

And now for something completely different (being Cassandra revisited)

by Leslie Kaye

This sermon is a modified version of my Earth Day sermon given in April of 2006, which was a modified version of a series of email letters in response to a long-time family friend who was formerly employed by Atomic Energy of Canada. My Uncle Eric suggested that nuclear power is a reasonable, safe and, in fact, “green” solution to projected energy shortages and that’s where this all started:

Dear Uncle Eric,

If nuclear power is the new “green”, I’m blue and seeing red...

Humans have always proceeded on the assumption that we can devise some mechanism to get us out of whatever pinch we happen to be in at the moment. We have always had technology to fall back on.

However, I fear that our technology, arising from our arrogance, based on false assumptions and built on hubris, is what has gotten us into our trouble in the first place.

The false assumptions are: One, that nature can be “conquered” (or—the “kinder, gentler” version—that nature can be “managed”) and two, that we humans have the knowledge and the ability to understand how such an exquisitely complex and totally inter-related system works and what we can do with or without inside it.

But, as Max Frisch (an architect and writer) pointed out “Technology is... the knack of so arranging the world that we don’t have to experience it.” We construct an habitable space (a house, a garden, a city, for example) inside the natural world and then pretend that this artificial bubble is a reasonable substitute for the whole, a sufficient model for the entire world. It isn’t. The beauty of the world is that we will never fully understand or know it. But we are afraid of mystery so we deny the fact that we have a very limited idea of how the world really works.

We are blind.

Every techno-fix we have designed to date has simply allowed human beings to think they can go on growing forever (like a cancer, but we won’t think about that).

Let’s assume that nuclear energy could work (although the International Atomic Energy Agency does not). The truth is: it would not be used as a substitute or a stopgap. It would be used as one more excuse for humans to say, “See, there wasn’t *really* an energy shortage problem.”

It has ever been thus. Every “advance” in technology has simply given this most promiscuous of animals the ability to over-breed and to overrun its niche, crushing the planet’s animate and inanimate co-habitants in its path.

We were given the brains to do the right thing but we still screwed up. We have known for decades that we are putting too much pressure on a finite resource base, but we haven’t even slowed down, let alone try to stop. We decided to party till we drop, no matter how much it bothers the neighbours. Well, the party is over.

Researchers have determined that a person needs about 110 gigajoules of energy per year to have a decent, comfortable life. The average Canadian uses 340 gigajoules, more than three times that amount. Those 230 extra gigajoules do not make us happier or healthier, but we have lived this way for so long we can no longer imagine how our lives would be without them.

I fear that the present recession will lead to policy-makers to recycle that tired old notion that we must choose to *either* save the environment OR save jobs (as if one could work when one can’t breathe) and the fight against climate change will once more be relegated to the back seat. But I suspect that climate change and our economic woes are actually different symptoms of the same old problem—the problem of asking the wrong questions and then, surprise, surprise, getting with the wrong answers.

The usual economic and policy question is some variant on “What do we need to do to fix the little glitches in our capitalist economy so that we can go on living the way we always have?” The general response to the latest economic downturn has been to carry on as in the past and do everything we can to create greater and greater

growth. We still believe that we can shop our way out of this mess. In other words, the “answer” to the problem of having too many people sharing too few resources has always been to mine the planet for *more* resources.

I don't know how to fix this problem of getting the wrong answer to the wrong question. Economist Herman Daly and process theologian John Cobb Jr. have taken a crack at it in *The Common Good: Redirecting the Economy Toward Community, the Environment and a Sustainable Future*.

When we reached a population of about 1 billion people, we began to create an energy deficit, running on stored sunlight in the form of fossil fuels. In other words, as it was described by Thom Hartmann in *The Last Hours of Ancient Sunlight*, we stopped eating just the energy *interest* and began to eat the energy *principal*. The earth can probably sustain 1 billion people at the 1950 resource-use rate. In 30–50 years, I guess it will probably be half a billion at the 1750 to 1800 rate. If using nuclear power delays the time it takes before we wake up, the more resources we will use, the more space we will take up and the more damage we will do, leaving the earth capable of sustaining even fewer survivors. And the survivors will still have to dispose of nuclear waste and the rotting corpses of spent nuclear power plants with reduced resources.

So the hard and truthful answer to the usual economic question is “We need to *stop* living like this. The little glitches are not little glitches. They are fatal system errors. We must do something completely different.”

But how do we *re-imagine* the future from inside this monolith (that is, something having an apparently inflexible quality or character)? As they used to ask on Sesame Street, “What happens next?”

Westerners generally avoid being worried by *doing* things—anything. The Green Revolution, the Space Program, genetically modified foods, moving to the country, the invasion of Iraq, whatever.

Well, it is time to *not* just *do* something. It is time to sit. And to think.

Change is possible. We have managed to make some widespread social changes that were once deemed *absolutely* impossible. Although minor in nature, legislation has changed our attitudes towards wearing seat belts, smoking, drinking and driving and picking up after our dogs, giving me hope that we can actually change in regard to the things that would really make a difference. Market forces, such as rising gas prices, have also changed our casual assumptions about the ever-ready availability of fuels.

So... the changes that would really make a difference:

Here's my take:

We must figure out ways of getting the human race down to a reasonable, sustainable number, especially in the West, where our environmental impact is so much greater than the rest of the world.

We must redesign our economic paradigm.

We must figure out how to have an equitable and just **steady-state economy at a much lower state** than we have now.

We must think in terms of real, long-term solutions, that is, 10,000-year solutions.

