyond it … toward something that may be radically simpler but also radically better. And *therefore* rather than passively waiting for the shock to hit us, resilience says we can *choose* to move toward that fossil fuel-less future. Resilience allows us to lean into transition with an urgency that is tempered by both confidence and longing. One key facet of resilience, as I mentioned in my last post, is *to enliven imagination in a political-economic-cultural system designed to shut it down*.[49]

Fossil fuel dependency endangers both us and the planet so "effectively" because it permeates so many systems. It's central to producing and transporting almost everything we make and much of the food we eat. We rely on it to light and heat our homes, run our appliances, and get us from here to there to everywhere. It's bound up with our comfort and convenience, but also with many things necessary for civilized society. Put all these things together and it's just plain hard to imagine other ways of life that are so drenched (in largely unseen, non-greasy ways) in oil.

Add to this short list that the fossil fuel industry is extraordinarily profitable, and we have a scenario in which lack of imagination isn't simply a matter of personal or even societal laziness, it's *orchestrated*. We live in a political-economic-cultural system *designed* to shut imagination down. Today we may be more nuanced in our understanding of how these systems work, but, as I've noted earlier (GIT #6 "Home by Another Route") this is hardly a new insight altogether. It's exactly what the apostle Paul means when he observes that our lives are constrained not only by the temptations

[48] http://transitionus.org/why-transition
[49] Rob Hopkins and Sarah McAdams in "The Transition Movement: Past, Present, and Future," roundtable discussion, 2018 Transition US Tenth Anniversary Online Summit: www.transitiongathering.org/videos.

or the mere limits that come with being human but also by "powers and principalities"—amoral but deadly forces that get embedded in systems. Human choices conspire with them, but even human passivity acts as accomplice because these forces operate with a relentless inertia of their own that welcomes our indifference … or our distraction.[50]

In this context—and spanning two thousand years—Jesus' parables and teaching persist as seeds that seek to expand our vision beyond what is and focus our attention on what matters. Such gifts are more necessary than ever today because the stakes involve the entire human community as well the flora and fauna across the planet. Churches (indeed faith communities of all stripes) MUST become places where enlivening our capacity for vital social imagination is not viewed as a civic nicety separate from church but as a ministry imperative. It is the pressure of the gospel on the present moment—and it is always pressing for transformation.

Thus, it is a matter of remembering—and reclaiming—*who we are*. At the heart of Jesus' ministry was his announcement of the "kingdom of God." More clumsily—but more accurately—rendered as "the activity of God reigning as king," Jesus' parables, healings, and table fellowship both image and embody the surprise and reversal that accompany the energy of God as it moves through our world.

While Jesus uses kingdom language (likely as a *severe critique* of human kingship) we might today name the positive dynamic of divine energy as *kin-making* activity. This radical unsettling grace transforms children, Samaritans, women, even lepers into mascots of God's kin-dom. It resides as the revolutionary spirit behind Jesus' commission that we see his visage on the least of these in our world. It drives Paul to declare a "new creation" in which there is "neither Jew nor Greek, neither slave nor free, nor male and female" (Gal. 3:28). *Of course* these differences remain, *but they no longer serve as reasons for division*. (*Except* that the powers and principalities continue to play these differences off against each other: rich vs. poor; human vs. nonhuman; first world vs. developing world; labor vs. environment, etc.)

For this reason, *biblical literacy is a progressive Christian value*. It enables us recover the full power of the gospel, producing inward *and* outward transformation at both personal *and* societal levels. The gospel declares the love of God for the *whole* of creation and beckons us to imagine a world—in *this* world—that echoes God's love, not simply for those most like us, but even and especially for those least among us, whether human or non-human. This imagining is what the Transition movement calls for, although it frames this in secular language. But as faith communities we not only have a clear doorway into this conversation, we also have both a heritage to honor and a vocation to answer. Called to be this generation's new creation community, Christian imagination invites us to lean into transition with an urgency that is tempered by both confidence and longing.

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[50] Just in February 2019 Joe Balash, U.S. assistant secretary for land and minerals management told a meeting of companies involved in oil exploration, "One of the things I have found absolutely thrilling (!) in working for this administration is that the president has a knack for keeping the attention of the media and the public focused somewhere else while we do all the work that needs to be done on behalf of the American people." Whether he's serious or cynical in calling this "work on behalf of the American people," his recognition that the fossil fuel industry is aided by distraction is all too accurate. www.theguardian.com/environment/2019/mar/14/offshore-drilling-trump-official-reveals-plan-and-distractions-delight.

Resilience – as Deep Agency

David R. Weiss – March 17, 2019
The Gospel in Transition #15 – **Subscribe at www.davidrweiss.com**

As I begin week 15 of my yearlong pledge, I'm keenly aware that each post I write begs for further development. Many of these short essays contain the seeds enough for an entire book chapter in them. Perhaps eventually I'll come back to selected posts and fill them out further. For now the discipline of weekly blogging is helpful in getting a wide array of ideas out of the table, and I trust that as I devote myself further to this work, next steps will present themselves.

In this post I want to consider the second of four key facets to the Transition movement: that we must tap into deep agency, both as individuals and as local communities.[51] Transition names the necessary commitment to shift away from the dominant expression of modern life insofar as it depends on intensive fossil fuel consumption. It seeks this transition because it recognizes that fossil fuel use is directly tied the catastrophic climate change currently occurring around the world, and also because it asserts that we can actually live *fuller* lives when we choose social patterns that are more in keeping with the planet's natural limits.

Such patterns will produce lives that are overall necessarily (and rewardingly) more local in meeting the whole range of human needs. Precisely because these transitions will succeed only to the extent they fit their context, they require *deep agency*. Part of Transition movement's wisdom is to trust that there is no central monopoly on environmental wisdom. Almost by its nature—indeed, *by the planet's nature*—all environmental wisdom is local. Each place has its own unique eco-character and if human communities are to live in harmony with the planet that will happen place by place by place.

In transition, no one size fits all. No top-down hierarchy calls the shots. Yes, there are a number of requisite principles and skills. But beyond them, improvisation wins the day. And the hallmark of improvisation with integrity in one's own ecological context is deep agency. It is knowing who we are, where we are, what's needed in *this* place (both for Earth and for community)—and then making real choices toward transition from this knowledge. Imagination, creativity, vision, knowledge—these are foundational. But the energy to animate all of them in coordination rests in deep agency: the near miracle of taking charge of our lives within worlds that profit by keeping us consumer-cogs of the status quo. Deep agency involves becoming citizen-architects of the world that awaits our fashioning.

Citizen-architects. Who knew this could be such a high Christian calling? Well, Jesus and Paul, for two. And the author of Luke-Acts as well. Not that it is much in evidence in most churches today, where personal-communal-religious-civic agency are often a buried legacy, covered over by the multiple powers of clergy, money, tradition, and fear, all of which tend to erase the deep agency that is our vocation and Christian birthright. I'm *not* anti-clergy, though I might make an exception in a few specific instances … and I'm *not* anti-tradition, though I'm decidedly wary of traditions that too easily become more focused on self-preservation rather than anchoring vibrant responses to the present and being open to self-transformation in that process.

However, the vocation of citizen-architect—part of the church's earliest tradition—is one tradition essential to fostering the deep agency needed for transition. It begins in Jesus' ministry, where time and again Jesus himself shows far less interest in being atop a hierarchy than his later followers imagine (which they do more to their benefit than to the gospel's). Jesus, for his part, sends the disciples out in pairs (Matt. 10:1-15 ‖ Luke 10:1-20) telling them to share with those in need the same energy that swirls within him—and to do so freely. In fact, Jesus promises them

[51] I introduced these in GIT #13, "Redeemed for Resilience." They were identified by Rob Hopkins and Sarah McAdams in "The Transition Movement: Past, Present, and Future," roundtable discussion, 2018 Transition US Tenth Anniversary Online Summit: www.transitiongathering.org/videos.

(John 14:12) they will ultimately do things *beyond* what they've seen Jesus himself do. Not because they become greater than Jesus, but because the Spirit's empowering energy within the community of his followers will ripen over time.

This commissioning as veritable equals becomes yet clearer when Jesus extends the "keys to the kingdom" to his disciples (Matt. 16:9). He tells them their authority is now sufficient to "bind or loose" (to forbid or permit) which, I'd argue, is less about establishing rules than it is about charting the way forward into uncharted territory. In a similar scene in John's Gospel Jesus breathes on the disciples as a way of sharing God's Breath/Spirit with them (John 20:22). It is about conferring deep agency. And doing so, not so much in his absence, but in his ongoing though invisible presence (John 14:15-28). Matthew captures this in the closing words of his Gospel, "And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age" (Matt. 28:20).

So Jesus establishes a community committed to a new way of being together in the world grounded in a notion of God's radical grace and manifest in the practice of compassion toward one another. And he tethers them not to a fixed set of rules but to the living presence of Spirit, confident that the Spirit will guide the church as it exercises deep agency. When Luke extends his tale of Jesus from the Gospel into the Acts of the Apostles, he continues to show prayer as intentional opening to the Spirit. Just as Luke's Jesus carries out his ministry persistently grounding his actions in prayer, Luke offers a portrait of the early church similarly drawing its life out of prayer. Its devotional life, to be sure (Acts 1:14; Acts 2:42), *but also its socio-economic life* (Acts 2:44-45). The early church was not simply (perhaps not even primarily) a movement driven by beliefs about the next world, but a daring, Spirit-driven movement about life in *this* world.

Still, citizen-architects? *Yes, exactly*. When St. Paul exhorts the early church at Corinth to "exercise bold speech" (2 Corinthians 3:12, often rendered—domesticated!—as "acting with boldness") he is, in fact, using the Greek word (*parresia*) that is the specific term for the "free speech" exercised only by the free property-owning men who gathered in the assembly of Roman cities to chart their community's future.[52] The Christians to whom Paul was writing would have known this—precisely because it was speech forbidden to many of them: women, aliens, and slaves. Yet, emphatically for Paul, it was the baptismal birthright of *every person* in the church (free, slave, male, female, rich, poor, Jew, Gentile) to have *parresia*. Such bold speech was none other than the deep agency that guided the unfolding future of the church.

Once again we see why *biblical literacy is a progressive Christian value*. Our roots run back to a church in which agency was granted to—*indeed commissioned to*—every member in the community. This deep agency was fed by the gospel announcement of grace and the gospel praxis of compassion, and guided by the Spirit. *Our Christian vocation is to be citizen-architects of a different world*. In each generation we are called to envision the world that is needed—and then to bring that world into being. In *this* generation the world needed is one in transition. We'll need to learn much from those beyond the church to better understand the world that is needed. But the breadth of empowerment that can help bring it to life…*that* lies within our own heritage, if only we dare to reclaim it. *I say it's time to take that dare*.

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[52] David Fredrickson, "Free Speech in Pauline Political Theology," *Word & World*, 12:4 (1992), pp. 345-351.

Resilience – and Earthbound Skills

David R. Weiss – March 24, 2019
The Gospel in Transition #16 – **Subscribe at www.davidrweiss.com**

This week I take up the third of four key facets to the Transition Movement: that we reclaim and share the very earthbound skills required in this moment.[53] If you hear a soft-spoken ominous edge in that phrase, it's intentional. Transition does *not* promote a doomsday portrait of the future. But it is a *movement made by math*, so to speak, and the numbers—from those that estimate the oil/gas reserves beneath the ground to those that measure with apocalyptic precision the rising CO2 in the atmosphere above us—well, the numbers portend a future that (like it or not) will look *very different* from the one we've taken as our birthright.

Thus, Transition asks us to imagine moving *toward* that future rather than denying its need or passively waiting for its inevitable encroachment into our lives. For one, that future will be dramatically less centered around the extraction and use of fossil fuel. But, more than this, that future—sooner or later—will also (and just as necessarily) be centered less around consumption period. Even as we develop newer, cleaner ways to generate energy, produce goods, and get around—quite apart from all such advances—*we inhabit a finite planet*. Even with an abundance of renewable energy, the material wealth we count as "success" cannot be extended across the globe without exhausting the planet itself. Whether we embrace a renewed appreciation for simplicity on this side or the far side of socio-industrial-ecological collapse is up to us. Embracing it on this side, might actually avoid forcing our children to face life on the far side. Or maybe not; hard to say. There's that soft-spoken ominous edge again.

Nevertheless, Transition places its focus on the surprising goodness of lives that choose "local and less" in the genuine confidence that these choices actually mean "deeper and more." Which brings us to what I've named "earthbound skills."

The big-picture lecture I give about Christian spirituality in a time of climate change is titled "At Home on Earth." I chose that title because I think the roots of our disastrous relationship with this planet and its entire ecological community are tied up with an unspoken assumption that since our "true" (heavenly?) home, is somewhere other than this place, whatever this place is, it's NOT home and so it doesn't really count. On the contrary, I think the *truest* Christian message—the truest *human* message regardless of which faith tradition it's refracted through—is that *Earth is home*. Regardless of how you or I think about an afterlife, in *this* life … and during the lives of all the generations before and after us … Earth is home. It provides all our material needs, and we overstep its capacity to provide (we take at a rate faster than nature can renew) to the detriment of all (human and nonhuman) who come after us and many who share the planet with us right now.

When a finite planet is home, *simplicity* (an active notion of enough that is humane and ecologically sensible) *is at once a moral obligation and an act of reverence*. Thankfully, as Transition suggests, it is also a choice for festive wisdom: it is the doorway through which lies existential joy. Not to the exclusion of natural disaster, unforeseen tragedy, human sorrow—these will always be found within the fabric of finitude. But when life is lived oriented toward "local and less" even these become more bearable because community grows stronger when it reflects the planet's preferences, of which an intimate acquaintance with enough is front and center.

So, by "earthbound skills," I mean the practical knowledge that helps us reclaim the sense of Earth … *as Home*. There are a multitude of such skills that Transition thinking identifies and supports. They literally span the gamut of our lives: food, housing, transportation, education, healthcare. How would we

[53] I introduced these in GIT #13, "Redeemed for Resilience." They were identified by Rob Hopkins and Sarah McAdams in "The Transition Movement: Past, Present, and Future," roundtable discussion, 2018 Transition US Tenth Anniversary Online Summit: www.transitiongathering.org/videos.

retool our lives—beginning locally, personally, in our natural communities—if we took seriously the need to "homestead"? To live as if *this place*—right here—needed to sustain us indefinitely, and by drawing fairly on resources available to us and to others? Because, um, *it does*. What would we work to undo? What new projects would we envision and undertake? (There are lots of resources to seed this conversation and someday I'll dedicate a whole column to them; www.transitionus.org/knowledge-hub is a gateway to many resources. Right now my own learning curve remains steep!)

My goal today is to say that while this may strike us as a radical, almost disorienting shift in worldview, it shouldn't. It actually has ancient roots within Christianity, albeit roots we've neglected too long except as aspirational imagery.

When Luke tells us that the early church held everything in common, with members sharing freely out of their excess and receiving freely for their needs (Acts 2:44-45; 4:32-35), he isn't describing some perfect eschatological commune. He's offering a mundane image of an imperfect church grasped by a worldview that saw the church radically called to be there for each other. If you read the rest of Acts you see how imperfect it was at times, and yet it *was* a community seeking to live out Jesus' invitation that we see his face in the eyes of those in need (Matthew 25:32-45). It *was* a community imagining life beyond the value-laden divisions of Jew and Greek, slave and free, male and female, rich and poor (Gal. 3:28; I Cor. 11:17-22). It *was* a community experimenting with truth (as Gandhi might say) in being the Body of Christ (I Cor. 12) where the diversity of gifts (spiritual, intellectual, emotional, practical) was not intended for competition but for compassion, for sustaining the health of the whole Body together.

Obviously, in the early church this mindset was not exercised against the backdrop of an impending climate crisis, but it was communally embodied … in daily life … shaped by the context of its day … fueled by vivid spiritual imagery and ritual … in a society that dismissed (and at times persecuted) this intermingling of justice and joy. *And we need those things today*. One of the transcendent (nearly theological) insights of the Transition Movement is that when localized community energy is freely shared to meet the needs of the moment in shaping a better (less fossil-fuel-fed) future, in that exchange, community is strengthened, justice happens (needs are met without exploitation), joy is generated—and in the midst of all of this: *hope grows and imagination reaches out yet farther*.

Church communities are "pre-seeded soil" for this type of eco-centered ministry. The same energy that undergirds church potlucks, funeral luncheons, quilting groups, workdays, etc. (energy often flagging today, but still echoing in our traditions), might … *must* be revitalized and redirected as one part of the larger movement to transition away from acquisitive lives that have never been truly abundant and toward lives that offer us so much more. Among the local "needs of this moment" are an array of mundane "home-making" skills, some of them from reclaimed from yesteryear, others leaning into tomorrow. All of them will prosper through cross-generational skills-sharing in communities where diverse gifts and generous spirits abide.

Indeed, if churches choose to revitalize and deepen their practice of Christian fellowship, applying it earnestly toward *Earth fellowship* as envisioned by the Transition Movement, they'll find not only a wealth of renewed energy and hope, they'll discover what it feels like to know Earth as God intended: as Home.

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Resilience – Without Waiting for Permission

David R. Weiss – March 28, 2019
The Gospel in Transition #17 – **Subscribe at www.davidrweiss.com**

From catastrophic flooding in the U.S. Midwest[54] to Cyclone Idai's devastation of southeastern Africa[55] to the recent confirmation we're living in the warmest decade since records have been kept,[56] the reality of climate change is hitting us everywhere these days. Except in Congress, where we continue to be regularly embarrassed by politicians who take the floor to mock climate science and ignore the suffering being multiplied all around us.[57] Taken together, these two observations explain the fourth core insight of the Transition Movement: that we should (1) enliven imagination, (2) tap into deep agency, (3) reclaim and share earthbound skills … (4) *without waiting for permission from the "governing" (political, corporate, and cultural) forces around us*.[58]

Convinced that climate change is already upon us—and that any livable future will necessarily look different than the past-present that brought us to this point—Transition believes that the faster we embrace that different future, the better off we and all future generations will be. And Transition affirms that the fastest, healthiest way to transition is *local*. Local transition leverages the energy available among people in neighborhoods and communities as its own natural resource. Resilience in the face of climate change arises not only by changing how we live but also by *strengthening the bonds* that join us to each other as we work for a human community more in harmony with the planet. Resilience is as much a social deepening as it is a technological transformation.

Transition's fourth insight is critical because the "governing" (political, corporate, and cultural) forces around us are often *conflicted*—so entangled in profit interests or the preservation of power that they actually become tools in *preventing* the changes needed for our survival. Only rarely do they actively foster positive change. And if we wait for their permission to transition, our worlds—both social and natural, both local and global—will be in a shambles before we're officially "permitted" to change. This is yet another place where Christian origins can inspire us today.

The Jesus movement unfolded in a society … *without permission*. In Jesus' day, Roman society espoused values that ran wholly contrary to the radical hospitality and compassion that Jesus taught and practiced. Even the dominant expression of Jesus' own Jewish tradition—deeply grounded by the prophets in hospitality and compassion—was persistently tempted to seek ways to preserve a measure of its own power under Roman rule so that it also worked to suppress its best impulses. Indeed they both exerted enormous political, social, and religious pressure to conform to values designed to keep society fragmented and stratified between a variety of in-group/out-group divisions that left no room, *no permission*, for community that didn't come at the expense of some "other."

For Jesus to announce the good news of God's grace—radical acceptance-welcome-affirmation—as the basis for a new community could only happen by *not waiting for permission*. Across my last four essays I've given just the barest glimpses into some of the ways that the ministry of the historical Jesus and the earliest patterns of the Christian church were far more *this worldly* in their

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[54] www.thinkprogress.org/deadly-flooding-midwest-nebraska-climate-impacts-ac8865fd6160
[55] www.theguardian.com/world/2019/mar/19/cyclone-idai-worst-weather-disaster-to-hit-southern-hemisphere-mozambique-malawi
[56] www.truthout.org/articles/were-living-in-the-warmest-decade-since-record-keeping-began
[57] www.commondreams.org/news/2019/03/26/if-guy-can-be-senator-you-can-do-anything-progressives-mock-mike-lees-climate-speech
[58] I introduced these in GIT #13, "Redeemed for Resilience." They were identified by Rob Hopkins and Sarah McAdams in "The Transition Movement: Past, Present, and Future," roundtable discussion, 2018 Transition US Tenth Anniversary Online Summit: www.transitiongathering.org/videos.

focus than many of us grew up thinking. This is not to say that Jesus and the earliest Christians did not have truly deep convictions about an Ultimate and Gracious Reality they knew as God. But it is to be clear that they *experienced God* as impinging graciously *in this world:* redeeming … renewing … altogether remaking the conditions in which human life found possibility. And that aspect of Jesus ministry and the early church is profoundly worth reclaiming today.[59]

A few snippets. In a classic exchange with the Pharisees (Mk 12:13-17 || Mt 22:15-22 || Lk 20:20-26), Jesus is asked whether it's lawful to pay tribute to Caesar. It's a trick question. To say, Yes—as Roman law demanded—would break Jewish law by paying the tax (as required) with a coin that proclaimed Caesar as god. To say, No—as Jewish law demanded in its strict rejection of any actions that gave even the appearance of idolatry—would break Roman law. Jesus' good options are reduced to none. But in a move that perhaps anticipates James T. Kirk's response to the *Kobayashi Maru* dilemma in Star Trek,[60] Jesus … cheats. Well, he alters the frame.

After asking whose image appears on a Roman coin, Jesus responds, "Then give to Caesar the things that are Caesar's and to God the things that are God's." The catch is two-fold. First, for a Jew *all things are God's*, leaving—in truth—nothing that belongs to Caesar. Second, for a Jew, because every human being bears the image of God—and together in our common humanity and infinite diversity we bear witness to the unity and infinity of God—and therefore, that paltry Roman coin, with its cheap attempt to replicate the very finite image of Caesar endlessly across the empire … well, actually it just shows how far short Caesar falls of the greatness of God. So if you must pay the tax to survive, you will not be judged for that. In fact, your payment might even be made as something of an insult to the Emperor.[61]

But that is not to say that every hard choice has an easy out. When we consider new mining initiatives in Minnesota's northlands or the Line 3 pipeline project: whose image is reflected in the boundary waters? Whose life-giving nature appears in the aquifers beneath the land? Whose sacred presence is known in the wild rice? Whose character upholds the weight of treaties (even if we choose to break them)? These questions do not resolve on so neat a turn of wit. But to recall that Jesus reframed dilemmas to reveal both their stakes and our other options is critical for us today.

Walter Wink (among others) reveals the extent to which the Jesus' famous words (Mt 5:39-42 || Lk 6:29-30), about turning a cheek, giving a cloak, or walking an extra mile are *all* exhortations to not simply trust in the long arc of the moral universe, but to *bend it* with nonviolent human action.[62] Perhaps because, if the moral arc of the universe bends toward justice, it will be because of those who bear the image of the God of justice jumping on it with all their might. With all their hope.

Perhaps that's the place to pause today. More about Wink's discussion—and *how we jump*—next time.

PS: I've set up a Patreon site to help fund my work in this area. I hope you'll invest in my thinking and writing. You can learn more about how to support me here: www.patreon.com/fullfrontalfaith

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[59] There are multiple sources for this. I've found Marcus Borg particularly insightful and compelling—across all his writing, but most clearly presented here: *Jesus: A New Vision* (HarperSanFrancisco, 1987) and *Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time* (HarperSanFrancisco, 1994).

[60] www.en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kobayashi_Maru. Far be it from me to call Kirk a messianic figure, however he does seem to share with Jesus the confidence that there is no such thing as a no-win scenario.

[61] www.theshalomcenter.org/content/god-caesar-image-coin. There's *a lot more* going on here than I discuss above.

[62] Walter Wink, *The Powers That Be* (NY: Doubleday, 1998), pp. 98-111.

Resilience – and Jesus' Third Way

David R. Weiss – March 31, 2019
The Gospel in Transition #18 – **Subscribe at www.davidrweiss.com**

I closed my last essay with a reference to Walter Wink's discussion of the largely unrecognized *radical* character of Jesus' famous words about turning a cheek, giving a cloak, or walking an extra mile. I characterized them as exhortations to not simply trust in the long arc of the moral universe, but to *bend it* with nonviolent human action.[63] And I promised more about Wink's discussion—and *how we jump*—in this next post. We still won't quite make it to jumping today, but we'll take a good look at Wink and see how he can help with resilience.

So let's turn to the text in question (Mt 5:39-42 ‖Lk 6:29-30; Wink considers Matthew's version closer to Jesus' original words than Luke's). For two millennia most Christians have likely presumed these verses either advocate a Christian pacifism that is impossibly perfect (beyond the reach of all but true saints)—or they advise an unpromising *passivism* that sees virtue in simply accepting whatever ill-treatment other persons or social systems throw our way. Wink says it's neither of these, and he's adamant that the wisdom in these verses offers us a measure of revolutionary savvy that is as crucial today as it was for Jesus' first listeners.

Each of the three situations Jesus mentions was an occasion, easily imaginable for his hearers, for humiliation by someone with greater power. When he refers to being struck on the *right* cheek (Mt 5:39b) he's discussing a back-handed slap by a right hand wielded by someone in power (master, husband, Roman) to put a person of lesser status in their place (slave, wife, Jew). Such a strike was not meant to cause outward injury but public and inward humiliation: to re-inscribe the lines of domination in the relationship. It could *only* be administered with the right hand (and *only* to the right cheek) because only that hand could uphold one's honor. The left hand was reserved—by indelible cultural-religious tradition among both Jews and Romans—for "unclean" tasks like cleaning oneself after using the toilet. It was *socially impossible* to conceive of using one's left hand to assert dominance.

Thus, when Jesus instructs his hearers to "turn the other cheek" he *isn't* counseling them to submit to humiliation. He's inviting them *to turn the tables*. Because to offer the other cheek (the *left* cheek) is to say, "My dignity is not yours to take." And while the left hand is utterly unavailable for use by the person in power, to use the right hand to now strike the left cheek is a movement that *confers* equality—and the recipient's right to self-defense, perhaps even retaliation. This remark by Jesus is ripe with wisdom for exercising dignity and self-worth in the face of a dehumanizing system. *And we mostly never knew*.

Jesus continues, "If someone seizes your coat, give them your cloak as well" (Mt 5:40). As Wink discusses, the Hebrew Bible provides several references to the rights of creditors over those in debt to them. If a debtor is too poor to offer anything of real value to secure a debt, the creditor may claim the debtor's outer garment as "collateral," though he must return it *each night* so the debtor can use it as a blanket against the cold. With no material value, it's an exercise in daily humiliation by one Jew against another, a public reminder of just who the "haves" and "have nots" are in the community.

However, in a culture where to see the nakedness of another was a powerful taboo—a transgression that shamed *the one viewing* far more than the one naked—Jesus tells poor debtors *to turn the tables*. If a creditor shows up in the morning to insist on claiming their collateral for the day—your outer garment (a claim that serves only to humiliate you), then strip yourself naked and offer *all* your clothes. The insufferable pettiness of such creditors will be revealed in their shame. Again, the words are about preserving dignity in a situation where it's literally up for grabs. *And we mostly never knew*.

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[63] Walter Wink, *The Powers That Be: Theology for a New Millennium* (NY: Doubleday, 1998), pp. 98-111. This text offers a very accessible discussion of Wink's more scholarly treatment in *Engaging the Powers: Discernment and Resistance in a World of Domination* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992), pp. 175-193—itself a chapter based on Wink's exegetical analysis in "Neither Passivity nor Violence: Jesus' Third Way," *Forum* 7 (1991), pp. 5-28.

Finally, immediately after this (Mt 5:41) Jesus tells his listeners to "go a second mile" with anyone who asks them to walk a first one. But, critically, such a request was *never* made by just anyone. It was *exactly* the "request" that any Roman soldier could make of any civilian to "walk with them for one mile"—and carry their sixty-plus pound backpack as well. Jews were a frequent target of such requests, which were a weighty reminder of who represented the occupying force and whose land-culture-religion was occupied. Yet history also provides ample examples showing that Roman soldiers faced real disciplinary consequences for abusing the "one mile" limit to such requests.

Hence, under Jesus' advice, the moment a Jewish person walks (with backpack) into that "second mile," they're absolutely NOT extending an extra kindness—they are, in fact, *turning the tables*. Now the soldier no longer holds power; in fact, he's in very real danger of being disciplined himself. For a third time Jesus is advocating the exact opposite of quietly putting up with injustice. He's offering suggestions for a nonviolent transformation of the world. *And we mostly never knew*.

In fact, this threefold set of teachings is introduced by the phrase, "Do not resist the one who does you evil" (Mt 5:39a), which Wink argues is an unhelpful translation. The Greek word behind "resist" literally means "stand against," and it's used most often to describe battlefield encounters: where soldiers "stand (violently) against" one another. So Jesus is really saying, "Do not *stand-against-with-violence* the one who does you evil." Then he proceeds to offer examples of just how one might *stand-against-WITHOUT-violence* the one who does them evil. Wink describes this as Jesus' Third Way. In a world—from Jesus' day to ours—where options in conflict scenarios between unequal powers are often reduced to "fight or flight," *Jesus offers a Third Way*. A way that preserves—and amplifies—one's dignity and thereby aims to transform the dynamics of a no-win scenario into a moment with breathing space … and fresh potential.

And that's precisely what Transition communities aim to do. The "governing" (political, corporate, and cultural) forces around us—from fossil fuel industries to corporate lobbyists, bought-up politicians, and deep-seated and long-cultivated personal habits—all exercise inordinate power over our day-to-day choices and jeopardize our long-term future. We cannot wait for their permission to act differently. We must, in effect, borrow our authority from the future.[64] Once we can see which direction the arc of the moral universe *must* bend (think slavery, women's rights, civil rights, LGBTQ rights, human rights, etc.), *our task is to bend the arc*. Borrowing authority from the future and jumping on that arc with all our might.

Jesus' words encourage us today to resist those powers that threaten life and dignity *actively, nonviolently, and creatively*. This will sometimes involve saying "No!" with words, votes, and bodies to policies and projects that threaten Earth's wellbeing. As we engage in acts of resistance, we place ourselves in the company of the Hebrew prophets, countless Jewish martyrs, Jesus himself, and early Christians, all of whom knew that sometimes the affirmation of life begins with an emphatic, "No!" But just as importantly, other types of resistance say "Yes!" with words, votes, bodies—and especially as local communities—to patterns of life that find a Third Way forward, beyond what "permission" allows. *Those types of resistance are the soul of resilience*. We'll consider what they might look like next time.

PS: I've set up a Patreon site to help fund my work in this area. I hope you'll invest in my thinking and writing. You can learn more about how to support me here: www.patreon.com/fullfrontalfaith

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[64] I first heard this phrase from Amalia Vagts as she explained how Extraordinary Lutheran Ministries ordained LGBT persons for ministry without "permission" from the ELCA (pre-2009 policy change). Having prayerfully discerned the moral imperatives of the moment, she stated calmly, "We borrow our authority from the future." Amen.

Resilience – Bending the Arc

David R. Weiss – April 4, 2019
The Gospel in Transition #19 – **Subscribe at www.davidrweiss.com**

Today I want to conclude my thoughts (begun in GIT #17) on the fourth core insight of the Transition Movement: that we should (1) enliven imagination, (2) tap into deep agency, (3) reclaim and share earthbound skills … (4) *without waiting for permission from the "governing" (political, corporate, and cultural) forces around us*.[65] These forces are so entangled with profit and/or power that they're NOT going to offer permission, let alone support for us as we make the changes that are necessary for a transition away from fossil fuel intensive living. But we *must* transition—and quickly.

