

DESPAIR AND HOPE AT THE WORLD'S EDGE A PERSONAL REFLECTION ON GLOBAL WARMING

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Published in the Spring 2007 issue of *Genesis V*, the alumni magazine of St. Ignatius College Preparatory in San Francisco

I live in a land of drying lakes, thinning ice and toppling trees. Coastal villages are eroding away, and the permafrost is melting, releasing ever more carbon dioxide into the atmosphere. For twenty years, I have served as a wildlife biologist in western Alaska, striving to learn more about the mysteries of creation that we might better care for it. And now, at the dawn of the 21st century, the more we learn, the more it is clear that we have neither the knowledge nor the will to care for it as we should.

I was asked to write this article for *Genesis V*, to provide a perspective on the crisis of global climate change. It is a challenge that I undertake with serious misgivings. *Genesis* articles are inevitably confident and constructive dispatches of achievement, inspirational communiqués of success and accomplishment.

In that vein, I could, as a scientist, provide a laundry list of climate change predictions, and then provide you with a road map to planetary health. But you can find such resources anywhere these days — in the media, on-line, at the office water cooler. For me, it would also be dishonest to take that approach, because I have come to believe that we lack the will to use such information anyway. Instead, I invite you to explore with me not global warming itself, but the effects the crisis has had on me as a Christian scientist who has dedicated his life to protecting the environment. In this article, I will share with you the dynamics of a flourishing personal despair and the genesis of a struggling hope that may seem far too circumscribed to the optimists among you.

“What is truth?”

What is the truth about global climate change? Before attempting to answer, let's look at a more fundamental question, “What is truth?” Standing before Jesus, Pilate raised that eternal question which becomes ever more pressing in this era of relativism. Even beyond the realm of ethics and morals, the borders of truth become hazier with each passing day. Alleged truths proliferate and metastasize throughout cyberspace, where you can find your every opinion canonized, every impulse confirmed with the grease of apparent authority and fact. The great paradox of the Information Age is that the marvels of the Internet have reduced our certainty that the information we receive is actually accurate and reliable.

Consider events of the recent past. Did Al Gore or George Bush actually receive more votes in Florida in the 2000 election? Are civilian casualties in Iraq in the tens of thousands as some claim or in the hundreds of thousands as others assert? Is embryonic stem cell research truly the panacea that both its informed and ignorant advocates claim, or, despite the tens of millions of dollars spent on embryonic stem cell research around the world, is the continuing litany of failure at finding solutions to the well-known challenges in this field evidence of a radically overblown optimism regarding its potential?

What is the truth about global climate change? Are the global climate patterns we see today truly anomalous? Are they beyond the range of previously observed or inferred change? Is human activity responsible? The scions of Socrates would have us think that science can provide the answers to these questions. We are taught that science is objective, unbiased and definitive. Unfortunately, as the debate about global climate change illustrates, that is too often not the case. Despite protestations to the contrary, there is no consensus about the magnitude, causes or implications of global warming. The supreme courts of science have issued their opinions, but they comprise simply majority decisions. For all we know, they could be as wrong as the scientists of

Galileo's time, most of whom rejected his hypothesis of heliocentrism because of its empirical, not theological, inadequacies.

Regarding global climate, there is a small but persistent minority that refutes the majority opinion, marshaling its own suite of data, models and assumptions. Because science is frequently biased, it should come as no surprise that supporters of the minority opinion include the usual suspects — researchers sponsored by corporations or governments interested in maintaining the status quo. Many of the minority opinions, however, are voiced by researchers with no obvious political or socioeconomic prejudices.

Variable Responses

Although the majority scientific opinions (i.e., global warming is occurring and human activity is at least in part responsible) appear to be winning in the court of public opinion, that result is not universal. The degree and nature of uncertainty about global climate change plays a key role in limiting personal and social responses to the crisis. Consider the media reaction to the recent report from the UN Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change. The report confirmed that the planet is getting warmer, and that there is at least a 90 percent probability that human activity is the culprit.

