

Where Is the Hope after Copenhagen? January 17, 2010
An open letter to all Canadians from the Moderator (UCC)

This letter was born in Copenhagen where, heartbroken, I watched the international climate talks fall apart.

Heartbroken because it was clear to me, as it was to many of you, that the talks in Copenhagen needed to succeed, that it is no longer safe for us to go on as we have before.

I believe this is a unique time in humanity's fretful reign on Earth, a rare moment that will have historic significance.

And yet the Copenhagen talks failed. We have no plan to reduce deadly emissions of carbon dioxide. Emissions that are a symptom of our broken relationship with the web of life. Emissions that are rising faster than at any time in human history.

We also have no legally binding agreement. Instead we have feeble words cloaked in mistrust, the phantom of a deal.

Our moment of opportunity came and then went, and here we are now, the fate of civilization and of millions of the planet's life forms hanging by the frayed thread of inaction.

So where is our hope?

I believe the answer to this question is that hope is in you. It is in me and in all of us who choose to reject despair and embrace hope. Together, we will replace the Copenhagen failure with success. It is up to us.

Why do I say that?

Because I believe something important shifted in Copenhagen. Watching the tens of thousands of citizens who gathered at the talks to exhort our world's political leaders to act reminded me of the words of Martin Luther King, Jr., who said it would be "fatal...to overlook the urgency of the moment." He also spoke of the "fierce urgency of now."

King's fight was against the great moral ills of his day, what he called the "manacles" of racial segregation and the "chains" of discrimination. He refused to wait and called on everyone to act.

I too believe the time for waiting has run out

While I was in Copenhagen, I reread the letter King wrote nearly 50 years ago in Birmingham, Alabama, where he had been jailed for taking part in a non-violent protest against segregation. White church leaders were harshly and openly critical. His actions weren't right, they said. His letter, which remains a powerful work of literature, is an answer to their charge that he should stick to his knitting.

He said: "Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny."

I think about his words now that Copenhagen is over. What if, instead of racial segregation, King had spoken about high greenhouse gas concentrations in the atmosphere? Would his words hold? It seems clear to me that they would ring loud and true.

Biologically, we live within an inescapable network of mutuality. Science tells us that. Without the web of life, there is no life. We need each other. We are emphatically, biologically not alone. As the carbon dioxide concentrations in the atmosphere rise, the planet will fail to provide for us. Life as we know it will die. Millions of human lives are on the line, rich and poor, old emitters and new, vulnerable and strong. There is no inoculation against this except all of us changing our behaviour all at once.

We are tied in a single garment of destiny.

This is why the issue of too much carbon dioxide in the atmosphere has moved far beyond a political process. It has also moved far beyond being just a scientific issue. It is an ethical issue.

Science has shown us that we have caused the chemical changes we can now track in the atmosphere and the ocean. Therefore, because climate change has been caused by our actions, we are ethically obliged to take responsibility for those actions.

I believe the ecological crisis is one of the most urgent moral challenges in human history. Just as racial segregation and discrimination, and before that slavery, were in their times. Responding to this moral challenge lies with us, and the time is now.

I say this despite the fact that there are those who would say faith leaders have no place in addressing the issue of climate change. Stick to praising your God, they say.

That's what we're doing.

I do this within the tradition of my own faith community, The United Church of Canada. Because of our faith we have struggled with moral issues for generations, and we have often been criticized for it. We pressed for all sorts of social advances that today are givens: universal education, legal birth control, the social safety net. We did this from a deep faith that hope and change are possible.

My faith also leads me to remember Nellie McClung. Like me, she was a member of the United Church. She used wit, strategy, the power of her congregation, and unceasing political pressure nearly 100 years ago to help Canadian women win the right to vote. She appalled the premier of Manitoba of the day, who muttered to her that “nice” women didn’t *want* to vote. McClung was remorseless. She placed the church at the heart of women’s right to vote. It was the price of admission for a person of faith.

Like King half a century ago, like McClung half a century before that, like the Englishman William Wilberforce a century before her who used his beliefs as the springboard to abolish slavery, we cannot extricate the pressing moral issues of our day from our faith.

Nor should we. It is my job as a faith leader to refuse the false choice between contemplation and action, between praying and doing. Action requires contemplation just as contemplation requires action. If we breathed only in or only out, we would die.

And so, while it may be true that humanity’s sacred stories don’t speak about the intricacies of climate change, they do tell us about right and wrong. They are an archive of human dreams, a narrative of inspiration, humanity’s call to rise to the occasion. King saw the earliest expressions of Christianity, for instance, as society’s thermostat rather than its mere thermometer. At its best, faith gives us reason to hope. It helps us take heart and understand that there is another way.

That is why I believe we must look at issues through the lens of morality and faith. Science describes what is. Faith describes how things can and should be. On this issue science is not enough. We need more. And that is why ecological issues are also fundamentally moral, ethical, and theological concerns. And, therefore, why faith leaders must grapple with them. Why we all must grapple with them.

Because when our actions threaten the lives of millions of people and other creatures, that is wrong.

When our lack of action endangers communities in every region of the world, that is wrong.

When our economic systems jeopardize the well-being of future generations, that is wrong.
When the lifestyles of the wealthy undermine the survival of the poor, that is wrong.

If we fail to act, we are helping to doom millions of our species to abject suffering and death. That is wrong.

So what am I asking you to do?

Whatever it takes to follow in the footsteps of inspirational leaders like Martin Luther King, Jr.

Whatever you can imagine. I wouldn’t dream of limiting you to my list. The possibilities are abundant. In our homes and offices, in our places of worship, in our families and community organizations, as individuals and acting together, let us choose hope and action over despair and paralysis. Every day I receive new messages from people who are making dramatic changes in their lives. The answers are already here. Together, let us act by our beliefs.

When we do this, we will replace the fearful self-interest of Copenhagen with joyful inclusion and healing of the world.

This is a transformative moment in the planet’s history. The world will be shaped by how we and our communities respond in the months to come. It will take all of us. All of you. I can see your imagination springing forth even now, making this safe, healthy new world come to life.

A new world where broken hearts are transformed as we take heart together.

With sincerity and hope,

Mardi Tindal
Moderator
The United Church of Canada