Moreover, the Transition Movement asserts that the transition needed is actually life-giving as well. Profits may suffer, power may be less concentrated, but life—that will be richer … more *abundant*, as Jesus called it. And I argued across my last two essays that Jesus, in fact, teaches about acting for good without waiting for permission—even when such actions are outright (and creatively) subversive of the status quo. I described what Walter Wink calls Jesus' "Third Way"[66] (an option beyond "fight or flight") as a way that preserves—and amplifies—human dignity, transforming the dynamics of a no-win scenario into a moment with breathing space … and fresh potential. And I suggested it invited us to not simply trust in the long arc of the moral universe, but to *bend it* with our own action.

As we face climate change—and systemic forces that constrain our options and obstruct our capacity for social transformation—besides imagination, energy, and skill, we must create moments with breathing space and fresh potential. And that's precisely what Transition communities aim to do. Moving with cheerful(!) energy away from a carbon-intensive society, they are localized invitations to jump on that long arc of the moral universe—believing that its arc is not inevitable but the result of concerted communal choice. This is NOT to suggest that God is indifference to the universe's moral character, but that *God counts on those who bear God's image to play a decisive role in shaping God's universe for good*.

But how? While this *will* (absolutely) sometimes involve saying "No!" to policies and projects that threaten Earth's wellbeing (and hopefully doing so with creative gusto and fierce resolve), *the defining resilience* of Transition Movement is its creative gusto in saying "Yes!" to patterns of life that bend the arc toward a more sustainable, regenerative flourishing of life. Transition also regards wisdom as necessarily local, contextual, so it doesn't offer definitive answers to how any given community might bend the arc. (And I'm also no expert, merely a fellow traveler along the way.) But I can offer some examples.

Transition Movement focuses on neighborhood connections, making a secular affirmation of Jesus' pronouncement that the Kin-dom of God[67] is at hand—near enough to touch … *perhaps waiting only upon our linked arms to burst into full bloom*. Since I'm writing for faith communities, I want to suggest ways for churches, which may not have a neighborhood-based membership but *do* have reservoirs of deep social bonds, to exercise the "Yes!" at the heart of resilience. Transition is rooted in learning the skills to live more lightly on the planet in community because that communal aspect not only stretches the reach of all the learning, it also activates joy and hope. Thus, the goal is precisely NOT to encourage these as individual endeavors but as opportunities to *mutually* build community and deepen planetary kinship … even reverence for creation.

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[65] As identified by Rob Hopkins and Sarah McAdams in "The Transition Movement: Past, Present, and Future," roundtable discussion, 2018 Transition US 10th Anniversary Online Summit: www.transitiongathering.org/videos.
[66] Walter Wink, *The Powers That Be: Theology for a New Millennium* (NY: Doubleday, 1998), pp. 98-111. This text offers a very accessible discussion of Wink's more scholarly treatment in *Engaging the Powers: Discernment and Resistance in a World of Domination* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992), pp. 175-193.
[67] Jesus, of course, says "Kingdom," but kings are a distant abstraction for us, and he actually means something close to kin-dom in that God's gospel activity is expressed in deepening the embrace of kinship in all directions.

Here are several ideas of where to start. [68]

Food. Imagine conversations *and* group activities that foster confidence *and* fellowship around growing food, buying local/organic, supporting farmer's market/CSA's, moving toward plant-rich diets, eating seasonally, reducing food waste, canning/freezing for food storage, or using permaculture in home gardening/landscaping. Some of these could (should!) culminate in actual shared meals.

Housing. Conversations and group activities can foster confidence, fellowship, and change around energy efficient light bulbs, basic home weatherization (which *could* involve sharing how you adjust seasonal clothing choices before you adjust thermostats!), insulation, and energy efficient appliances. Trade experiences or aspirations for living in closer community: denser housing, co-housing, even communal homes. Some of these are "costly"; others are inexpensive and repay their investment quickly. The point is to actively share knowledge/skill *and take the responsibility within our reach for the lives we live*.

Transportation. Conversations and group activities can foster confidence, fellowship, and effect real change in how we move ourselves around. Creating car pools for church events—perhaps tracking this as a community challenge. Offering learning opportunities in using mass transit, from reading bus/train schedules to finding route connections to even making groups rides so that anyone who wants can feel confident using mass transit. Creating (and celebrating) opportunities to bike and walk as alternatives with side benefits of personal health and company. Maybe skills sharing in basic bike repair.

Waste. Conversations and group activities can foster confidence, fellowship, and effect real change in how we refuse, reuse, reduce, recycle, and rot (compost) our waste. There are zero-waste initiatives and recycling classes that can inspire and teach us a lot. Ending the ease with which we toss what we don't want in the garbage is *an ecological, moral, spiritual imperative*—and by pursuing it as an act of communal learning, hemmed in by humility and seasoned with joy, we can go farther than as individuals.

Finally, imagine framing all of these activities—on each occasion—with prayer or other simple rituals that link this learning to our desire to care for the planet by living lightly upon it, our gratitude for Earth's bounty, our hope to keep "home" in ways that align with Earth as our wider home. Imagine lifting up these efforts regularly (habitually!) in our communal worship as holy pursuits … *as holy habits*.

None of these things are nearly so daunting as the challenges to which Jesus offered his Third Way. Or are they? We've brought our entire ecosystem planet to a point of genuine peril by not facing them sooner. The forces that limit not only our choices, but also our imaginations are far more daunting than we want to admit. Our hearts and minds are *occupied* by forces that count on our complicity as they sell off our children's future (and so much more). Saying "Yes!" to new patterns such as I suggest above will not come easily, which is why the communal and worshipful aspects are so essential.

And why the resulting joy is such good news. In fact, perhaps it is not so much the jumping itself but more precisely the union of *seeking justice while generating joy* that is able to actually bend the arc.

PS: I've set up a Patreon site to help fund my work in this area. I hope you'll invest in my thinking and writing. You can learn more about how to support me here: www.patreon.com/fullfrontalfaith

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[68] http://transitionstreets.org/ offers a curriculum that guides small groups through practical learning toward Transition. It could be used "off the shelf" within faith communities, though I believe framing it explicitly within a faith narrative will greatly deepen its impact when used by groups for whom a faith narrative is key in life meaning.

Palm Sunday Politics and Planet Earth

David R. Weiss – April 11, 2019
The Gospel in Transition #20 – **Subscribe at www.davidrweiss.com**

In just two days we'll remember Jesus' entry into Jerusalem at the beginning of what we now call Holy Week. Often commemorated as a "triumphal entry" followed by the Temple "cleansing," both frames understate the power of Jesus' actions.[69] By seeing them for the richly provocative actions they were, we might also see them as suggestive for our response to climate change.

Jerusalem. Not just any place on Earth, in Jewish tradition the city—especially the Temple—stand as an *axis mundi* (literally: "Earth axis"), a point where transcendence and immanence touch; where Mystery and mundane meet. Such points are known in every faith tradition. That the events we consider today play out *here* makes them more than history: they're *holy drama*.

Additionally, they're located in time as well as space. Jesus doesn't enter Jerusalem in a vacuum. It's Passover, the Jewish festival of liberation, no doubt "celebrated" with bitter irony under Roman rule. Still, the memory of liberation is so fresh at Passover, that Rome dare not let it be celebrated under anything other than a watchful and well-armed eye. Thus, Pilate (Rome's appointed governor for Jerusalem) would've ALSO made *his* entrance into Jerusalem around the same time Jesus did, though coming from the opposite direction.

And his entry would've been *triumphal* in the most militaristic way: soldiers on foot and on horseback, weapons, drums, banners, and poles bearing a golden eagle—symbol of Jupiter, the god of Rome. His procession and presence during the week was meant to remind Jews that the Passover meal would be the only liberation they could expect to taste anytime soon.

Once we realize Jesus' palm-strewn pathway into the east side of city happens over against Pilate's procession from the west, it becomes evident that Jesus is making a visibly *anti-triumphal* entry. He comes, mounted on a donkey in a deliberately embodied echo of Zechariah 9:9-10. His "kingship" is marked by humility … and the promise of genuine (that is, *just*) peace. As with his parables on the "kingly activity of God," his Palm Sunday procession makes an intentional critique of Rome and its regal pattern of domination. Though some of his listeners may have wished otherwise, Jesus presents no call for violent revolution, but offers an unmistakable summons to a whole different way of life.

But Jesus wasn't just taking issue with Rome or with Pilate. In 6 CE (during Jesus' youth) Rome made the Jewish Temple authorities responsible for collecting imperial taxes and maintaining the debt records frequently invoked to foreclose on Jewish land. Even prior to this, the Jewish Temple had been twisted to serve those holding religious power and economic wealth, but from 6 CE onward it also became *the religious edge* of Rome's political-economic oppression. Even if they did somewhat begrudgingly, the Temple elites were chaplain to Empire. (How deeply the Jewish public resented this is shown at the start of the Jewish Revolt, when besides driving out the Roman army, they immediately burned the records of land debt kept at the Temple.)

So when Jesus clears the Temple on Monday, he isn't just temporarily displacing money-changers and animal vendors. Something *much more decisive* is playing out. He's pronouncing a *judgment* against the Temple for having allied itself with the forces that are stealing both land and life from God's people. As much as the Temple was seen as the very throne of God, a whole string of Hebrew prophets spoke out in the harshest words possible whenever they saw Temple rituals carried out in the absence of justice in Jewish society. They knew God wanted *nothing* to do with worship cut off from justice.

[69] The texts are Mk 11:1-22 || Mt 21:1-21 || 19:28-48. For a full treatment, see Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan, *The Last Week*, HarperOne, 2006, pp. 1-53.

Some 700 years before Jesus, Jeremiah accused the people of presuming the Temple somehow guaranteed their security despite rampant social injustice, saying "They have treated the wound of my people carelessly, saying, 'Peace, peace,' when there is no peace." (Jer. 6:14 || 8:11) Thus, when Jesus invokes Jeremiah's words about "a den of robbers," (which, his original hearers knew, culminated in the threat that God would *destroy* the Temple), there can be no doubt in the mind of anyone present: *this is no mere "cleansing."* It's a prophetic action that symbolically *destroys* the Temple. Not the building itself, but the systemically twisted relations it had come to divinely authorize. If you've heard Black Lives Matter protesters shout "Shut It Down!" as they move on to an interstate highway, you've heard *the same tone of protest* that Jesus used to shut down the Temple that day.

It's hard to overstate the provocative depth of Jesus' action at the Temple. No doubt, even some of his own followers were uneasy. It was a symbolic act that reached DEEP into primal emotions, not unlike burning an American flag. Or, to "bring it home," like pulling the vestments off your local church altar *and burning them* if your church has been silent (or, worse, complicit) in any of Rome's more recent deeds: caging immigrants, bashing queers, killing black bodies, or belching CO2. Most of us would hesitate to go there. *Jesus does not*.

Let's be clear. Palm Sunday was no innocent pageant of Jewish peasants lining the road with palm branches as Jesus rode through on a donkey. There was, I'm sure, genuine joy in the air. But every cheer of "Hosanna," every cry of "King," every salute to "Son of David"—*these were all dangerous words*. No wonder some of the Jewish leaders tried to get Jesus to quiet the crowds. But recall his reply: "I tell you, if these people were silent the rocks and stones would cry out." (Lk 19:39-40) *Earth itself longs for a rule other than Rome's*. And that scene in the Temple? It isn't a judgment of *someone else's* religion. Jesus is calling out *our* religious tradition anytime it offers even silent complicity to rulers or systems that plunder land, impoverish people, imperil ecosystems, or promises "Peace, Peace," while catastrophic climate change comes at us. And there's plenty of both of those going on in churches today.

These two events at the start of Holy Week remind us there are *real choices* in front us, too. And they don't show up out of nowhere. From Jesus' first announcement that God's kin-dom had come near, his ministry consistently posed a stark alternative to the politics of Rome and the Temple. One grounded in compassion toward and reverence for all life. That alternative asks for our allegiance still today.

Palm Sunday's politics long to be good news for planet Earth. But it will take more than a few half-hearted Hosannas while we wave our palm fronds to convince the rest of creation we're ready to show up … for all of us. So if you find yourself feeling a bit foolish, limply waving a palm frond in church just a day before our President's "triumphal" visit to Minnesota, remember, for Jesus, Palm Sunday was neither triumphant nor tame. It was confessional and confrontational: the communal enactment of pledging loyalty to God and, on that account, *withholding it from Caesar*.

For Jews, eating the Passover makes that experience *present* to them *right now*. For New Zealanders grieving the mosque shooting last March, the Maori haka dance *joined* the mourners (across their diverse cultures) to New Zealand's deepest past. Our Palm Sunday worship ought to have the seriousness of a Jewish Seder and the resolve of a haka dance. Dare we? The rocks and stones will be waiting.

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Maundy Thursday – Meeting the End with Love

David R. Weiss – April 16, 2019

The Gospel in Transition #21 – **Subscribe at www.davidrweiss.com**

John 13:34-35 – "I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are followers of the Way: because you love one another.[70] Part of Jesus' long farewell discourse in John's gospel, these words have given us the name for Thursday in Holy Week: Maundy. The Latin behind "commandment" in this verse (echoed again in 15:12-17) is *mandatum* (from which comes our word, mandate. This is "*Mandatum* Thursday": "Commandment Thursday." It might better be called Love Thursday, since Jesus calls his friends[71] to love many times more than he uses the word "commandment."

Overall John's gospel is noteworthy on several counts. Considered by scholars to be the last of the biblical gospels authored, his telling is often regarded as the least historical and most theological (which is not to say that he ignores history, that the other gospels ignore theology, or that the others present history the way we think of it today). But, even a surface reading of John reveals no parables, multiple lengthy discourses, and a self-focused Jesus (as opposed to a focus on God's kin-dom), all of which place him in stark contrast to the three Synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke, so-called "synoptic" because they view Jesus through the same lens).

One might make the case that John is thus less interested in historical fact, but he remains supremely interested in Truth. John's gospel—which, like the other gospels aims to communicate good news to his original readers/hearers in a way that fosters *the experience of good news in the hearing itself*—is finely crafted and reflects both the lived experience of his community and John's own nuanced theology. Of particular note is John's commitment to "realized eschatology," a fancy theological mouthful for saying that John believes that the redemptive/liberatory impact of Jesus on us and our lives begins right now—*in all its fullness*. Whether John regards another layer of fulfillment in an afterlife is not the point. He believes that the full power of the gospel is unleashed in the world through the Spirit moving in our lives today.

Two features of John's Maundy Thursday narrative stand out to me. First, contrary to the Synoptics (and likely contrary to history), John does not have Jesus eat the Passover meal on Thursday night. He pushes Passover back by day: a small bit of "historical license" with theologically seismic implications. Not much is changed about Thursday evening, but the *absence* of a Thursday Passover means that on Friday afternoon throughout Jerusalem Passover lambs are being slaughtered in preparation for the meal … a slaughter that aligns with Jesus' death on the cross. It is John's way of profoundly linking Jesus to the Passover lamb (whose blood, in the original Passover tale kept Jewish homes safe during the final plague in Egypt).

It's a symbolic connection that (in my mind) has disastrous echoes in atonement theology for millennia to come: in assertions that say our forgiveness/redemptive hinges on the spilling of Jesus' blood. Given the scandal of Jesus' death on the cross—which surely rocked his friends' and followers' worlds in way we cannot imagine—John's daring interpretation of the death is understandable. His logic, I suspect, is quite different from ours. We often *begin* the story of Jesus with the assumption he *came* to die and skip over the very messy theology that undergirds that assumption. The earliest communities of believers began with the *inexplicable fact* that he DID die—for which they were utterly unprepared—and then find themselves making daring efforts (that are hardly consistent across the gospels or the early church!) to reconcile the profound goodness of Jesus' life to the irreconcilable(!) character of his death.

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[70] This is mostly NRSV translation, but I have replaced "my disciples," which is certainly what the Greek says, with "followers of the Way," which is what the church came to understand and which resonates with my sense that Jesus never saw himself as having a monopoly on "the Way."

[71] There's a whole theology behind this one word, which links Jesus directly to the Hebrew notion of God's Wisdom. Jesus says his ministry will be (*can only be?*) carried on, not by followers or disciples, but by *friends*.

It's possible—in light of John's realized eschatology (where redemption happens NOW, among the living)—that he identifies Jesus with the Passover lamb not to make his blood key to redemption, but to *include his bloody death in the redemptive power of his life*. As though by finding a place for Jesus' death within the Passover story of God's liberating work, John insures that the cross cannot become a cause to doubt the power of Jesus' life. Like the Passover lamb, his death is one piece of a much larger tale of liberation.

The other intriguing feature of John's Maundy Thursday account is this. We commemorate Maundy Thursday as the night when Jesus instituted Holy Communion at the end of his last supper and before his arrest and crucifixion. But, although Thursday in Holy Week gets its name from John's gospel, in his telling Jesus *never celebrates Holy Communion*. He has a final meal followed by a famous foot-washing scene, but there is no lifting up and breaking bread, no pouring and sharing wine. How can it be that this meal—so emblematic of our faith … *so sacramental* … is simply missing in John?

No one knows for sure, but I'm persuaded by a suggestion I heard decades ago (alas, uncredited because my memory recalls the insight but not the origin): in John's community they gathered to read aloud pieces of this gospel each week. And each week they did this *while celebrating communion, themselves taking and breaking bread, pouring and sharing wine*. John wrote for their lived experience, so he wrote a gospel to *compliment* the meal already at the heart of their gathering. No need to describe the meal itself.

Whether that's the real reason or not will likely never be known. But it fits with how I see *this* night in *this* week intersecting with our experience of climate change. Put yourself, even if just momentarily, in Jesus' sandals. He sees the end—*his end*—rapidly approaching. It's not that he wants to die, but that he *will not* compromise the power of compassion that dwells in him. And he sees the rising powers of the world determined to preserve themselves at the cost of his life. This isn't divine foreknowledge. It's simply the sober commonsense insight accessible to most every person who's been a prophet/martyr.

But Jesus' primary concern on *this* night in *this* week is to ensure that the compassion birthed in and through him continues to be realized in the world after his death (that's realized eschatology). And how does he do that? He tells his friends to love one another. Relentlessly. Fiercely. Even at great risk. *Love*. Jesus' death would seem to undermine the usefulness of this counsel. But before we race ahead to the resurrection and see there some miraculous overturning of death, before we do that—just wait. Because on that first Maundy Thursday there is as yet *no resurrection*. No gospels have been written. No Sunday School lessons learned. No Hallelujahs hurled heavenward. No Easter lilies bought. None of that is "real" yet. There is ONLY a daunting, messy, chaotic end racing toward Jesus. And he meets that end by sharing a meal and asking his friends to persist in loving one another.

Perhaps that love is central to what happens on Easter morning. (I happen to think it is, though in a very unorthodox way.) *But I want to hold us in the shattering uncertainty of Maundy Thursday for a moment*. There is a strand of eco-awareness today that looks at the unnerving science and the damning math and assesses it with the same sort of sobering certainty that Jesus did on Maundy Thursday: *we're screwed*. And who knows whether it is alarmist (as we like to hope) or just … inconveniently honest. But I ask you, today, to put yourself in an ecological Maundy Thursday moment. *What if* there's ONLY a daunting, messy, chaotic end racing toward us? If so, how will we meet that end? Here is the thin, profound, powerful good news of Jesus: Let's meet it gathered with friends, sharing a meal, and pledging love.

PS: I've set up a Patreon site to help fund my work in this area. I hope you'll invest in my thinking and writing. You can learn more about how to support me here: www.patreon.com/fullfrontalfaith

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Easter – Resurrection AS Extinction Rebellion

David R. Weiss – April 22, 2019
The Gospel in Transition #22 – **Subscribe at www.davidrweiss.com**

Nobody saw it coming, not even his own followers.

Both the elites within the Jewish religious establishment and the Roman authorities knew that the man—and the message he so recklessly embodied in the community he gathered around himself—had to be stopped. This notion of divinely sanctioned compassion threatened to undo the carefully guarded structures—religious, cultural, and imperial—that helped ensure that profit, power, and status moved in … predictable … patterns. Reserved to those with the right families, the right connections, and (occasionally) the right opportunities. After all, social stratification is a hallmark feature of civilization.[72]

But this man's other-worldly vision, his relentless conviction that you could actually weave community out of compassion seemed to have just the right mix of intriguing presentation and beguiling practice. The common folk (upon whose lower, outcast status rested the leisure of others) were enthralled. Not all of them to be sure. Both religion and empire have ways to rein in the aspirations of those usefully deemed "other." *But this man was something else*. And for the sake of everyone who was someone, he needed to be stopped. Hard. And publicly. Because that was the most effective method to dispose of both the man and the message. Thus, the point of the crucifixion was not simply to crucify Jesus but to crucify compassion.

On Holy Saturday it certainly appeared that compassion was extinct, so to speak. By all accounts Jesus' followers and friends were fearful: scattered, in hiding, bereft. How long that first Holy Saturday endured we cannot know. The narrative, of course, says three days, but I suspect that's our own wishful literalism treating the awe-filled testimony of the gospels as though they're news stories rather than *true* stories.

The "fact" of the resurrection is beyond this essay. It's interesting though that Paul (the earliest author in the new Testament, writing perhaps 15-20 years after the crucifixion) speaks primarily of a *vision* of a post-crucifixion Jesus. Mark (the next to write, perhaps 35-40 years post-cross) speaks of an empty tomb but *not* a risen Jesus. Matthew, Luke and John all have "proper" resurrection tales, but it's taken 50-plus years for them to … arise. And John even describes the disciples on Easter morning as out fishing. That's hardly the type of activity you'd go back to just 36 hours after seeing your closest comrade publicly, horrifically executed for treason. So this resurrection business is complicated, to say the least.[73]

But whether you believe that Jesus walked out of the tomb *or* that those tales seek to name a reality deeper than fact, *the bottom line—the gospel truth, if you will—is that there WAS a bodily resurrection: the church*.

And that happened via compassion. The church was not born by affirming a set of doctrines or beliefs. It was born as Jesus' followers and friends began—sometime on the far side of the crucifixion (my guess is weeks or months afterward, but that's just a guess)—after a season of fear, grief, and confusion to recapitulate among themselves the radical compassion that Jesus had preached. And in the praxis of compassion they found Jesus "alive" in their midst again. That experience *became* the resurrection.

Resurrection is the original "extinction rebellion." It is the dramatic affirmation that *with our own bodies* we will counter every effort to extinguish the seeds of compassion that have been sown in our hearts. For Jesus, and for his first followers and friends, that compassion was incarnated primarily in a widening welcome extended to *humans* in need. While the empires of Jesus' day could

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[72] www.en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Civilization

[73] I Cor. 15:3-8; Acts 9:3-6; 22:6-11; 26:13-15; Mark 16:1-8; Matt. 28:9-20; Luke 24:13-53; John 20: 11-29; 21:1-14. My thinking on resurrection has evolved over many years, beginning in seminary (1984) and continuing in graduate school (1992-97) in both seminars and a candidacy exam that looked at the Historical Jesus. Those most influential for me are John Dominic Crossan, *Jesus: A Revolutionary Biography* (HarperSanFrancisco, 1994), Marcus Borg, "The Truth of Easter" in *The Meaning of Jesus*, (HarperSanFrancisco, 1999), and Willi Marxsen, *Jesus and Easter: Did God Raise the Historical Jesus from the Dead?* (Abingdon Press, 1990).

surely wreak havoc on ecosystems, they had no ability to fundamentally fracture the entire planet's health. There was, of course, as yet no scientific understanding of the intricate web of creation—although psalmists and prophets intuited this web as have most (maybe all) aboriginal peoples.

As I noted in "Redeemed for Resilience" (GIT, Essay #13), by the end of the fourth century the early church became the *imperial* church, and the radical compassion that drove the resurrection became reserved for saints and monastics. The majority of believers were instructed in doctrine and duty, and in many ways, the church chose to recapitulate the very dynamics of profit, power, and status that Jesus had challenged. The embers of resurrection never entirely faded, but for most of its history the church has been shaped by priorities other than radical compassion. (Yes, the church *has* fostered its share of compassion, kindness, mercy, etc. But, for the most part, the church made sure to ration these goods out in amounts that promote "good order" rather than instill them with the prodigal world-changing extravagance that Jesus did.)

Fast forward to the present day. Now "Extinction Rebellion" names a fairly new loose-knit global movement of activists committing non-violent actions to protest inaction by governments to address climate change.[74] Although secular in origin, their credo is not unlike that of the earliest Christians: to deploy their own bodies in countering the complacency that threatens to extinguish the very seeds of life that have been sown on this planet.

On one hand extinction—the complete disappearance of a life form from the biotic community—is a cosmic fact. As life bubbles up across eons, some of those bubbles go bust sooner than others. And sometimes cataclysmic cosmic events—sudden meteor strikes or slow-moving ice ages—dramatically reshape life's context and reset the bar for survival for entire ecosystems. On the other hand—the hand that matters right now—today, we don't face extinctions dealt out by the unfolding cosmos. We face—*we're experiencing, as I write and as you read*—extinctions at a pace unknown since the dinosaurs died out 65 million years. At a pace some scientists say qualifies as the sixth great extinction in Earth's long history.[75]

But this round of extinction has two noteworthy characteristics. First, rather than being caused by an insentient cosmic process/event, *this* extinction is being caused *by us*. Initially (and still) driven by how human development undoes specific habitats, ripping asunder the web of flora and fauna that constitute an ecosystem, this extinction is also being amplified by climate change, the cumulative impact of an industrial society playing Russian roulette at the level of atmosphere and ocean. Second, unlike the first five extinctions, which we view from a vantage point of safety measured in millennia past, *this* extinction may well include us. All life is interconnected. There are only so many strands of the web we can extinguish before the web nearest us collapses, taking us with it.

It's time for churches to reclaim extinction rebellion as our cause. To use our individual choices, communal practices, and civic power to strengthen the social and ecological webs that support life. Maybe even to join Extinction Rebellion in some of its theatrical (liturgical!) nonviolence. I could say we ought to do these things "because" we believe in resurrection. But, actually, *I think it's the reverse.* Easter's "Alleluia!" belongs to all the Earth. *Only* as we begin to rebel with our own bodies on behalf of all life, letting compassion echo evangelically in our lives, only then can we say—*only then are we saying*—"Christ is risen! He is risen indeed!" If you're looking for an Easter alleluia, you'll find it there.

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[74] www.theguardian.com/environment/2019/apr/20/stroud-cotswold-town-that-spawned-radical-protest
[75] www.projects.propublica.org/extinctions/

Doubting Thomas … Climate Change and Touching Hope

David R. Weiss – May 3, 2019

The Gospel in Transition #23 – **Subscribe at www.davidrweiss.com**

If you were in church last Sunday you probably heard the familiar story (John 20:19-29) of "Doubting Thomas." John places it exactly one week after the original Easter account, and most churches use it as the Gospel text on the first Sunday after Easter. It's one of those stories that's so familiar (it's even given us "Doubting Thomas" as a idiom) that it becomes easy to think we know exactly what it means—until we realize we don't.

Here's the way it unfolds in John. On Easter evening the disciples are huddling in fear in an upper room. Suddenly Jesus appears to them. Except Thomas misses it. And when the disciples report it to him afterwards, he replies, "Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe" Sure enough, one week later Jesus appears again, this time with Thomas present, and he invites Thomas to indeed place his fingers into the wounds. He tells Thomas, "Do not doubt, but believe." (Thereby sealing his nickname for history.[76]) And the scene ends with Jesus seeming to make Thomas an example of how NOT to be: "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet believe."

It seems pretty straightforward. But consider a couple things.

Nobody in this account believes without seeing, so Thomas gets more than a bit of a bad rap. All the other disciples saw Jesus the first time, so it seems a little unfair to single out Thomas as though he was the only one who needed to see in order for his belief to take hold.

Second, Thomas reacts *exactly* like any of us would. By now some of us have been so conditioned to believe Jesus was raised from the dead we affirm that without even thinking about it. But how many of us would be as quick to accept a tale told (even by a good friend) about a man who died last week in a near by town, and three days later was seen walking about? How many?! I thought so.

Third, even Thomas, while seemingly scolded for his need to see, *still gets to see*. But none of us do. *And that's who this passage is really aimed at*. John's gospel was written, at the earliest, around 90 CE (others date it 10, even 20 years later). So John is writing for people living now sixty years after Jesus did. In other words, everybody in John's audience from his first readers right on through us, is in the same "predicament": *we all have to choose whether to believe or not—without seeing*. Which only heightens the tension. Does that mean all John offers *us* is a scolding of Thomas—who still gets to see—and a "blessing" for the rest of us if we can manage to do better? No.

Which brings us to climate change. It often feels as though the more you know about the dire straits we're in, the harder it is to muster hope. To actually read the reports and study the science—even as a layperson—well, you begin to feel like those disciples huddled in that upper room. The world as you knew it has ended. And the world opening up in front of you is fringed round about with fear.

For Thomas—who, after all, *is* our example in this text—the crucial thing is not that he gets to *see*, but that he gets to *touch*. And not that he gets to touch the arms, the cheeks, etc.—but *the wounds*. His hope comes from touching the worst that the world dealt to Jesus and realizing that there is still life to be had.[77]

In a sense this episode in John's gospel is an "Easter echo" of Jesus' words in Matthew about "the least of these" (Mt 25:31-46). In that passage Jesus suggests the place where faith is found is precisely in deeds that meet the needs of others: feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, visiting the sick and imprisoned. Here, in John's gospel it isn't mere sight that makes resurrection real for Thomas, it's the tender touch of Jesus' wounds. And John's subtle wisdom to us—who can neither see Jesus in our midst nor light at the end of this climate crisis—is that if we wish to believe, it is

[76] Actually … Thomas *never doubts*. The Greek word for doubt is *distazo*. Jesus uses *apistos*; it means, rather more bluntly "without belief." But it came into English as "doubt," and that word got paired with Thomas ever since.

[77] I don't think this is about physical resurrection. Maybe it is, but I think John is making a much more nuanced assertion here, one intended to spark our belief in the value of compassion, love, life itself.

less an act of will than a deed of compassion that will bring it to pass. *Hope lives in the habits we form … provided those habits hold compassion.*

This intuition is at the heart of Joanna Macy and Chris Johnstone's book, *Active Hope*,[78] an offering of practical wisdom for meeting this perilous moment. They distinguish between two meanings for hope. The first is hope rooted in *likelihood*. There's at least a reasonable chance it will be sunny tomorrow; I sure hope so. That type of hope was beyond the reach of the disciples huddled in the upper room after the crucifixion—and beyond the reach of anyone who wades very far into the current data on climate change. Reasonable likelihood is no longer on the table.

The second meaning has to do with desire, independent of likelihood. The disciples knew he was dead and buried, but even in their fear, they could have told you they *wanted* him with them once again. So, what do you *hope for*, for your children? Push "pause" on "now be realistic," and just ask, "What do you hope for, for them?" Chances are, the answers aren't buried very deep.

But there's yet one more distinction to make. When it comes to hope as desire, it can be either *passive* or *active*. Passive hope waits for outside forces to bring something to pass. As a result, passive hope can easily feel hopeless. Active Hope is participatory. *It's a deed*. Macy and Johnstone call it a *practice*—a habit of deeds, if you will. They liken it to tai chai: a set of movements that may seem to accomplish very little, but are nonetheless done with focus and intent … and become like water shaping rock. Far from a disposition you try to "have" as a ground your actions, Active Hope begins as an action-by-action habit that eventually grounds our disposition. Perhaps most significantly for us, Active Hope doesn't presume optimism. It simply asks that you honor the desire of your heart and act with sincere humble focus.