In the wake of these straightforward conclusions, The New York Times declared that the debate about global warming is over, and The New Yorker proclaimed that it would be “suicidal” not to take radical steps to reverse the process now. But National Review Online pointed out that the forecasts were less dire than those in the last such report in 2001 and opined that climate scientists still don't really know what's going on. The Wall Street Journal reflected that, because large scale climate change has been happening for millennia, we should focus on adapting to change, rather than preventing it. Most alarmingly, The Washington Post suggested that “The dirty secret about global warming is this: We have no solution.”

This uncertainty can paralyze the well intentioned and grant license to those who exploit and profit from the status quo. Some claim that the economic costs of implementing changes are too high, given the degree of uncertainty about the processes we hope to reverse. Others contend that, even given the uncertainty, the risk of failing to act is simply too great to be ignored, and that we must accept the prospects of short-term economic hardship to ensure a healthy biosphere. Others claim that we can have our cake and eat it, too — economic profit and a healthy environment. Although this position is probably true at small scales now, and perhaps generally true decades hence, it fails to account for either the magnitude of the problems we apparently face right now, or the radical steps that will be required to turn things around.

Debate about how to proceed is not limited to the secular arena; it resonates through the Church as well. Among the many issues of social justice confronting us today, where should followers of Christ put their emphasis? Adherents of a particular interpretation of the “seamless garment” theology see the care of creation as one of many “human life” issues, all of which merit equal attention. They often castigate those in the Church who define human life issues more narrowly by elevating certain topics above others. Those who focus their attention on issues directly relating to the sacred nature of human life itself (e.g., abortion), as opposed to the “quality of life” topics often championed by their ideological, theological or political opponents, might respond in the words of Richard Neuhaus: “The defense of the dignity of the human person at the points of his or her greatest vulnerability is the foundation of social justice. If we don't get this issue of social justice right, we will not get anything right” (“The Public Square,” *First Things* 169, January 2007).

I agree with Fr. Neuhaus. If we, as a society, lack the will, clarity of vision and compassion to protect consistently and unequivocally those most vulnerable among us, how can we have the hubris to assume that we have the wisdom necessary for dealing with the economic, social and ecological complexities of global climate change? If, despite the biological evidence, we have such a difficult time deciding when human life begins, how can we possibly move forward on responding to global climate change, given the phenomenon's inherent uncertainties?

Can the Planet Be Saved?

For arguments' sake, let's stipulate the twin premises of global climate change: first, the global environment is, on average, getting warmer, and second, human activity is at least partially responsible. Given the preponderance, if not unanimity, of the scientific evidence, I am personally convinced of both points. So, how do we respond? More to the point, is there reason to hope? Do we throw up our hands, as *The Washington Post* implied, or can the planet be saved?

In a different context, that was the same question I asked myself 30 years ago. Your editor and I worked separate jobs in downtown San Francisco that summer. Each evening, we'd ride home together, discussing all that we would need to do as Christians in order to "save the world." Beyond the sophomoric presumptuousness inherent in considering the prospect of, let alone the need for, repeating Jesus' unique and sufficient salvific work, we were confident in society's ability to meet any challenge, nudged along, of course, by our humble efforts. We combined a natural American optimism with the Ignatian search for God in all things. In retrospect, I suspect that combination yielded a creeping Pelagianism, far too confident in our ability to dictate our fate and the fate of societies, let alone the fate of the planet. Three decades later, my own life experiences and a better appreciation of the magnitude of evil in the 20th and early 21st century leave me much more comfortable with Augustine's theology of fallen humanity. The Roddenberyesque dream of a human society embarking on a unidirectional quest for social maturity seems hopelessly naive. Although sin may have been excised from the Federation, it is alive and well in the real universe.

So, can we "save the world?" And if so, whose responsibility is it? Some would say that it is up to governments to enact and enforce policies that will reduce and ultimately reverse the processes that have led to global climate change. Regrettably, the track record of governments is not encouraging. Our own country conspicuously refused to sign the Kyoto accords, in part because of concerns that the U.S. would be at an economic disadvantage relative to two of the 21st century's largest polluters, China and India, countries that would not be bound by the accords. Even among signatories to the accords, however, there has been a notable lack of progress toward achieving the limited reductions of greenhouse gases specified in the agreement.

