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## **Leadership & the Apocalypse**

One of the distinctive activities of religion is the formation of basic assumptions regarding human nature and our place in the scheme of things. As theologians widely agree, all theology is anthropology.<sup>1</sup>

### **Purpose**

The purpose of this paper is to establish the ground for personal leadership in the face of human activities that may result in the collapse of the biosphere. It describes this leadership in terms of the author's thea/ology, temperament, social/cultural location, vision, and call.

### **Thea/ology, Philosophy, and Anthropology**

#### Nondualism, Panentheism, and the Ground of Being

My theology, which may more accurately be described as a philosophy because it does not include a God in any Abrahamic sense of that word, is nondualism. Because nondualism is difficult to describe and can only be appreciated experientially, we will go on a journey through panentheism and systematic theology to make it more comprehensible.

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<sup>1</sup> Sallie McFague, "Cities, Climate Change, and Christianity," *Harvard Divinity Bulletin*, Winter/Spring, 2010, [http://www.hds.harvard.edu/news/bulletin\\_mag/articles/38-12/mcfague.html](http://www.hds.harvard.edu/news/bulletin_mag/articles/38-12/mcfague.html). (accessed November 23, 2010).

*Wikipedia* tells us that panentheism is “a belief system which posits that God exists and interpenetrates every part of nature, and timelessly extends beyond as well.”<sup>2</sup> In pantheism (a more familiar theology), everything is God; in panentheism, everything is in God.<sup>3</sup> Panentheism as a belief system isn’t entirely satisfying to those of us who don’t believe in God; however, it is a useful heuristic.

Paul Tillich’s phrase “the Ground of Being”<sup>4</sup> also can come in handy. No one is likely to think that God is dirt (or at least solely dirt), yet the metaphor helps dispel or at least interrupt the image of God as an bearded, old, white guy.

My understanding of nonduality is that everything arises from consciousness (preferably not capitalized) and everything returns to consciousness, hence the appropriateness of “the ground of being” as a metaphor. Consciousness, as opposed to its contents, isn’t personal. Just because we all have different perceptions, thoughts, feelings, sensations, etc., which are the contents of consciousness, that does not prove that consciousness itself is personal.<sup>5</sup> Though consciousness is constantly creative, it doesn’t interfere/intervene (as an anthropomorphic god/dess presumably could) in the phenomenal universe which arises from it.

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<sup>2</sup> *Wikipedia*, November 15, 2010, "Panentheism," <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Panentheism> (accessed November 23, 2010).

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> *Wikipedia*, November 21, 2010, "Paul Tillich," [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Paul\\_Tillich#The\\_use\\_of\\_.22Being.22\\_in\\_systematic\\_theology/](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Paul_Tillich#The_use_of_.22Being.22_in_systematic_theology/) (accessed November 23, 2010).

<sup>5</sup> I found this line of thinking very, very difficult to wrap my mind around and contrary to my day-to-day experience. I was only able to see it eventually through meditation and reflection. Even now, it's so easy to snap back into the delusion that consciousness is person because that hypothesis is the basis of our language and our interpersonal relations.

This philosophy left me in a very hard place as I was learning about the likelihood of ecological disaster. While I do not believe in a God/dess who punishes or who sets things right, I was still angry with the Deity. Human beings were causing and/or colluding in their own destruction. We are like lemmings that leap off cliffs to their own destruction (a myth)<sup>6</sup>, or whales who die from beaching themselves (a fact)<sup>7</sup>. Actually, we're worse than proverbial lemmings or actual beach whales because we're pushing our progeny off a cliff. Collectively, we don't seem to have the sense that God/dess gave a goose. Who was in charge here, and why was z/s/he asleep at the wheel?

