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UUFTC, Sonora

Unitarian Universalists and The *Inconvenient Truth* About Global Warming

This afternoon, this Fellowship will be hosting a screening of *An Inconvenient Truth*, Al Gore's excellent documentary on global warming. I urge those of you who haven't seen it to come this afternoon. And those of you who have seen it should come anyway – the film is worth seeing more than once, and we will have a discussion afterwards. It will be a chance for you to express your views and to hear what others have to say. I am proud that we are hosting this showing – this is the kind of public outreach that we want to be doing here. So this morning, I want to talk about a Unitarian Universalist perspective on global warming – what do we have to say, and what can we do, about global climate change.

What I don't want to do today is to re-hash the scientific arguments that are made in the film and that are being discussed in the public arena. Each one of us, I believe, should try to learn as much as we can about the phenomenon of global warming. There's a wealth of material available. I have compiled a list of websites – a few out of the many that exist – and I have placed the list on the table at the back for you to take with you if you're interested. I also want to make special mention of a document produced by our UU Ministry for Earth, entitled *The Science Behind the Threat of Global Warming*. You can find it by going to the website for UU Ministry for Earth, which is in the list that I am making available. This paper contains a brief summary of much of the current scientific thinking concerning global warming. But its greatest value lies in the abundant footnote citations, which refer to many primary sources on climate change.

This article refers to a study done by Dr. Naomi Oreskes, a professor at UC San Diego. She analyzed ten years of articles on climate change in the scientific literature. She found that there were no papers – none – out of nearly 1000 in peer-reviewed journals that disagreed with the scientific consensus that Earth's climate is changing as a result of human activities, particularly rising concentrations of greenhouse gases, especially carbon dioxide.

I believe that global warming is one of the most serious crises facing humanity, if not the most serious. And I believe that Unitarian Universalists have a great deal to contribute to the effort to turn things around. One of the real difficulties we face when we see a film like *An Inconvenient Truth*, or when we read books and articles, or hear speakers – is that we risk becoming overwhelmed by the magnitude of the problem. It's easy to think, "well it's already too late; there's nothing I can do," or to fall into a state of despair about the scope of the problem. And, of course, when we go down that path, we take away our will and our ability to mobilize to do something about global warming. So what I want to talk about today is where in all this we can find hope and the determination to join the struggle.

Well, where do we find hope? What we tend to hear so often is news about melting tundra, retreating glaciers, shrinking polar icecaps, starving polar bears, rising sea levels, and so on – and all of these things are real, no doubt about that! Last weekend, a colleague and I led a discussion about global warming at a Presbyterian

church in Oakland, and we posed this question to them – where do we find hope? This congregation seemed to me to be much less aware ecologically than most UU congregations I have known. And the answers they came up with were instructive. For example, several people spoke of their faith in science and technology, and their belief that we will come up with technological solutions to the problems posed by global warming.

And there is much to be said for this point of view. Indeed, as Unitarian Universalists, we are great believers in science, in the scientific method, and in the use of reason. And technology does hold a great deal of promise for providing solutions to the problems caused by rapidly rising levels of carbon emissions. Some of us have hybrid cars – my immediate family happens to own three hybrids. (Of course we would do a lot more for the Earth if we managed to subsist with only one car – or better still, with none). Solar technology is becoming more widely available and affordable. After several years of study, my home church in Berkeley is about to install photovoltaic cells on the church roof. With state rebates and imaginative financing, a task force has figured out how to meet the up-front costs, so that over the coming years, the church will save a great deal of money on energy costs, even as it is putting relatively clean, renewable energy back into the energy grid. Many other alternative energy sources are becoming more and more common. Our member Mike Malloy has started a company that will market biofuel in this area, derived from cooking oil that would otherwise be discarded by commercial kitchens. In the next few years, scientists will probably come up with relatively inexpensive ways to sequester the carbon dioxide that is produced by large coal-fired plants that produce much of our electricity.