It's worth being clear: Macy and Johnstone *don't* claim Active Hope will turn things around. They *do* believe it will turn *you* around—especially if embraced as a communal practice. That is, by choosing to actively align our energy, in even small ways, with a larger story (vision) that matches the desires of our heart, we invest ourselves (and, ideally, it is a WE doing this) in actions that "help us restore our sense of connection with the web of life and with one another." Broadly speaking they describe this dynamism as the Work That Reconnects. I think John might describe it as the Work That Resurrects.

As Macy and Johnstone relate, this work "comes from gratitude" (begins with awe at what is) and "honors the pain of our world" (*feels* loss: let grief have its way with us). During Jesus' ministry his disciples learned to come with gratitude; we hear that in the stories of wonder and surprise that swirl around Jesus. After his crucifixion they're overwhelmed by the pain of their world. Initially they're too overwhelmed even to hope. But when Thomas, in spite of his dis-belief, dares to touch the wounds, he chooses to honor the pain in the pain rather than turn away from it. And in that choice, resurrection occurs. John offers wisdom to the first Christian on how to fuel their movement: by touching the wounds of the world.

It's essential that we honor the world's pain and touch it with tenderness—which may include full on anguished lament. Honestly, it may or may not "save" the world. But I'm willing to bet my whole life it can "save" us and our children come what may. Which is to say, it has the ability to root our lives in Active Hope—no matter what. That's resilience. And that's good news, even to people huddled in fear.

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[78] Joanna Macy and Chris Johnstone, *Active Hope: How to Face the Mess We're in without Going Crazy* (Novato, CA: New World Library, 2012). In this post I'm drawing primarily on the Introduction, pp. 1-7; I'll return to this book again.

When the Gospel Comes as Grief

David R. Weiss – May 14, 2019
The Gospel in Transition #24 – **Subscribe at www.davidrweiss.com**

It's been a week now since the United Nations released a new report from the Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES).[79] The Global Assessment Report, the result of three years of work by 145 researchers from 50 countries, reviews some 15,000 scientific and government sources and offers the most far-reaching appraisal to date of nature's overall health. It is *not* encouraging.

The IPBES media release opens with a gut punch: "Nature is declining globally at rates unprecedented in human history." How do you quantify that? The report has a statistic to offer from almost every angle; I'll mention just one. Of the approximately 8 million total species of plants and animals (including insects) on Earth, *one million* are in danger of extinction, each one a cathedral millennia in the making.

The threat isn't entirely due to human-driven climate change. The report names the top two causes as (1) human impacts on land and water habitats and (2) direct exploitation (e.g., over-fishing). Then comes climate change, followed by pollution. But each cause reflects human activity that's been repeatedly indifferent to the needs of the natural world. This is not "creation groaning in travail" (Romans 8:22); this is *creation being relentlessly executed by the ecological inertia of our choices*.

Whatever the author of Genesis meant by according us "dominion" over creation, killing off better than 1/10 of Eden's abundance does not count. Indeed, a careful study of the word "dominion" in the Hebrew Scriptures shows that it always refers to *power-exercised-with-wisdom-and-justice*.[80] What we've done as a species—exemplified by certain "advanced" civilizations and cultures—is *not* dominion. It's mere—*sheer* destruction. In fact, by biblical standards (and in the report's judgment!), indigenous peoples living far more simply than us are perhaps the best examples of dominion on the planet today.

How do we respond to a report that is simply overwhelming in its bleakness? That catalogs so much life—habitats, ecosystems, and species—at risk? I recall a line in a film I saw decades ago (*Mass Appeal*, 1984). One character, a young seminarian, tells a story about his tank of tropical fish. One night the heater went bad and they all boiled. He recalls, "I woke up the next morning and went to feed them, but I found them all floating at the top. Most of them split in two, others with their eyes hanging out. It looked like violence, like suffering, but it had been such a quiet night. *And I remember wishing I had the kind of ears that could hear fish scream*."

We need those kind of ears today. Neither undaunted optimism nor debilitating despair are useful now. We face a moment when, for people of faith, the gospel comes as grief. (I think this is true in secular terms as well, although it would be described somewhat differently.) Grief will be fundamental in any pursuit of the transformative change the IPBES report says is necessary: "We mean a fundamental, system-wide reorganization across technological, economic and social factors, including paradigms, goals, and values."

Yes, there is much to be done: changing individual choices, exerting political pressure, pursuing technological breakthroughs, and altering corporate agendas. But in the midst of all that doing, we need to root ourselves, as it were, in grief. And because our culture as a whole avoids grief, communities of faith may have a unique responsibility in this precarious moment: to work feverishly to facilitate grief.

Grief, by itself, is not nearly enough to save us, but it is a fundamentally spiritual undertaking (tapping into our emotions on an existential scale) and if we do not embrace it, everything else done by ourselves and others is little more than banter on the way to oblivion. Read that sentence again, if you have to. I'm *not* saying that politics and technology and industry (and more) have no role to play. I *am* saying—shouting if need be—that *grief is the most important entry point and the most neglected one in addressing climate*

[79] May 6, 2019: www.ipbes.net/news/Media-Release-Global-Assessment
[80] Lloyd H. Steffen, "In Defense of Dominion," *Environmental Ethics* 14 (1992), pp. 63-80.

change. And every week of worship that we delay in giving voice to ecological grief as *our primary work as the church today*, we fail to be the people of faith that God and the whole of creation need us to be today.

But not just any grief will do. Professor Josef Settele, one the IPBES project's co-chairs, observes, "The essential, interconnected web of life on Earth is getting smaller and increasingly frayed. This loss is a direct result of human activity *and constitutes a direct threat to human well-being in all regions of the world*" (emphasis mine). I absolutely agree, but I worry his tone remains too anthropocentric. As though we must now care because WE are in peril. I disagree. For grief to be gospel, it must be larger than this.

In fact, grief expressed as our felt response to the threat now posed to human society and to our particular human loved ones, while still an honest emotion, is more like throwing an adult temper tantrum over a world whose physics and math have sorely disappointed us. It's venting grief because the finite yet overall abundance of our home does not meet the baser appetites we've allowed to take root.

As a theologian, I have to say quite clearly: *any response rooted in human self-interest is doomed*. Many seem to believe the exact opposite: that we must somehow activate and leverage self-interest, our own survival instinct, to respond to this ecological crisis. I think that assumption makes two critical mistakes. It presumes we are somehow 'separate' from the rest of the world. But from the macro level of ecosystems to the micro level of intestinal biomes, to be self-interested is both theologically and scientifically dishonest. There is no human 'I' or 'we' that is not intrinsically *more-than-me* and *more-than-human*.[81]

Second, to regard it as overly idealistic (unrealistic) to call for grief on behalf of flora, fauna, and even terrain *for its own intrinsic value* is an error rooted in primal arrogance believing that our deepest energy comes from love of self rather than love of that which is other. If we grieve for the rest of creation only on account of its transactional value to us, *we preclude ourselves from tapping into the oceanic energy of the cosmos, which alone might grant us the transpersonal power necessary for this moment*.

On the other hand, grief that arises in response to our willingness to feel our connection to *all* that is imperiled, *that grief*—even as it threatens to undo us because of its intensity—can also connect us to the sacred energy that even now courses through the cosmos. In this sense, *that grief is gospel*, because it is born of our recognition that, along with all the rest of creation, we *are* at home on Earth.

But will even that grief be enough to save us? Quite frankly, I don't know. But anything less will *not* save us; of that I'm certain. And whatever solutions politics, technology, and economics might provide, if they—*if we*—are not schooled by grief, they'll be of marginal value. (Whatever short-term gains they offer us, will be *only short-term* if we have not done the deep work of re-rooting ourselves in the whole of creation, work that will be done first by waves of grief.)

I understand, we like our gospel to come with a 'guarantee.' As if anything worthy of the word 'gospel' *must* be able to produce news that is ultimately 'good' on our terms. But overall we have not yet done an honest cost accounting of the peril in front of us. Just this weekend the atmospheric CO2 measured Mauna Loa Observatory in Hawaii crested 415 ppm for the first time since … *three million years ago*. That's since before our earliest, most distant, pre-human ancestors. As far as our future goes, *all bets are off*. To say that today visceral creation-wide grief is gospel doesn't guarantee anything except a slender *possibility* of life with integrity. Which, if you really think about it, is all gospel has ever promised.

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[81] See GIT essay #4 "Christmas: The Most Important Four Ounces in the Manger."

Threatened with Resurrection

David R. Weiss – May 16, 2019
The Gospel in Transition #25 – **Subscribe at www.davidrweiss.com**

"They have threatened us with resurrection." The words come from a poem written in 1980 by Julia Esquivel, a Guatemalan poet-theologian and peace activist.[82] Penned in a time of fierce persecution of peasants, human rights activists, and church workers, the image evokes a holy irony: for Christians, to live under near constant threat of death is to be … *threatened with resurrection*.

This wasn't glib optimism. During Guatemala's civil war (1960-1996) some 200,000 persons were killed. Death squads were common, as were torture, assassination, mutilation, rape, and 'disappearances.' To suggest that living under such conditions was, in fact, to be "threatened with resurrection," was an act of revolutionary inward defiance. It declared: Because we do not regard death as the end of our story—for it was *not* the end of Jesus' story—therefore, even in times like these, "we go on loving life" (the last five words are drawn from the poem itself).

Climate change is NOT state-sponsored terrorism. But it *will* (in some places it already *does*) mean living in the face of daily unpredictability, chaos, suffering, and grief. And it will require a posture of revolutionary inward defiance (one aspect of the Inner Transition that is central to the Transition Movement goal of *resilience*) to cultivate both the inner and outer resources to embrace life in this new world. Which is why, especially after my last post summoning us to embrace ecological grief, it seems a good time to remind us that as Christians, *climate change threatens us with resurrection*. Which in turn invites … *compels* us to live in the holy irony of meeting the prospect of radical uncertainty with an undaunted love for life.

This, too, is *not* glib optimism. The science around climate change is too unforgiving for that. The media spin is often shaped alternately by a foolhardy thirst for one more round of profits, or a fear-laden denial convinced it can't be *that* bad, or the naïve belief we'll invent our way out of this without needing to deeply(!) re-work the misshapen appetites and assumptions that got us here. But once you push through the spin, BLEAK is what stares back at you. And bleak doesn't blink.

Part of our problem, however, is that unlike in Guatemala, where Esquivel's poem was read against the *lived experience* of brutality (no one doubted they lived under immediate threat)—today both society and church remain largely in denial of the peril still mostly unseen in front of us. Even as anxiety over climate change creeps into the background of our daily lives, the immediacy of the threat is seldom felt. Not here. Not yet. But it is inexorably on the way. So I tend to shout. Sorry. (Not sorry.)

I get it. 'Bleak' isn't good for the market, for one's career path, or for our widespread consumptive addictions, so we find ways to push it to the side. But 'bleak' is what science tells us today, so my task is to be *unrelentingly imaginative* in making that bleakness real.[83]

For some it already is. *The Agenda*, a Canadian public television current affairs show recently hosted a 30-minute segment on the emotional impact of climate change on those directly involved

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[82] Julia Esquivel, *Threatened with Resurrection: Prayers and Poems from an Exiled Guatemalan* (Brethren Press, 1982). You can find the whole poem here: www.how-matters.org/2012/08/31/julia-esquivel/

[83] Walter Brueggemann considers the primary task of the Hebrew prophets as *poetic*. Initially (pre-Exile), that meant finding images—sometimes spoken, sometimes embodied—sufficient to carry the grief of God and visceral enough to break through the numbness of God's people. Later (mid-Exile) it meant finding images able to awaken hope in God's people in moments when their capacity to hope was all but extinguished by the circumstances of their lives. See *The Prophetic Imagination* (Fortress Press, 1978) and *Hopeful Imagination* (Fortress Press, 1986).

in the research.[84] Scientists, whose work places them before any spin, are increasingly wrestling with deep grief as they *see* an Earth unmade by human folly—sometimes first hand in habitats they've come to love, sometimes in climate models made by math they've learned to trust. While objectivity is crucial in collecting and assessing the data, when that objectivity announces existential crises for habitats and for humans even scientists are given pause.

It's what comes after the pause that counts. Rob Law, a longtime Australian climate activist, writes, "to truly tackle the climate and extinction crisis we also need to give ourselves permission to grieve, personally and collectively."[85] Why? Not as an exercise in self-defeat, but as a means to clear the way for action. Acknowledging our grief, Low continues, allows us "to create new ways of connecting to one another, to mourn for what we all love and are losing day by day … and to galvanize what is most important." Michael Mann, a leading climate scientist, agrees, commenting in the *Agenda* segment, "It's not a matter of are we 'effed' or not [as though it's a simple binary either/or], it's a matter of *how* 'effed,' and *that* is left for us to determine—and that requires us to become active participants in reducing whatever carbon burn we can."

We don't gain anything by denying the bleakness of our present situation. In fact, denial—as well as a too-easy optimism—only heightens the risk for all of us … for all of Earth. But we need not be paralyzed by it either. As Christians, the more we dare to really hear the science, such as the IPCC report from last fall or the IPBES report from last week,[86] the more we *will* find ourselves threatened with resurrection.

Our response should be to manifest an undaunted love for life. The Transition Movement offers us uncanny (even providential) insight into the shape of that response, and I'll explore Christian adaptions of Transition in a series of posts over the summer. But fundamentally, to be threatened with resurrection—as those living in Guatemala in the 1970's and 1980's knew firsthand—is to *begin from grief*. It is to recognize that the wellspring of our action (which must be manifold) is the grief we dare to feel for the whole of creation.

Moving into this grief, making it part of our faith and witness in the twenty-first century, is our foremost calling as Christian communities today. (And there is more that must be written about, too.) But calling for grief is, in a sense, *good news*. Biblical faith has never been afraid of grief. It is the ground out of which resurrection comes. And if there is hope for a restored future on the far side of calamity that is yet to be weathered, it will be because we dared to grieve.

If we believe in a God who works miracles with mustard seeds, then grief is the mustard seed we must sow today. We, who are threatened with resurrection.

PS: I've set up a Patreon site to help fund my work in this area. I hope you'll invest in my thinking and writing. You can learn more about how to support me here: www.patreon.com/fullfrontalfaith

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[84] www.tvo.org/video/burnout-and-despair-studying-the-climate.
[85] www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2019/may/09/i-have-felt-hopelessness-over-climate-change-here-is-how-we-move-past-the-immense-grief.
[86] IPPC report: https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2018/oct/08/global-warming-must-not-exceed-15c-warns-landmark-un-report; IPBES report: www.ipbes.net/news/Media-Release-Global-Assessment.

Permaculture: Becoming Friends with God

David R. Weiss – May 25, 2019
The Gospel in Transition #26 – **Subscribe at www.davidrweiss.com**

"Jesus said to them again, 'Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, even so I send you.' And when he had said this, he breathed on them, and said to them, 'Receive the Holy Spirit'" (John 20:21-22). This is the moment of "Pentecost" (the sending of the Holy Spirit) in John's Gospel.

Luke's much more vivid Pentecost narrative (rushing wind, tongues of flames, and speaking in other languages—in Acts 2) happens on the fiftieth day after Passover. (Hence, the name Pentecost: Greek for "fiftieth" and the Greek name for the Jewish harvest festival of first fruits celebrated on this fiftieth day. In John's Gospel "Pentecost" happens about fifty *seconds* after Jesus makes his first resurrection appearance to the disciples on Easter evening.[87] Seriously, he appears in the room—seemingly moving through walls and locked doors—announces himself by saying, "Peace be with you," shows the disciples his wounds, and then we go immediately into verse 20 as quoted above. Breath, Spirit, Pentecost. Bam.

I propose, though, that we call John's version of Pentecost, *the Permaculture Moment of Easter*, because John shows Jesus establishing the post-Easter community of believers as a permaculture community. I can't say whether those first Christians fully appreciated that, but I will say that *the very meaning and purpose of the church today hinges on recognizing its call to be a permaculture community today* as we meet the climate emergency on our doorstep.

Permaculture? You won't find it in your catechism or creed; it's not exactly a theological term (though I'd argue it ought to be). Permaculture is a design philosophy for thinking about agriculture … and human culture.[88] It emerged in the late 1970's as a way of critically rethinking (and rejecting) the steady growth of industrialized agriculture. Seeing a multitude of problems connected with an agricultural model that was increasingly determined to enslave the soil by means of machinery and chemicals, permaculture, in essence, chose to *listen* to the land instead.

Permaculture begins with the presumption that most (if not all) of the challenges we face in producing food (or, ultimately, in the other aspects of our lives) have already been faced—at least analogously—by nature. And, having the benefit of a timescale far beyond us, nature has found solutions to these problems. Nature may think slowly, but it is utterly undaunted, and it holds within it, quite literally, the wisdom of eons. So permaculture developed twelve design principles—drawn from how nature approaches problem-solving—as a framework for our own way of being in relative harmony with nature.

Besides the twelve principles (which are more complex than we need to know for this column), permaculture has three core tenets: (1) Care for Earth—treating the soil (and really all ecosystems) in ways that promote flourishing for all creatures in the Earth community; (2) Care for People—that the necessities of life (both material and social) be available to all; (3) Return of Surplus—that we take not more than our fair share and reinvest the surplus back into the system or within our community.

Permaculture began as an agricultural movement (it was first known as "permanent agriculture"), but rather quickly became a way of thinking about the whole of human culture since all agriculture sits within a broader social-cultural context. I'm thinking about permaculture today because it's the philosophical infrastructure for the Transition Movement. Rob Hopkins, co-founder of the Transition Movement, was himself a permaculture instructor, and, in many ways, he imagined Transition Towns as adaptations of permaculture principles to a more urban (or at least a village-neighborhood) context.

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[87] John describes an encounter between Mary Magdalene and Jesus in the garden outside the empty tomb on Easter morning, but the evening scene is the first time John describes and encounter with the rest of the disciples.

[88] Rob Hopkins, a permaculture instructor himself, admits the concept is "notoriously difficult to explain in a single sentence." My portrait here is drawn from Rob Hopkins, *The Transition Handbook* (Vermont: Chelsea Green Publishing, 2008, pp. 60-61, 136-141), and augmented by www.permacultureprinciples.com/principles/.

But where does Jesus fit in? We begin with the Hebrew Scriptures where Wisdom is acknowledged as a divine attribute (at times even a divine feminine person) present at creation. In Proverbs (8:22-31) and Sirach[89] (ch. 24), Wisdom is the presence of God that patterns Itself/Herself into creation. In other words, Hebrew Scripture affirms that *Wisdom is at work in the patterns seen in nature*. The language is far more spiritual than permaculture uses, but the intuition is the same. Moreover, the Hebrew notion of Sabbath rest for people-animals-land anticipates the holistic ethic of permaculture core tenets.

In John's Gospel, Jesus is deliberately likened to Wisdom. Described as "the Word" (Greek: *logos*) in John's prologue, Jesus is linked both to God's creative word at creation, and also to Wisdom present with God during creation. In Greek, *logos* means not simply "word," but also the "wise principle" or pattern behind something. John 1:1-3 clearly aims to evoke Proverbs and Sirach in the ears of its Jewish audience. And when John writes (1:14), "the Word became flesh and dwelt among us," his readers likely heard Baruch 3:37, "Afterward she [Wisdom] appeared upon earth and lived among men."

Elsewhere Wisdom invites her followers to feast (Proverbs 9:1-5, Sirach 24:9-21); promising that she alone provides bread and drink that satisfies. When John has Jesus offer living water (Jn 4:13-14) and the bread of life (Jn 6:31-35), he is again telling his community that Jesus is God's Wisdom in their midst. Finally, in his long Last Supper discourse, John has Jesus announce a new relationship with his disciples: no longer servants, he calls them "friends" (Jn 15:15). Which brings us back—almost, to the Easter-breath scene. In the book of Wisdom (likely written in the century immediately before Jesus lived) we read, "Wisdom is a *breath* of the power of God and … In every generation she passes into holy souls and makes them *friends* of God" (Wisdom 7:25-27).

Throughout John's densely symbolic Gospel, he is convinced that one way to understand Jesus is as the embodiment of the Wisdom of God. And in his "Pentecost" moment, *John shows Jesus passing the breath of that Wisdom on to his followers and through this Holy Spirit making them friends with God*.

Today's climate crisis is the direct result of humans (many of them "Christian") failing to discern the wisdom present in creation and instead choosing to treat nature as devoid of wisdom: mere raw material for meeting human desire. But—like permaculture—the Wisdom tradition in Hebrew Scripture sees nature as bearing Wisdom's imprint. And, by linking Jesus to that tradition again and again, John's Gospel tells us: to be a follower of Jesus is to become a friend of God, to recognize the echo of Wisdom in Jesus' life, … and to discern the pattern of that same Wisdom in the natural world around us.

In John's Gospel, *the first thing* Jesus does in meeting his disciples on Easter evening is *breathe on them*—stepping directly into the Wisdom tradition and breathing his followers into friendship with God *and God's world* (seeing God's Wisdom writ within nature is *inescapably part of friendship with God*).

It would be our *moral* duty to embrace permaculture principles (and become Transition communities) in response to the climate crisis, if only because these things best position us to preserve what we can and to grieve for what we cannot preserve. But John's Gospel makes clear that, for those who follow Jesus, something more than "mere" morality at stake. *Permaculture is how we befriend God*.

I cannot imagine a greater act of joy. So take a deep … breath, and let's get started.

PS: I've set up a Patreon site to help fund my work in this area. I hope you'll invest in my thinking and writing. You can learn more about how to support me here: www.patreon.com/fullfrontalfaith

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[89] Sirach, Baruch, and Wisdom (both mentioned below) are *apocryphal* books: among a handful of ancient Jewish texts that are pre-Christian but are not considered part of the Hebrew Scriptures. Though not regarded as sacred by Jews, these writings helped form the context against which John was interpreting Jesus.

Permaculture: Breathing Earth ... Finding Home

David R. Weiss – May 27, 2019
The Gospel in Transition #27 – **Subscribe at www.davidrweiss.com**

"Then the LORD[90] God formed a man from the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and the man became a living being." (Gen. 2:7) Forget Jesus' breath in John's Easter scene, *this* is the moment when the Judeo-Christian tradition first affirms permaculture.

In my last post (GIT #26), I said Christian communities were "commissioned" as it were to be permaculture communities all along. Of course, that's a bit of a rhetorical claim—permaculture as an intentional movement appeared nearly 2000 years *after* the first Christian communities. But my point stands. John's Gospel links Jesus so clearly with the Biblical figure of Wisdom (who the Bible links with the wisdom inherent within creation) that Christians *ought* to enthusiastically embrace the core insight of permaculture: that nature itself is a repository of lived wisdom useful in shaping human life as well.

Not that nature *dictates* how we live, but our capacity for reflection, self-transcendence, and choice doesn't set us *above* nature any more than the capacity for flight, parthenogenesis, underwater breathing, or photosynthesis sets any other bit of creation above nature. Permaculture, the infrastructure for the Transition Movement, suggests it's both wise to learn *from* nature and ethical to seek to live in harmony *with* nature because we *are* nature. We're simply nature with elevated cognitive, emotional, cultural, spiritual capacities.

That most Christians find this idea quite foreign reflects how far we are from the truth of our own tradition. Worse, given the way scientific-industrial progress has raced forward largely unbridled by ethics in a culture self-identified for generations as "Christian," the church has been (at least!) complicit in the reckless advances that now threaten to wreck the ecosystem that sustains us. Permaculture argues that other paths were, and perhaps still are, available to us. So does this creation account in Genesis.

As a creation myth it oozes truth (not fact) in a story about how creation came to be and where we fit within it. However, it's a myth made for people in another time and place. That doesn't mean it has nothing to say to us, but it does mean we'll need to listen carefully to hear across cultures, languages, and whole eras of understanding. Still, for those of us who continue to draw meaning and life out of this faith tradition, that extra care is worth it. And as we meet the climate emergency in front of us, there's an added urgency to pay attention. Because some of the things we've often missed just may become lifelines in this moment. I'll suggest several.

English translations have always told us "God formed a man from the dust of the ground." The exact words vary, but every translation I've seen BURIES the truth of the Hebrew where God fashions an *adam* from the *adamah*. Later on, these translations render *adam* as the man's name, Adam. But it is Hebrew for "earthling" fashioned from earth, or "dirtling" made from dirt, or "humus being" formed from humus. The truth intended by the original teller of this tale was that *we are dirt*. Enlivened by divine breath, but nonetheless still—forever and always—kin to the ground beneath our feet. The claim isn't intended to humiliate us. Rather it tells us, on this ground *we are home*. No small truth for beings who have evolved our way into existential loneliness.

In this tale, God's breath brings one particular bit of humus to life by breathing into it. We become humus beings—living soil. Later on the Hebraic Wisdom tradition begins to intuit what both science

[90] In many English translations of the Old Testament you'll often see the word LORD printed in upper case letters. When you do, it indicates that behind this word lies the Hebrew word often viewed as the name of God: *YHWH*. Jews consider it too sacred to speak aloud, so when reading their scriptures they replace it, by saying the word *Adonai*, which means "Lord." (It actually means "Lords"—plural—which is itself a fascinating detail, as though in the midst of Judaism's strict monotheism, a bit of the God's ineffable "moreness" leaks through here.)

and permaculture confirm: *we aren't the only soil that is alive*. Whether you call it the breath of God or the ferment of microbes, the black dirt under our feet is fairly crowded with animate energy. Permaculture begs us to honor it; this Genesis creation tale says no less.

This creation account goes on to describe Eden, the garden planted by God into which the humus being (*adam*/Adam) is placed. We do an injustice to the peoples who first heard this tale when we presume they regarded it as a divinely-relayed newspaper account of an anthropomorphized God, who acted like a supernatural botanist in setting up Eden. AND—we do an injustice *to ourselves* when we presume we're either beholden to read the verses that way today—or entitled to be embarrassed by verses so unembarrassed about narrating divine activity. Ancient peoples were "fluent" in myth. They felt no need to decide between fact and fiction. Myth told truth—and it moved freely across these less important distinctions in telling its truth.

With the garden in place, we learn that God set the *adam* [that is, "the humus being"—as yet single and ungendered] in the garden of Eden "to till it and keep it." (Gen. 2:15) This, then, is the paradigmatic human vocation according to this account: *to work the land and sustain its abundance*—in other words: *to practice permaculture*. There is no talk of being *imago Dei* ("in the image of God") or "having dominion" in this account—I'll discuss that in a future post.

Almost as soon as the humus being begins tending the humus, God observes, "It is not good for the *adam* [the single "humus being"] to be alone." (Gen 2:18) So God fashions all manner of animals, none of whom provide quite sufficient companionship, until God splits the *adam* itself into two: man and woman. (Gen. 2:19-23) One might consider a host of (worthwhile) gender issues here, but today I simply want to note that in this story God invites the humus being *to name* each creature. The invitation and the act are significant because throughout the biblical text names are *not* used to establish the power of ownership or exploitation, but *to carry the truth of relationship*.[91]

In Eden, naming is a vocational act alongside tending the garden. *It is a prototype of ecology*. Indeed, once we see the purpose of naming as placing ourselves and our companion creatures into appropriate relationship, then naming and tending become essentially one *interwoven* vocation. We cannot tend the humus well if we do not attend as well to the ways that *all life* is humus-borne.

From creation to Christianity, authentic biblical faith anticipates permaculture (and Transition). To understand ourselves as *humus beings*—"breathing earth"—places us firmly *within* this natural world. And not as punishment or burden, but as home and calling. We were not made to be masters of this material world. Rather, *we were intended for intimacy with it*. Facing a climate crisis of apocalyptic scope, that intimacy will mean allowing ourselves to feel unfathomable grief. But it will also mean catching glimpses of revelatory joy. Perhaps most of all, it will mean holding earth in our hands and feeling the goodness of home.

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[91] Just a few examples: "Eve" means "the mother of all living"; "Isaac" means "laughter"—the child whose unexpected birth brought laughter; "Israel" means "one who wrestles with God." There are a number of ways to convey the sense of YHWH: "I am what I am"; "I am who I am"; or "I will be who I will be." Because the most vivid account of God's self-revelation comes in the scene with Moses at the burning bush (Exodus 3:1-15), linked to a series of future promises, I find it evocative to hear the name as "I will be who I must be for your liberation."

Permaculture ABCs: Apples, Boundaries, and C(K)ings

David R. Weiss – June 2, 2019
The Gospel in Transition #28 – **Subscribe at www.davidrweiss.com**

Eden's idyllic garden setting (the focus of my last post) doesn't last long, of course. As the tale continues (Genesis 3:1-24) we encounter apples,[92] boundaries, and—hiding at the edge of this narrative—c(k)ings. Without claiming that this 3000 year-old myth speaks directly to the issues of a changed climate, I do believe it can help us re-root ourselves (and our faith) in a worldview rich in pre-scientific wisdom.

I noted earlier (GIT #26) that permaculture—the DNA for the Transition Movement—began in the 1970's as a response to a very broken garden. Its own antecedents appeared early in the twentieth century through pioneering thinkers and growers whose holistic views of an interconnected living world shaped their approach to agriculture. But it was the post-WWII boom in the use of petro-chemical fertilizers—and the mechanized machinery that applied them—that permaculture directly responded to.

In particular (although they wouldn't have phrased it exactly so), permaculture arose as we increasingly traded *tending* the soil—our kin if you recall my last post—for *dominating* it. Industrial agriculture represented a tragic dys-tending of the living earth, twisting it asunder from its own natural cycles and pressing it to deliver according to our desires. *Genesis warned us of this*. And warns us still.

As anyone familiar with the creation account featuring the Garden of Eden will recall, there is a tree in the center of Eden that is off limits to Adam and Eve, those first humus beings.[93] It's the Tree of the knowledge of good and evil. It's the *only* tree they are forbidden to eat from, but of course they do, and that eating becomes responsible for "the Fall"—the end of that first paradise and the entry of sin and death into the world. Now, *this is myth* (see GIT #27), which means there is no biblical claim here that there was some time in primal history when humans didn't die. Myths offer truths not facts.

There was never a time when death itself—mere mortality—was not part of human life in this natural world. But there *was* a time in our pre-human past when instinct still reigned and our cognitive capacity was poised just at the cusp of self-consciousness. And this story tells the truth of what happened as we moved beyond that cusp into fully self-aware beings. It tells us that (at least, in this Hebraic tradition) *only God has sufficient perspective to render final judgments about good and evil*. We humans are consigned to live by making our best assessments of moral situations—and maintaining a hefty dose of humility. And when we choose to act as though we are privy to absolute knowledge of good and evil? Inevitably: sin, domination, violence, and death. From Cain's murder of Abel right on up to the present.

This myth is not about breaking an abstract divine command (as though God simply made one tree off limits to test our uncritical obedience). It was always about more substantial boundaries: that we live best when we make a wise peace with the ambiguity that speaks the final word about our best guesses—and thus allow that ambiguity to usher humility to the forefront of our judgments. More often, however, from Eden onward we transgress that boundary. And our overblown confidence that we—little more than dirt whirling in Wind—can assert absolute value judgments … that kind of thinking has often characterized the worst excesses and atrocities of human history.