It took me a while to own up that my distress about the great unraveling was not theological, but a psychological. I didn't *like* what I was learning. It was very painful to contemplate that my children would probably have a miserable old age if they were unlucky enough to live that long. It was very painful for me to contemplate my complicity in their terrible future. I wanted to blame a deity. Why would a loving, compassionate savoir not prevent the unnecessary destruction of her/his/hir creatures? I wanted a loving creator to guide her/his/hir foolish progeny out of harm's way. Responsibility for preventing ecological collapse seemed much too large and intractable

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<sup>6</sup> "But one thing lemmings don't do is commit mass suicide by jumping off cliffs. Every four years or so, the local lemming population goes into a sudden decline as the lemmings migrate to new territory in search of food. Along the way, they usually encounter bodies of water, and try to go around them. If they can't, they'll try to swim across them, and inevitably many of them drown. But the idea that lemmings are hard-wired to control their own booming populations by throwing themselves into the sea is ridiculous, the stuff of medieval legend." Christian Drake, "Jonestown," *The Quantum Biologist*, September 29, 2010, <https://quantumbiologist.wordpress.com/2010/09/29/jonestown/> (accessed November 25, 2010).

<sup>7</sup> Please note that there are multiple theories as to why whales beach themselves. Their behavior is not likely to be as foolishly self-destructive as pumping carbon into the atmosphere, nor does it provide evidence of intergenerational injustice. *Wikipedia*, November 21, 2010, "Beached Whale," [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Beached\\_whale](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Beached_whale) (accessed November 25, 2010).

to lay solely at the feet of humanity. Was humanity, to steal a phrase from organizational development, “built to fail”<sup>8</sup>?

Yet my feelings and my judgments were not congruent with my experience of consciousness. After I finished running around like an angry two-year-old yelling, "It's not fair; it's not fair!", it became clear to me that another path was needed. Blaming an imaginary deity was not proving productive.

### Anthropologies

One of the greatest challenges of climate justice work is dialoguing with people who have very different worldviews and values. George Lakoff has written extensively about this topic in books such as *Whose Freedom: The Battle over America's Most Important Idea* and *Don't Think of an Elephant!* In the former, he wrote the following:

Much of traditional liberalism was based on the rationalist myth – as was traditional liberal economics, which assumed that people acted like rational actors (maximizing self-interest), as well as liberal foreign-policy, which assumed that nations also acted as rational actors (maximizing their national interest – their national wealth, military strength, and political influence).

Modern cognitive science has shown that this theory is false in just about every detail. Most thought is not conscious. Though some forms of reason are universal, much of reason is not, because we think using frames and conceptual metaphors, which need not be universal.<sup>9</sup>

So if rationality doesn't rule the roost, what does? There are several answers to this question. One I stumbled upon in the process of doing additional research about lemmings and beached whales was the following:

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<sup>8</sup> Andrew Chen, "Built To Fail: How Companies Like Google, Ideo, And 37signals Build Failure-tolerant Systems For Anything!," @andrewchen, July 13, 2009, <http://andrewchenblog.com/2009/07/13/built-to-fail-how-companies-like-google-ideo-and-37signals-build-failure-tolerant-systems-for-anything/> (accessed November 25, 2010).

<sup>9</sup> George Lakoff, *Whose Freedom?: The Battle over America's Most Important Idea* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2006), 250-251.

Why do lemmings leap off that cliff in Norway? What explains fads like Beanie Babies and Pokémon? ...

Herd behavior occurs when a decision maker imitates the actions of others, while ignoring his own information and judgment with regard to the merits of the underlying decision. Various explanations for herd behavior have been offered, some of which are more easily squared with rational choice theory than others. For example, following the crowd may have a reputational pay-off even if the chosen course of action fails. Because even a good agent can make decisions resulting in a bad outcome, the market evaluates the agent by looking at both the outcome and the action before forming a judgment about the agent. If a bad outcome occurs, but the action was consistent with approved conventional wisdom, the hit to the manager's reputation from an adverse outcome is reduced. As Keynes famously remarked, "it is better to fail conventionally than to succeed unconventionally." ...

There is lots of evidence that smart, seemingly rational decisionmakers are prone to herd behavior.<sup>10</sup>

Now that rationality has been dethroned, the question of what does drive human behavior and decision-making has become very popular spawning books such as *Predictably Irrational: The Hidden Forces That Shape Our Decisions* by Dan Ariely, *Nudge: Improving Decisions about Health, Wealth, and Happiness* by Thaler and Sunstein, *Sway: the Irresistible Pull of Irrational Behavior* by Brafman and Brafman, and *The Science of Fear* by Daniel Gardner.