So, for starters, I'll toss these out:

- Plant and nurture trees.
- Eat local products. Stop competing with the indigenous populations of Third World countries for their products—a competition they can't win.
- Bring back the bicycle.
- Bring back the horse and buggy.
- Practice composting, which re-sequesters carbon where it should be, underground.

- Use those billions of dollars not on nuclear power plants but on diverse research into all sorts of local, rather than centralized, sources of sustainable energy.
- Use some of those billions on expropriating and protecting the Amazon rain forest and other sensitive bio-regions.
- Begin reversing the desertification of the Sahara and other devastated areas. Remember that asphalt is even less life-sustaining than a desert.
- Redesign cities so that people can live near to where they work.
- Re-imagine the nature of work—how humans do what they do and why—and redesign it so that it is constructive rather than destructive and demoralizing.
- Make it a mandatory condition of every new development or construction project that it be at least carbon-neutral, if not a carbon sink.
- Question free trade in goods and money—either make trade *truly* free or regulate it fairly.
- Bring back the free trade of ideas.
- Imagine a world without economic growth and the myth of “trickle-down.”
- Abandon tied aid.
- Store, in a secure, durable, *non*-electronic form, all the knowledge we will need if we do have a future in an energy-scarce world.
- Fight the American corporatist empire and any other reactionary movements that insist that the economic status quo is sustainable.
- Reject the idea of private property. How can the idea that a minuscule number of the earth’s inhabitants can own the planet out from under the feet of all the rest of its inhabitants be either logical or sane?
- Educate humans to take seriously the fact that this world, and only this world, is our true home. Even in space flight humans take air, water and food from this earth to survive.
- Fight fundamentalist America, Islam, the Catholic church and other patriarchal institutions that believe that the sole function of women is to breed.
- Encourage people to not have more than one or two children.
- Make psychologically acceptable the idea that childlessness is a good thing.
- Recognize that, to give people a reasonable expectation that their child will survive, especially in the poorer nations, will involve an equitable redistribution of wealth, health care and resources.
- Base development on what children *need*, not on what men *want*.
- And then there’s *recycling* and, more importantly, *garbage reduction*. The Reverend Ed Brock said that one of the things a truly inspiring church does is give one hope. I need you to give me hope. Recycling *isn’t* Environmentalism 101, it’s Environmentalism Pre-Kindergarten, and we find, every time we go to put out the trash here, this church is failing Environmentalism Pre-Kindergarten. If recycling and garbage reduction aren’t second nature to you, how can you move on to the bigger changes we are going to have to make? I need you to give me hope.

But, in the meantime, plant and nurture trees. If we took trees as seriously as we should and gave them the space they deserve, we would be more critical of the juggernaut of urban “development” and the space it takes up. It’s not so much that trees are essential. They are, but the point is to remind ourselves that we have no right to take over *every corner of the world*. Like small children, we have to learn how to share this sand box.

(On the other hand, you should also remember that *we* need trees, *they* don’t need us.)

But, in regard to the bigger changes, how we get to a new paradigm, obviously, will take enormous amounts of creativity, creativity which will be better spurred on by the *sincere* knowledge that we *are* about to hit the energy wall rather than dulled by the false comfort of another patchy techno-fix. These “solutions” won’t be as macho and grand as shiny new power plants, so there won’t be the emotional commitment that huge, heroic “solutions” have, and therefore they will be harder to “sell.”

The change will not be easy or quick, but real change *has* to come or the human race simply does not deserve to survive. I am quite serious about this. I do not believe there is any empirical reason to assume that this species should survive over against any other. Just because we are supposedly thinking beings that have the ability to say “Oh, shit!” as the lights go out for the last time is no reason to assume we are due any special privileges or that God loves us more than anything else.

When we human animals lost the gift of instinct, we had to substitute intelligence, creativity and morality, but we didn’t. Instead we became addicts. And I mean *all* of us in the “developed” countries. Addicted to our rich way of life, living inside a monolith, at present unable to imagine a different way of being. We are *blind*. And mass media are spreading our addiction around the world.

To restore our humility and our true sense of place, we have to be able to seriously contemplate the *possibility* that human beings are an evolutionary mistake, that *our* form of consciousness is a misstep and we will have to step aside to let what *should* be here take our place. Scary, indeed, but surely a valid point of consideration. At the very least, we should treat this assertion as a swat up the side of the head, as a paradox—“a statement, proposition, or situation that seems to be absurd, but in fact is or may be true.” The only truly unusual thing about such an exercise is that the object of study is also the subject. We have had no problem consigning other objects to oblivion for what we thought was *the* (that is, *our*) greater good. We must contemplate the possibility that perhaps it is now our turn.

But I don’t want to believe that *all* human life will be destroyed. I think that it is possible that the farther people are from “civilization,” the greater their chance of survival. But life as we have shaped it *will* come to a halt in the not too distant future, or *all* primate life will come to a halt. The problem is the enormity of that idea. We do everything we can to deny and avoid it. As Frisch said, that’s what technology is for.

Obviously my analysis doesn’t apply solely to nuclear energy, which is just the most expensive and potentially dirtiest of all the possible forms of power. *Anything* that allows this most invasive and dangerous species on the planet to continue to proliferate is equally problematic.

We have to be able to face the very real possibility that there *is no solution to a problem that just keeps on growing*.

Therefore, the growing must stop.

The problem is not a technical one, it is moral and psychological one that will take more imagination, political will and courage than I have yet seen. But why not trade in material wealth for spiritual wholeness and wellbeing?

So... and now for something completely different...

But what that something different will be is also *your* job to figure out.

So be it.