Apples and boundaries. And c(k)ings. This creation myth is part of the larger Yahwist narrative, that long strand of the Hebrew Scriptures—myth/legend/history—named for its use of YHWH as the name of God.[94] And it has a couple kings hiding at the edges. The Yahwist narrative as a whole is interested in

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[92] While most of us *do* encounter "apples" in Eden in our popular imagination, the Bible only mentions "fruit."
[93] There's A LOT going on in this tale (including an infamous serpent). I'm only scratching the surface.
[94] There's currently a lively debate over the dating of the Yahwist narrative. For years it was dated around 1000-950 BCE: contemporaneous with King David and/or King Solomon. Recent scholarship cites linguistic clues and allusions to historical/theological motifs to argue for a much later date, perhaps between 600-550 BCE.

recounting the accomplishment of King David in uniting Israel's tribes into a monarchy, which then reaches its apex under King Solomon (and then almost immediately fractures). But this creation myth stands as a subtle critique of both kings and their unwillingness to live within Eden's boundaries.

David is largely honored within the biblical tradition—his passion for God becomes the measure of future kings, and an entire millennium after he lived, the Gospels view it as an honor to link Jesus to David. But the sin that undoes his kingdom from within is his rape of Bathsheba.[95] When the prophet Nathan confronts him over this, his words evoke Eden's garden. Basically he tells David, "As king, you *could* have chosen a wife from *any* of the trees in Israel—*except one*: the tree of married women. Yet you took from the one tree forbidden to you." David's sin is to presume that boundaries do not apply to him.

Solomon is lauded for his wisdom and wealth (1 Kings 1-12). Less known is that after David's death Solomon consolidates his rule by violence. And the opulence of his reign rests on plundering his own people and the land.[96] None of his prosperity reached the peasants in Israel. Ultimately, his many wives are blamed for luring his loyalty away from Israel's God to foreign gods. There may be some truth to this, but the "proof" of Solomon's disloyalty to YHWH is less that he has multiple marriages than that he turns Israel into a kingdom that, for those at the bottom, *echoes the experience of their ancestors who were slaves in Egypt*. Solomon's sin, like David's, is to presume that whatever he *could* do, must be good.

Both kings are hiding in this tale—eating the apple, transgressing its boundary, and wreaking havoc as a result. The power of myth is that it exists "outside of time" and tells a tale that can be true again and again.

In so many ways the story of our modern acquisitive culture is the story of presuming that whatever we *could* do, must be good. Apples, boundaries, and c(k)ings all over again. More is better. And when the land—our kin—shows its inborn limits, why, we'll *force it* to give us what we want, when we want it, and as much as we desire. That's the story of industrial agriculture, too. And by now it's done untold damage to the familial earth beneath our feet. It's played a lead role in threatening the very extinction of insects. It's fostered structural violence against both farm workers and farm animals. And … insofar as "we *are* what we eat," all of us raised on industrial agriculture have been fed not simply the food *but the story that somehow earth's limits don't apply to us*.

When I said industrial agriculture began in the "post-war boom" of petro-chemical fertilizer, that wasn't colloquial dating. During the war "thriving" industries developed to produce nitrogen-ammonia for weapons: for dealing out death. After the war, there were stockpiles of nitrogen-rich ammonia and the means to make more—that needed a market. So what we couldn't use for bombs we sold to farmers to "bomb" the soil with chemicals to bend it to our will. When Cain murders Abel (Gen. 4) God says to him, "Your brother's blood is crying out to me from the ground! And now you are cursed from the ground, which has opened its mouth to receive your brother's blood from your hand." What irony, that we used the overflow of materials no longer needed to kill people to curse the ground instead.

Permaculture believes a better way exists. Transition builds on permaculture. And our future rests upon our ability to hear both the wisdom and the warning in this creation myth. And to hear in permaculture a story about what *might* be. What *must* be if we want a future to be at all.

PS: I've set up a Patreon site to help fund my work in this area. I hope you'll invest in my thinking and writing. You can learn more about how to support me here: www.patreon.com/fullfrontalfaith

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[95] 2 Sam. 11:1-12:23. Often described as David committing "adultery" with Bathsheba since she is married, there was *ZERO* consent in this sex. This is royal rape; any other description erases the very real power dynamics at play.
[96] The forced labor, large army, and high taxes predicted by Samuel (1 Sam. 8:10-18) are fulfilled under Solomon.

Permaculture and Dominion: A Creation Account from a Cliff

David R. Weiss – June 10, 2019
The Gospel in Transition #29 – **Subscribe at www.davidrweiss.com**

Dominion. It's the elephant in the room, I suppose. No matter what I say about Eden and those first "humus beings," someone is whispering the whole time, "Sure, sure, but *dominion*."

Or maybe not even whispering. Almost thirty years ago I spent about thirty inauspicious days as a Greenpeace door-to-door canvasser. The cause was already dear to my heart, but it was hardly work that matched my psychic energy. Read: introvert's nightmare. I still recall one man who met me at his door, his demeanor dismissive before I even finished my short introduction. He smiled, patronizingly (he was old enough then—maybe early 50's—to be my father), and said, "I have four words for you: *'Let. Them. Have. Dominion.'* End of conversation." And he closed the door in my face, smiling the whole time.

Today's post is NOT for that man. Would it be great to swing the minds of those most opposite me in their views? Sure. But there are already a host of other people who find themselves increasingly uneasy with their inherited understanding of humanity's place in creation. You don't have to be a Greenpeace supporter to worry that we are "dominioning" ourselves and some of our favorite creatures to death. I write for that "moveable middle," hoping to invite those of you there to re-considerre a cosmology[97] that is in at least as much crisis as our climate is.

Permaculture sets the "cosmology," as it were, for the Transition Movement. It paints the picture of a world in which mutually beneficial ecological relationships are possible, desirable, and rewarding. I offer my reflections on the Genesis creation narratives to suggest that they (both!) carry a cosmology that resonates far more with permaculture than we've been taught. Because our best wisdom—both its Hebraic roots and early Christian expression—has been largely submerged by another story so pervasive that we presume it's "our story." *But it's not.* That other story glistens with shiny things, but upon a closer examination the pattern in the weave reflects domination, alienation, dualism, and exploitation. Look closer still and you'll see that the threads are woven strands of insecurity, arrogance, and fear.

"Dominion" first enters *our tradition* in the Priestly creation account found in Genesis 1:1-2:3. Like the Yahwist account (see GIT #27 & #28), the Priestly account is entirely *disinterested* in telling us science. But it's not quite myth either (myth tends to have a richer narrative plot). This "story" is really *liturgy*. It holds the rhythm, the soothing cadence, of worshipful words: *these verses invite a community to rehearse the truth of its world*.

When I taught Bible in college I told into my students, "Scripture has nothing to do with nowhere." By which I meant that every text has *context*. Yes, some passages speak well across time and place, but the most potent clues to their meaning and message are bound up with their birth. So it matters profoundly that *this creation liturgy was born into a shattered world*.

This creation account is ascribed to the Priestly Source, one of the major author-editor voices present in the Pentateuch—the first five books of the Bible. Concerned with ritual and its role in securing the Hebrew people's identity, most scholars date it to the Exile.[98] That is, this voice (likely a *collection of*

[97] Cosmology can be either scientific or religious-cultural. A scientific cosmology is the best picture science can offer of how the universe came to be and how/why it unfolds as it does. A religious-cultural cosmology is the picture offered by religion (often through origin myths) or, more often today, submerged in a whole set of explicit and implicit cultural assumptions that speak to the 'how' and 'why' of the universe and our place in it. In many ways our current climate crisis is a symptom of a crisis in our religious-cultural cosmology.

[98] Some date it to the post-Exilic period; for my purposes the exact dating isn't significant. It's likely the Priestly material took its final form over several generations, and even post-Exile, Israel's life and theology was indelibly shaped by the impact of the Exile itself.

voices with a shared worldview) appeared in Israel's life *after* the kingdom united by David (1000 BCE) and expanded by Solomon had been fractured by civil war (930 BCE). It surfaced *after* the Assyrian empire swept across the Northern Kingdom and forever scattered those ten tribes to the wind (722 BCE). And it arose *after* the Babylon Empire not only overshadowed Assyria but claimed the tiny Southern Kingdom, comprised of the remnant tribes of Judah and Benjamin as well (597-586 BCE).

In this last national catastrophe, not only did the people see their countryside overrun and the capital city laid waste, they even saw their Temple burned to the ground. They found themselves landless people—exiles. What does it even mean to be a people without a land? To borrow the image from the older Eden tale, *what does it mean to be humus beings torn from the humus that you know … and that knows you?* It means that among the many forces shaping Israel's shared identity, the very precariousness of their even being a people at all threatens to be the loudest "rhythm" in their daily life.

But even more than this—with the Temple reduced to dust and ashes—*what does it mean to have a "homeless" God?* Isn't that an ontological oxymoron? Perhaps a lesser spirit, perhaps a demon, might be homeless. But to be incapable of protecting one's temple lay on the wrong side of any ancient litmus test for a god. If to be a landless people stretched the notions of "peoplehood," to be a God-less landless people snapped those notions of "peoplehood" altogether.

THIS is the context—*the precipice* on which the Priestly writers crafted their words. These were *cliff-dwelling theologians* not because of the physical terrain in which they lived but because of the social and theological reality into which they wrote—audaciously. So while there is more to say about this creation account, the first thing to notice—*BECAUSE WE READ IT FROM A SUCH A DIFFERENT PLACE*—is that the Priestly account is speaking to people whose power political has been brutally broken, whose national identity has been almost entirely erased, and whose personal-communal-religious self-esteem has been completely shattered.

In THIS context, to announce—through liturgy—that people are *imago Dei* (in the image of God – Gen. 1:26) is no invitation to arrogance; it is the incredible assertion that, contrary to all outward appearances, *you carry within yourselves the very echo of the energy that animates the universe*. This image is salve for the soul of a people otherwise undone by their history.

Likewise, in THIS context, "dominion" (also in Gen. 1:26) is hardly a summons to dominate. It is more the suggestion of the *possibility* of life in which one's place in the natural world does not merely punctuate the chaos of the last military campaign. This sense of dominion, too, stands in stark counterpoint to an experience mostly unknown to us: the cataclysmic erasure of both personal and national power. It comes as a word of comfort, not conquest.

It's possible that yet in *our lifetimes* (or our grandchildren's) we will *ourselves* be people undone by our own history, experiencing the cataclysmic erasure of both personal and national power. In that case, we might learn first hand the original power of this creation account. Though perhaps we can still turn away (one might say "repent") from that future.

In my couple of posts I'll explore these notions—*imago Dei* and dominion—further. They're actually *rich with promise* for a cosmology that would've served us much better than the one that's given us a changeD climate. And, if we reclaim them quickly enough, they might indeed serve us well as we move toward communities of faith that can embrace Transition and be resilient in the midst of uncertainty.

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Permaculture and Imago Dei: An Ecological Divinity

David R. Weiss – June 18, 2019
The Gospel in Transition #30 – **Subscribe at www.davidrweiss.com**

We're coming back to "dominion," I promise. But in Genesis 1:26, the conferral of dominion happens like this: "Then God said, 'Let us make humankind* in our image, according to our likeness; and let them have dominion …" So it makes sense to consider first *imago Dei*, the Latin phrase that captures this declaration that we are somehow "in the image of God," as a prerequisite to exploring what it might mean to "have dominion."

> *As in the Yahwist account (Gen. 2:4-25), the Hebrew word behind "humankind" here is also *adam*—a play on the word for dirt: *adamah*—so God is effectively saying, "Let us make dirtlings, earthlings, humus beings in our image …"

I want to suggest that *imago Dei*—to carry an image … reflection … echo … of divinity—evokes an *intrinsically ecological notion of divinity*. Most of us grew up steeped in a sense of God's transcendence, although we likely didn't have the words to say it. We knew God as infinitely distant, infinitely other; certainly in heaven and certainly not on earth. It's true that both Christian theology and the Hebraic spirituality that came before it, have held distinct strands of *both* transcendence and immanence (God's infinite nearness), but Christians in particular have tended for generations to downplay immanence. Seems like it's easier to ruthlessly exploit the planet if God is elsewhere.

But what if our ancient cosmologies carried a wisdom predating scientific fact that saw animate energy interwoven with cosmic matter from the very start? Recognizing that the deep cosmology of the Bible is a distant but clear cousin to permaculture just might inspire us to get better acquainted with this legacy that might be our lifeline toward Transition.

Even before we take up *imago Dei*, this verse raises another interesting question. God says, "Let *us* …" Just who is that creative *us*? Some scholars view it as a vestige of an ancient sense of multiplicity in the godhead: that even as the ancient Hebrews embraced the radical notion of monotheism (with frequent slips into worshipping other gods), there was still an overwhelming intuition that God's oneness was somehow *also a manyness*. Others regard it as an instance of the "royal we" or the "majestic plural," where the writer shows God speaking like a monarch on behalf of the royal house, perhaps a collective reference to the whole host of heaven: God and all the angels. I've even seen arguments that this is a hint at the Trinity—as if we overhear God conversing with godself.

I'll offer a more evocative reading. Genesis tells us, "God said, '*Let the earth put forth* vegetation …'" creatures …'" and "God said, '*Let the waters bring forth* swarms of living creatures …'" and "God said, '*Let the earth bring forth* living creatures …'" (1:11, 20, 24) These aren't scientific or historical claims, but it seems significant that this account portrays a God who works *with* creation in creative partnership. Given what we know today of life's unfolding course, why not read the "us" as God turning *to the entire animal kingdom* (all brought forth in the immediately preceding verses), and saying to them with a grand *evolutionary* invitation, "Now, let *us*—all of you creatures—let us *together* make human beings in *our* image … so that they carry within themselves both the seeds of creaturely roots and the aspirations of God."

Alongside the theological awe in response to God's absolute otherness, there is an equal awe appropriate to God's absolute nearness. God's wisdom is writ upon the natural world. Those who dare, might say God's wisdom is *wholly at home there*. And what are we humans, if not earth, able at last—after eons of cosmic patience—to sense the wisdom and beauty that has been waiting to be known all along?[99]

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[99] Already 35 years ago, Brian Swimme's dialogical parable *The Universe is a Green Dragon* (Bear & Company, 1984) blended contemporary physics with sacred reverence to suggest that human beings are (at least one instance of) the universe coming to conscious awareness of itself.

Now, *imago Dei*. Few biblical notions are so dear to our heart—and so dysunderstood as this one. (Okay, that's not a real word, but it's accurate: we don't merely *mis*understand this word, we twist it to suit our desires; we intentionally *dysunderstand* it.)

The burden of self-consciousness is existential anxiety. We actually know we *are* … and can anticipate that we might one day *not be*. Our drive to fashion meaning—through religion, culture, art, work, etc.—is the basic alchemy of humanizing our lives. Done sufficiently well it "treats" our existential anxiety and makes life bearable. Done exceptionally well it renders life meaningful.

This is the inescapable predicament of humanity: this is what it means to carry within ourselves both the seeds of creaturely roots (finitude) and the aspirations of God (imagination). And, too often, we prefer to evade the entire ordeal by pretending as though "we're not really from around here." We read *imago Dei* as lifting us above creation. We take *our* lesser angels, lust for absolute power and absolute knowledge; we project them upward onto God; and then congratulate ourselves on bearing that image.

In the biblical story, while God certainly exercises power as one might expect, God also and remarkably *chooses* vulnerability again and again. Look at the company God keeps: second-born sons, enslaved people, slow-tongued leaders, women, Gentiles, and awkwardly outcast prophets. God opens godself to a depth of emotion that we rarely connect with divinity: feeling anguish at the suffering of the Hebrews in Egypt; betrayal by their infidelity; sorrow at their exile in Babylon; even compassion for the Ninevites in the Book of Jonah. It would overstate it to call God an emotional wreck, but the God of the Hebrew Bible chooses to *be whole* not by avoiding vulnerability but by embracing it.

But what if God is in fact unimaginably *from around here*—far more intimately immanent than we expected? Mechtild of Magdeburg (1210-1280 CE), a Beguine mystic, said, "You ask me where God dwells. I will tell you. There is no lord in the whole world who lives in all their dwellings at once except God alone." About fifty years later, Meister Eckhart (1260-1329 CE), the famous Rhineland mystic, offered an even more visceral image: "God was pregnant with every creature from all eternity."[100] In other words, what if being *imago Dei* means to be intimately interwoven with the natural world? What if being *imago Dei* means *exactly* to call the tension between finitude and longing *HOME* and to do so with grace?

We find ourselves as a society—no, *as a species*—in the most excruciatingly vulnerable moment of our existence. We have pretended for so long—and with such a vengeance—that we are not from around here, that Here is on the verge of becoming no longer hospitable to our being. If there is a way forward in this moment, permaculture and Transition will be essential companions. Recognizing their essential kinship with our being in the image of an ecological divinity may help us embrace them as the family we need right now.

PS: I've set up a Patreon site to help fund my work in this area. I hope you'll invest in my thinking and writing. You can learn more about how to support me here: www.patreon.com/fullfrontalfaith

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[100] Mechtild was a German Beguine (a lay religious order that was dedicated to serving the poor, but did not take did formal vows). Eckhart was a Dominican theologian and friar (preacher). Both quotes appears in *Meditation with Mechtild of Magdeburg* (ed. Sue Woodruff, Bear & Company, 1982, pp. 15, 29).

Permaculture and Pride: Queer Gifts in a Time of Climate ChangeD

David R. Weiss – June 23, 2019
The Gospel in Transition #31 – **Subscribe at www.davidrweiss.com**

I have one more essay on "dominion" in Genesis 1:26 to write, but this week, in honor of LGBTQ Pride, I want to consider how Pride offers some timely gifts that should resonate in faith communities adapting to climate changeD.

Permaculture, as we've seen, begins with the presumption, *Earth knows Earth best*. Because of its capacity to "think" and "problem-solve" across a geological timescale, Earth can patiently tease out the best way to do things. Hence, permaculture encourages us to work *with* Earth's "best practices" when interacting with Earth (e.g., farming) and to learn *from* Earth as we *earthlings* fashion the physical communities and cultural worlds where we dwell. Permaculture says we're wise to follow Earth's lead rather than dictate terms that may be more to our immediate liking but aren't likely to be sustainable. And permaculture gently, persistently reminds us that because *we are Earth first*, if it isn't sustainable for Earth, it isn't wise for earthlings.

Pride is a celebration of resistance by the LGBTQ community. Sure it has its gaudy, *fabulous*, festive expressions, but it began—fifty years ago in the Stonewall riots of 1969—as an act of resistance and ultimately a declaration of authentic selfhood. After decades, generations, centuries of being marginalized, ostracized, criminalized, and demonized, through Stonewall the queer community said, ENOUGH!

Now, there is a *long complex* history here, and I'm not fully competent to tell it. But I can say a few things. While Stonewall became "the" lightning rod event, it was far from the first moment of resistance. And the visible faces, audible voices, and leading figures within the queer community have been contested at length. Although the Stonewall riots were led by drag queens and transwomen, in the wake of the riots it was primarily gay men, whose relative social/economic status gave them more power than others in the queer community, who emerged as most visible vanguard of Pride. But over the past five decades—with plenty of vigorous discussion along the way—many others have emerged, bringing their own particular colorful identities to Pride: lesbian, bisexual, transgender, asexual, gender fluid, intersex, queer persons of color, and more.

Regardless of their pathway into Pride, what links these persons together is their resistance to being socially othered: deemed criminal, forced out of view, condemned as sinful, or branded as "queer"—queer as "that-which-fouls-the-normal."[101] And the positive expression of this resistance, seen in Pride celebrations and even more importantly in the daily dignity with which these persons carry themselves is this permaculture-like assertion: *We know our own truth best, and we will live from the truth that is ours.*

Over against a dominant patriarchal society that has worked relentlessly to objectify earth, animals, persons of color, women, and LGBTQ persons—pressing them all into the service of foolhardy dreams of domination, Pride becomes one more voice among many saying, *ENOUGH*. Earth knows Earth best. Animals have intrinsic dignity, "knowing" themselves in way we can only humbly guess at. Persons of color bear witness to an experience of life—especially in white-dominant societies—that is unknown to the rest of us unless we listen in rapt silence. Women know women (across a multitude of particular experiences) best. And queer people (in all their extravagant diversity) know queer people best.

[101] True, some persons choose to wear "queer" itself as a term of pride, "turning the symbol" so that its othering power is erased. Such acts may render the symbol itself harmless to certain hearers, but it's a much bigger project to render the systems that use the term harmless.

In some ways the Garden of Eden myth of eating from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil (in Genesis 3 and discussed in GIT #28) is the story of the primordial "fall" into the arrogant—and often deadly—presumption that I can know you *absolutely* and without needing to listen to you. It tells of the temptation for those with social power to believe they can map out the world's morality without reference to the world's diversity—as though the measure of "good" and "evil" is ours alone. Such efforts are worse than foolish. They inevitably alienate us from Earth, animals, and others, and usually that alienation is costly—even deadly—for those with less power.

Indeed, one might view much of the arc of human history through this lens. Different empires competing for whose version of the world can "map" the rest of the world most to their advantage. It's a story of human folly and tragedy … and evil and genocide. And as human technology has advanced the stakes have gotten higher for everyone, including Earth herself.

There are at least two fundamental gifts that Pride might bring to conversations about how we live toward Transition in light of our changeD climate. Foremost is this permaculture-like assertion: *each community*, whether Earth or animal, gender, or sexual identity, *knows itself best*. And deserves to be met on its own terms. That's the heart of Pride. It sits at the intersection of resistance, celebration, and wisdom. And it's a truth we all need today.

The second gift is more sobering but just as essential. Both on account of its enduring across long generations of oppression and more keenly through its searing experience with HIV/AIDS, the queer community has learned—by sheer necessity—to foster community by leveraging inner resources more than outer resources. Even to tend to its dying members with grace without knowing when—or if—its suffering would end. This is NOT a lesson anyone would be eager to learn. But as the disparities in our world deepen and as ecosystems became more strained and as we begin to experience the backlash of having lived so long out of sync with our own Earth home, we may need this "gift" most of all.

I just finished watching HBO's miniseries, *Chernobyl*. It's a piercing look at the factors that led to that nuclear catastrophe and the devastation it wrought. I'll be haunted for a long time by words spoken by Valery Legasov, one of the lead characters in assessing how this unimaginable disaster could've happened: "Every lie we tell incurs a debt to truth. Sooner or later that debt is paid."

Our consumptive industrialized world, so dismissive of the wisdom of permaculture, has lived a long lie. The rising rate of carbon in the atmosphere is but one indicator of how great our debt to truth has grown. And it is coming due soon. It is no small thing to suggest, as Pride celebrations swirl around us this week, that if we can learn the first lesson of Pride, acknowledging and honoring the integrity of each Earth (and earthling) community we will be better able to transition away from the lie that has claimed most of our lives to date.

And it is no small thing to whisper that if (when?) chaos, uncertainty, and suffering come to define our world it may be the hallowed memory of the queer community that can help show us how to hold onto dignity and joy even then.

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drw59mn@gmail.com

Permaculture and Dominion: An Unlikely Love Story

David R. Weiss – July 9, 2019
The Gospel in Transition #32 – **Subscribe at www.davidrweiss.com**

This is my fifth and, for the time being, final essay on the biblical creation narratives (the others are GIT 27, 28, 29, 30). These origin tales from our distant religious roots don't offer perfect ecological wisdom. They grew out of a culture and worldview already knocked askew by patriarchy. But they harbor wisdom born of a relationship more attuned to both the divine and the mundane than is common today. And the power we often borrow from them to fuel our domination of the planet comes to us only by misreading the terms and ignoring the distance between their context and ours.

So, *dominion*. The word (in Hebrew *rahad*) appears in Genesis 1:26-28, where it describes the relationship God sets us in with respect to the rest of creation. But wait. This account—like *all* Scripture—does NOT objectively record God's actions or inclinations. To say these verses report "the relationship God sets us in …" is accurate enough of the words themselves, but hardly sound as theology. Truer to say: in these verses an ancient Hebrew storyteller *imagines God* setting humans in such relationship. Theology is *always* expressive of decidedly human imagination, and to do theology responsibly *always* involves a readiness to critique that imagination.

Still, if there there's a blank check in the biblical creation accounts, whether from God or from that ancient storyteller, it's "dominion." Arguably no concept has so fueled our un-ecological relationship with the planet as dominion.[102] But what if these verses *never meant that*? What if we've been raised to *misread* this text to our own planetary peril?

As I explained earlier (GIT 29) the context for this creation account/liturgy is on the far side of national disaster—*and that makes a big difference*. We don't know its exact dating, but scholars agree it was written either for people living as refugees, exiled to a foreign land, or for Israel's post-Exilic community, former refugees seeking to rebuild after having lost *everything*. For such people to be told (Gen. 1:26) they were created *imago Dei* (in the image of God) is far from a prideful assertion. It is the sacred reaffirmation of a dignity by then thoroughly shattered by the world.

Similarly, to be set into a relation of *rahad*/dominion with the natural world—whatever that might mean—sits differently when you realize the word comes to people who've been scattered and whose *best* technology can only hope to eek out reliable harvests but cannot inflict real damage on the earth. Context matters. But so does original meaning.

Imagine: there *are* other ways to arrange the stars in the night sky besides the constellations so familiar to us like the Big Dipper. But by now our eyes *insist* on seeing *those* patterns. At least since the King James Version (1611CE) the Hebrew word *rahad* has been rendered as dominion. Against the backdrop of the Renaissance, the Scientific Revolution, and the Age of Discovery,* translating this word as the "politically correct" version of "domination" made a certain sense—because it took (West European) humanity's burgeoning *hubris* and dressed it up as God's own commission.

*More accurately: "The Emerging Scourges of Colonialism, Capitalism, and White Supremacy." *Seriously*.

Considering how *rahad* is used elsewhere in the Bible and how it functions in this text shows that domination has NO relationship to *rahad*.[103] "Dominion" is, in fact, *a very poor choice* to translate this word for God's desired relationship between humanity and the rest of creation. Nowhere in the Bible does *rahad* carry a sense of domination or oppression. Most significantly, in Psalm 72 *rahad* describes the rule of the king *who ensures that justice is done and that the needs of the vulnerable are cared for*. Thus, *rahad*, minimally, is "righteous reign." But we can suggest even more.

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[102] For instance, see Lynn White, Jr., "The Historic Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis," *Science* 155 (1967), 1203-07.
[103] My thoughts here are indebted to and in conversation with Lloyd H. Steffen, "In Defense of Dominion," *Environmental Ethics* 14:1 (Spring 1992), pp. 63-80.

Rahad is established as the human vocation *before* humanity is distorted by sin so its later uses (as in Psalm 73) may name those fleeting glimpses when humans manifest the wholeness for which they were intended. And because the Priestly editors chose to place this creation account first, as a sort of prelude to the (earlier) Yahwist account, they likely meant to show the naming of the companion creatures in Eden by the original Humus Being (*adam*) as original *rahad*/dominion. Yet this naming creates the conditions NOT for oppression but for relationship—*for intimacy*. In this regard, *rahad,* far from what we think of as dominion, is much closer to the Native American notion that sees humans in familial relationship to all other creatures.

I'll go one step further. When Jeremiah (22:13-16) describes God-pleasing kingship he echoes Psalm 72: doing justice and protecting the vulnerable are defining royal deeds. But then he asks, most evocatively, "'Is not this what it means *to know* me?' says the LORD." That verb, "to know," is the same Hebrew word for love-making. It carries the sense of deep authentic intimacy. For Jeremiah, to practice justice and mercy is to know God … intimately. *Without being explicitly sexual about it,* rahad *is God's commission that we stand in erotic*[104] *relationship to the world around us*. To know creation intimately, to name it well, with a deep mix of wonder, awe, understanding, and care. This is *rahad*, and *it's a love story*.

Given these rich justice-driven, mercy-friendly, eco-sensitive connotations, the challenge isn't to "redeem" some nuanced version of "dominion," it's to find a phrase that actually carries *rahad* into English. Something like: "Then God said, 'Let us make humankind [*adam*: humus beings, earthlings] in our image, according to our likeness; and let them exercise *rahad*/~~dominion~~ [an eco-intimate and just-knowing relationship] with the fish of the sea, the birds of the air, and the cattle, and with all the earth and every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth." (Gen 1:26) That's *rahad*.

Of course, almost right after this (Gen. 1:28), we're instructed, as one primary expression of *rahad*, to *kabash* the earth. For 400 years we've read *kabash* as "subdue," translating it in tandem with the "dominion" rendering of *rahad*. But, having reframed *rahad*, it becomes evident that *kabash* actually means nothing more—and nothing less!—than to "till and keep" the garden. (Gen. 2:15) In fact, drawing all the richness of *rahad* into *kabash*, it's fair to say that *kabash* anticipates *permaculture* as the most practical expression of our human vocation.

Words matter. And translation is no innocent enterprise. The 2016 film *Arrival* is (among other things) a compelling reflection on the stakes in translation, where humanity's fate (not unlike our own!) hangs in the balance over how to translate a single word from an alien message. Is it "weapon" … or "tool"? And what leads us to select one over the other?

It is the height of folly to think the biblical creation tales authorized our ecocidal exploitation of the planet, but it's equally foolish to write them off as fairy tales that ask us to believe in magic. These texts bear deep wisdom. This Priestly account invites us to see our relationship (*rahad*) to the earth and our companion creatures … as a love story. Doing so won't solve the climate crisis, but it will offer us a warmer and wiser posture from which to address it, providing us with an unlikely but essential love story as we prepare to meet the tempest coming our way.

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[104] On the "the erotic," see Audre Lorde, "The Uses of the Erotic," (1978) in *Sexuality and the Sacred,* eds. Marvin M. Ellison and Kelly Brown Douglass (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 2010), pp. 73-77.

Mucking Along in the Great Marsh – Air Thick with Hope

David R. Weiss – July 13, 2019
The Gospel in Transition #33 – **Subscribe at www.davidrweiss.com**

"I swear, if we meet a triceratops around the next bend I won't be at all surprised!" Of course, I was mostly joking; I would've been *very* much surprised. But the ambience of the marsh was *so* ancient, it was hard not to feel a little anxious at Margaret's reply: "Well, if we do, you're on your own, because I'll be busy filming it chasing you with my phone, so I can text it to the grandkids and say, 'Look what Grandpa found on our hike!'"

We were meandering (and melting in the humidity) along the Great Marsh Trail,[105] part of the Indiana Dunes National Lakeshore. "Hiking" would be an overstatement because the mile-and-a-half trail is entirely flat and comprised mostly of a mown grassy path. But "walking" or "strolling" would be an understatement. We seemed *far* from civilization, as the muck that occasionally sucked at our shoes intimated.

And "intimated" itself is an interesting word. It means "suggested," of course, but perhaps in a more *intimate* sort of way. And once we'd ventured the first hundred yards into the marsh, it swallowed us … *intimately*. We were wrapped in a sultry sensory concoction of croaking frogs, flower scents, buzzing insects, swampy smells, bird songs, and a host of verdant hues. The marsh embraced us with the enthusiasm of a dear friend who hasn't seen us in ages. We felt *known*.

Setting my imaginary triceratops aside, and making allowance for the infrequent car we could see driving along the road at the far edge of the marsh, the trail did feel like we'd passed through time, back to a terrain unmarked by human activity. But not quite.

There are three levels to the tale, each holding its own measure of wonder.