As Sally McFague points out in the quote that opens this paper, theology is anthropology. She further elucidates her thesis by asserting the following:

so we are suggesting that *who* God is and *who* we are must be central questions if we hope to change our actions in the direction of a just, sustainable planetary living. It is useless to censure people for their actions when the results of those actions line in deep, unexamined assumptions. The problem lies in our theologies

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<sup>10</sup> A quote from Bainbridge, Stephen M., "Mandatory Disclosure: A Behavioral Analysis." *University of Cincinnati Law Review*, Vol. 68, pp. 1023-1060, Summer 2000, found in the following blog post by Dr. Bainbridge: Stephen M. Bainbridge, "The Economics Of Summer Blockbusters," *Professorbainbridge.com: The Vocational And Avocational Journal of A Corporate Law Professor*, February 20, 2006, <http://www.professorbainbridge.com/professorbainbridgecom/film/page/2/> (accessed November 26, 2010).

and our anthropologies. The problem, as many have pointed out, is a "spiritual" one, having to do with our *will* to change. We already know more than enough about the disaster ahead of us – having more knowledge (or technology) will not solve the problem. Only changing human wills can do so.<sup>11</sup>

Finally, my Starr King education and my experiences with the “No on Prop 23” campaign have also changed my personal anthropology. I grew up believing in our institutions were, in the main, defending freedom, liberty, and democracy. I didn’t live in the illusion that they were flawless or in the belief “my Country right or wrong.” If I had, the Vietnam War would have disabused me of those notions. The role of the Federal Government in the Civil War, World War II, and the Civil Rights Movement was the foundation of my faith. Evil totalitarianisms such as Nazism, Stalinism, and Maoism might happen here, but were much less likely than in countries without our democratic institutions.

In my government years during the Clinton Administration, we increasingly turned to business best practices to improve our operations. We had a sense of progress and prosperity. These experiences made me much more business-friendly than I had been as a youth.

Though I had been a warrior against segregation and discrimination, Starr King sensitized me to systemic oppression. This provided a lens to viewing the injustice of intergenerational speciescide.

While *A Paradise Built in Hell* provides hope that some or even most of us with behave well after disaster strikes, it provides little assurance that we will avoid or even mitigate disaster. It appears that as Bill Moyers has been warning us for so long, that the

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<sup>11</sup> Sallie McFague, *A New Climate for Theology: God, the World, and Global Warming* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2008), 31.

growing role of money in politics will assure that a substantial portion of the electorate will continue to vote against its interests and ours.

### Speaking in Tongues

The irrationality of Unitarian Universalists and some of their progressive allies could fill a book; however, this is not the place or the time to write it. Instead, we will focus on the seeming irrationalities of other faith groups, and the importance of "translations" when dialoguing with them. Working in spiritually-based community organizing and political activism at the state and local level has convinced me of the importance of interfaith work, especially with Christians, who are the strongest political-spiritual force in the Nation.

In Christian circles, when there are debates about climate and the environment, the two critical words seem to be "dominion" and "stewardship." Genesis 1:28<sup>12</sup> states that God gave humanity dominion over the earth and all its creatures. Some have interpreted this to mean that we can do anything we damn well please. However, in most interfaith conversations in which I have participated, the children of the Abrahamic religions acknowledge that their God didn't give Earth to humanity, but instead made humanity stewards of the Earth. They read passages such as Ezekiel 34:17-18,<sup>13</sup> the Parables of the Talents (Matthew 25:14-30<sup>14</sup>), and the Parable of the Ten Pounds (Luke

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<sup>12</sup> Michael Coogan, ed., *The New Oxford Annotated Bible: Third Edition: NRSV* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), Old Testament 12.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, Old Testament 1230.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, New Testament 47-48.

19:12-27<sup>15</sup>) to support God giving humanity stewardship over Earth and hold humanity responsible for how that stewardship is exercised. Pointing to these passages have made Christian-UU and conservative-progressive dialogues easier.