Governments have often played catch-up when it comes to big issues of justice in our history. During both the battle against slavery and, a century later, the battle for fuller civil rights, individual citizens organized and led the fight, and the government eventually followed along. So, does citizen action portend well for a positive resolution to the climate crisis? Consider the two aforementioned battles. In the fight for emancipation, many abolitionists both spoke out and risked their reputations, careers and even lives to help free slaves. During the struggle for civil rights, advocates of justice spoke out, but then also marched and launched voter registration drives. Some gave their lives in the effort.

Such commitment is not conspicuous when it comes to environmental activism. Scientists, politicians and NGO representatives speak out about the magnitude and timing of the climate crisis and then burn fossil fuels driving home to the suburbs and flying to global conferences around the world. A colleague of mine serves as an apt metaphor for the contradiction. In her professional life, she aggressively strives to limit the impacts of rural development on migratory birds. In her personal life, however, she insists on driving an SUV in the city because they have a better safety record in crashes than smaller cars. Some would call for more radical commitment. Like John Brown during the mid-19th century battle over slavery, small bands of ecoterrorists see violence as a solution to today's problems, but it is unlikely that their misguided efforts will spark a societal conflict leading to greater environmental responsibility.

Fossil fuel consumption is a good index of how serious we are as a nation about the climate crisis. We currently use about a quarter of all energy produced globally. Since the Torrey Canyon oil spill disaster and the Arab oil embargo in the early 1970s, we have known that there are significant ecological and geopolitical risks to dependence on fossil fuels. We have known of these risks for three decades, long before there was a hint of

concern about global warming. In all that time, what have we accomplished? Progress on reducing consumption has been dwarfed by increases. In 1973, we imported 35 percent of our oil; today we import 60 percent. Take a look at the roads. Yes, there are more cars with higher fuel efficiency; there are hybrids and other new technologies in development, but there are also more gas-guzzlers on the road. As a nation enamored of Hummers and NASCAR, we have still not grown up. Instead, we send our children to fight in a desert floating on a sea of oil, while oceans of water threaten to inundate our coastlines.

Some might argue that even in times of crisis, the wheels of response and change turn slowly. Again, however, history reveals a striking dissimilarity between past national crises and the present. Less than five years passed between that hot summer in Philadelphia and the victory at Yorktown, between the fireworks over Charleston Harbor and the passage of the Thirteenth Amendment, between Pearl Harbor and Hiroshima. It took less than 10 years to make that giant leap for mankind, from a President's inspiration to the first human footprint on the dusty lunar surface.

The great era of lunar exploration coincided with the birth of the modern environmental movement. Some would say that memorable photograph of our precious blue home above the lunar landscape almost launched the environmental movement. Yet nearly 40 years later, the biosphere continues to degrade. People are not giving up their cars, are not increasing the use of mass transit and are moving farther from, rather than closer to, places of work. Americans are amazingly (and disturbingly) docile toward the abridgement of civil liberties in the face of potential terrorism but distressingly stubborn about ceding civic freedom and economic potential in the face of a global meltdown.

The Anatomy of Despair

"He was shaken by the overwhelming revelation that the headlong race between his misfortune and his dreams was at that moment reaching the finish line. The rest was darkness."

— Gabriel Garcia Márquez, "The General in His Labyrinth"

Although I don't quite feel the same sense of personal apocalypse that struck the dying General Simón Bolívar in Márquez's novel, this passage resonates with me more than I would wish. Like the accelerating dissolution of the South American union that Bolívar struggled to create, the misfortune that I experience is not mine alone. It is our corporate misfortune to be sharing a dying world while holding the cure in our hands. We simply lack the will to use it, settling instead, whether we admit it or not, for the pathetic consolation that, by the time the great blue biosphere winds down, erodes away, and finally unravels, our generation will be gone.

The threat of global climate change has triggered the great crisis of faith in my adult life, not in terms of faith in God, but faith in humanity. If the richest, most powerful, most politically blessed country on earth cannot muster the will and resources to attack the problem seriously, who will? As a child, as a teenager, as a university student, I was confident that with enough knowledge and know-how, environmental crises could be averted. Now, I no longer believe that.