The Great Marsh once stretched for about fifty miles in a crescent just beyond the first ripple of sand dunes along Lake Michigan's southern shore.[106] For hundreds of years the marsh was a crucial wetlands habitat and an important layover for migratory birds. Then, many portions of the marsh were "developed," which, if we're blunt, is a nice way of saying they were destroyed. Because: humans. Dried out and turned into farmland, industrial sites, or (in our case) residential neighborhoods. Habitat loss was extensive as even the "undeveloped" sections were changed by non-native and invasive species.

About twenty years the Dunes National Lakeshore began a concerted effort to restore a 500-acre strand of the Great Marsh—with great success. Drainage ditches were plugged so that the soil could again saturate itself (and then some!). Plants that didn't belong were removed, and others, long lost in the marsh, were replanted and thrived. Today this section of the Great Marsh teems with waterfowl again and is an oasis for migrating birds. Parts of its prehistoric feel comes from the dead trees—some still standing, many toppled over—that came in when the land was drier and are now being repurposed by the marsh itself. Hardly lost, they're being embraced (albeit a bit more aggressively than Margaret and me—thank goodness!) by the ecosystem, becoming infrastructure and food.[107]

As we walked the trail, it was apparent that had we strayed three feet off the trail in either direction we'd have been in ankle-deep muck or knee-deep water at any point. I remarked to Margaret, "I wonder how they even made the path we're walking on. They must've had to fill it in."

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[105] https://www.nps.gov/indu/planyourvisit/gm16.htm
[106] For a pair of personal blogs (by someone I don't know at all) that offer appreciative and accessible (non-scientific background on the Great Marsh written six year apart, see: https://terriofthetrails.blogspot.com/2013/07/the-great-marsh-of-indiana-dunes.html and http://terriofthetrails.blogspot.com/2019/06/the-great-marsh-trail-redux.html
[107] Find our photos from the day here: www.facebook.com/davidrweiss/media_set?set=a.10156702212626596&type=3

When we got back to my parents' home, I pulled the area up on Google Maps to show them where we had walked. My first surprise came when I clicked it over "satellite" view. Perhaps the image was several years old—and likely taken during early spring or late fall because very little foliage is present—but what *is* clearly present is the "echo" of old residential roads still visible peaking up through the marsh. You'd never know they were there from ground level; they've been reclaimed more thoroughly than the dead trees.

Then I looked closer and the first wave of wonder hit me: the trail we'd walked matched *exactly* the lines of several of the abandoned roads. We had, in a sense—a very humid, sweaty, sultry sense!—strolled the streets of that planned but never fully built neighborhood from 90-plus years ago. *And never knew*. Because: marsh.

The second wave of wonder came courtesy my dad. As he looked at the map showing the now marshed-over streets, he shook his head with a smile of recognition. He said, "You know, when my dad [thus, my paternal grandfather] was just eighteen years old, in 1930, he had a job driving a town car for a real estate company. He would pick up the sales agent and together they would drive to the south Shore train station [it still operates, just 600 feet south of where the Great Marsh Trail begins] and pick up well-to-do clients coming in from Chicago. They'd ride the train to Michigan City to consider where they might build a summer home. *My dad drove those streets 90 years ago*."

No wonder the marsh knew us. "We'd" been here two generations earlier. Under very different circumstances. I can't—*and don't*—blame my grandpa for his tiny (and teenage!) role in trying to develop the marsh. But I can't help but wonder whether that oh-so-warm embrace we felt from the Great Marsh held an offer of forgiveness. Not for my grandpa's actions, but for humanity's general *hubris* in thinking that every corner of creation is just waiting for our imprint. We came to the marsh with our eyes, ears, noses(!)—and hearts—wide open. And she welcomed us back.

Which leads to my third wave of wonder.

If you've been following my blog for much of these past 33 weeks you know that my hope for a future in which humans have a healthy relationship with the planet runs thin most days. I often think the planet is just waiting us out. That a century or two from now *most* of our cities will look like the Great Marsh: reclaimed by Earth for Earth.

But there is a seed of hope here. Because the Great Marsh Trail bears witness to Earth's eagerness to heal itself if given half a chance. Make no mistake. She *will* seek to heal herself—with or without our aid. And if necessary, she will rid herself of us in order to make healing possible. BUT that trail is also hint of Earth's readiness to welcome us as partners in renewal. I suspect though, as I've suggested across my past columns hearkening to permaculture, that this time she'd like us to take our places as *junior* partners—apprenticed to her—in that work.

I'm game for that. Are you?

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On Being Frederick

David R. Weiss – July 19, 2019
The Gospel in Transition #34 – **Subscribe at www.davidrweiss.com**

No, not *that* Frederick. (As some of you know, my father is named Frederick, but this post is *not* about finding myself becoming my dad.) I'm thinking about Frederick, the field mouse, in Leo Lionni's simple picture book, *Frederick*.[108] It's a sweetly told fable that reminds us the value of persons and their work is not always immediately apparent.

In the story a family of field mice are busily preparing for the coming winter: gatherings bits of food and bedding. They are nonstop activity. But Frederick, who spends his days staring across the meadow, seems to be doing nothing. When the other mice scold him for not working, Frederick replies that he *is* working: gathering sun rays, meadow colors, and words. The other mice, dedicated to more practical preparations, are skeptical.

Winter arrives and so long as the food is plentiful and the bedding plump the new season feels festive despite the barren fields outside. But as the winter drags on, the nuts and seeds grow scarce and the soft straw no longer buffers the cold. Spirits waver. Finally, the mice turn to Frederick and ask, "What about *your* supplies, Frederick?" And he delivers. Using his words to summon memories of the warm sun and the colorful meadow and the very rhythm of their lives, he weaves meaning back into the long bitter winter. For all of them. The worth of Frederick's "work," hard to see during the summer or fall, reveals itself in the moment most needed.

Thank goodness (for the sake of all the mice) that Frederick persisted in his own harvest activity even under the reproachful glances of his fellow mice. That's a sense of vocation.

So, on being Frederick.

I've actually been Frederick for some time. A misfit in both the academy and the church, for decades now I've known the questioning glances of those who wonder why I'm not doing more "real" work. I have great respect for college and university professors who do their work well. That *might* have been my work had things played out differently earlier in my life, but at this point—relegated to the ranks of adjunct faculty—that work cannot be mine any longer. It offers a mere pittance for the knowledge and experience I have. Worse, it directly distracts with the pretense of respect and purpose, from the work that my "inner Frederick" feels called to do.

Similarly, I have great respect for pastors who do their work well. But it isn't my work. (Although I would welcome a church that offered to "host" me as public theologian, providing a tiny bit of support, measure of collegiality, and the mutual embrace of community. I think my work could find a welcome home in the right parish—where we might make a learning lab for public faith in the face of climate crisis. But I have yet to find a "vocational dating site" for folks like me.)

Today, this year, these weekly essays—plus the background reading, listening, thinking, anguishing and imagining that I do alongside them—*are* my harvest activity. I'm NOT a climate scientist, but I read widely and deeply enough and take science seriously enough to sense what comes next for us. And even apart from the misplaced temperature reference, that long bitter winter the mice faced is *nothing* compared to what's headed our way. No mere season of heat, but *generations* of disruption and collapse. How will we navigate those days—those decades, maybe centuries—ahead?

We *already* feel the upsurge in anxiety over extreme weather events—especially those that touch our country directly. Many coastlines—east, west, south—*already* show signs of sea level rise and erosion. Many farmers *already* wrestle with the way floods, drought, and a changing climate make

[108] Leo Lionni, *Frederick* (New York: dragonfly Books/Alfred A Knopf, Inc., 1967).

farming an even more tenuous affair. And we *already* see the rise of refugees from famine and unrest around the world—including at our southern border.[109] This is climate crisis unfolding across our lands and our lives already now.

Meanwhile, political leaders in Washington and elsewhere prey on the anxiety creeping into our psyches and use it to fashion every "other" into a threat and an enemy. Before long we'll be hemmed in by fear and mistrust on all sides. Just waiting for someone with twisted charisma to tell us whom to hate next. The anxiety fraying our social fabric is rooted in a multitude of things, but its taproot runs to the gnawing intuition that the lives we've built for ourselves by exploiting both people and planet (and everything in between) are wholly unsustainable. Those lives are starting to collapse—and as they do, they may well take us down with them. *That anxiety is real*. Something MUCH more challenging than winter is on the horizon.

Stoking xenophobia in response to this anxiety is one navigation strategy. It is utterly unchristian, inhumane, and will prove deadly even to most of those drawn in by it. But it has undeniable appeal because, for many, *it is more palatable to raise our hate for others than to acknowledge how far we have travelled in the wrong direction* ... economically, industrially, ecologically, socially, culturally. Let that sink it: it's easier to raise the level of hate than to consider correcting our course. This is *the* story of our politics across much of the world today—especially here at home.

Nonetheless, I'm working daily to harvest supplies for a different strategy. One that can re-tether us to the deepest life-giving roots of our past while responding to the life-altering needs of the present. I'm listening to biblical passages and liturgical seasons for ancient memories that offer fresh wisdom today. And I'm reading the latest news headlines with the Bible, theology, and the church year all percolating in the background, just waiting for touch points to emerge. I've "gathered" thirty-three essays of supplies so far, and there is much more yet to do.

Still, by most standards on most days, it looks like I'm not doing much of anything. Truthfully, some days I *feel* that way. But then I think of Frederick.

I believe my work—my gifts as writer, teacher, theologian, poet—can play an important role in aiding faith communities as they face the climate crisis. Unlike the field mice in the story, we won't move into our "winter" with the same certainty of a changing season. Climate crisis will lurch across our planet unevenly—*it already is*. And my gifts are already useful. But in the days ahead they may become even more needed as other sources of meaning and security become strained to the breaking point. I believe there is meaning to be had no matter what. And I'm determined to do my own peculiar work, my unique gathering, even as some people wonder whether I'm doing any "real" work at all.

I am, after all, Frederick. (But you can call me David. Thanks.)

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[109] A recent study, analyzing migration data from 198 countries, found that the impacts of climate change are now *the leading cause* of migration, higher than either economic inequality or conflict.
www.scidev.net/global/climate-change/news/climate-now-biggest-driver-of-migration-study-finds.html

Bumbling Toward an Earth Ethic here at Home

David R. Weiss – July 31, 2019
The Gospel in Transition #35 – **Subscribe at www.davidrweiss.com**

It began with a Spanish swear word, I'm sure, but I'll skip that part. Last Thursday after supper two of our grandkids were playing baseball in our side yard. "Baseball" is overstatement; they were taking turns swinging at an assortment of tennis balls and light plastic baseballs pitched to them underhanded by their dad, Will. "Side yard" is also overstatement; this thin strip of yard is only 15 feet wide—and interrupted by a tiny porch, two window wells, a sandbox, a bird feeder, and a small flower bed. It hardly counts as "yard" and only manages to make a very makeshift baseball field because John (5½) and Benjamin (3) are equally small.

When Will, who'd been pitching while barefoot, slipped his feet back into his sandals—that's when the swear word slipped out. Even if his English were stronger (it isn't), in moments of existential crisis you naturally fall back on your mother tongue. And this was such a moment, so it was Nicaraguan Spanish that whistled its way through the pain. While Will's sandals were sitting on the lawn a large bumble bee was nosing its way through one of them—and found itself suddenly trapped between leather thong and Nicaraguan foot. One of the bumble bees unique "features" is its *barbless* stinger. Which means these bees can sting without dying … again and again. But I don't think it took more than one plunge of the stinger into the soft flesh between Will's first two toes for all debate over current occupancy to be decided. The sandal belonged to the bee.

On Friday night two other grandchildren, Nora (7) and Gretchen (6½), were here and had high hopes of playing in the sandbox after supper. But as we prepared to uncover it we noticed a small flurry of bumble bees nearby. There aren't any flowers right here—not even any real clover in the grass to speak of—so why so many bees? It didn't take long to trace their meandering paths to a common point: entrance to an abandoned rodent burrow now clearly repurposed as a long-stay bumble bee bed and breakfast. Oops.

My first instinct—duly accompanied by twin pangs of tragedy and vengeance—was to ask myself, *"How do I kill them all?"* My first internet search was "exterminating bumble bees." That's how far sin—brokenness from (and toward!) the web of life—has crept its way into my impulses.

Soon I noticed a clear parting of ways in the narratives told about bumble bees. Every site that profited from extermination services amplified the threat. They sting. And it hurts. And they can sting repeatedly. And they will aggressively defend their nests. Damn villains. But there was another story told. Less often to be sure, but there *are* those who champion the bumble bee, who speak of it with wistful wonder (even if also with healthy respect for its personal space).[110]

Did you know, the bumble bee is the only social bee native to North America? Honey bees were brought here from Europe. All the other bees native to this continent are solitary. Bumble bee nests, started early each spring from scratch by a single queen, only hold 50-200 bees; maybe 500 max—compared to honey bee nests with 10,000-50,000 bees. Bumble bees are thus "small town" bees.

But big time pollinators. They actually pollinate more effectively than honey bees. Their wings beat about 130 times each second (which is par for honey bees, too), but their size sets them apart. They actually generate heat as they bumble about, meaning they can start their flights earlier in the morning and continue into the cool of the evening. It also means they're among the first pollinators to be out and about in the spring … and among the last still buzzing about in the fall. Speaking of that buzz, and owing again to the combination of wing beats and body size, bumble bees can cause "buzz pollination"—they actually … I might say *erotically* (See GIT #32) … vibrate plants into releasing pollen.

[110] My bumble bee background comes from: www.bumblebeeconservation.org, www.buzzaboutbees.net, www.bumblebee.org, and www.blog.nwf.org/2014/04/5-facts-about-bumble-bees-and-how-to-help-them.

Their fuzzy bodies carry more pollen from plant to plant. And some bumble bees have such long tongues they can feed at (and thus pollinate) flowers that other bees just can't effectively flirt with.

Unlike honey bees, whose hives might endure for years, bumble bees hold more modest expectations; their nests just last a single season. Each spring a queen emerges from her winter hibernating place (usually a tiny hole in the ground, or a nook under some tree bark), goes on a flower feast to restore her energy, and then scouts out a spot for to start her nest. Once settled, she lays eggs—all female. None will become queens—these are all workers, and all summer (living just 4-8 weeks each) they collect nectar and pollen, pollinate plants, clean and protect the nest. By late summer the queen starts laying eggs to produce male bees (drones) and new queens. Besides eating, the male bees have just one job: mate with a new queen. Most don't even manage to do that before they die. The new queens, once "satisfied," bulk up on food and find a safe solitary place to over-winter and start the whole cycle again next spring.

All in all, they're pretty amazing little creatures. And, all in all, under rising threat from habitat loss, pesticide use, and a changing climate. Suddenly extermination seemed barbaric. Surely I could hire someone to relocate the bees without killing them. (In fact, I did find such a person.) But those bee-friendly websites practically *plead* with people to leave the nests *undisturbed*. Since only the new queens survive from one year to the next, even trying to safely relocate the live bees right now would risk damaging the as yet un-hatched (likely un-laid) new queen and drone eggs. Every future generation of this nest—and the untold millions of flowers, fruits, and vegetables the bees will pollinate—rests on my next move. So what do I do with the bumble bees nesting in our side yard?

All ethics is finally household ethics. I've often urged my readers to imagine a wider sense of community: to entertain *the truth* that we are interwoven in creation itself. Not apart from, not above, but entirely *in, with, and under it*. (Which is, ironically—maybe appropriately—exactly how Luther describes the mystical-real presence of Christ in the Sacrament.)

So I've roped off the nest area with yellow caution tape and posted signs offering both a word of caution and a few "fun facts"—why not take a little educational delight in these bumbling sojourners? Our swing set is several yards away; no worries there. The sand box is closer than I wish, though with a watchful adult nearby, toddlers ought to be fine playing in the sand while bees hover above the entrance to their home just a few feet away. As for baseball, given John's growing savvy as a slugger, it was probably time to take those games up to the park anyway.

Ideal? I'm tempted to say very quickly, "Of course not." But, wait. Our entire ecological crisis—from overheating climate to chemically wounded ecosystems, from badly polluted land, air, and water, to countless species pushed to the brink (nest by nest by nest!)—stems from our presumption *that we come first*. And these nests (we eventually found *two* entrances, likely to two nests) actually invite us, from grandparents to grandchildren, to remember that we come … always … *together*.

Preserving a pair of bumble bee nests in our yard will not stop climate crisis. But among all the choices we face on a daily basis, re-thinking the ones closest at hand—the ones right at home—is how we build the resolve to do face the even bigger challenges ahead. So along with the bees, we are bumbling toward an Earth ethic that includes all of us.

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What's on Your Plate?

David R. Weiss – August 12, 2019
The Gospel in Transition #36 – **Subscribe at www.davidrweiss.com**

I think I surprised myself as much as anyone in the room—which would mean *everyone* was caught off guard by the uncompromising tone of my voice. I'm usually a pretty soft-spoken person, retiring even around groups. And this voice was neither soft nor retiring.

We were discussing my step-daughter Megan's electric stove, which was hers not by choice but because it came with the house they bought a little over a year ago. And because when she checked the cost to put in a gas line to connect to a gas stove it seemed exorbitant, so she's begrudgingly getting used to cooking on electric. I told her she was ahead of the curve, and that we'd be looking at electric next time our stove needed replacing. To which Margaret responded, "Um, No, why would we do that?" And that's when I mildly exploded, "WE'D DO IT FOR THE FUTURE, FOR GOSH SAKES!"

Okay, everyone calm down. First, our gas stove isn't all that old and it still works fine. We're not in a position to just scrap it and replace it with electric. So Margaret and I have several years to sort out our feelings about this. And the amount of gas we use in food preparation is not huge. But, like Megan, I'm not indifferent to exorbitant costs—and, for me, the exorbitant ecological cost *to my grandchildren* of buying a new gas oven is one I will not bear.[111] But honestly even I was surprised by the demanding urgency in my voice.

Maybe it's the timing of that conversation. This past week the latest Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) report declared unambiguously that what we put on our plate today—from the food we choose, to the way it gets produced (and transported) at every step along the way to our dining room table—will directly impact the climate our grandchildren inherit tomorrow.[112] And right now we're *literally* eating their future.

The report details the way that land degradation (much of it from ill-conceived food production practices) contributes to the climate crisis … while the climate crisis also drives extreme weather that can irreparably damage the ability of ecosystems to produce food. Additionally, new studies reveal that food produced with higher CO2 rates in the atmosphere becomes less nutritious—both rice and wheat have lower protein and vitamin content. And while a few areas will see better food production as a result of a changing climate, *most* will see production fall—and in countries already food insecure, declining production will have cascading health, social, and political effects … that will inevitably cross borders. Rising threats to food security anywhere will become threats to national security everywhere.

More bluntly rising threats to food security pose threats to *human* security globally. This isn't an argument for secure borders; it's an argument for wiser and more equitable choices about how we produce (and transport and prepare) our food and the land we grow it on. The IPCC report notes that empowering women farmers and strengthening the land-security of small-scale farms is an evidence-based way to support the health of the land. And relentless deforestation must be checked or we will mortally wound the planet's ability to store carbon at a level that conducive to human society (and to many creatures besides us).

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[111] A recent NPR story discussed natural gas and climate: www.npr.org/2019/08/05/745051104/give-up-your-gas-stove-to-save-the-planet-banning-gas-is-the-next-climate-push

[112] The data I cite from the IPCC report comes from these articles:
www.theguardian.com/environment/2019/aug/03/ipcc-land-use-food-production-key-to-climate-crisis-leaked-report
www.cnn.com/2019/08/08/world/ipcc-report-land-climate-crisis-sci-intl/index.html
www.cnn.com/2019/08/09/health/ipcc-report-food-security-climate-scn/index.html
www.vox.com/2019/8/8/20758461/climate-change-report-2019-un-ipcc-land-food

The report criticizes an "extractive industrial system" that secures food for us in ways that *fail to secure* the soil's integrity—either as a supplier of nutrients or a keeper of carbon. Tim Crews, one the authors, commented, "We're not thinking holistically from an ecological point of view. We're not thinking of our food producing farms as being ecosystems themselves. The natural systems that existed before agriculture have a lot of the answers. We should really start paying attention to that."[113] That's a pretty direct shout out to permaculture. (See GITs #26-32.)

Meanwhile, Eric Holthaus, author of the *Rolling Stone* piece, echoes this sentiment and goes one step further: "In speaking with a half a dozen authors of the report, there was a single transformational thought that underpinned the urgency of their findings: Until we realize that we exist as part of an ecosystem, that we are part of a living planet, we will continue to destroy the soil that makes our existence possible." And that, in large part, is the task of cosmology: having a grand story (religious or otherwise) of who we are that places us wholly within the web of this world.

The IPCC report describes a food production system that is wildly out of touch with a finite planet and a sustainable society … and one that operates (mostly) beyond the reach of actual food eaters. But not entirely. The report does make this much clear: *we will not stave off climate catastrophe without slashing the amount of red meat we consume. This is non-negotiable for a livable future*. Hence, in the U.S. in particular, we must make a real—population-wide—shift toward plant-based, vegetarian, and vegan diets. Or we must at least acknowledge we are damning our grandchildren to a bleak and dreadfully over-heated future because we'd rather eat as much meat as we wish today.

If enough of us rethink our meal choices we will reshape food production priorities. And, if we don't, our grandchildren will perish. And if not ours, someone else's—I'm not trying to melodramatic, I'm trying to be emotionally and unmistakably concrete. We can eat exactly the way we've been raised to eat … exactly the way we prefer to eat … and it will kill future generations. It's time to stop pretending that personal diet choices remain personal. They are choices with cross-generational consequences, which makes them political. They reflect how people choose to share (or withhold) power in a community—including communities stretched across time.

So, maybe having all that on my mind explains the edginess in my voice in discussing oven choices. I'm largely vegetarian (occasionally eating sustainable seafood). But I have plenty of areas of choice in my own life to press myself on. One is eating "closer to harvest,": lessening my consumption of processed food. Another is continuing to increase my consumption of (and support for) organic produce. Another is becoming more savvy about growing and preserving foods myself. And, yes, one more, is being willing to question the way I heat the food I prepare in my own home.

Jim Skea, one of the lead authors of the IPCC reports states, "We know about the huge challenges of climate change, but I don't think we want to get across a message of despair. We want to get across a message that *all actions make a difference*." That's worth remembering as we choose what to put on our dinner plate today. Because whatever choices we make, our plate also holds one more thing besides the food: *tomorrow*.

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[113] www.rollingstone.com/politics/politics-news/ipcc-land-report-climate-change-869466

Okay, it's NOT about the Beef

David R. Weiss – August 14, 2019
The Gospel in Transition #37 – **Subscribe at www.davidrweiss.com**

It's not really about eating beef—or using natural gas to cook with. (But, of course, at some level *it is*. I'll come back to that.) If my last post felt a bit heavy on its handedness and light on its theology, I suppose it was. Anybody can have a long week that leaves them short on patience. It was my turn. So let me clarify a couple things and then get on with my point.

First, beef. Feeding America's appetite for red meat *is* a threat to our future.[114] Livestock production drives deforestation across the globe, decisively weakening the planet's capacity to capture and hold carbon. It also diverts cropland into growing livestock feed rather than raising food to support plant-based human diets—a woefully inefficient tradeoff, because if we weren't raising so much damn cattle feed some land being used for livestock production could be used for carbon capture, and we could feed all of humanity on the rest. And, of course, the methane produced by cows is far a more potent greenhouse gas than CO2. Clearly, beef is a bad deal for the planet today and a (much!) worse deal for those who inhabit the planet tomorrow.

That doesn't mean that anyone who cares about the planet has to give up red meat. But it does mean—if they care about the planet and its inhabitants (human and more), they need to exercise real, tangible restraint in their meat-eating.

Second, natural gas. Yes, natural gas is a "cleaner" fuel source than coal or oil. And, unlike beef consumption, which, for nearly all of us *is* a matter of choice, meal by meal, most of us "inherit" our utility choices with the homes we buy. So the dimension of personal choice can be far less immediate, far more costly, and, in the case of home-heating, a real challenge in colder climes. Still, as demand for natural gas increases (precisely because it's "cleaner") *so does its downside*. In particular, as we exhaust the easiest access to natural gas and turn more and more to fracking, a whole unhappy host of health and geophysical risks arise, as well as the inevitable leakage of natural gas[115] (mostly methane, a greenhouse gas that is 30 times more powerful in its contribution to global heating as CO2).[116]

Natural gas is no innocent choice. The challenge *has* to be to reduce our fossil fuel use to a bare minimum as rapidly as possible. There is *no other way* to a tomorrow that does not willfully char Earth's ecosystem than to get out of fossil fuels today. So, even as they are built into our structured homes and lives, as swiftly as we can make legitimate choices to move away from them, we should.

And *choice* is the doorway through which both ethics and theology enter. We face many choices as we navigate our personal and communal lives in response to global heating. I am *not* your expert on dietary decisions or utility option; I'm often not even my own. I muddle through those areas—and bumble bees, too!—as best I can for myself and/or with Margaret. But I *am* committed to making my own choices. And while one part of that is gaining the knowledge so I can make an informed choice, *the bigger part is cultivating within myself* (or within my marriage, or any other widening circle) *the moral restlessness that makes choosing possible*.

Cultivating this restlessness is a fundamentally *human* endeavor; I happen to believe that faith traditions (of many kinds) can assist in sowing and sustaining moral restlessness. But I also must admit that many religions harbor expressions (frequently among their most dominant/"successful"

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[114] www.climatecentral.org/news/studies-link-red-meat-and-climate-change-20264

[115] On fracking and natural gas: www.commondreams.org/news/2019/06/05/not-freedom-gas-failure-gas-first-its-kind-report-details-planetary-perils-us, www.commondreams.org/views/2019/06/23/growing-case-ban-fracking, www.commondreams.org/views/2019/07/31/research-stop-fracking-asap,

[116] Methane is *86* times more potent than CO2 in trapping the sun's heat, but it stays in the atmosphere a shorter length of time before breaking down. The "30 times more powerful" is the official measure of its "global warming potential" over a 100-year window: www.epa.gov/ghgemissions/understanding-global-warming-potentials

expressions—shit!) that promote a sense of morality that is primarily private (between me and God, or me and my immediate family and friends) and committed to simplistic certainty (a short list of rights and wrongs). In these instances the genuine moral restlessness that is the measure of authentic humanity is reached (if at all) in spite of, not because of religious faith.

Moral restlessness approaches the choices we face with a "hermeneutic of suspicion." That's "big-talk" for saying we should instinctively *interrogate* the choices we're presented with by asking, "Who benefits if I choose this or that?—and who loses?" Without actively distrusting the world, moral restlessness takes very seriously the distortions (theologically, we might say, "sin") present in both the people and (especially!) the systems around us. In a consumer capitalist society, where money speaks loudest—and where advertising money plays directly to our insecurities and deceptively to our deepest hungers—we need to be especially … *suspicious* … of who benefits and who loses in the choices we're encouraged to make as consumers.

In fact, consumer capitalism, built on limitless choice of (endlessly cheaper) stuff and limitless economic growth, is wholly invested in *eliminating* moral restlessness—from every corner of our consciousness. The market works relentlessly to narrow the context in which we perceive ourselves until it's simply me and mine, here and now. It wants us to measure the exhilarating range of our choices by our freedom to be indifferent to the consequences those choices have on other persons, other creatures, other places, even the entire planet and future generations. Our sense of choice becomes as big as our "moral community" is small: the fewer persons/creatures/ecosystems that really "matter" to us, the freer we are.

Within that shrunken moral community, not much beyond taste, allergy, convenience and price shape the choices I make about food … or oven. Across the entire range of household choices in front of me, the market says that only me and mine, here and now, matter. And that's called freedom. No. *This is the very antithesis of being human*.

We *are* through others. Every deep faith tradition has a way of offering this truth. Non-theistic Buddhism asserts it no less than monotheistic Christianity. Most situate that "we" in a web that comprises an entire world of flora, fauna, and fellow beings—and stretching across time and place. It's an ecological truth framed long before science conceived the field of ecology.

To be fully human is to act with moral responsibility in *this* context. When we fail to embrace the moral restlessness that considers this wider community we risk … being inhuman. That's sounds like harsh moral judgment, but it's more *a profound existential lament*. We're so entangled in the cultural lie of individualism, that we hardly recognize the full interwoven dignity of which we are capable. To make our choices with care and concern for the whole web of life is *not* a "limit" to our freedom; *it is, rather the very condition in which we discover it*.

Finally, it's not about the beef (or the gas oven) or any of the specific choices we make. It's about making those choices—which may well differ from one person to the next—with moral intention and from a place of genuine moral restlessness. And—because the *web* of life *is* the context for that restlessness—it means making those choices in the generous company of the communities to which we belong. More than a matter of what's on your plate, it truly a matter of who you recognize that you're making the meal with. *Our kitchens include the world*.

PS: I've set up a Patreon site to help fund my work in this area. I hope you'll invest in my thinking and writing. You can learn more about how to support me here: www.patreon.com/fullfrontalfaith

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Moral Restlessness and the God Who is … Not Yet

David R. Weiss – August 24, 2019
The Gospel in Transition #38 – **Subscribe at www.davidrweiss.com**

There may be no more essential "growing edge" in Christian faith than to embrace a theology of moral restlessness. To be sure, I am fully convinced that nonreligious persons can hold (and ought to cultivate) a posture of moral restlessness as well. But as I'm writing these pieces foremost for persons of religious faith,[117] for *these* persons, the way we imagine God (often at a level deeper than words and creeds) is the foundation of our moral vision.

In response to the climate emergency (have you been following the news this past week … month … year?!) I say we need to find a deep well of moral restlessness within us. By moral restlessness I mean that we need to be "on our toes," ready to shift both the impulses and the long-standing habits of our lives (think beef, gas stoves, and air flight—for God's sakes!—among other things) if we wish to have any chance of preserving a future for those we love. And yet we seem to find this so difficult. It's only one steak—how could that make a difference? Gas cooks so much nicer than electric—why would I want to change? And Sun Country just announced $79 fares from the Twin Cities to Florida this winter—who could resist that?

It's true that the scope—and the roots—of the climate crisis are such that only structural change will make much of a difference. Those corporations and individuals with the most money have the loudest voices in shaping public policy and they have clearly rigged the system to benefit their interests. And their interests are driven by a genocidal addiction to profit, power, wealth, status, and privilege. They will threaten *everything*—that's us, animals, eco-systems, and the entire planet's stability—in order to satisfy their genocidal urges. And they will buy influence to game the system to prevent change for as long as possible. That's the stark truth.

Although it's possible that political campaigns and grassroots efforts *can* make a difference. We see instances of that in the twentieth century (civil rights, women's rights, apartheid, same-sex marriage, etc.), although we also see how fragile those gains can be. I'm *not* arguing for social-political indifference; from city and town to state and nation, we *need* to be engaged.

But there is also an *inner engagement* we must make. It is essential for the sense of integrity and personal empowerment that can not only fuel our social-political work, but can also undergird the quality of inner calm that will be in short supply as the climate crisis deepens. That inner engagement is most lively when supported by moral restlessness, which for Christians, might be defined as *faith leaning into the life of God*.

Moral restlessness is the persistent hunger to foster wholeness in the world. It is the readiness, not simply to rearrange the furniture but to remake the entire home if needed to ensure the flourishing of all. Of course, our moral choices are framed by the bounds of our moral community. To whom are we accountable? For whom will we exercise restraint? Upon whom will we lavish our care? With whom will we share our joy? And whose sorrows, joys, needs do we embrace without hesitation? The challenge of moral restlessness—even in a finite world where conflicting values are inevitable—is to refuse to make firm boundaries about our moral community. Ever … *restless,* it should be ever-widening, ever-extending itself one ring further. Ever listening for the voiced and unvoiced aspirations of the others with whom we share this planet.

