



Reflections on Earth Day

Clay Nelson © 15 April 2018

Something was off when I woke up in my dorm room in late January 1969. I realised I couldn't hear the ocean, which was only 75 metres from my bedroom at the University of California at Santa Barbara. The sea was silent. I and other early risers went to the cliffs overlooking the normally pristine coastline. The ocean waves were weighed down by oil and tar, unable to crash on the beach.

We had heard, of course, that one of the oil drilling platforms in the Santa Barbara Channel had had a blowout a couple of days earlier, but the Union Oil company had assured us only a few thousand barrels of crude oil had escaped before it was capped. A barrel of oil is 42 US gallons or 159 litres. That sounds like a lot but the capping didn't work and eventually an estimated 80,000 to 100,000 barrels of oil were released. In the 11 worst days of the spill 35 miles of coastline were tarred with the crude. Eventually ocean currents would carry it as far as San Diego, 200 miles south of the blow-out and to Pismo Beach, a hundred miles north.

The soiling of the beaches was bad enough, but the real tragedy was the death of over 10,000 seabirds, dolphins, seals and sea lions, as well as countless fish and the destruction of their kelp bed habitat. This was the worst such environmental disaster in history. It would be another 20 years for one that was worse, the Exxon Valdez in Alaska and another 21 years before what the worst is now, the BP blowout in the Gulf of Mexico.

The community came out in droves to save as many as possible of the seabirds and mammals dying on the beach. It was heart-breaking work that left us often disappointed when we went home exhausted to practically bathe ourselves in tar-remover. Only hundreds were saved. It would take years for the environment to recover, but in the moment, it mobilised those trying to clean up the oil company's mess. Residents of Santa Barbara had protested since the late 19th century the granting of oil drilling rights in what geologists considered an unstable seabed. Their fears having been realised, anger boiled over and organisations like GOO (Get Oil Out) were formed to bring political pressure to bear.

Because of its beauty and climate, Santa Barbara had long been home to the rich, famous and powerful. That quickly made a local story national news. The outrage spread. Richard Nixon had just become president. He couldn't care a toss for the environment, but he saw a political opportunity. He was the first president to establish national agencies to protect the environment. Democrats weren't going to let him have all the glory. Senator Gaylord Nelson of Wisconsin proposed in the Senate that April 22 be proclaimed Earth Day as an environmental teach-in in direct response to the day the sea went silent in Santa Barbara.

According to Wikipedia, "The first Earth Day celebrations took place on the 22nd of April 1970 in two thousand colleges and universities, roughly ten thousand primary and secondary schools, and hundreds of communities across the United States. More importantly, it brought 20 million Americans out into the spring sunshine for peaceful demonstrations in favour of environmental reform. It is now observed in 192 countries, and coordinated by the non-profit

Earth Day Network. Earth Day is now the largest secular holiday in the world, celebrated by more than a billion people every year.”

After the first Earth Day, people were energised to defend Mother Earth. In the US the Environmental Protection Agency was created. Clean Air and Clean Water Acts were passed. Internationally, environmental activists began to organise. Greenpeace was launched in 1970. Greenpeace and Kiwis have been allies even before the Rainbow Warrior was sunk in Auckland Harbour by the French. The nuclear free movement and battle against genetic engineering – GE Free – have both had a strong presence in NZ. Since the sea went silent hundreds of international and national government agencies and NGOs have been established around the world, focused on environmental protection and stopping climate change.

With all of this activity on behalf of our Mother Earth, 49 years after that fateful morning looking out on the silent sea, I have to wonder why we are still pursuing extinction with head long abandon in our disregard for her health and well-being. This week alone we have suffered two category two storms that have crippled our largest city. We have twice been in the cross-hairs of two cyclones in the last month. We had the warmest summer on record, raising sea waters to temperatures well above normal, affecting fish migrations. Ocean swimmers have had to check a website to see what beaches are safe after a storm and three out of four of our rivers are no longer safe for swimming. No informed person doubts that these are consequences of climate change.

In the country of my birth I’m watching Trump decimate all the limited protections Nixon and even Reagan afforded the environment. The congress is getting ready to approve a climate change denying coal baron as the number two man at the Environmental Protection Agency, even as its number one is being accused of gross corruption. Trump has rolled back requirements for better fuel efficiency of cars by executive order and continues to trumpet the mining of coal.