There are similar dialogue challenges between environmentalist who appear to be most concerned about the health of nature and those who are most concerned about the health of humanity. There is another category of folks who may only be reached when they recognize the consequences of the crisis for themselves and their loved ones.

To make the kinds of change needed to reduce the catastrophes that are now increasingly appear inevitable, we need to create a coalition that is as broad-based as possible. Politics and saving the biosphere make strange bedfellows, but we can hope for valuable learnings and spiritual deepening through this process of collaboration.

### Temperament

Within me reside both doggedness and despair. Naturally, these two attributes are at war with one another. The magnitude of the challenge of climate change and the increasing likelihood of disaster despite our best efforts have often given despair the upper hand. Like the boatswain in “The Bottle Imp”<sup>16</sup>, one is tempted to eat, drink, and be merry because we’re all going to Hell anyway.

Luckily, despair doesn't last because doggedness kicks in. My sense of duty drives me to keep trying to do my best.

I did find increasingly annoying counsel to develop a message of hope. I could understand this when I functioned as a chaplain. Even in a deathbed, I could help people

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid., New Testament, 134.

<sup>16</sup> Robert Lewis Stevenson, "The Bottle Imp," *Gaslight*, 1893, <http://gaslight.mtroyal.ca/bottlimp.htm>. (accessed November 28, 2010).

hope to die in peace and hope to live on in the memories of their loved ones. With climate change, too often "hope" it seems to serve as code for denial or magical thinking. People hope for a technological or spiritual miracle that will save the day. Such thinking may serve as an excuse for not acting.

At some level, I recognize that I was not being fair. We all need hope, even if it's only hope that we will pass with the knowledge that we did the best we could once we awoke to the dangers facing all of us. The challenge is figuring out what "the best we could" means in this context. It's a moving target as more and more evidence is gathered, more and more people become concerned, and their level of concern rises as the frequency and magnitude of disruptions increase.

#### Social/Cultural Location

This is a tough one for me. I started life in an almost exclusively African-American, working-class neighborhood, and my parents whisked me into an upper-middle-class lifestyle at the age of 7 1/2. Being of mixed ethnicity and growing up Unitarian, my perspective was always a little askew from those of my peers.

My Starr King education made me much more aware of my social location and issues of systemic oppression. The fact that I engage the issue of climate change mostly as a consequence of concerns about my family and other loved ones is itself evidence of privilege. My loved ones and I have much to lose, including our privileges, due to climate disruption. The fear of these anticipated losses has led me to do extensive grief work. I imagine that the fear of becoming desperate and hopeless may be different for

someone who is already desperate and homeless. I also imagine that some of the very wealthy may believe that their wealth will protect them and theirs from the apocalypse.

### Vision

For me, vision and hope are intimately current connected. It's hard for me to have hope for the future without a vision of a positive future.

I am a city boy. I've always hated gardening and working in dirt. I love cats and dogs, and even squirrels, but I can't imagine – or I can only barely imagine – caring for farm animals. The future described in *Eaarth*<sup>17</sup>, much less the more dismal future found in *Sacred Demise*<sup>18</sup>, or the even more dismal one in the movie *The Road*<sup>19</sup>, fill me with dread.

But I also must confess that the thought of giving up my weekly steak or giving up my automobile also filled me with dread, and once I decided to give up the stake it really turned out to be not that big a deal.

In the larger scheme of things, however, what I like and I mentioned of them civilization not based on fossil fuels, I find it difficult to imagine a civilization without electricity. The resistance I have felt giving up some of my creature comforts and stimulation that comes from the communications opportunities available to me will be multiplied by an almost unimaginable amount if we start thinking about this whole culture

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<sup>17</sup> Bill McKibben, *Eaarth: Making a Life on a Tough New Planet* (New York: Times Books, 2010).

<sup>18</sup> Carolyn Baker, *Sacred Demise: Walking the Spiritual Path of Industrial Civilization's Collapse* (Bloomington, IN: iUniverse, 2009).