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[117] "Faith" itself is its own type of complicated. To the extent that "faith" names the "gut disposition/frame of meaning" that *all of us* hold toward life, every human being is a person of faith (except perhaps those who are simply pathological or nihilist in their worldview). For nearly all of human history our frames of meaning have used religious/sacred language, but there is nothing intrinsically religious about faith. It is the innate human response to finding-fashioning-living-in-accord-with meaning in our lives.

Thus, moral restlessness regards the grandeur of mountains, prairies, wetlands, and such as partners in a whispered dialogue of awe. It regards the intricacies of microbes, the inner lives of plants, and the beyond-our-ken cultures of our fellow creatures as invitations to community. Moral restlessness underlies the viewpoint Henry Beston (naturalist, 1888-1968) so hauntingly offered:

> We need another and a wiser and perhaps a more mystical concept of animals. … We patronize them for their incompleteness, for their tragic fate for having taken form so far below ourselves. And therein do we err. For the animal shall not be measured by the human. In a world older and more complete than ours, they move finished and complete, gifted with the extension of the senses we have lost or never attained, living by voices we shall never hear. Neither siblings nor underlings: they are other nations, caught with ourselves in the net of life and time, bound up in the splendor and travail of the earth. (*The Outermost House*, 1928)

That viewpoint—whether sparked by profoundly human awe or religious faith—might be sufficient to check the impulses and re-fashion the habits that presently threaten all that moves on this awe-full orb. We *must choose* to press ourselves uncomfortably at the level of personal choice, individual habit, and communal/cultural presumption. We *must choose* vastly different lives—and starting *now*—if we wish to leave anything other than a smoldering wasteland for those who come next.

For Christians (and Jews) that viewpoint has ancient seeds in the Exodus narrative. In the famous scene at the burning bush, Moses hears a voice commissioning him to assist in liberating the children of Israel from their bondage to Egypt. Moses is understandably intimidated by the task and he wants to know just WHO he's supposed to be representing. So he asks God for a name. God responds with a self-declaration that claims a form of the verb "to be" as the way to name this Holy Presence. Some scholars have regarded this as an evasion of a name—a roundabout way of saying "none-of-your-business," but this fails to plumb the depth of the exchange.

In Hebraic culture names establish the ground of relationship. So when God tells Moses (as it's often translated), "I am That I am," God sets the terms of the relationship as these: "I will burst every box you seek to contain me in. I will defy every limiting definition you devise for me. I will imagine possibilities for you—for us together—beyond your wildest dreams. Whatever *you* choose to think of me, *I* will be who I will be. I am freedom." Well.

But there is a yet more evocative angle here. Hebrew has no distinct future tense; context determines when to cast a verb as future. And the context here (Exodus 3:13-22) calls for future tense. *As though God's very divinity rests on fulfilling the liberatory promises to free the people from their oppression and establish them in a place they can flourish*. Liberation theologians have made this argument in regard to this very passage: that God is so wholly committed to the full flourishing of all as to make the proof—the truth—of God contingent on the promise of liberation.

From this radically evocative perspective, God, eternally and infinitely yearning to consummate liberation, justice, and flourishing … *is not yet*, pending our response, like Moses, to join in God's holy work. Moral restlessness, then—*faith leaning into the life of God*—is the very womb of God. In the determination to alter our impulses and habits for the well-being of all—this is where Holy Presence begins.

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Making Love as the World Ends: on Joy During an Apocalypse

David R. Weiss – August 29, 2019
The Gospel in Transition #39 – **Subscribe at www.davidrweiss.com**

Today's post is dedicated to M, a young friend and former student of mine. I've been thinking about writing on these thoughts for some time now—they speak to the pitched tension in my own life, too. But the final push was M's recent lament: "How do I keep working towards seemingly pointless goals like career and marriage when the earth is dying and my lifetime will probably see an apocalyptic world?"

To some of you, M's mini-existential crisis might seem like mere young adult drama. But I assure you, it's your misplaced sense of security that makes M's anguish seem over the top. If you ask me, *she's named all too pointedly the path we're ALL on*. She simply has the (dis)advantage of seeing-feeling this more clearly than most of us. In part because she's young enough to have not yet fully found her place in the world; and having not yet landed on her feet as an adult means it's a bit easier to call "Bullshit" on the increasingly empty presumptions of that adult world.

Besides this, M is inwardly home to a perfect storm of intelligence, empathy, creativity, curiosity, playful spirit, and wounded soul. She feels life—including at times *the absence of feeling*—with an immediacy that would be refreshing were it not just as often overwhelming.

Her question is really OUR question. (Even if we haven't asked it yet—though if you know me, you know my own versions of her question have chased me relentlessly the past few years.) And I want to share some thoughts on it—for M, of course. But also for the rest of you. And for me, too.

Our worlds—both the physical biosphere and the constructed social-cultural sphere—are *not* on the verge of collapse. *That collapse is already underway*. The fabric of our common life—flora, fauna, ecosystems, and societies—is a single garment, and it is actively fraying right now, though often beyond our line of vision. There are certainly things we can do to lessen the speed and the scope of that collapse—though it is an open question (really, a doubtful prospect) as to whether we muster the resolve to do those things. But the idea that we can somehow sidestep the coming collapse, that's the type of wishful delusion that M is unwilling—in the immediacy of her perception, *unable*—to swallow.

And I'm with her.

But if this is our real situation—if we truly face the end of the world (at least the world as we know it), how dare we spend our time making love? How dare we pursue joy while an apocalypse arrives? I say: *HOW DARE WE NOT?* Even—maybe especially—in a world fast unraveling, *the invocation of joy is a deep good*. Indeed, revelatory.

Let me explain. I suspect I'm actually both *less hopeful* AND *more hopeful* than most of my readers. *Less* hopeful, because I'm persuaded that over the next five decades (maybe sooner) our world will be *unmade* by the choices we've made over the past several centuries. Mad Max? No, probably not (but maybe). But the worst problems we face here and there today will be amplified … and everywhere. Ecological, social, political, relational. When I say "collapse," I don't choose the word for effect but for accuracy.

And yet, *more* hopeful as well. For two reasons. First, because life on the far side of collapse may actually come to embrace practices that are more sustainable and regenerative, more in sync with our place on the planet. Collapse may do for our society what our political-cultural-moral will seems roundly incapable of: reigning in the egos and addictions that are deadly to life itself. It may not, of course. In which case, Mad Max may yet have his day. But it just might. Secondly, though, I'm more hopeful than most of you because even in the midst of collapse, I believe human dignity, compassion, meaning, and beauty *can* survive. Here, too, it's possible they won't. But they may—and I hope they do.

Which means that career and marriage—meaningful work and chosen companionship—still matter. *And, if anything, they matter all the more, because such things as these will be among the first notes in any halting symphony that sounds forth beauty in the midst of chaos*. Which is why I might argue that we have a *human moral duty* to make love as the world ends. "Duty" is a strange word to apply to intimate ecstasy, so I use it advisedly—more to make a point about how important it is, than to turn joy into obligation.

Our capacity to make love—to cultivate profoundly tactile joy with another—as the world ends, is one measure of our commitment to make sure that such intimacy carries forward on the far side of that ending. Our quiet persistent intention to choose simple joy and vocational purpose and authentic companionship matters, even as the unraveling world tries to tell us they don't. It's capitalism and consumerism and corporate power that don't matter. It's these forces (and more) that underwrote this unraveling. And while they might want to take every last vestige of humanity out with them, we *can* claim the best of who are as worth saving. *We must*.

Something does come next. And what we value in this moment will indelibly mark the next one.

So, M, this is my counsel to you. I can't pretend it's perfect or wise. It's just my own heartfelt intuition. But I trust it. And I think you will be able to hear it right now. Others may need to tuck it away until the day comes when they have nothing left to hang onto except crumpled words like these.

Trust the grief that calls your name. It is real, and deep, and overwhelming. It is the world's wound asking to be known. It is, if you like, God crying out in this corner of the cosmos. No mere babe in a manger, but *every* babe … and every creature … and even whole ecosystems creaking under the strain of human folly. And if we cannot heal the earth, we might at least cradle it in our heart.

And while I do not think Earth's anguish wishes to undo you, it still might, if you do not tether yourself also to joy.

This, then, is the deep paradox, the peril-promise of this fraught moment. Seek to find work with humble purpose, because by doing mundane good day by day by day, you will also discover that Earth's pain can be borne only the same way: day by day by day. Treasure the trusted and tender companions you've made, because in their company the infinite weight of Earth's wounds will press you low, but not too low. And make sweet love (or bake bread, or paint pictures, or walk in the woods—however you find your simple ecstasy)—yes, make sweet love as the world ends, so that Earth's heartbreak is somehow held within your joy.

If you do these things—even imperfectly—it *will* be enough.

The seed cannot predict the soil or the weather, its whole purpose is to be ready to do its small part to carry one more generation forward. You are that seed of compassion and curiosity, of searing sorrow and giggling joy. You are enough.

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Inner Transition: Where the Given Meets the Gospel

David R. Weiss – September 7, 2019
The Gospel in Transition #40 – **Subscribe at www.davidrweiss.com**

I have to be honest. There are days when the latest climate news hits hard. Actually, there are weeks and months like that for me. The science is not encouraging. The math is simply unforgiving. And the physics has no empathy.

Consider: the lag time between releasing CO2 (and other greenhouse gasses) into the atmosphere and when we actually experience the impact of those raised CO2 levels is 30-40 years. That means we are just *TODAY* experiencing a climate shaped by the 350ppm (parts per million) of CO2 in the atmosphere 30-40 years ago. And (maybe you've noticed) it's NOT pretty.

And because *current* CO2 levels are now *well above 400ppm*, the next 30-40 years are pretty much locked in as a "pre-paid" immersive learning experience on the impact that raising CO2 from 350-400ppm will have on our world. We like to think we can (somehow) swerve back from the edge of disaster just in the knick of time. But the choices we make (or fail to make) today are not so much about the next 30-40 years but what comes after that.

In other words, my own (grown) children's climate future is NOT at the center of discussion. *Their* climate future was settled over the past three decades. We don't know exactly what it's going to look like (because if/when the positive feedback loops kick in things will get *precipitously* worse), but wildfires, hurricanes, flooding, droughts, sea level rise, global food insecurity and political insecurity all seem certain to increase—accompanied by an unimaginable number of climate refugees.

That's *the given*. Our choices today will not alter that. But they do matter in other ways. They will determine whether we manage to lessen the worst impacts of global heating, which are still 40+ years ahead of us. And whether we endure the coming crisis—*the next 30-40 years a reeling climate that's already bought and paid for*—with integrity and compassion. But there's a catch—and it inextricably links these two sets of choices. Even if we make all the right choices for that four-decades-off future we can barely imagine (but which will become our grandchildren's and great-grandchildren's daily life), even if we act with supreme wisdom and restraint now, *things will continue to get worse*. For many of us, for the rest of our lives. *Even if we do the right things. All the time*.

Which means, both for our own well-being and for the sake of persons not yet conceived, we must resolve to cultivate compassion and nurture integrity *without expecting it to save us*. On the one hand, the emergence of such deep character is the only thing that *will* save us—preserve our humanity. But it will not have any significant effect on the increasingly hostile climate conditions most of us fifty-and-older will face for the rest of our lives. And the sooner we acknowledge that, the more focused we can be on the character we need to survive.

In a sense, this is what the Transition Movement has always been about: recognizing the extent to which our present lives are hitched to unsustainable—indeed deadly—practices, and choosing to transition away from them and toward truly sustainable practices before we are caught off guard, and as a matter of communal choice. And—with a measure of good spirit; because these deadly practices have not only been eroding the planet's ecosystems, they've also been steadily eroding our humanity, so making different (albeit unfamiliar) choices has the capacity to re-humanize us.

At the macro level the window for orderly transition away from a fossil-fueled societal collapse is fast closing. (Indeed, a growing number of well-informed folks say the window has not only closed, it's been padlocked shut. ☹) And while Trump is a convenient scapegoat for this—his administration has gone out its way to damn future generations to a living hell—nonetheless our dilemma reflects decades of inaction by politicians of all stripes. Generations of fixation on profit/wealth/money/stuff as the measure of meaning in our life. And the collected energy of corporations, the wealthy, and those bought off or tricked into doing their bidding. There is plenty of blame to go around; our current

president is only the latest, loudest, most brutish and clownish manifestation of a cultural infatuation with an ecocidal way of life.

In the face of this, the Transition Movement—without dismissing the value of street protest or political action—opts to place its energy in building fresh patterns of community. Because only by *remaking our notion of humanity itself* will we find patterns for living that can sustain us through the coming decades and (perhaps) sow the seeds of a fundamentally more ecological form of human life in the future. For all its practical focus on transportation, food, energy use, and the like, this is ultimately "religious" work—though by no means necessarily tied to a religious tradition. But beneath all of this it is about fashioning … inhabiting … a different *cosmology*, one that sets us more accurately and more compassionately within the web of creation. The immediate payoff—against the backdrop of the climate emergency—is that in the process we will recover the humanity that we barely remember was once ours.

This cosmology-crafting is at the heart of Inner Transition: tending to the neural paths and emotions that comprise the infrastructure of personal choice, shared community, and culture. It sometimes happens implicitly, the spontaneous result of pursuing outward habits that happen to produce corresponding inward life-giving rewards as well. And sometimes it transpires as the result of careful intent. Inner Transition is the place where—most directly—faith communities contribute to the character-shift, the cosmological revolution necessary in this moment.

The practices evident in how we hold and share power in faith communities (even in how we conduct our committee meetings) can easily echo the top-down power dynamics that are killing our planet. But they can also experiment powerfully with ways to embrace shared power, ways that echo, adapt, and amplify the model of Jesus. The shape of our worship, from the language, songs, and visual imagery we choose to the way we embody our rituals, these things, too, are cosmology-craft at work. Our willingness to endure (welcome) truth-telling in our midst and our commitment to fellowship that pushes past polite company into authentic relationship frame the crucible in which a new cosmology might be born.

We have largely *and tragically* imagined the Gospel—that declaration of God's unconditional and unnerving love for every bit of creation—as a message-with-the-means to carry us from this world to the next. I am here to tell you that the only Gospel that is truly good news—that bears the message-as-means of God's awe-full love—is the one that can carry us to the heart of *this world*. And inspire us to make it once again our home.[118]

And it *is* our home. No less so on account of the wounds we've inflicted on it. No less so on account of the decades of wound*ing* that we've already loaded in the atmosphere. This IS our home. We die, endure, or heal right here. But our tradition is clear, God loves *this* world. Embracing that truth with all of our audacious creativity, courageous compassion, and practical wisdom—in every corner of our personal and communal lives is what Inner Transition looks like. It is Gospel wrapped in all manner of flesh. As it is always is.

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[118] I believe many—most!—faith traditions *can* support a cosmology in which we are fully wed to this world. My work is within the Christian tradition because this is the tradition I'm writing out of—and into.

Global Youth Climate Strike: Not Nearly Enough—and Yet

David R. Weiss – September 23, 2019
The Gospel in Transition #41 – **Subscribe at www.davidrweiss.com**

I attended the Minnesota Strikes Back rally on Friday, our little part in the Global Youth Climate Strike that encircled the planet that day. I was encouraged to see so many youth at the gathering—and so many parents and grandparents, too. There is untold strength in becoming a multigenerational movement. It's important for youth to realize they aren't alone in their quest for a livable future. And equally important for adults of all ages to realize the swell of energy—anguish, anger, and grit—rising in youth today.

We were 5000-plus at the State Capitol and among *millions* across the globe—literally: in over 150 countries and on all continents, including Antarctica, where folks at a research station bundled up and went outside to join in the strikes. Frankly, our numbers in the Twin Cities were paltry. This is, after all, *our lives* we're talking about. We will need so many more people to show up—and in ways much more committed than an afternoon strike if we intend to preserve some recognizable semblance of a future for our children and grandchildren and beyond. Strikes—even with millions in the streets—will not be nearly enough. And yet when I see people dismiss the strikes as so much silliness I'm angry. Silliness my ass.

The Guardian reported yesterday, per a *United in Science* report released in conjunction with the UN Climate Summit going on today, that climate change is outpacing past predictions and we'll need to at least triple our current efforts on cutting emissions to even have a chance at holding global heating to 2°C; and quintuple them to actually hit the (much!) safer target of 1.5°C.[119] If we merely continue slowing emissions at the pace we've managed to achieve since the 2015 Paris Agreement, we'll reach a temperature rise of 2.9-3.4°C by the end of this century. That's the path we're on today. I have grandchildren who will live to see 2100. So how do I say this politely? THERE IS NO WAY TO SAY THIS POLITELY: *If we hit 3°C in global heating, we'll have a planet that will make Mad Max look like a Disney amusement ride*.[120]

Meanwhile President Trump planned to skip the UN Climate Summit, instead scheduling himself at a meeting on religious freedom—which, despite real concerns over religious persecution in some places, in its most common and current toxic expression, is freedom to assert bigotry and deny basic human rights to women, migrants, and others as an expression of religious conviction. I note this not as an editorial snipe at Trump but because the rise in religiously-based xenophobia, other-ing, and simple hatred is intrinsically bound up with indifference to the coming climate catastrophe. They're flip sides of the same damn coin.

Minimally, school strikes can raise awareness. They can light a fire in the imagination of youth—and the rest of us. Clearly not everyone. But maybe enough of us. Perhaps they already have. It was only in May 2018 that 15 year-old Greta Thunberg—entirely unknown at the time—won an essay contest on climate change sponsored by a Swedish newspaper. Three months later, in August 2018, propelled by her own alarm and conviction, she began her solitary Friday school strikes outside the Parliament Building in Sweden. And thirteen months later the entire world (well, close to four million of us) joined her. As for Greta herself, if you heard any of her remarks to the UN Summit today (9/23/2019),[121] you heard the voice of a child prophet. (And she is neither the first,[122] nor the only

[119] www.theguardian.com/environment/2019/sep/23/countries-must-triple-climate-emissions-targets-to-limit-global-heating-to-2c
[120] www.grist.org/climate-change/2011-12-05-the-brutal-logic-of-climate-change
[121] www.theguardian.com/environment/video/2019/sep/23/greta-thunberg-to-world-leaders-how-dare-you-you-have-stolen-my-dreams-and-my-childhood-video
[122] www.irishtimes.com/opinion/twenty-five-years-before-greta-there-was-severn-and-we-ignored-her-1.4022656

one. Every speaker except one at the Twin Cities Climate Rally was twenty years old or younger—most were in their teens. All were eloquent, passionate, and inspiring.)

Is one Global Youth Climate Strike—or even a dozen—enough? Not nearly. But it reminds us that ordinary citizens—both youth and adults—*are* the sleeping giant in this picture. Like a test of the emergency broadcast system, running a global climate strike and turning out four million shows that *this much* is possible. And *this much* is already pretty extraordinary.

We'll need to move to general strikes—entire cities being shutdown by work stoppages carried out by rank and file citizens across all fields. And to nonviolent civil disobedience on a scale never before seen—because we are facing a threat on a scale never before seen. Hard to imagine? Yeah, but so is a planet so over-heated as to become a threat to human life. And as *that threat* becomes more imaginable—if science education doesn't see to that, then physics, chemistry, and biology operating in the real world will—the anticipatory anguish-anger that drove millions into the streets on Friday will drive them (and yet more!) to press further. General strikes and nonviolent resistance will become civic virtues of the highest degree.

Will even that be enough to turn the tide? Who can say? But I am willing to lend my feet, my body, and my words to this cause, believing it is yet possible to cut through to the hearts of enough politicians and other leaders to rouse them to deeds that are more than just window-dressing for an apocalypse.

Still, Greta's concluding words in addressing the UN Climate Summit today are prescient: "You are failing us. But the young people are starting to understand your betrayal. The eyes of all future generations are upon you. And if you choose to fail us I say we will never forgive you. We will not let you get away with this. Right here, right now is where we draw the line. The world is waking up. And change is coming, whether you like it or not."[123]

So, to those who prefer to deride the striking youth from the sidelines, I have a suggestion. Join them—*or buy plywood for your windows*. If strikes and other nonviolent resistance do not succeed, I guarantee you, rocks and worse will be next. And they will be justified. Many of our youth now recognize—as too many of us do not yet—that they are literally fighting for their lives against forces that are willing to use them as tragic extras in a neoliberal economic snuff film.

No doubt this is complicated stuff. Not so much the climate science, which is alarmingly clear. But the politics and culture, the superficial motives and deeper addictions, the technology and the ethics, and the need to imagine both unimaginable horror … and, just as much so, unimaginable hope. We will need more than just strikes and nonviolent resistance—but we will surely not prevail with less than them.

PS: I've set up a Patreon site to help fund my work in this area. I hope you'll invest in my thinking and writing. You can learn more about how to support me here: www.patreon.com/fullfrontalfaith

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[123] www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2019/sep/23/world-leaders-generation-climate-breakdown-greta-thunberg

Chasing the Wind: A Moment for Immodest Hope

David R. Weiss – September 28, 2019
The Gospel in Transition #42 – **Subscribe at www.davidrweiss.com**

Our hopes were so modest. They shouldn't have been. We don't have time for modest hope any more. But it wasn't until I saw the brightly colored streamers chasing the wind in the afternoon breeze that I realized something special was in the air.

Last winter Tracy (co-conspirator with me in climate work at our church) and I began asking how we might bring more folks at our church into active conversation around climate issues. We set our sights on two modest ideas. Host a round of informal conversations around Transition Movement ideas and then aim to do a book study on a climate-related theme over the summer.

In May seven of us met for three hour-long sessions reading, reflecting, and discussing ideas central to the Transition Town Movement. We used a "reflection circle" group process to shape conversation to include everyone and guide us to the depths of our reactions. This process intentionally paces and restrains initial sharing. We went around the circle twice. The first time each person simply shared a single idea or sentence—in their own words or directly from the reading. Nothing more. The second time each person could add 2-3 sentences to their own initial sharing or to someone else's opening comment. Again, only these few sentences, around the whole circle, with no "cross-talk" out of turn.

The wisdom in this process is that it creates space for quieter voices, softens the enthusiasm of louder voices, prioritizes listening over speaking, and invites the most compelling ideas forward at the start. After these rounds of slow, paced sharing we opened up for broader conversation, now in random order, but still attending to all voices in the room. The conversations were always rich, at times piercingly so. When these three sessions ended we turned attention to the summer book group.

Several from our initial group joined the book study as well; others stepped back due to schedule conflicts; and a few fresh faces stepped forward. There were again seven of us as we set out into *Active Hope* by Joanna Macy and Chris Johnstone.[124] Although originally slotted for four 55-minute sessions, Tracy and I felt we needed more and longer sessions. On our first evening we proposed six 75-minute sessions as a way to honor the depth of the book, the weight of the topic, and provide time for fuller conversation. Our group unanimously agreed; they were *hungry* for hope. A good first sign.

Active Hope is grounded in Joanna Macy's teaching, "The Work That Reconnects," developed over her decades of spirit-rooted activism. (Macy grew up Christian and later became Buddhist. Her work hearkens to a Moreness to Reality, a Generous Energy upholding life itself.) Focused on reconnecting ourselves to the web of life, Macy and Johnstone explore how *reconnecting* to ourselves, one another, our sibling creatures, and a near mystical sense of life itself (and doing so across time and space) joins us to an energy that can steady us in tumult and even empower us to live with active hope. They name four "movements" to The Work That Reconnects. We begin by *coming from gratitude*, then move on to *honoring our pain for the world's pain*, *seeing with new eyes*, and finally to *going forth*. Each movement has a peculiar wisdom and gift. Altogether they form a dynamo that generates active hope.

That brief description falls far short of the power of the book—especially when read and processed in community. Which is what we did. Over the course of July and August we made our way through the book—using a modified reflection circle process to guide our conversation. We also utilized many of the exercises offered within the book, which Tracy and I often adapted to our specific context.

Thinking back to our first evening, I doubt any of us fully anticipated the journey ahead. Hungry for hope, yes. But our expectations were so modest, if only because we didn't know each other or the material well enough to set them any higher. Already our second session brought palpable anguish

[124] Joanna Macy and Chris Johnstone, *Active Hope: How to Face the Mess We're in without Going Crazy* (Novato, CA: New World Library, 2012). While the book offers many insights simply by reading it, its full power is best felt by using it within a group.

into the room—voices broke and eyes teared—as we honored the pain in our souls over the present and future suffering wrought by climate chaos. We hadn't expected to dive *so deep* into vulnerability … authenticity … communal anguish. But we did. And the promise of Active Hope held true: the power to move forward comes not by avoiding such anguish, but by embracing it honestly and with others.

By mid-August, as we neared the end of our study, we began to ask, What's next? This question is one aspect of attentive listening in the *going forth* movement: you listen to the world to ask where your rising energy might be called. It was also an expression of our sincere wish to see the active hope growing within our group find an ongoing purpose that might *keep us* moving forward together. Still using our reflective circle process, we considered many ideas about how our group's energy might move outward into our congregation and beyond. We dreamed some big dreams—some of which might indeed come to pass months or even years into the future. But we also entertained one smaller whimsy that seemed ready—*ripe*—for our investment.

When I suggested that we might use our spiritual heritage to offer some form of worship service in solidarity with and as a complement to the Global Youth Climate Strike coming up the following month it sparked interest throughout our group. More than this, *it called forth the multitude of our gifts*. Thus, upon ending our book study on August 21, *in just one month* we pooled imaginations, ideas, energy, and skills to craft an entire service: A Sacred Circle for Our Climate.[125]

There are *a lot* of moving parts to a liturgy—especially when you're creating it from scratch. From imagining the chairs arranged in a circle on the lawn, to symbols for the four elements, to publicity, liturgical actions, music, songs, hospitality, and more. We were a whirlwind of ideas, bouncing off each other and racing off in different directions. Watching the flurry of email activity and the energy in our few meetings, I knew our Sacred Circle had real potential. But our timeframe was so short we never put all the pieces together until the Friday evening of the Sacred Circle itself.

So it wasn't until then that I sensed what might be. The bulletins were printed. Locally grown apples (freshly washed) and locally baked bread (festively laid out in baskets) were set up for hospitality afterwards. Musicians would be warming up soon, and the sound system was on the way. Outside, the chairs were set in a circle, the altar built of nature pieces at the center, and the colorful streamers representing the four elements—blues (water), green-brown (earth), silver-purple (air), and orange-yellow (fire)—chasing the wind in the afternoon's sunlit breeze. We'd read about emergent energy in *Active Hope*—disparate swirls of intention crisscrossing and building up to more than merely the sum of their parts. Here on the lawn, *this was emergent energy in action*. And about to burst.

The service went exceptionally well. Most everything happened when and how it was supposed to. But much more than that, every aspect of the evening came together to create a circle that was sacred not simply in name but in *presence*, such that *active hope moved through our liturgy and through those present*: gratitude, grief, new vision, and fierce resolve.

We began last May, and again in June, and again in August with such modest hope. But we are in a moment in which immodest hope is needed. And now, having found it chasing the wind on a Friday afternoon, I daresay our hopes will reach further from now on. They have to.

PS: I've set up a Patreon site to help fund my work in this area. I hope you'll invest in my thinking and writing. You can learn more about how to support me here: www.patreon.com/fullfrontalfaith

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[125] A shareable version of our service is here: www.davidrweiss.com/2019/09/18/sacred-circle-resource/

The Nobel Conference: An Exercise in Public Science

David R. Weiss – October 9, 2019
The Gospel in Transition #43 – **Subscribe at www.davidrweiss.com**

Last month I attended the Nobel Conference at Gustavus Adolphus College.[126] Under the theme "Climate Changed: Facing Our Future," the conference brought together noted speakers representing disciplines at the center of climate science and its impact on our world. It offered "public science" the way I offer "public theology." On a much grander level, yes; which gives me something to aim for. ☺

Today *every person* is a scientist-of-sorts. No, we don't all have degrees in science, but our words and choices demonstrate whether we regard scientific inquiry as useful and overall trustworthy in describing the world. Given the stakes of global heating, it's imperative that we navigate the challenges of the climate crisis with a healthy regard for science and an ability to converse with public science as citizens, neighbors, parents, and members of the planetary community.

The Nobel Conference was a model in how to do that. Over a thousand non-scientists (the public!) gathered to hear the speakers share their perspectives and engage in dialogue with us and with each other. Of the seven presenters, five have been directly involved in UN Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) reports. Each speaker offered insight into our changed/changing climate and what that means for us and for our future. Together they put physical science, social science, human rights, and (to a lesser extent) the humanities into vibrant and essential conversation. It's impossible to capture 8+ hours of lecture and panel responses in 1000 words. Still … hold my beer …

Amitav Ghosh (Indian novelist/essayist) lamented that public discourse on climate change is shaped almost entirely by "specialists," while those who most directly experience its effects (refugees and the poor) remain unheard. He also noted the costly environmental impact of the military—even in peace-time—stridently stating we must choose *either* to fund peace and sustainability *or* preparation for war. We cannot do both. (Quite frankly, Earth can only afford the former.) And he called for "thicker" models of a climate-changed future because these changes will play out across already stressed geo-political fault lines that can be modeled with far less precision. Note to self: it's also worth asking how our changing climate will shape churches and theologies—and faith—in the future.

Richard Alley (ice core scientist and IPCC author) said the physical science on climate change is now so thorough and so clear that the scientific community is effectively "done." But other interests still perpetuate a (non)argument over the science, which only delays the crucial turn to policy responses. He's convinced the IPCC reports offer (potentially) *good news* alongside the cause for alarm. The IPCC reports *can* chart the way to a stronger economy, healthier lives, a more peaceful planet, a cleaner environment, and a more compassionate human community. On the other hand, asked which climate "tipping point" concerns him most, Alley was blunt: *human enmity*. As a scientist, he's less worried about a tipping point in Earth chemistry than in human character. Note to self: faith communities have a critical role in addressing the character crisis that a changing climate threatens to reveal.

Diana Liverman (social geographer and IPCC author) explored how UN development goals (raising people out of poverty and much more) relate to climate change. Human development can put more stress on ecosystems as standards of living rise, but other aspects *can be green* (notably women's empowerment and energy technology). Thus, we need to identify *synergies*, where development efforts and climate responses reinforce one another; especially those rare "triple-wins" where the same project supports human development, mitigation of global heating, *and* adaptation to a changed climate. By attending to the details in the margins we *can* reduce human suffering while also responding to climate challenges. *We must*. Note to self: faith communities have a role here, too, in fashioning sustainable appetites, both for those of us already "developed" and those still developing.

[126] You'll find background on the conference and each speaker, as well as archived videos of most keynotes, at www.gustavus.edu/events/nobelconference/2019/

Sheila Watt-Cloutier (Inuit and human rights advocate) brought Arctic cold to the global heating podium. Her people's culture is *built on cold*: it's central to health, security, safety, and livelihood. Countering those who say indigenous people must "learn to adapt," she observed that indigenous people around the globe have survived *because of* how adaptable they are. Now, having *adapted* to live sustainably in their environment for generations, globalization's *un*sustainability threatens their cultures and their accumulated deep wisdom of patience and persistence. She added that, like the planet, her people have a history of trauma vis-a-vis Western/white society—traumas that are *interwoven*. Yet the Inuit are eager to offer their voices in shaping a path toward a shared healing that she believes will be grounded in our felt connection to Earth and to one another.