As the years go by, I spend more and more time feeling like I do when I visit Hawaii. For someone writing while a blizzard howls in subzero temperatures outside his window, that might seem like a good thing, but it isn't. As a biologist, I love being in Hawaii, reveling in the rain forests, the volcanoes and the coral reefs. At the same time, however, the experience is always bittersweet. So much of the biological richness of the islands was degraded or destroyed in the centuries of human occupation before our own lifetimes, and the wave of destruction has not yet crested. Degradation of habitats, introduced pests and widespread extinctions have left the Hawaiian biota just a shadow of its former glory. I experience joy when I see a flaming scarlet iiwi flit about an ohia blossom and probe for nectar with its long pink bill, but I also feel a hollow pain of regret for all its feathered relatives that have disappeared forever and will not be seen again. Now, with the specter of global

warming looming on our collective horizon, that ragged ache has become my bittersweet companion wherever I am — in Alaska, the Everglades, the Sierra Nevada, the Appalachians.

At times, I feel like Denethor, steward of Gondor, after gazing into the dark crystal of the palantir. I see nothing but death and destruction. Have my visions been darkened by the dark lord? Have I been blinded to the possibility of hope? What does it take to be like Aragorn, to look into the same dark crystal, to see the death of his beloved, and still have the strength and the courage to venture to Mordor to do battle against evil? How does one persevere in the face of despair and apparent hopelessness? How can one declare, like Aragorn, “There is always hope.” How can one soar like John of the Cross?:

“Somehow, I continued to go a thousandfold beyond reaching; heaven grants to the beseeching what they earn through hope. For no prize but the prey would I tarry, and hope raised me by and by until I was so high, so high that I closed upon the quarry.”

The Anatomy of Hope

As a Christian, my vision is drawn high to the slopes of Calvary. Where do we find hope at Satan’s festival of death? Although I suspect that Kazantzakis and Scorsese both overstated and misconstrued Jesus’ last temptation, I agree with them that he almost certainly was tempted to despair when he hung upon the cross. As Hebrews tells us, He was like us in all things but sin (Heb 4:15). Jesus could not blithely pirouette past the roadblock of temptation; he had to confront it. How else can we make sense of his cry, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (Mark 15:34). Was it merely a headline for the terminal optimism of Psalm 22, or was it a genuine plea of existential despair?

When Neo chooses to save Trinity in *Matrix Reloaded*, the Architect smirks, “Hope. It is the quintessential human delusion, simultaneously the source of your greatest strength and your greatest weakness.” Here, at the apogee of their entertaining technobabble, the brothers Wachowski nearly formulate the truth ultimately revealed from the summit of Calvary: Hope is not a delusion, because in our greatest weakness, we find our greatest strength. “We preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. For the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men” (1 Corinthians 1:23-25).

But the hope that flows from Calvary is an eschatological hope, not a temporal one. A great chasm yawns between my spiritual hopes and my secular hopes, my confident hope for a future with Christ and my waning hope for a future of planetary health. I long for a connection, a continuity, a flow joining one to the other. As I search for a means to heal that rift, I encounter a paradox. I find that I am both a disillusioned biologist and a hopeful deacon. In my ministry as a deacon, I see no greater prospect of visible success than I do as a conservation biologist. I baptize, I catechize adults and children, I visit the sick and lead liturgies for prisoners, I preach at Mass, and I do it all with no empirically-based confidence that my words will take root and bear fruit for Christ. And yet, aware of my own sinfulness and limitations, and confronted continuously with the evidence of sin in the lives of others, I exercise my ministry with peace, joy and a firm hope that God will use my poor efforts to achieve his will for me and others. I have great faith in the words of Isaiah: “For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and return not thither but water the earth, making it bring forth and sprout . . . so shall my word be that goes forth from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and prosper in the thing for which I sent it” (Isaiah 55:10-11).

Why does such a gap exist between the poles of my twin hopes? Saving souls is clearly God’s will, but is saving the planet? Will the unraveling of the biosphere lead to a radical reduction in the planet’s capacity to support life? Will it then limp along for centuries or millennia, perhaps recovering, but perhaps not, until the Parousia? Or is the descending spiral a direct and rapid path to imminent eschatological fulfillment and renewal, to the arrival of the New Jerusalem, the new heaven and the new earth within our own lifetimes? If the latter, does that render all of our efforts to protect the environment useless and contrary to God’s ultimate design and purpose?