In New Zealand, where the new government made clear in the recent campaign that the environment was one of its primary concerns, it is getting bashed by conservative media for fulfilling its promise to grant no future licences for oil and gas exploration off our shores.

I have a Unitarian friend in Florida who, when I told him we were slowly working towards getting rid of plastic bags, lamented that in Florida the state legislature passed a law preventing any city in the state passing a law preventing their use. This, in spite of a recent report of a plastic dump larger than the size of France floating in the ocean.

These atrocities committed against our planet are just the tip of the iceberg. Every day the news brings reports of further degradation of the environment.

It is no surprise to anyone here of my commitment to various social justice issues: homelessness, the Living Wage, immigration, full inclusion of the Rainbow community, racism, gender equality, supporting unions, freedom of and from religion, and peace. But the most important social justice issue we face is protecting the environment. Climate change will have an impact on all the others or make them irrelevant in the face of needing to survive.

I am baffled by humanity’s failure to act in the face of overwhelming evidence. We are Unitarians after all. We love facts, especially the scientific kind. Many of us are well read as

to what they are. Most of us probably saw Al Gore's *Inconvenient Truth*. We know about rising CO₂ levels and their impact on the environment. We know that these changes are not naturally occurring but the result of human use of fossil fuels. Why don't others understand this? There is some hope on the horizon. The Paris Agreement to lower global temperatures entered into force on 4 November 2016 with 175 of 197 countries having ratified it. We have yet to see how individual countries will meet their obligations.

It turns out that facts don't have any use unless they reinforce our existing values. If they don't support our values, we take it personally. We dig in and double down. So much for humans being rational, but the last US election already made that point.

Apparently, according to social scientists, our receptivity to the importance of environmental issues, including climate change, has nothing to do with how many facts we can throw at them. It has to do with identity and ideology. A climate change denier experiences all of our scientific facts as bashing, much like how Unitarians feel when an Evangelical comes after us armed with the Bible. The more information we throw at someone who has based their identity on rejecting climate change the more we may be making them more entrenched. Ironically, the facts may only be polarising us further, just at a time when we need to be joining hands with everyone to save ourselves. Once we are gone, the planet will survive. The sea will no longer be silenced, but we will be.

As Unitarians, perhaps, we should spend more time focusing on our first principle, *the inherent worth and dignity of every person* if we want to realise our seventh, *respect for the interdependent web of all existence*. Social scientists have discovered that if we really want to advance acceptance of climate science, we don't begin with the science. Begin with connecting with the person. We need to focus on how climate change affects us personally. Even better if it is about how it affects something we already care about. Find a shared value with the person. Just because you don't begin with a shared concern about climate change doesn't mean you don't have other shared values. Once you identify real shared values, connect the dots between that and climate change.

One story in the Herald after the worst of this week's storms told of man who heard a terrible noise during it. He went outside to find a roof in his neighbour's yard. He asked whose it was. He was given the bad news... it was his. His verbal expletive can be easily guessed, but it is an opportunity to connect the dots.

Less dramatic opportunities are parents worrying about their children on the playground exposed to excessive heat and UV rays. Skiers wondering why ski resorts are bare. Fishers wondering where the fish have gone from their favourite fishing holes. Hunters wondering why game has become scarce. Farmers worrying about lower yields due to too much rain or too little. No one is not affected negatively by climate change whether they acknowledge its reality or not. That is the place to begin connecting.

But connecting is not enough. Social scientists tell us that when a problem seems too big we become overwhelmed by a sense of powerlessness. Then the normal human response is to either deny or ignore the problem. Where climate change is concerned there are many small and large things we can do individually and corporately to reduce our footprint. If you are not sure what they are, a quick google search will give you numerous ideas. Then explore them and their benefits with those with whom you have connected over shared values.

As Auckland Unitarians we are not allergic to facts and besides they reinforce the seven values we share. They are on the wall for all to see. I'm sure everyone here has taken steps to reduce their carbon footprint to some extent. But can we do better? Perhaps this Earth Day we can commit to supporting each other to become even greener here, in our homes and in our places of work? We have an AGM coming up on May 20th. I would like to challenge us to discuss at that time practical ways we can facilitate and support such an endeavour.