Gabriele Hegerl (climate modeler and IPCC author) echoed some of Watt-Cloutier's themes, noting that many people needing development assistance today, need it because they were *pushed into poverty* in earlier generations. She also said we need to reclaim human feeling as a *complement* to thinking—rather than a distraction to it. She reported (from a front row seat) that many climate negotiations occur "in rooms where there is no heartbeat"; the conversation is all numbers. And this lament came from a woman whose doctorate is in applied mathematics! Recognizing how multi-layered these negotiations will be, her counsel was that we take the greatest care of our political institutions; their structural well-being will be critical to navigating the disagreements that await us.

David Keith (climate technology and IPCC author) focused on solar geo-engineering as a necessary strategy (among many others) in slowing temperature rise. This basically involves spraying fine particles high in the atmosphere to reflect back enough of the sun rays to lessen the rising heat without making an appreciable difference in our sense of daylight. He was clear: the technology is *not* ready today, and even the idea of it as a promising technology may lead some to take the need to cut emissions less seriously—which Keith considers foolhardy. But he believes that in three decades—even with carbon cuts—such technology may well be needed for our safe survival and he'd rather we start working on it now so we're ready. How's that for a sort of gloomy optimism?

David Hulme (human geographer and IPCC staffer) spoke last. After several decades doing climate modeling, he became convinced (about fifteen years ago) that the real "frontline" of climate work was attending to our cultural, moral, and spiritual senses. The rush of numbers obscures the more pressing questions, which are about our very humanity and how we relate to the material world and to one another. He argued the humanities have unique value in this project as they allow us to explore notions of meaning and purpose, humanity and politics in ways that can help us map out a moral ecology. Without discounting the sciences, he felt it was critical that science be driven by humanity.

At four points during the conference all the presenters formed a panel to respond to the talks just given. It was insightful to hear these "brightest minds" bounce appreciatively off one another, even as the concluding panel grew … fractious. Following Keith's spray-the-skies geo-engineering and Hulme's center-the-humanities approach, it became awkwardly evident how mistrustful science and the humanities *can still be*. How easily we speak past each other when we listen to make *our* point rather than to hear *others'* points. Several IPCC authors added their dismay at the news media's focus on relatively random deadlines in reports (as though Earth operates on calendar time the way we do). By amplifying the IPCC's dire *projections* into apocalyptic *predictions,* we miss that the data only tell one piece of the story. Human values will tell the rest. Note to self: *public theology starts here*.

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Rooftop Solar: The Nuts and Bolts of Choosing Sunshine

David R. Weiss – October 18, 2019
The Gospel in Transition #44 – **Subscribe at www.davidrweiss.com**

Sometime soon Margaret and I will—at least metaphorically—flip one of the most significant switches of our lives when our rooftop solar array goes live. Whether we actually get to flip a switch remains to be seen (maybe the Xcel Energy technician or Apadana Solar Tech's master electrician has to do that). In any case, we're excited! Let me tell you *how* we got here. (Next post I'll tell you *why*.)

We've been intrigued by solar for years, although, like most people I suppose, we figured it was beyond our reach. Then, over the past 2-3 years, while out on our evening strolls, we've seen a small but growing number of rooftop solar installations on homes right in our neighborhood. But we were still intimidated by how little we knew about getting into solar and how modest our income is. (We're practically a single-income household; I earn only about $10,000/year, leaving our household income well below six figures. I say this not to embarrass myself or garner pity, but to emphasize, if solar was doable for us, it's doable for *many* households—presuming your home/roof is a good match for solar.)

Last June we received an email invitation to a residential solar "bulk buy" information session hosted by Minnesota Interfaith Power & Light (MNIPL). That was our doorway into the process. It was a no-pressure event where we learned about the potential benefits to rooftop solar, including the financial incentives, directly from the president of Apadana Solar, the firm chosen by MNIPL.[127]

The fact that an MNIPL task force (comprised of persons with far more solar savvy than us) vetted several firms and chose Apadana was crucial in helping us explore solar with confidence. Among MNIPL's reasons: Apadana is minority-owned, employs a diverse workforce, has a strong reputation from past projects—*and* was eager to collaborate in creating a residential solar program accessible to people with a range of incomes. MNIPL hosts info sessions to recruit buyers as a group. Apadana can then buy materials for a bundled set of homeowners at one time, passing along that bulk savings to us. We were in the first group of bulk buyers—in fact, ours was the very first solar installation completed as part of this program. We haven't turned it on yet, but so far the process has been a breeze.

The average home solar system costs about $20,000. Our total cost was $28,650, but that's because our roof is larger than average with reasonably good sun exposure on most of it,[128] allowing for a 26-panel array—enough (just shy of 10kW/year) to theoretically offset our *entire* electricity usage. We could NOT afford $28,600. *But we didn't have to*. A federal tax rebate will pay back *30%* (the rebate decreases to 26% next year), so next spring we'll get $8600 back at tax time. Also, because we're tied into Xcel's grid, they pay us a "Solar Rewards" premium—about $625/year (based on our energy production at 7¢/watt) for ten years; this allows them to claim our array as part of their "distributed grid" in meeting their renewable energy goals. That offsets another $6250 over the next ten years.

The remaining $13,800 is our actual cost—but because the solar array will effectively cancel our electricity bill, which is projected to run about $13,700 over the next ten years, the system will be paid for in ten years' time with *virtually no outlay of money from us*. Yes, we'll incur interest on the loan, but even that is held down by a special solar home loan program available through a couple Minnesota credit unions (www.cu-green.org/#solar-financing). After that, the solar array will provide "pure" energy savings to us or the future homeowners: over $40,000 of *net gain* during the last 20 years of its 30-year life. And, while it obviously adds value to our house, that added value is *excluded* from property tax calculations. All in all a very good deal—even though this wasn't our primary motivation.

Back to the process. We were encouraged to bring several months of utility bills to the info session. Between those bills and a special sun-exposure map view of our home, Apadana was able to compare

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[127] MNIPL: www.mnipl.org/bulkbuy; Apadana: www.apadanasolartech.com. There are other local solar installers; they might be great, too. I can just say that Apadana was communicative, professional, and friendly at every step.

[128] This map (www.solar.maps.umn.edu/app) shows your rooftop sun, though the results can vary quite a bit depending on exactly where you place the cursor. Apadana uses something like this but with more precision.

our annual electricity use to our roof size/layout to determine if there was enough flat rectangular space (solar panels come in non-bendable 3'x6' rectangles) with good sun exposure so the panels could generate sufficient electricity to make it a worthwhile investment. It looked good, so they provided us with an initial proposal in early July—to be followed by a site visit if we were interested. We were!

Two weeks later two Apadana workers came to check our home's current wiring, take some exact measurements, and get a firsthand view of the roof. The wiring checked out, but a couple quirks in our roof lines required a few adjustments to the proposal. By the end of July we received our final proposal and sent in our first $500 to secure a spot in the bulk buy. Now we were ready to seek financing. In early August we applied for a Home Solar Loan through Hiway Federal Credit Union. The loan process moved slower than anything else—its pace dictated by a required title search and appraisal. We were finally able to close on our loan in early September. With the loan money in hand, we sent in our 30% down payment and were promptly scheduled (much sooner than we expected!): September 23-26.

The installation went very smoothly.[129] Scaffolding went up on Monday afternoon. On Tuesday all the supplies were delivered and they fastened the rails—the frames that hold the panels—to the roof. On Wednesday and Thursday they affixed the panels to the rails and cleaned everything up. Just like that. They updated our main electric meter housing and added a couple extra boxes alongside it for the solar connections. Before the crew left on Thursday I got to watch the several-second test. They flipped on the system; the sun was shining brightly; and I watched as the slowly rotating disk inside our electric meter snapped to a stop and then started positively *whirring* in reverse—sending excess energy back to the transformer on the pole in the alley where it would ricochet right back out to a neighbor's home. Then they switched it off. Next step: city inspection.

Saint Paul has several inspectors who reflect a degree of personal discretion in their inspection expectations … which keeps life "interesting" for Apadana's master electrician. A recent meeting among the inspectors promised to get them all on the same page; still a slightly different page than Minneapolis inspectors, but at least one standard for all of Saint Paul. Except, not quite. At our inspection, last Wednesday (October 16), the inspector balked over a "missing" pair of decals on two of the utility boxes. Not required on the other side of the river. Not discussed in the recent inspectors' meeting, but deemed essential by this particular inspector before he'd sign off on the project. Oh well.

As soon as we get those decals put on, Xcel Energy will schedule a time to come out and install the photovoltaic meter next to our usage meter—hopefully yet this month! This meter tracks our solar production (used to calculate our Solar Rewards payment). When we use more electricity than we're generating (winter, and nighttime year round) we'll draw it from the alley transformer (and be billed by Xcel). But when we generate *more* than we use, the excess goes *back* to the alley transformer—and out to a neighbor's home. Xcel buys that extra from us at the same rate as they charge us when we need it from them. Over the course of the year, it should balance out to something close to zero.

The day the photovoltaic meter is installed, someone (maybe one of us!) will throw a switch … and we'll be making energy from the sun! Hardly a fix for the climate crisis, but one small step in bringing the practical side of our life into closer alignment with the values of our hearts—and the needs of our planet. Which is where I'll begin next time.

PS: I've set up a Patreon site to help fund my work in this area. I hope you'll invest in my thinking and writing. You can learn more about how to support me here: www.patreon.com/fullfrontalfaith

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[129] Find some photos of our installation here: https://tinyurl.com/solarpixs

Choosing Sunshine: The Heart of the Matter

David R. Weiss – October 21, 2019
The Gospel in Transition #45 – **Subscribe at www.davidrweiss.com**

For Margaret and me, putting in rooftop solar was never about financial incentives.[130] It was simply one more step in bringing the day-to-day details of our life into closer alignment with the convictions of our faith, the values of our hearts, and the needs of our planet.

Although the intricacies of our personal faith may differ in details, we share the deep conviction that we are *at home on Earth*. That the world—indeed the entire cosmos—is profoundly interwoven in ways that hold us, and all that is, in community. This awareness has percolated upward in each of our lives by varied paths at varied paces; these days it is seamlessly part of the faith we each hold about the Mystery that dwells at the heart of all that is.

That Mystery, however named or understood, is the energy behind creation, animating it as it unfolds in wonderful diversity, terrifying upheaval, and awe-inspiring beauty. We honor that Mystery when we acknowledge that nature—from mountain ranges to microbes, from whole species to specific creatures—bears the imprint of the Holy no less than we do. When the Genesis creation tale tells us that "God saw all that God had made, and behold it was very good," (Gen. 1:31) we say, Yes! And we affirm creation as a very good place to call home.

We see in Jesus—and in many other holy teachers, as well—an embodied announcement that God's goodness runs far deeper than we can imagine … embracing *all* of us. *And*—that such unconditional goodness invites our company as it runs rampant across creation. Thus, however imperfectly, we seek to echo the goodness of God in how we live our lives, from the tenderness of our love for one another, to the love we hold for our families, to the hospitality we offer to those we encounter in the world, to the respect and reverence we cultivate for the Earth community. That new solar array on our roof? It's simply, truly, one more echo of the goodness of God, that we offer to the world.

Indeed, although the words "solar panel" did not appear in our marriage ceremony, they were resting right between the lines. We shaped our service around "seven sacred stones"—the core values that had ripened in each of our lives independently before we pledged our love to one another at forty-one. We set these "sacred stones" at the center of our wedding … at the center of our marriage … at the center of our shared life. Among the seven[131] were these three (emphasis added here):

> **2. Connections to creation: honoring the earth from our bodies to the dirt.** This stone honors the joy we experience at being immersed in creation. It honors our celebration of being embodied persons *and our celebration of the goodness of the earth, both in its wild grandeur and in its more mundane presence in our own backyard*.
>
> **3. Cooperative living with one another.** This stone honors the simple joy we take in living and working side by side. It marks our commitment to share happily in all that it takes to build and maintain a home together—*and to do so in ways that care for one another and the earth*.
>
> **6. Spirituality: turning outward in compassion and justice.** This stone honors the outward movement of our spirituality as our care for those around us. It honors the passion with which we seek to practice compassion and justice toward our neighbors, *our companion creatures, and the earth itself*. And it honors the various ways we each do this, together and individually, in our work and in our play.

We basically got married to put up solar panels. ☺

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[130] I discuss those incentives, as well as the other practical steps in our process to install solar, in my last post: www.davidrweiss.com/2019/10/18/rooftop-solar-nuts-and-bolts.

[131] Curious? You'll find a list of all seven sacred stones here: https://tothetune.files.wordpress.com/2019/10/seven-golden-stones.pdf.

If those 26 solar panels manifest the momentum of our earlier lives coming together, they also reflect the loves that have grown since we married in 2001. In particular, the intertwined love for the six children we now share in our blended family and the nine grandchildren who have graced our lives over the past thirteen years. We put up solar for them. None of them live with us any longer, and I rather doubt any of them will want to buy our 100-year-old home (and its many quirks) when we decide to sell. But those panels on our roof are nonetheless a testament to our hope for *their* future.

As our rooftop array comes to life, we hope it piques the curiosity of our grandchildren (and our children) about the near-limitless power of the sun. The sun's energy reaching Earth is 10,000 times our current usage! That's not to say we can capture all of it—or that the other far more finite resources on the planet could sustain a humanity using all that energy (learning to live with "enough" is one of the primary vocations for our species). But it does suggest that the pathway toward a better future is soaked in sunshine not fossil fuel.[132] We'd be overjoyed for them to grow up in a world where residential solar (and other forms of solar) becomes the norm—and is rooted in the reverent awareness that investing in solar is one way we embrace Earth as home.

On a much more sobering (but no less honest or enthusiastic) note, as we reckon with the climate crisis, which *will* get worse—and for a long time—before it gets better (the getting worse is near-certain, the getting better remains a long shot), we want to lessen our reliance on fossil fuels as much as possible. We're still stuck in a society where practical denial or malignant indifference to climate concerns at the level of public policy/planning still makes solar a "novel" choice. But, as climatologist Michael Mann has said, "It's not a matter of are we 'effed' or not (as though it were a simple binary either/or), it's a matter of *how* 'effed,' and *that* is left for us to determine—and that requires us to become active participants in reducing whatever carbon burn we can."[133]

Over its 30-year life our small solar array will provide sunshine-driven electricity to our home, leaving 88 tons of coal where it belongs: underground. That's hardly enough to save the planet (a phrase so foolishly anthropocentric it reinforces the very problem it tries to address, but you get the point). Not even enough to save our souls. Another hugely problematic phrase—I simply mean that one solar array does *not* secure our personal integrity. From our embrace of creation, to our following in the company of Jesus, to our love for another and for our family, rooftop solar is just one piece in the work of integrity. That's the project of a lifetime, and Margaret and I are in it the way we're in our marriage: till death do us part.

With that fierce familial love that says "to hell with the odds" and reaches defiantly from this generation to the next, those panels harnessing today's sunshine are also our investment in a tumultuous tomorrow, buying our children and grandchildren a future that is a little less 'effed': one that perhaps has a little more time for them and the rest of their generation to find their own way home to a planet that's always been waiting for us. Right here.

PS: I've set up a Patreon site to help fund my work in this area. I hope you'll invest in my thinking and writing. You can learn more about how to support me here: www.patreon.com/fullfrontalfaith

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[132] *Drawdown*, edited by Paul Hawken (New York: Penguin, 2017, pp. 10-11), lists rooftop solar among the most promising alternative technologies to "draw down" our use of carbon-emitting practices and reach a future where we live in relative harmony with nature rather than in opposition to the very planet that is our home.

[133] www.tvo.org/video/burnout-and-despair-studying-the-climate.

Climate Crisis as *Kairos* Moment

David R. Weiss – November 2, 2019
The Gospel in Transition #46 – **Subscribe at www.davidrweiss.com**

Kairos. It means fraught time. Time that is swollen, pregnant, bulging with promise … or peril. Such is our time today.

The word is Greek. Both *kairos* and *chronos* mean "time" in Greek, but only *chronos* made its way into English (e.g., "chronology"). *Chronos* indicates time, second by second: clock time, calendar time, *ordinary time*. On the other hand, *kairos* indicates time in its most consequential mode. We *know* time in this dimension, too, but because we lack a way to clearly name it, our culture tends to let the gravity of such moments be carried by awkward whispers rather than by clear discourse. Which is not helpful when so much is as stake: in *kairos* time, decisions—from personal to political, individual to communal, neighborhood to government, consumer to corporate—are decisive, even fateful. And not because *we* vest them with power, but because *the larger forces of the given moment make them so*.

For this reason *kairos* time is precarious. Choosing to play it safe in such moments is not simply unwise—it's impossible. There is no safety. Everything is at risk. And there are wise risks, foolish risks, communal risks, selfish risks, generous risks, perhaps even evil risks. *But safety is off the table*.

In the Bible *kairos* often means a moment of promise or possibility. Jesus begins his preaching by declaring, "The time/*kairos* is fulfilled and the Kingdom of God is at hand. Repent (literally: "reverse course") and believe the good news" (Mark 1:15). Similarly, Paul writes (2 Cor. 6:2), "Now is the acceptable time/*kairos*; behold now is the day of salvation (literally: the day of wholed-ness)."

But *kairos* is a necessarily *participatory* moment. We must act in response. To decide to "wait and see" rather than "repent and believe" is not simply a missed opportunity; it's potentially a missed lifetime. Jesus chides the crowds (Matt. 16:2-3; Luke 12:54-56) for knowing how to read the sky and the wind to tell the weather—and choose wisely in response to what they read there—but then failing "to read the signs of the times/*kairos*," that is, the mood of the day, with its social-political-religious ramifications. The edge in Jesus' voice is because he knows how much is at stake. The promise is real—the peril just as much so. A short time later when Jesus weeps over Jerusalem, he laments that the city "does not know the things that make peace" but has instead sealed its coming devastation "because you did not know the time/*kairos* of your visitation" (Luke 19:44).[134]

Today we stand collectively—from individuals and families all the way up to governments, societies, and our very species—in *kairos*. Fraught time. Bulging with peril. Barely hinting at promise. In fact, in something that approaches ironic overstatement, the climate crisis (itself a looming catastrophe entangled with other crises) is a moment when "the signs of the times" (the evidence of the momentous choices we face) are—in many ways—read in the sky and on the wind.

The climate *kairos* is also exponentially *present time*: a moment almost apocalyptically disconnected from our past (although it clearly has roots back there). But to the extent that the climate crisis is redefining how weather happens, how ice melts, how oceans rise, how wild fires rampage, how crops grow, how cities flood and refugees move, how ecosystems (and their inhabitants) creep to more hospitable latitudes or collapse if they cannot—*to that extent this climate crisis ushers in a whole new world*. Meaning there is no guarantee that the values that seemed to serve us well in the past will be

[134] While *kairos* entered my vocabulary in first year Greek at Wartburg College in 1978, its theological nuances were filled out during my seminary years. The passages referenced here are used to explain *kairos* in *Kairos: Three Prophetic Challenges to the Church* (ed. Robert McAfee Brown, Eerdmans Publishing Co, 1986), pp. 3-4. That book explores how the contemporary Christian Church has summoned its followers to discern and live in response to *kairos* moments of the 1980's (e.g., apartheid in southern Africa as well as the violence and political repression in Central America, Africa, and Asia).

helpful in the world now opening before us. Some values that proved "successful" in the former world might be counter-productive now. Less noble values that were tolerable then might be deadly today. And other values that were unheralded in that earlier world may well be prove to be the ones most vital today. Who knows?

But the persons we choose to be today (even as we merely muddle forward)—the values that we affirm, the pathways we open up … and the possibilities we foreclose—will significantly set the parameters for the options our children and grandchildren have before them. The past guarantees them *nothing* now. Thus, for those of us alive today, *kairos* is *soul time*. Because the choices we make—at all levels—define our soul. Reveal our mettle. Crystalize our character. Decisively shape our identity. *Image our God*. We choose either to align ourselves with grief … or denial, with hope or fear, with love or hate, with spirit or despair. *Kairos* is time that will be made holy or unholy (life-giving or death-dealing)—by us.

Churches are not the only communities that can perceive, announce, and shape a response to *kairos* time. But because churches are committed to care for the well-being of the world, foster just and life-giving community, and shape personal character, they have a profound stake in recognizing *kairos* time and responding to it.

And because the stakes of this *kairos* moment are so high, churches ought to welcome every possible partnership and every source of wisdom in meeting this moment. Over the remaining six essays in this first year's cycle I want to return to the Transition Town Movement and consider more closely the wisdom it offers to progressive Christian theology in responding to the climate crisis that is our common *kairos* moment.[135]

Even though the Transition Town Movement does not use the term *kairos*, it represents a deeply thoughtful and implicitly spiritual attempt to respond to its own acute perception of *kairos*: time strained by climate crisis in ways that *will* remake us ecologically, and also socially, politically, and spiritually. This remaking is no longer optional (if it ever was). And many of the dimensions of this remaking will be determined not by human preferences, but by physics, chemistry, and biology—processes that will play out impersonally, relentlessly, and ruthlessly.

But there is a response for us to make in the midst of this remaking that is larger than us. And that our response might have integrity, compassion, grace, and a measure of beauty and joy—this is yet possible. But not guaranteed.

Kairos names the precarious possibility that is NOW. My job is to help us seize that possibility with a faith that inspires us to the best that we can be. Now that safety is off the table, it's time for wisdom, imagination, resolve, and compassion to have their turn.

PS: I've set up a Patreon site to help fund my work in this area. I hope you'll invest in my thinking and writing. You can learn more about how to support me here: www.patreon.com/fullfrontalfaith

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[135] There are other movements besides Transition Town that also aim to support a personal-communal response to the perception of a climate *kairos*. Extinction Rebellion and Deep Adaptation are among them; and they also have profound spiritual resonances. I may explore these in future essays.

From *Kairos* to the Transition Town Movement

David R. Weiss – November 7, 2019
The Gospel in Transition #47 – **Subscribe at www.davidrweiss.com**

In February 1979 scientists from fifty nations gathered in Geneva for the First World Climate Conference, sponsored by the UN's World Meteorological Organization. On Tuesday (11/05/2019), and in commemoration of the 40th anniversary of that conference, the journal *BioScience* published a piece titled, "Warning of a Climate Emergency."[136]

The statement's opening paragraph begins, "Scientists have a moral obligation to clearly warn humanity of any catastrophic threat" and concludes, "we declare clearly and unequivocally that planet Earth is facing a climate emergency." Drafted by five lead authors with 31 contributing reviewers, it proceeds to do just that, announcing that we—that is, *all of us*—are at risk of "untold suffering." It sums up the situation using a couple dozen graphs that track key data from 1979 to present. Arranged in two groupings, the graphs show (a) an escalating pace of "excessive consumption" by humanity's wealthier members (that's really middle-class Americans and better—and those with comparable lifestyles across the globe); and (b) the "climatic response" to that pace of consumption. It's not pretty.

The authors note that despite forty years of increasing scientific knowledge and ongoing climate negotiations, governments, business, and societies as a whole have "generally conducted business as usual and have largely failed to address this predicament." Which is a big problem, because they join the IPCC in telling us that only "major transformations in the ways our global society functions and interacts with natural ecosystems" will lead to a "just transition to a sustainable and equitable future." Succinctly, "To secure a sustainable future, we must change how we live." Now.

And now means *NOW*: "The climate crisis has arrived and is accelerating faster than most scientists expected. It is more severe than anticipated, threatening natural ecosystems and the fate of humanity." Then you can download a file listing the *more than 11,000 scientist signatories* representing a wide range of specialties from 153 countries around the world. In a scientific community where independent—and competing—views are prized, the depth of consensus on this strong statement is remarkable. To an alarming degree.

Voices like theirs represent a veritable cloud of witnesses and confirm that this is truly a *kairos* moment (See GIT #46)—overfull with both peril and promise and awaiting a clear response from a faithful church. I believe as the church awakens, not simply to the call of care for creation but also to this alarm of climate crisis, that it should avail itself of wisdom and insight from the Transition Town Movement. This movement offers a response that fashions promise in the midst of peril, prioritizes the potential in local communities, and resonates in some profound ways with the Christian tradition.

Over the next several essays, as I close out my first year of weekly blogging, I'll explore the Transition Town Movement more carefully and explain why I regard it as an especially crucial and creative conversation partner for people of faith as we take our place among others in responding to climate crisis by becoming communities of solidarity and resistance, imagination and resilience.[137]

Rob Hopkins co-founded the first Transition Town in Totnes, England in 2006, but the roots of Transition go back several years earlier.[138] In the mid-90's Hopkins first studied and then began

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[136] www.theguardian.com/environment/2019/nov/05/climate-crisis-11000-scientists-warn-of-untold-suffering; find the full statement here: https://academic.oup.com/bioscience/advance-article/doi/10.1093/biosci/biz088/5610806.

[137] The phrase "communities of solidarity and resistance" echoes the thought of Sharon Welch in *Communities of Resistance and Solidarity: A Feminist Theology of Liberation* (Orbis Books, 1985; reprinted, Wipf and Stock, 2017). "Resilience" is the cardinal virtue of Transition, naming the capacity of local systems or communities to bounce back from destabilizing events by cultivating the ability to think on their feet, adapt on the fly, anticipate impending shocks, and even seize such moments as opportunities for growth. www.transitionnetwork.org/news-and-blog/building-resilience

[138] The background here is from Rob Hopkins, *The Transition Handbook: From oil dependency to local resilience* (White River Junction, Vermont: Chelsea Green Publishing, 2008).

teaching permaculture design. That experience became one of the building blocks of Transition. Permaculture itself (which I explore a bit more in GIT #26-28) was born in the oil crisis of the 1970's and began as an effort to liberate food production from its heavy reliance on fossil fuels. Originally conceived as "permanent agriculture," it's a method of agricultural design focused on learning *from* and working *with* Earth's natural proclivities to grow food in dense, diverse "food forests." It eventually broadened to an overall philosophical approach to living in (relative) harmony with the planet on multiple levels, still rooted in food production, but encompassing all facets of human life and culture.

On a practical level, permaculture is a scientific approach that looks to Earth's history as a storehouse of accumulated wisdom (even if you "only" use trial-and-error, over eons trial-and-error can teach you a lot!) and a model of resilience. And although permaculture grew out of passionate engagement with, careful observation of, and deep respect for Earth's natural systems (and not in response to any sacred text), as I explain in GIT #26, it represents a viewpoint *profoundly at home in a faith tradition that affirms Wisdom as an active principal in creation*.

Hopkins was teaching permaculture courses where he encountered the idea of "peak oil" in 2004. Beginning in the late 1950's peak oil made waves by predicting the near-term "peak" of global oil production—the point at which we had extracted *half* of all the oil that was technologically and economically accessible across the globe. After hitting "peak," oil production would (slowly but irreversibly) decline … forever, while the price of oil would (perhaps less slowly but just as irreversibly) rise … forever. For an entire civilization built on fossil fuel, peak oil is a huge threat. It declares—in unmistakable terms—that an end to our growth is on the doorstop. We won't run out of oil when we hit peak, but the cost of all the remaining oil will begin to move beyond the reach of all but the wealthy. It's like knowing an impending super-charged hurricane will hit—and soon, even if you can't predict its exact path. In the circles where it held (holds) currency, peak oil marked the entry into an era we were (are) utterly unprepared to navigate. It's a recipe for conflict and chaos.

Various dates have been projected for peak oil by analyzing known oil reserves, production, and demand, etc. Some of the earliest projections put peak oil in the 2000's. Obviously that didn't happen, primarily "thanks" to new technology that enabled us to access more oil—but in much more ecologically costly ways, like tars sands oil and fracking. Currently, the projected date for peak oil ranges from the 2020's to the 2040's. But peak oil *is* out there. Just waiting to turn life as we take it for granted *entirely upside down*.

Hopkins had already been teaching permaculture design for four years in Kinsdale, Ireland (a small community of about 2300) when he learned about peak oil and realized the threat it posed. He immediately saw the value of his permaculture training in responding to peak oil—as well as to the looming reality of climate change. The Transition Town Movement was born in that ferment.

We're still mid-story, but I should wrap things up and resume the tale next time. Just to remind you, there is *MUCH* more going on here than a simple account of the birth of an interesting social change movement. Peak oil and climate crisis are ultimately stories about human alienation from the natural world—what we in the church might call our fractured, sin-twisted relationship with creation. And permaculture hearkens back to the voice of God's Wisdom, which *still* daily declares the goodness of creation. And, as I will argue in the weeks ahead, Transition Towns offer a glimpse of communities animated by a renewed vision of life abundant and determined to seek the good the world around them. *That's gospel*. As churches we should be sitting up and paying attention.

PS: I've set up a Patreon site to help fund my work in this area. I hope you'll invest in my thinking and writing. You can learn more about how to support me here: www.patreon.com/fullfrontalfaith

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Kairos and the Core Convictions of Transition

David R. Weiss – November 19, 2019
The Gospel in Transition #48 – **Subscribe at www.davidrweiss.com**

This essay builds on my last post (GIT #47) about the Transition Town Movement. As said then, I'm convinced this is a *kairos* moment (GIT #46) for humanity as a whole—a time when the choices we make, individually and collectively, at all levels and in all places—will decisively shape the future … for everyone on the planet … and for generations to come. Faith communities have a particular responsibility because the skills needed in this *kairos* moment are among those that faith communities are distinctly suited to offer (which is not to say we're the only ones able to do so, or even that we're actually offering them—only that we *could*!). And there are insights in the Transition Movement that faith communities can learn from. That's why we're here.

To pick up from where I left off last time, in 2004 as Rob Hopkins became aware of the intertwined threats of peak oil (see GIT #47 for more on this) and climate change, he saw his training in permaculture as offering a powerful resource in shaping a community response.[139] So he assigned his permaculture students in Kinsdale, Ireland (pop. 2300) a course project of developing an "energy descent plan" for Kinsdale. Recognizing that any response to peak oil and climate change would *require* that communities dramatically lessen their dependence on fossil fuel, he asked his students to put their minds to imagining how to do this over the next fifteen years. That is, to reduce Kinsdale's reliance on fossil fuels to one fourth of its then current use. The project goal was to produce a vision for a post-carbon Kinsdale that would be an *even more desirable community* to live in—and to launch the Kinsdale community itself into conversation about its future.

Although this was not yet a full-blown Transition initiative, Hopkins' first foray into fashioning a positive, inviting community response to the challenge of living sustainably on a finite planet was a crucial learning experience for everyone involved. The students' final result, the Kinsdale Energy Descent Plan, was never fully adopted in its original 2005 form, but it planted seeds for countless conversations and eventually led to Kinsdale becoming a Transition Town the following year.

Meanwhile, in 2005 Hopkins himself moved to Totness, England (pop. 8500). There he built on his Kinsdale experience and partnered closely with Naresh Giangrande, a peak oil educator, to create a Transition Town process more intentionally from the ground up—and as a community project rather than a campus one. Beginning in fall 2005 they used a whole series of community events to carefully lay the groundwork for a community-wide "unleasing" of Transition Town Totness in September 2006. This was followed by an entire year of further community-strengthening events ranging from educational to transformational. Since that birth of the Transition Town idea, over a thousand Transition initiatives have been undertaken in countries around the globe.

