

## **Climate, Politics and the Human Spirit**

My colleagues are here to speak about the claims made in HJR 012. I am here to speak about climate politics and the human spirit.

The 20<sup>th</sup> century was a time of horror and a time of marvels. One of its great accomplishments was to recover the history of the planet and how it was transformed from a seething cloud of dust to become a living, vital planet. Era upon geologic era compound to host an every more complex array of life until at last the scene was prepared for our arrival as a species. Since then we have come to occupy every conceivable niche on the planet and to become its single most influential presence. As a species, we now displace more earth from place to place than all the geologic forces of erosion, earthquakes and volcanism combined. We have timbered most of the planets forests, some several times over. We have plundered its fishing grounds to depletion. We have altered the chemical composition of the troposphere. We have poisoned, crowded out or hunted down over half the species with which we previously shared this planet. Within 10 generations, mankind has grown from being one species among many to being a force of geologic proportions on the face of the Earth.

The mobilization of fossil fuels has provided the energy for this marvelous and horrifying transformation. Millions of years ago, when the atmosphere was richer in carbon dioxide, plants, which would seem strange to us now, drew in carbon dioxide, respired oxygen and proliferated with such profusion as to alter the very composition of the air. These plants are with us today. Transformed through millions of years, these plants now appear as fossil fuels. We have burned them with such profligacy as to return to the air almost half of the carbon dioxide they sequestered.

This has precipitated a generation's worth of research into whether increasing atmospheric concentrations of carbon dioxide are responsible for increased variation in local weather patterns, the pole-ward migration of plants and animals, the intensification of tropical storms, the melting of glaciers, the calving of ice shelves, the early arrival of spring, the late onset of autumn, an acceleration in sea level rise and the increase in mean global temperature.

People around the world, recognizing that they cannot respond adequately on their own, are asking whether their governments should respond to this seeming threat. Sadly the question has been transformed into a debate as to whether global warming is real. This is terribly misleading.

The question of whether our governments should respond can be answered with the climate science that was in place three decades ago. If we know how to frame the question, we need not insist on high scientific precision. "How can this be?" It's because the question is fundamentally not a question of science but of ethics.

The question of “whether-to-respond” shapes up as a two-by-two decision table. We simply ask what happens if we respond and if we don’t respond under the assumption that, first, global warming is real and then under the assumption that it is false. Next, we fill in the table with a few simple generalizations and ask, “What’s the worst that could happen?” A single result jumps forward to claim our attention: If we choose not to respond and global warming is real, then we incur at some undefined speed ecological catastrophe, an overshoot and collapse of civilization and the fury of a fortress society.

Choosing is an ethical act. We cannot look to science to compel a choice: science necessarily leaves behind some uncertainty. Choosing is an ethical act because it weights possibilities, compares outcomes and asks what is good and what is not. Choosing requires wisdom: it requires judgment. Those who don’t like hearing these words can think of it as a form of risk management.

Not everyone is guided by this kind of ethics. Many are guided instead by an ethics of duty. "Don't talk to me about societal consequences," they say. "My first duty is to myself and my family." There's a subtext to this claim. It means that for the claimant to succeed he must conform to specific rules about how to think and act or he'll be thrown out on the street with no means to protect self or family.

Yes, economic dependency is real, but it doesn't mean one has to deny the larger context of which one is a part.

Instead, be still. Listen quietly and you will hear what every civilization to rise and fall has heard before. Yes, it is the Earth. The Earth speaks. The Earth speaks of a duty deeper than that to self and kin. The Earth speaks of a duty to respect her ways and to care for all life that has found support in her folds.

So now the legislature of an often-overlooked state has passed a joint resolution to outlaw global warming. Well, not exactly. Their resolution calls on the Federal Government to take no action on global warming. Speakers at the legislative hearings say, "We are Americans and can't afford to do anything about this problem." Or more outrageously, "Global warming is a conspiracy to control population growth." It's absurd. It's a poke in the eye. These politicians need not be reasonable, and they know they can get away with such nonsense.

But don't think for a moment that climate-denying politicians are dumb. On the contrary, they understand well their political support base. They enjoy the backing of industries that stand to lose profits if responding to global warming means an increase in production costs. These politicians play expertly upon the fears of those who would be hurt by change. And they encourage those who heap scorn when confronted. Their political power lies in their ability to capitalize on the frailties of the human spirit. They take such strength from human weakness that they can thumb their noses at reason itself. They are conniving

and irresponsible but not dumb.

Increasingly it appears that the challenge of climate change may be too big for our factious country. We have made mistakes. In error, we accepted the denier's premise that responding to climate change is a question of scientific evidence. We have failed to acknowledge that the question of "whether-to-respond" is fundamentally an ethical question.

We have also failed to distinguish closely between the two questions – "whether-to-respond" versus "how-to-respond." The first question is easily addressed as a problem in ethical decision-making under conditions of uncertainty. The second question defines short-term winners and losers. It creates a powerful incentive for short-term losers to muddy the issue. This is what is challenging about climate change as a public policy issue: it creates incentives for some to deny the inevitable in the short-term to the detriment of everyone in the long term. It invites some to say, "It is better to have our offspring loose a civilization and have the wicked survive than to bear now the costs of transition to a post-carbon world."

How could we have lost our way so irredeemably? Do we no longer know who we are and why we are here? Are we not intended to be first and foremost stewards of the Earth and the life thereon? How could we have fallen prey so easily to the coyote-men in our midst? We must hold politicians responsible for confounding the issue and preying intentionally upon our predictable weaknesses. We must hold ourselves responsible for having thus succumbed. It is now time to step forward, to disavow our reptilian instincts, to affirm the right to think for ourselves, to embrace our stewardly purpose, and to act upon an ethic that affirms life.

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