We cannot know for sure. Yet, my guts tell me that an active eschatological hope, open to the possibility of imminent fulfillment, cannot be an excuse to abandon ecological hope, a hope for the restoration of our oikos. My passion for the environment arose out of the enjoyment and inspiration that awaited me whenever I stepped or swam in wild, natural places. That passion matured in the realization that I wanted to share that sense of wonder and peace and amazement with others, in the understanding that we as humans need wild places to restore and inspire us, to reveal ourselves to ourselves. We need wild places so that we can hear God.

Many of my most profound experiences with God have occurred in the wilderness — on the Yukon Delta, in the Rocky Mountains, in the Surinamese rainforest. Such encounters with God, infused with the glory of his creation, serve as touchstones in my life. Fleeting foretastes of the heavenly banquet, their memory fortifies my faith in moments of doubt and spiritual aridity. My experiences in nature are not unique. For many people, their most intimate experiences with God occur in wild places, far from the disruption and distraction of humanity. And that raises yet another troubling paradox. If we are made in God's image, if the God-man Jesus Christ brought everything together in himself (Ephesians 1:10), why is it that for so many people, God's presence is most manifest where human presence is least obvious? Perhaps the root of that paradox can be traced to Eden. At the creation, we were made in God's image, but that image was tarnished pretty early on in our history. The consequences of the fall have a dual effect. First, the corruption of humanity, our sinfulness, the havoc we unnecessarily wreak on the natural world, naturally lead those who appreciate God's creation to seek those areas where it has not yet been trampled by human greed, arrogance and shortsightedness. At the same time, we see now only darkly, and all too often, we fail to see the good in human life, human nature, human enterprise. Like Denethor peering into the palantir, the consequences of sin sometimes limit our vision to the darker images.

Healing Wounds

For me, my love of biology is both a blessing and a curse. It has been a blessing because it draws me into the wild; it provides opportunities to love both the creation and the Creator. At the same time, it is a curse because I find nature endlessly distracting. Even when I escape to nature explicitly to spend time with God, my ingrained need to observe and question causes my prayer to detour and dissolve into casual scientific inquiry. When I see with the eyes of the scientist, I cannot listen with the ear of the mystic.

I have no such problem before the Blessed Sacrament. I encounter my Lord most consistently in the Eucharist and can pray most effectively before the tabernacle. It is here that I literally find communion, where the divine and the human, the natural and the supernatural, come together. I kneel before the one through whom the entire universe was created, I kneel before a tabernacle within a church, I kneel in the flickering beams of a candle or by the light gloriously filtered through a mosaic of stained glass. And all of them were consecrated by human hands — the tabernacle, the church, the candle, the glass, even the Sacrament itself. Although a redwood cathedral can reveal God in needle, branch, fern and wren, I find a more focused revelation in a cathedral of glass and wood and stone. There I can more clearly perceive His essential nature as Trinity — a community of persons seeking intimacy with us, his frail and flawed creatures.

And so, as I seek a path that might mend the great tear in the fabric of my hope, I seek the Blessed Sacrament. In my home parish, at the Church of the Immaculate Conception here in Bethel, Alaska, a great batik hanging adorns one side of the Church's interior eastern wall. The batik is about 20 feet high and 5 feet wide, plummeting nearly from the ceiling, then cascading over the small altar of repose where the Blessed Sacrament resides, before coming to rest on the floor of the sanctuary. The images on the batik are enormous salmon, the source of life for many who live here along the banks of the Kuskokwim River. These great pastel-colored fish, muted crimson and violet and orange, are all straining upward against the flow, striving heavenward, in a desperate, hook-jawed frenzy of self-sacrifice, racing to give their lives so that they might create life.

There, in the swirling school of salmon, I find the bandage to heal my wound. The gap between my growing hope in God's promises and my dying hope for the world he created is spanned by the tautly stretched body of his Son on the cross, the one who gave his life that we might live. That gap is like the pale band of light between the dark horizon and dark clouds at dawn. When the sun rises, its light floods the gap, illuminating both the earth and the clouds. The darkness of futility and the darkness of the unknown are both dispersed, bathed in shades of scarlet. "It pleased God to make absolute fullness reside in him and, by means of him, to reconcile everything in his person, on earth and in the heavens, making peace through the blood of his cross" (Colossians 1:19-20).