The Transition Town Movement has certainly matured as it has played out over time and spread to new settings, but it remains remarkably true to Hopkins original vision, which was to bring the insights of permaculture from their largely rural setting into town, villages, and cities. His conviction remains that as people in all settings begin to awaken to just how "not right" things are, the principles of permaculture can do much more than guide us in how we tend the land; they can also inspire us to tend our communities—our entire cultures—with renewed earth-offered wisdom.

Transition identifies three major crises facing humanity today. (In truth, there are more than just three, but these three intersect with many more—both amplifying and being amplified by them—so I don't want to get tripped up by asking whether these three are the "top" three. Each is decisive, multifaceted, and reaches far. The first is peak oil, which acknowledges the extent to which our lives

[139] The background here is from Rob Hopkins, *The Transition Handbook: From oil dependency to local resilience* (White River Junction, Vermont: Chelsea Green Publishing, 2008), especially pp. 122-145; supplemented by the Transition US website: www.transitionus.org.

are unsustainably swimming in fossil fuel—and anticipates the coming crash when those fuels become scarce and costly. The second is the climate crisis, which is, of course, driven primarily by our use of fossil fuel, but this crisis is concerned with the multitude of ways that a changing climate will wreak havoc on our lives and on Earth's ecosystems and creatures.

The third crisis the economic crisis, which is hardest to capture in words. In its most abstract form, it names the dangerous extent to which money has taken on a life of its own today: as global economic relations exist largely independent of real world products and services. The sheer weight of debt servicing and speculative investments as a share of the economy make the economic foundation of actual lives more volatile and precarious. It's as though economic growth is a Jenga tower built ever higher only by making the base ever more likely to fall. This plays out in rising inequality, excruciating poverty, unemployment and economic displacement, etc. When money takes on a life of its own, *human* life is diminished from every angle.

These crises, which conspire to pose an existential threat to countless species, human society, and humanity itself, reflect what Christian faith has called sin. They expose our profound alienation from creation/nature, one another, and the sacred. But such a claim needs to be explored with nuance because one wide swath of Christianity has twisted sin into mere personal (often sexual) morality and reduced the arc of God's work into a fall-redemption plot where Jesus' primary purpose is to be killed. *I mean none of that*, and it will take a post of its own just to *begin* that exploration. But Christianity HAS language to name the dynamics behind these crises, and that means Christianity *might* be capable of rousing its members to respond in this *kairos* moment.

Transition also holds four key assumptions. (1) Finitude (seen in both peak oil and climate crisis) means any future other than death *requires* much lower energy consumption—and, knowing this, we're wiser to *plan for it* rather than crash the system. (2) Our communities presently lack the *resilience* (think: imaginative-practical agility-adaptability) either to make the swift shift in our lives that is needed or to respond to the crash when it comes. (3) Individual actions (while necessary) are insufficient and government actions (while also necessary) are politically tenuous and practically slow, therefore *collective action*—by friends, neighbors, and fellow citizens—to build community resilience and to plan for and move toward a post-carbon life is *indispensable* to any future in which human society (and some semblance of a "healthy" ecosystem) might persist. (4) If we "unleash the collective genius" in our communities today—ideas, skills, stories, visions, etc.—it would be *possible*, not only to weather the worst of what's headed our way, but even to fashion new patterns of life together in which joy and justice flourish on a finite planet.

Each of these assumptions—again, to be explored in another post—can be embraced within faith communities. Although church membership today is far more geographically scattered than in earlier eras (especially in urban areas), churches remain communities where this type of collective action could find a natural habitat. And, because these assumptions speak to the salvation (that is, the healing) of the planet and its people, churches that choose to explore what it means to be faith-based Transition communities, have the opportunity to revitalize their internal faith and energy, while also recovering a sense of external purpose that the world actually needs.

Right now. Because a *kairos* moment demands nothing less.

PS: I've set up a Patreon site to help fund my work in this area. I hope you'll invest in my thinking and writing. You can learn more about how to support me here: www.patreon.com/fullfrontalfaith

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Reckoning Where We Are: Entangled

David R. Weiss – November 22, 2019
The Gospel in Transition #49 – **Subscribe at www.davidrweiss.com**

You *can* find good news on climate concerns. Our solar panels are having the sunniest day since being turned on. A recent breakthrough in solar technology has shown that sunshine can be harnessed with sufficient intensity to drive industrial processes like making steel, glass, or concrete.[140] And Sweden, through a program based in one of its public research universities, has hired a Chief Storyteller to help craft a public engaging and inspiring narrative for their Viable Cities program.[141]

These are all remarkable things in their own way. And good news feels *good*. But I fear we also need a much stronger medicine, because remarking on the technological breakthroughs in the construction of the Titanic or even commenting on the inspiring music being played by the ship's ensemble won't keep you from getting sunk by an iceberg. And Transition reminds us that even while bits of good news trickle out—and are worth noticing and celebrating—the larger picture is undeniably ominous.

While Transition is absolutely about shaping a *positive* vision for a sustainable future, that future is only positive, only sustainable, if it reckons honestly the gap between our present and that future. And overall the news is not kind to us on climate issues—or any other facet of forging a sustainable future on the finite planet we call home. (And that last phrase, while colloquial, also betrays the very disconnect that betrays us these days. It doesn't do any good to "call" Earth home if we don't really mean it, or act like it. And, bottom line, it isn't ours to "call" at all. "Call" suggests *choice*, as though we picked Earth from a list of options. But there are no other planets available. Earth IS our home. And a large part of the gap between collapsing present and sustaining future lies in that faulty notion.)

The latest IPCC report highlights the size of that gap.[142] These IPCC reports—because they represent the consensus of many studies and authors—inevitably present *moderate* assessments. And when moderate assessments sound *alarming*, it gets increasingly difficult to find a foothold for even cautious optimism. This last report, released in late September, looks at Earth's oceans and ice regions as one key player in the climate crisis. It states soberly that if we do not hold temperature increase below 1.5 C, "the same oceans that nourished human evolution are poised to unleash misery on a global scale." *Remember, that's the moderate angle*.

And it echoes earlier IPCC reports in telling us that limiting temperature rise to 1.5 C rests on making "rapid, far-reaching, and unprecedented" changes in nearly every facet of our lives. This is now so close to a political impossibility as to practically make limiting the increase to 2.0 C our best hope right now. We're likely to crest 1.5 C in the *next 10-30 years* and we may well be flirting disastrously with 2.0 C before this century ends. Which means we should brace ourselves for the report's somber (again, "moderate"!) predictions. Sea level rise will rewrite coastlines and submerge coastal cities, displacing industry and some 280 million people—quadrupling our already record-high refugee count. Political borders will be battered by waves, both watery and human.

The biggest change we need to make is to reduce our use of fossil fuels as swiftly as possible. Honestly, we need to do it, *not* without disrupting our economy, but (ideally) without crashing it. *Disruption is the price of survival*. Unfortunately, we're not willing to pay that price yet. A recent report by the UN Environment Programme analyzed the announced coal, oil, and gas production plans of the world's

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[140] www.cnn.com/2019/11/19/business/heliogen-solar-energy-bill-gates/index.html; still, this breakthrough includes a measure of ambiguity. If it slows fossil fuel use without shifting the way we see ourselves on the planet, it will simply provide a "scorched-Earth" means to destroy the planet that doesn't require oil.
[141] www.citylab.com/environment/2019/11/climate-change-news-solutions-per-grankvist-viable-cities/601597/
[142] See www.nymag.com/intelligencer/2019/08/leaked-un-draft-warming-oceans-could-unleash-misery.html; IPCC is the UN Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change. The full report is here: www.ipcc.ch/srocc/home.

countries over the next decade.[143] As of today we're still *planning*—HOPING?!—to extract more than TWICE the amount of fossil fuels that would keep us at the safest 1.5 C increase and 50% more than would even keep us at 2 C—the point characterized by the IPCC report above as "unleashing misery on a global scale." We are *planning*, by 2030, to have locked in global catastrophic consequences.

Considering only our own fates, *this is sheer madness*. Considering all whose lives and wellbeing is at stake today and in the future, *this is sheer evil*. It matters little that this path toward *chosen collapse* is built into our societal structures and beyond our personal reach. When it reaches our doorsteps, our families, our grandchildren, our claims to powerlessness will mean nothing and save no one. Either we find ways to become persons with the power to act—which is what Transition Towns are all about—or we become complicit in the choice to assault the planet.

Of course, *we already are*. We were born into patterns of consumption, habits of living, assumptions of comfort and convenience that were misshapen long before we realized it. Long before we became aware of the threat. Or the extent to which those patterns entangle us with others beyond our view.

The worst consequences of global heating will (*already do*) fall disproportionately on "the least of these"—those living in less industrialized countries who are least responsible for carbon emissions and least equipped to respond … those in whom Jesus says we encounter him today. And it's much more than just climate consequences. The searing inequities of the globalized economy are fundamental to the misshapen patterns that define our lives. Some of this, which Transition clearly calls out, involves the way that high finance drives down wages and makes employment more precarious right here in our communities. But it's equally true that the consumer culture, driven by industrialized capitalism, weds us ever more deeply to injustice against our more distant neighbors.

Is "neighbors" the right word for those we never really see? Yes—given their intimate connection to our lives. Two examples suffice, drawn from the past week's news. A BBC report describes a pair of villages in Indonesia where villagers practice subsistence "farming": by sorting through mixed plastics sent by Western countries to be recycled. Only the best plastic can be "harvested"; the rest is burned as fuel by local industry. So these "neighbors"—after all, it's the plastic *we* recycle from *our* consumer choices that ends up in their village—deal with respiratory ailments from toxic fumes released by the burning plastic and eat chicken eggs with dioxin levels 70 times higher than considered safe.[144]

Meanwhile, in Madagascar children as young four years old "work" long hours—day and night—in makeshift mines collecting shards of mica. Some of it winds up as the sparkle in the cosmetics on your face. Most finds it way to China and then to the U.S. in the hair dryers that style our hair or the audio speakers that play our music (though it also shows up in an array of products that populate our everyday lives—although they'd be unimaginable to the children crawling through the darkness).[145]

We are *entangled* in a web of relationships, a system of structures that expects us to use oil like there's no tomorrow. To use people like they're not human. To use the planet as though it were not our (ONLY) home. Christians have language for this, though as I said last time, we'll need to reclaim it from those who've cheapened it. *We are entangled in sin*. And next time I'll turn to that.

PS: I've set up a Patreon site to help fund my work in this area. I hope you'll invest in my thinking and writing. You can learn more about how to support me here: www.patreon.com/fullfrontalfaith

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[143] www.theguardian.com/environment/2019/nov/20/fossil-fuel-production-on-track-for-double-the-safe-climate-limit
[144] www.bbc.co.uk/news/science-environment-50392807
[145] www.nbcnews.com/news/all/army-children-toil-african-mica-mines-n1082916

Sin: Ripping the Fabric of Creation

David R. Weiss – November 26, 2019
The Gospel in Transition #50 – **Subscribe at www.davidrweiss.com**

My last post (GIT #49) left us *entangled*. But if we're so thoroughly caught in systems that pit us against each other, our fellow creatures, and even our planet, what hope do we have? We'll get there (to hope), but the first step toward that hope is realizing how *not right* things are.

I used the word *sin* to describe our entanglement—the *not-rightness* of our current situation—but that's hardly an uncomplicated word choice. "Sin" feels too religious for folks not connected to a faith community and too oppressively moralistic for many who are in faith communities. I could pick a different word, but I think *sin* is our word for a couple of reasons.

First, for better or for worse, *sin* is the word used in the Christian tradition to name the *not-rightness* that afflicts human experience. And if we're going to leverage the wisdom of the Christian tradition to address the *not-rightness* evident in the climate crisis, we should at least ask whether we're dealing with *sin*, since that's the *not-rightness* that Christianity aims to address.

Second, *sin* is also the word *misused* in the Christian tradition to narrow down that *not-rightness* to matters of personal morality, sexual shame, rule-based obedience, and othering (disvaluing those who are simply different). While there are legitimate expressions of personal morality and times for rule-based obedience, overall in its misused form *sin* has largely reinforced power relationships without ever asking about the *not-rightness* of the relationships themselves. In this manner sin has actually distracted us from recognizing the *not-rightness* that really matters. Because of this, it seems wiser to reclaim *sin* than simply coin a new term and allow "sin" to simmer away in the background—pointing fingers, sowing shame, and otherwise making noise that doesn't help us address the crisis in front of us.

Third, I'm convinced that a reclaimed understanding of *sin* can help us understand what we're up against and help us see how our tradition can guide us in this *kairos* moment (GIT #46). That is, only by being clear on what *sin* is, can we begin to draw on Christianity as a faith with the power to transform us both inwardly and outwardly: *this is the work of Transition*.

Let me be clear: the Transition Movement does NOT require a background in any faith tradition. And I'm certain faith traditions other than Christianity can benefit from engaging with Transition. My assertion is more modest but important: for Christianity to engage Transition in a meaningful and constructive way we need to recognize the "touch points"—places where Transition and Christianity come together. And what Transition sees as the *not-rightness* of the current moment—the crises of peak oil, climate chaos, and a misshapen economy—are the result of what Christians name as sin. We have *much* to learn from Transition, and we begin with remembering what we know about sin.[146]

A mini-theology. Reality is relational. Nothing is on its own. (Perhaps not even God; that seems to be one core intuition in the doctrine of the Trinity: even God is intrinsically intimate before anything else at all is.) This begs the question of ultimates: who/what is God? I'm not going there. I'll say this much. "God" is absolutely beyond our words. The very best we can do is seek words that capture shadows of the divine—God's "backside" so to speak (Exodus 33:19-23).

I regard "God" as the name given across multiple faith traditions to the energy that pervades all that is: the "pulse" of the cosmos, the "spark" behind the big bang, the "impulse" to evolve, the "webbedness" that characterizes the very nature of reality. Our minds tend to personalize and anthropomorphize this energy. I'll admit I'm agnostic-skeptical toward this. I doubt "God" is personal, but I'm inclined to affirm a purposiveness that comes right to the edge of sentience, and I'm adamant that I don't really

[146] People write entire books on sin; I have just a couple paragraphs. I'm most indebted to Sallie McFague (*The Body of God: An Ecological Theology*, Fortress Press, 1993, esp. pp. 112-129) and Carter Heyward (*Saving Jesus From Those Who Are Right*, Fortress Press, 1999, esp. pp. 82-88) for helping me articulate my own intuitions more clearly.

know. But, even if you prefer a fully personal God, my assertion stills stands: whoever/whatever God is, God's creation—the cosmos—is relational through and through. This is, I believe, both a theological truth and an empirical fact; a happy place where religion and science simply concur.

This claim is the canvas for any serious religious cosmology. Cosmology (more/less in *both* its religious and scientific form, though I'm speaking religiously here) means the big picture of how/why things came to be as they are, where WE fit, and how WE ought to act in light of this big picture. In this sense, cosmologies are inescapably "self-centered" in that that they orient US—the ones who fashion them, toward the world around us. But they need not be destructively self-centered. It is possible (I'd say critical-essential!) for a cosmology grounded in a big picture of cosmic relationality to be self-centered in a humble, searching posture that places us within—interwoven with—a web of relationships rather than atop a pyramid. At its best, that's what Christianity might offer.

In this cosmology, *every facet* of the cosmos from birth to death (both individually and as a whole) is *naturally* in ebb and flow with everything else. Life and death, renewal and rebirth, are the respiration of the universe. This is a far more modest picture than Christianity has often proclaimed, but it's more consonant with what we know scientifically. "Paradise" may be a useful myth-metaphor, but there's *never* been a time when any corner of the universe, least of all "Eden," has been without the tumult that is nature. That tumult—which includes predator-prey relationships and lots of death—isn't a moral problem. It simply *is* the way this universe works.

But at some point, on this particular planet, life evolved to the point that self-consciousness dawned. And with the notion of a self came the notion of an *ended self*—the anticipation of death; then anxiety over this finitude and then all manner of methods of trying to avoid death, many of which come at the expense others. As the Christian theologian Reinhold Niebuhr (d. 1971) said, contrary to the "fall narrative" in the Bible, we don't die because we sin; *we sin because we die*. Our failure to respond maturely to the challenges posed by finitude (and they *can* be mighty!) is the primal trigger for *sin*.

But it's critical to note, this *isn't* sin in the form of disobeying God. It's sin in the form of acting against the cosmic relatedness in which we "suddenly" found ourselves, a cosmic relatedness in which our personal-communal finitude posed extreme anxiety. It isn't surprising, perhaps, that self-consciousness caught us off guard in that primal past. But each choice to act or live against the relatedness of the entire cosmos threatened to rip us as a human species—as a human culture—further and further from the host of (finite!) connectedness that is our *home*.

The present crises of peak oil, climate chaos, and a misshapen economy are all distant but distinct echoes of that primal refusal to knowingly embrace our place in the (finite) web of life. By now that chosen refusal has been clothed so well in culture, myth (in fact, religion in its worse expressions), and systemic-corporate structures that we can barely imagine it as a dysfunctional choice. It passes so easily for normal. But it will kill us. All of us, if we don't stem that anxious impulse.

Religion—*at its best*—has served since ancient times to help us navigate finitude with grace. And that's an essential double entendre: "grace" as *with humble poise* and "grace" as *with a sense of the sheer giftedness of life itself*. From the earliest Goddess religions and aboriginal/indigenous traditions, on through the Taoist, Hindu, and Buddhist traditions, and up through the Jewish, Christian, and Muslim traditions, religion *in its wisest moments* has offered us patterns for embracing this life as sacred in the midst of finitude. That's the wisdom we need to plumb for today.

PS: I've set up a Patreon site to help fund my work in this area. I hope you'll invest in my thinking and writing. You can learn more about how to support me here: www.patreon.com/fullfrontalfaith

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Speaking of Sin

David R. Weiss – November 30, 2019
The Gospel in Transition #51 – **Subscribe at www.davidrweiss.com**

I don't harp on how entangled (GIT #49) we are in sin (GIT #50) to make us feel bad. I suppose at one level I do it to make us *feel* at all. Day in and day out our lives are profoundly out of sync with nature. Some of this is on account of the choices we make; much more is due to the myriad choices *made for us* by the way our society is structured. In either case, that out-of-sync-ness, that not-rightness, that SIN, is killing the very ground of our being. But we barely notice; it passes so easily for *normal*: for "the way life works." And we won't address the not-rightness of our lives until we *feel* it. So I harp.

By the way, "ground of being" is used sometimes in theology to name God: as that sacred presence that is the very foundation upholding us in all that we are. True enough. But at the mundane level of our flesh and blood bodies, it is *Earth*—its elements, ecosystems, and interconnected life forms—that physically-chemically-biologically upholds us as the ground of our being. And our current way of life (even if in ways mostly unseen, unknown, and hidden from us) is ripping asunder this web that upholds us. I won't go so far as to say we're killing God by our actions, *but we ARE assaulting the wisdom of God woven into the fabric of nature* … and doing so on a scale that threatens to render the planet unable to support us any longer, unable to ground our being. *And still, we barely notice*. So I harp.

Sunday, on the eve of the 25th United Nations Climate Change Conference, UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres acknowledged that global efforts to address the climate crisis have thus far been "utterly inadequate." He warned, "The point of no return is no longer over the horizon. *It is in sight and hurtling toward us*."[147] In fact, some scientists warn that we may have *already crossed* that ominous threshold on several fronts. That is, we *may have passed the first tipping points* that would set in motion unstoppable and cascading changes leading to climate catastrophe.

Writing in the journal *Nature* (Nov. 27, 2019), they said we are on the precipice of "an existential threat to civilisation." Earlier studies had suggested that these irreversible and interconnected "tipping points" (melting ice, rising seas, thawing permafrost, burning forest, drought, coral reef die off, ocean circulation, etc.) were only at play in a worst-case scenario—if temperature rise reached 5C. However, subsequent and more accurate studies now indicate we could pass these tipping points *even before we reach 2C*. We've already warmed the planet by 1C over the past century, and we're currently on track to heat it by total of 3-4C within the next hundred years. One British climate researcher soberly commented on the piece in *Nature*, "The prognosis by Tim Lenton and colleagues is, unfortunately, fully plausible: that we might have already lost control of the Earth's climate."[148]

However, if you've watched the news as its offers "glowing" reports of record holiday buying-and-flying over the Thanksgiving weekend, you'd be excused for not realizing *those very same records* are driving us toward a *glowing planet* that will extinguish—or at least wreck—organized human society during the lifetimes of today's children. I personally think that's newsworthy, but somehow it never makes the cut for our ten o'clock news. *That's why I harp on sin*.

But, again, the point *isn't* to make us feel bad. It's to *wake us up* so that we *feel.* Period. Walter Brueggemann, in discussing the Hebrew prophets described them as poets ransacking their language for words and images to evoke a spiritual-emotional response from a people who'd largely surrendered their capacity to feel.[149] Similarly, I'm not interested in using sin language to leave us wracked by guilt. We need, rather, to be *wakened* to perceive (viscerally!) the truth of our situation.

The Transition Movement is comprised almost entirely of persons who have already (largely) awakened to this truth. Churches, however, are comprised mostly of persons who have not. We might

[147] www.apnews.com/7d85d6d7b05c4436b6f4d162f6c06566
[148] www.theguardian.com/environment/2019/nov/27/climate-emergency-world-may-have-crossed-tipping-points
[149] See Walter Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination*, Fortress Press, 1978, especially pp. 44-61.

think we're "well-informed," but if we're not ready to all-out weep, rage, and act over climate, we're not yet awake. But as we awaken (and we WILL awaken—either quickly now or frantically in an over-heated future), sin language of the right sort, will help us link the not-rightness of the present moment to the tradition from which we get our wisdom and healing.

The right sort. Which is to say, sin language that is NOT focused on the risk of going to hell or the fear of pissing off God or even the need for personal salvation. Rather, sin language that is more directly descriptive of the earth-bound consequences of human action (and inaction). Sin language that speaks from the sacred-cosmic truth of absolute-relatedness and planetary-finitude. And sin language that declares simply, unmistakably, and (at least initially) without judgment, that we've stepped out of place with respect to the sturdy-delicate web of relations *that is our home*.

Perhaps there are good psychological-historical reasons for why we long ago hitched "sin" to otherworldly hopes or anxiety over divine anger. (Although I'd argue we should have also long ago grown past these linkages and refined our thinking. Instead, those holding power found ways to use those primal, but immature impulses to control others … But I digress.) Yet in this *kairos* moment, on this finite planet, *sin is the welcome recognition that we've "missed the mark."*[150]

Welcome, because when we recognize Earth as our home, and as we become "literate" in the language of sin, we can use it to name "negative feedback loops"[151] that help us re-true our attitudes and behaviors (ultimately, our cultures and societies) so they "fit" our finite context. *Well-declared, sin calls out the places in our lives that need attention—that need "repentance": literally "turning back from"—so that our lives actually support the web of worldly relations and pursue meaning, joy, and justice in ways that strengthen the whole fabric of creation.* That's the original purpose of sin language. And, as Christians, we either reclaim it in this sense or we let it distract us (perhaps with deadly results) from doing the work to which God calls us: the healing of ourselves and the world.

To employ sin language in its proper role means that in our churches and in our daily fellowship with others we'll actually ask together the *welcome* question of what constitutes sin today. And we'll avoid the cultural press to indulge in holiday flying-and-buying—because that behavior is deadly to others. We'll ask honest and restless questions about how much we drive, how we heat our homes, how we shape our diets, etc.—because those behaviors are directly related to a reeling climate. And, as faithful citizens, we'll ask about plans for new pipelines, gas fracking, nuclear plants, etc.—because those societal-corporate behaviors drive the planet toward a dangerous future.

This isn't about finger-pointing (in any case, most of the fingers would point back toward us). And it isn't about making blanket claims (e.g. "Eat vegan or else"); it will require seasoned ethical nuance. It's about recognizing that our future is in peril and we are wiser to ask about our behaviors with authentic earnestness now, rather than find our conversation driven by frenzied panic after a decade of *sinful* procrastination. Speaking of sin is essential as we seek to navigate finitude with grace.

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[150] The biblical words for sin in both Hebrew and Greek mean "to miss the mark." I might suggest, "to act off balance." Another Hebrew word carries the stronger connotation of "rebellion," as though to deliberately "miss the mark" … out of spite, vengeance, even desire for profit. *The Oxford Companion to the Bible* (Oxford University Press, 1993), p. 696.
[151] See, for instance, Joanna Macy and Chris Johnstone, *Active Hope* (New World Library, 2012), pp. 66-68.

Speaking of Christ … as King … or Not

David R. Weiss – December 2, 2019
The Gospel in Transition #52 – **Subscribe at www.davidrweiss.com**

Okay, enough on sin. Of course, it's far more complicated than the past couple essays could fully discuss. There are legitimate challenges to distinguish between those earth-wounding actions and attitudes in which we are entangled almost against our will … and those with which we acquiesce out of habit or selfish convenience … and those which we embrace with spiteful disregard for the ones who will be impacted. Likewise, there are real differences between choices at the individual/community level and those at the corporate/government level.

I don't underestimate the nuance needed to actually have thoughtful conversations in which we speak of sin as the rending of creation's fabric. But whether these tears in nature's web are outright spiteful or "merely" structural doesn't really matter if they doom our collective future. There is no solace in making a time capsule marked "Open in case of climate emergency" that holds the message, "Sorry, mates, we didn't mean it. We really hoped our actions wouldn't lead to *this*. Oops." Which is why it's exquisitely important that we take our lives—and other lives across the globe, and other species, and lives not yet here—seriously enough to start speaking of sin in ecological earnest. Now.

But the conversation can't stop there. *That* conversation gets us to the *start* of Transition. But the inward and outward transformation that *is* Transition will require something more than just repentance (more than simply "turning back") from the dire not-rightness of our … *whole* way of life. Indeed, it will require such a thorough transformation, one might even say we'll need to be *reborn*. That's why I think religious language—in my case, *Christian* language—is not just helpful, it's uncannily accurate and evocative. It may prove crucial in closing the gap between nagging/depressed awareness and committed/active responsiveness in regards to climate. And if it does, that won't be a curious side-effect of a tradition supposedly focused on another realm. It will reveal the truth of Christianity all along: that God so loved *this world* as to risk everything to show us how to be *at home here on Earth*.

I started this year-long venture the first week of Advent 2018. Fifty-two weeks later, the last Sunday of the church year is the Festival of Christ the King. So I'll close this blog with some ecologically provocative reflections on Christ … as king.

The festival of Christ the King was added to the church year by Pope Pius XI in 1925.[152] It was intended specifically to counter the rising ideologies that were seeking to assert their totalitarian reign in the world: communism in Russia, fascism in Italy and Spain (which soon after shape-shifted into Nazism in Germany)—as well as secularism in the West, which allowed capitalism to grow unfettered, in effect colonizing the minds of consumers and re-colonizing much of the world through the globalization of market forces. The impulse was perhaps noble—each of those ideologies has wrought havoc on humanity and the planet—but the messaging was also off the mark.

Even when invoked as a way to challenge other dangerous regimes, the church's notion of Christ's kingship has been deeply problematic on its own terms—shaped far more by the church's own authoritarian aspirations than by Jesus' actual life. The church has rarely had a problem with top-down or absolute power; it's just preferred to have a monopoly on it. But Jesus' own teachings and his lived practice stand in stark contrast to that preference.

Most biblical scholars agree that Jesus talked—a lot—about "the kingdom of God." It's recorded as the lead-in to quite a few of his parables and shows up elsewhere in his discourse. He *never* sets himself up as king, but setting that aside, it does seem that he imagines God as king—only big, better, more powerful than any earthly king. And if the church later saw fit to transfer that crown on to Jesus, that's maybe legitimate. EXCEPT. To the extent we allow Jesus to reveal God through what *he* says and

[152] Frank Senn, an eminent Lutheran liturgical theologian, offers a concise helpful history of the feast here: www.lutheranforum.com/blog/2017/11/11/the-not-so-ancient-origins-of-christ-the-king-sunday

does, Jesus seems to be so *severely critiquing* the worldly notion of kingship as to announce that, when it comes to kings, *the world has it ALL wrong*.

Jesus' focus on compassion, inclusion, humility, nonviolence, and radical transformative love as the manifestation of God's kingdom suggests that earthly kings—almost to a person—are mere *tyrants*. They traffic in the sort of power *rejected* by heaven: power that belittles, exploits, excludes, others those who are different, and in general operates as though disconnected from all else. Omnipotence is NOT a trait of God; it is *cosmic heresy* (it flies in the face of *everything* the universe reveals about the nature of inter-related reality). It's rather the sinful desire of humans who project it onto divinity and then think they have permission to image it themselves.

This archetype of kingship became the ideal for *every person* in their own sphere (even as the spheres were themselves misshapen by gender, racial, ethnic, sexual biases). Under the influence of this notion of kingship whole peoples have been colonized, Christianized, and decimated. The toll on other creatures and ecosystems has been no less devastating. Even when the church makes Jesus "King" for the "best" reasons, it betrays the message he brought—and it compromises the transformative power he sought to share.

When Jesus employed the phrase "kingdom of God" the way he filled those words with meaning *exorcised them of all their royalty*. The phrase is, in a sense, declared meaningless. *From God's perspective there is NO SUCH THING AS A KING*. It's a parasitic expression of humanity; a way of being that rejects the human vocation to image God … whose image IS compassionate liberating relationship.

I often shift the phrase "kingdom of God" into "kin-dom of God." Jesus' parables, healings, and perhaps most of all his boundary-breaking table fellowship (eating with folks that the social-religious rules of his day dictated he ought not even acknowledge) all work *so hard* against the notion of kingship, that *he seems rhetorically bent on remaking the meaning of the word into something entirely else: choreographing kingship AS kinship*. In the world God created *there are no kings, only kin*. Every corner related to every other corner, from microbes to mountains, from humus to human beings, and everything else as well.

We don't need a festival for some Imperial Christ who only seems to challenge earthly rulers but ends up ultimately reflecting their own worldly dynamic made divine. No. Just as we don't need (and the world can't afford!) a merely reformed capitalism, we don't need (and the world can't afford!) a Christ who is King. *Luckily, Jesus didn't offer us that. He offered us a Christ who is Kin.* A Christ who chose to be in relationship with all he encountered—because how else to embody the wisdom of God who wove the cosmos as one seamless garment? Let Christ be Kin—and let us follow his lead.

The Transition Movement is working hard to imagine, to experiment, to discover what it would look like to live from an awareness of radical kinship. It's time for the church to join that work *as its holy work*. In truth, *it always has been* our work. Jesus didn't come to save us. He came to *heal* us. (It's the *same verb* for "save" and "heal.") The difference is that we've assumed his goal was to save us to another life in another place. But I'm persuaded that his real hope, like most other great religious teachers, was to heal us so that we might dwell well (pursuing meaning, joy, and justice) *as kin* in this holy place. Earth. Our home. The place where all our relations are. May it be so. Amen.

PS: I've set up a Patreon site to help fund my work in this area. I hope you'll invest in my thinking and writing. You can learn more about how to support me here: www.patreon.com/fullfrontalfaith

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The Gospel in Transition by David R. Weiss is a year of reflections on facing our climate crisis, finding hope, and the alchemy of Christian community. My weekly essays consider climate change, Transition, and faith—using biblical images, liturgical seasons, science, and theology, as conversation partners. Writing in a voice a bit too restless to call "devotional," I aim to be insightfully evocative and usefully provocative. I'd be delighted to have you join me on this journey. **Subscribe at www.davidrweiss.com.** Thanks for reading and see you next week! **drw59mn@gmail.com**