So, I'm all in favor of technology. Not only should we be able to come with technological fixes, but we should also be able to start whole new industries to produce these technologies, creating jobs for many of our factory workers who are losing their jobs as the manufacturing sector declines in this country. Ross Gelbspan makes this point persuasively in his book, *Boiling Point*. He writes, for example, about the Apollo Project, a consortium of nonprofit groups that focuses on creating one million new jobs in renewable energy. It calls for spending \$300 Billion over a ten-year period on energy efficiency and renewable energy initiatives. That is a huge amount of money, of course, but it is roughly what the U.S. has already spent in the last three years of its pre-emptive war in Iraq.

There are, however, problems with looking to technological solutions. First of all, human history pretty well demonstrates that every technological solution tends to bring with it a new set of problems. We need look no further than the automobile, of course, to see how this works. A wonderful invention, designed to promote freedom of movement and independence for restless Americans, the automobile also caused us to develop and extreme dependence on fossil fuels and to produce the very carbon emissions that have contributed global warming.

A still bigger problem with looking to technology for solutions is that it tends to make us think that someone else will take care of the problem. There's no need for us to mobilize to create grass-roots solutions, because technology will rescue us from the predicament that technology has itself helped to create. This tends to remove any sense of personal accountability for our own additions to the problem of global warming, and it

also tends to give us a sense that we don't need to do anything to address global warming, either as individuals or as a community.

Another reason that last Sunday's group cited for hope is the resilience of human beings. When humans perceive a crisis of a sufficient magnitude, they are able to work together to solve the problem. I think this is certainly true – we are resilient, and we are capable of heroic efforts to solve problems once we perceive them to be serious. I was born at the beginning of World War II, and much of my consciousness was formed during the war years, when I was aware of Americans across the board making sacrifices to support the effort to defeat a real threat to freedom and democracy. I also think of the many campaigns to eradicate diseases, to send humans into space, and so on. Al Gore refers to the successful international campaign to reduce emissions of CFCs into the atmosphere so as to reduce holes in the ozone layer, especially over the South Pole. The United States took the lead – on a bipartisan basis – and secured worldwide agreement on a treaty to eliminate the CFCs that were causing the problem.

An intriguing strategy would combine technology with a mobilized public to reduce our carbon emissions over the rest of this century. This strategy, known as the "stabilization triangle," was first developed by two Princeton professors, Robert Socolow and Stephen Pacala, and it is gaining wider acceptance. **[Go to flip chart to illustrate].** Over the past 50 years, our carbon dioxide emissions having been increasing steadily. If we continue at the current pace, this will double our emissions over the next 50 years, taking us to around 560 ppm of CO₂ in the atmosphere, a level widely regarded as capable of triggering severe and irreversible climate changes. According to this theory, we should first focus on stabilizing our emissions, so that we can eventually begin to lower them. To do this, Socolow and Pacala propose envisioning a stabilization triangle, that would consist of some seven "wedges" that would reduce emissions by 25 billion tons over 50 years. The size and time frames of these wedges match what specific technologies can achieve. Various proposed wedges, for example, might be increasing fuel economy of cars to 60 mpg, cut the average yearly mileage of cars to 5,000; cutting electricity use in home and offices by 25%, increasing solar power 700-fold to displace coal; increasing wind power by a factor of four, and so on. On the one hand, this theory helps us to break up the problem into smaller, more manageable components. On the other hand, it calls for mobilization of the world's population to make these wedge strategies a reality.

Interestingly, when our group of Presbyterians made a list of things that might give us hope, no one mentioned either God or religion. This seemed to us to be a surprising omission. In *An Inconvenient Truth*, Al Gore refers to global warming as a moral issue. I agree – I think it is a moral issue too. And who better to address the morality of what humans are doing to the earth and undoing the harm we have done, than communities of faith?

In the Judeo-Christian tradition, the biblical concept of dominion is quite different from the concept of domination, and the difference is crucial. . . . [F]ollowers of the tradition are charged with the duty of stewardship, because the same biblical passage that grants them "dominion" also requires them to "care for" the earth even as they "work" it. [Al Gore, *Earth in the Balance*, p. 243].