<sup>19</sup> *The Road*, DVD 111 minutes. (New York: Dimension Films, The Weinstein Company, 2009).

pertaining to an 18th-century lifestyle. Therefore I have a of the future with clean energy, clean energy jobs, and educated and empowered women. We head toward 9 billion people more slowly than we had., M.D. Trenton population growth that is. In Japan and certain parts of Europe becomes worldwide. People no longer mission to buy their progeny nor are they dependent upon them for self-sufficiency during their old age.

As we were taught in the program on nonviolent communication, we achieve this great new world by being empathetic to the needs, feelings, and values of those who are now opposing us. However, I don't always have faith that nonviolent communication will be sufficient. *Climate Wars*<sup>20</sup> presents several scenarios about appear much more plausible than a nonviolent transition to a sustainable civilization.

### Call

As a sometimes agnostic Unitarian, it's difficult to know what to make of the word "call." The word in this context has theistic roots. God calls one to ministry. When one doesn't believe in God, from whence does the call come?

Initially, I said the call came from other UUs, both laity and clergy. Many people recommended that I become a minister or suggested that I would be a good minister before I decided to attend seminary.

The call to climate ministry came from the realization that humanity was headed toward its own self-destruction and might take the biosphere with it. Protecting my children, my loved ones, other people, and the biosphere seem to be more important than anything else I could think of doing.

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<sup>20</sup> Gwynne Dyer, *Climate Wars: The Fight for Survival as the World Overheats* (New York: Oneworld Publications, 2010).

The ministry of climate justice with the UU Legislative Ministry of California was a compromise. Though I can see climate through the lens of justice, I do not see it primarily as a justice issue. Rather, more importantly to me, I see it as a survival issue. I do not imagine that I can eliminate injustice nor do I feel called to do so. I do imagine that I might be able to increase the likelihood of humanity's survival.

Each Sunday at the Berkeley Fellowship of Unitarian Universalists, the congregation reads the following unison affirmation:

Let love be the spirit of this congregation and service its goal. This is our living covenant: to dwell together in peace, to see the truths in life, and to help one another.<sup>21</sup>

I grew up in a military culture, surrounded by civil service and military brats. My father was a World War II veteran and an employee of the Pentagon. Maybe that's one of the reasons I find the *Gita*, which is set on a battlefield, so compelling.

Climate ministry answered the question of how I might be of service, thus addressing the BFUU affirmation. Yet for me it also answered a deeper question, the question of what was my duty or Dharma.

While some may argue that one's duty is to be of service, I see service as a goal and duty as an obligation. There are lots of times when I've done my duty even when I didn't want to be of service. To me, the former is a greater moral and interpersonal obligation than the latter.

The heart of the *Gita*, what caused it to be written, was Arjuna's reluctance to fight because he does not wish to kill his relatives. Krishna, his God and his charioteer,

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<sup>21</sup> The BFUU affirmation is a slight variation of the following reading. The word "law" has been replaced by the word "goal." Laws are not very popular among BFUUs. The Hymnbook Resources Commission, ed., *Singing the Living Tradition* (Boston: UUA, 1993), Reading 473.

tells him that his relatives are already dead, that the responsibility for their deaths lay with Krishna. Krishna tells Arjuna that his only responsibility is to do his duty.<sup>22</sup>

Addressing climate change now appears to be my duty. However, unlike the chores of my childhood, the duties of my adult employment, or even the competencies required for ministry, my duty or duties relating to climate are much more difficult to discern.

I have come to value in new ways the knowledge, experience, and skills that I acquired before I entered ministry and have sought to apply them to ministry. I've also come to see ministry as a process of growth and exploration, a living example of what is called "lifelong learning" in organizational development circles.

The key experiences that have guided my climate work are teambuilding, public speaking/preaching, and chaplaincy/grief counseling. I am also developing new skills in and knowledge of community organizing and political activism. Climate work, just like chaplaincy, calls me to take my faith and my ministry into the world.

As is probably already obvious from other parts of this paper, climate work is calling into question both my faith and my call. Is my ministry the best way for me to help address climate disruption? Only time, attention, and reflection will tell.

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<sup>22</sup> Gavin Flood, *An Introduction to Hinduism* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 125-126.

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