

ECO-JUSTICE AND EARTH CARE - IINYS Briefing
Richard S. Gilbert – Rochester, NY — March 13, 2010

Some of us are old enough to remember the prophetic words of the comedic song writer Tom Lehrer: “Just two things of which you must beware: don’t drink the water and don’t breathe the air.” Fifty years ago this Harvard mathematics professor was on to something: what human beings do to the earth comes back to haunt them.

In Aristotle’s time economics was a subsidiary of ethics. Now economics seems to dominate everything and everyone. We sometimes forget that the economy is a wholly-owned subsidiary of the environment. The field of integrating our interest in the ecology of the earth and the ethics of justice is called eco-justice.

In a seminal essay by scientist Lynn White for the first Earth Day in 1970, he blamed the Bible for western civilization’s environmental sins. He quoted from Genesis 1:28; *Revised Standard Version*. “And God blessed them, and God said to them, ‘Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and every living thing that moves upon the earth.’”¹

In this creation myth God had given humanity its marching orders; subsequently we felt free to treat the earth as a mine, to exploit it for purely human purposes. The result was almost unrestrained ecological arrogance. Contemporary Poet Wendell Berry points out that there is another translation of that section of Genesis. In the earlier *King James Bible* we read, “Be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth, and subdue it.” We are to replenish the earth – to be good stewards. The earth is not a mine which we will one day exhaust, but a garden which continually replenishes itself – with a little help from responsible gardeners. Whether we agree with White or Berry, I do know, however, that spiritually this is an important distinction. How we view the earth – as mine or garden - is not only a spiritual matter, but also an ethical issue. Earth is both a mystery to be celebrated and a problem to be solved.

Our eco-justice dilemma is illustrated by a classic Jack Benny comedy routine. Benny poked fun at himself for being stingy. In one skit he is confronted by a robber.: "Your money or your life!" Benny is silent. Again the mugger demands, with growing anger, "Your money or your life!" Again, Benny is silent. "For the last time," the mugger shouts, "Your money or your life!" A brief silence, followed by Benny whining, "I know! I know! I'm thinking it over." That is where we find ourselves in the tension between economic development (money) and environmental preservation (life). Can we have both? Your money or your life? It is time to think it over.

Our American ethos is to grow, grow, grow, go faster, faster, faster, make and consume more, more, more. Our twin global crises, the environmental and the economic, are not the result of accident or random mishaps, but of deliberate human arrangements. Economics theoretically is the allocation of scarcity, but our assumptions are all geared toward abundance. Our slogans tell the tale: "grow or die," "more is better," growth will “trickle down,” we can "grow" our way out of these problems. Our economic god is the Gross Domestic Product, the total of goods and services we produce. One economist went so far as to write: "I must confess to an instinctive conviction that what cannot be measured may not exist."² Faith says the opposite.

GDP does not tell us how rapidly we are depleting our natural resources, or how badly we are polluting our environment or how unevenly we are distributing our resources or how happy we are. In fact, GDP includes cleaning up the effluence of our affluence, including all the investment in cleaning up the Gulf oil spill, mountain top strip mining or gas well drilling.

It is this arrogance that leads to our “rush to drill,” whether it be in the Gulf of Mexico or the Marcellus and Utica Shale deposits of New York State. The American economic ethos reflects several deadly sins: pride, covetousness, greed, envy and gluttony, all of which threaten to leave our descendents a tragic legacy. It is they who must clean up our waste; who must find natural resources to replace those we deplete; who must provide water in areas already desperately dry or polluted. As one wit said: “We are living beyond our means and the Earth Bank is not federally insured.”

We are the most gluttonous and profligate people in history. Accounting for some 5% of world population, we consume over 30% of its natural resources and produce 23% of its CO₂, 18 tons per person per year. We consume twice as much energy as do Europeans for the same standard of living. We are addicted to short-term profits. In the words of the United Nations Millennium Ecosystem Assessment “we are literally consuming the planet.” In short, we are energy hogs.

Ecologist Kenneth Boulding’s metaphor contrasts a cowboy economy with an astronaut economy. The cowboy of the plains sees resources as infinite, and has no need to conserve or recycle. The astronaut in a small capsule lives with finite resources which must be recycled for survival. For the cowboy, boundaries are un-American; for the astronaut, they are life parameters.³

This brings us to hydro-fracking: Drilling for gas in Pennsylvania, New York State’s Southern Tier and other portions of the Northeast is today’s hot button issue. While many are encouraged by the voluminous natural gas resources embedded in the Marcellus and Utica Shale deposits, the environmental implications may well be dire – in “fracking,” the use of large volumes of water to extract the gas and the potential pollution in the run-off into our lakes and rivers. We read of politicians and others eager for new jobs; then we read of water taps catching fire, and we know economic development and our environmental needs are often in conflict.