The Frontiers of Hope

"...even as a boy, I knew a gesture might mean life or death, and I believed the universe was similarly triggered." – Barry Lopez, River Notes

In an era when the potential for environmental apocalypse is both overblown and underappreciated, a gesture is called for. Despite the odds, despite the probability that our efforts will be futile, we are called to serve. We are called to participate in a doomed campaign, a forlorn hope. We can draw inspiration from the great heroes of history and legend. We can stand with the Spartans at Thermopylae, with Pope Leo before Attila or St. Francis before the sultan, with Don Quixote before the windmills. When a weary Frodo asks, "What are we holding on to?" we can stand alongside Sam in the ruins of Osgiliath, and answer, "That there's some good in the world, Mr. Frodo, and it's worth fighting for."

Most importantly, we should stand with the women before the cross, for there, and there alone, can we be assured that "in everything God works for good for those who love him" (Romans 8:28). Through Christ's sacrificial love, all futility is given meaning (Romans 8:20-21), absurdity is made wisdom (1 Cor. 1:21), sorrow becomes joy, and the weary and broken-down will be renewed (Revelation 21:4-5). At the foot of the cross we begin to understand what it means to love.

Christ commands us to love God with all that we have and all that we are, and he commands us to love our neighbors as ourselves (Mark 12:29-31). This love must not just extend to those who share the world with us now. As John Paul II emphasized, we must also love our neighbors in time, those who will follow us in the years and decades ahead. We are pilgrims here, and we should leave our home better than we found it, that future generations may yet prosper. I want others to share the joy and wonder and surprise of God's creation, and will do what I can to contribute to that end.

Mother Teresa reminded us that we are called to faithfulness, not success. Her words provide a welcomed breath of liberation. Blessedly, our efforts on behalf of those who follow us need not be measured by whether or not we ultimately succeed in "saving the world." They are not dependent upon earth's final destiny, because that resolution is ultimately in God's hands. Along the way to that final day, however, if children and parents and grandparents still have wild places in which to play and pray, then I will have contributed to something important. Our efforts, our gestures today, might make it possible for future pilgrims to have a moment of respite and refreshment. Even on a wounded planet, future souls may still share a moment of intimacy with their creator when they behold the remnants of what He created.

Perhaps, for me, that hope is enough. It does not bring perfect peace, it does not bring contentment, but perhaps it is enough. It is an imperfect hope that strengthens my heart, yet leaves it unsettled. And that is how it should be. A hope that left us perfectly content in this life would be a false hope. Augustine was one of many wise souls who realized this, as he said, "Our hearts are restless, O Lord, until they rest in you." Until that blessed day, we remain sojourners and seekers. Until then, these light breezes of hope are enough to fill my sails. They will sustain me until at last, at the end of all things, I can see safe harbor in the distance. They will comfort and

inspire me until I see, in the words of Gandalf, “white shores, and beyond, a far green country under a swift sunrise.”

Postscript

“It is possible I am wrong. It is impossible to speak with certainty about very much.”

— Barry Lopez, “River Notes”

Perhaps my hope for the planet is too constrained; perhaps my pessimism is unwarranted given the scope and grandeur of human achievement across the centuries. Shackled by a cynical empiricism, I may have miscalculated the magnitude of resilience and promise in both humanity and the world. If so, I beg you to prove me wrong. Dare to save the planet. Learn everything that you can about global climate change, but more importantly, take significant action. Act as an individual and a citizen in both the personal sphere and the political. Dare to challenge the corrosive assumption that unlimited economic growth is the panacea for the world’s ills and the avatar of human aspiration. The world is suffering, much of it due to our own sinful struggles for power and security. “We know that all creation groans and is in agony even until now,” but “the whole created world eagerly awaits the revelation of the sons of God” (Romans 8:22, 19). Dare to be revealed to the world as children of God, courageous enough to sacrifice, bold enough to hope, foolish enough to believe that redemption and healing do indeed flow from the bruised and bloodied savior hanging on the cross. v

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