I suggest our faith traditions help us think through this ethical issue:

First, religion provides a holistic perspective over space and time – the big picture – what we might call a “God’s eye view of the world.” We must look at all the implications of the hydrofracking process – not only the immediate drilling but also the total potential environmental impact. While natural gas is a relatively clean-burning fuel, we need to account for energy consumed for drilling – building pads, truck traffic, air, water and sound pollution, road and bridge repairs, decline in farming and tourism and reduced property values.

A faith perspective means that long-term stewardship trumps instant gratification, the health of the environment becomes more important than short term profit. Faith counteracts the moral myopia of this instant. We need to be alert to what might become a tipping point beyond which we are unable to recover from our abuse of the earth. We don’t know where or if it is, but we must be wary. Environmentally the Sword of Damocles may be hovering over our heads.

Second, religion provides us with humility. We know we are fragments of the stars, part of an “interdependent web of all existence.” Our faith reminds us to be grateful for the bounty of earth. With all our technology, as we have subdued the earth, we have lost that sense of dependence on Nature itself. We know we are utterly dependent on this, our one and only home. We need to learn to live within our limits, and the limits of our planetary home.

A friend with whom I worked at a church camp once joked that he knew his limits, but he always got drunk before he reached them. We are beginning to know the limits of this earth – but we are in danger of getting drunk and exceeding them before we sober up. “Mother Nature doesn’t do bailouts.”⁴

Third, religion enables us to grow spiritually and ethically. Our desire as a nation to be independent of foreign sources of energy requires a modification of our wasteful and extravagant life styles. How many resources must we extract and how much pollution can we tolerate for the good life? I believe the good life will require us to become born-again pantheists, in passionate love with the earth. This planet is our host; we must be worthy guests. Our life styles – personal and social - must become green. Will our continued reliance on fossil fuels simply delay our adoption of renewable energy?

Fourth, as people of the book, Jewish, Christian and humanist, we have been trained in a “hermeneutic of suspicion;” that is, our interpretation of all claims must be greeted with a degree of skepticism. According to some, regulation is one of the great “evils” of our time. But with freedom goes responsibility. In our eagerness to mine the earth we may be overly zealous to extract what it has produced over millions of years – what we will burn in a blink of the eye. We, who have been through Love Canal in New York State and the BP Gulf of Mexico oil spill are rightly skeptical of energy company claims. We have privatized profits and socialized risks.

One inspector with the overwhelmed Pennsylvania Department of Environmental Protection exclaimed, “We simply can’t keep up. There’s just too much waste. If we’re too hard on them, the companies might just stop reporting their mistakes.” John Hanger, who recently left the same Department as secretary, acknowledged, “There are business pressures” on companies to “cut corners. “It’s cheaper to dump wastewater than to treat it.” As that great liberal Ronald Reagan once said, “trust but verify.”

Finally, to be good stewards of the earth will require us to become prophets, not predicting the future, but speaking truth to power, shaping that future after our the vision of the Beloved Community – “let justice flow down like (unpolluted) waters.” It will require the kind of social action that looks at the systemic causes of our problems. We will challenge economic dogma – our obsession with speed, growth and a market economy whose profit motive too often ignores environmental collateral damage.

We can live more lightly on the planet. For proof I cite a *Wall Street Journal* article which pointed out that “We can save as much as 75% of our electricity, but may never do so because business requires paybacks of less than 3 years.”⁵ We need what William James called a “moral equivalent for war,” a transcendent goal to take the psychological place of war with its call to commitment and sacrifice. As a Boy Scout I was taught to leave my campsite in as good or better condition than I found it. All my trash was to be disposed of properly. The campfire had to be safely extinguished. Some extra kindling wood should be left for the next camper. Might this same ethic apply to human beings inhabiting planet Earth?

In the words of E. F. Schumacher of *Small Is Beautiful* fame, who rejoiced in being called a crank. “I don't mind at all. A crank is a low-cost, low-capital tool. It can be used on a small scale. It is non-violent. And it makes revolutions.”

“In our every deliberation, we must consider the impact of our decision on the next seven generations. From the Great Law of the Iroquois Confederacy (Hudsodony)

¹ Genesis 1: 28.

² Economist re. measurement.

³ Kenneth Boulding.

⁴ Sallie McFague, “Cities, Climate Change, and Christianity,” *Harvard Divinity Bulletin*, Winter/Spring 2010, p. 56.