

September 23,  
Rev. Linda Simmons  
Climate Change and Religion

In August of this year, Nathaniel Rich, wrote an article, “Losing Earth”,<sup>1</sup> in which he blames human nature for climate change and says there is not much we can do now to change it.

Naomi Klein, Canadian author, social activist, and filmmaker, disagrees. She sees this not as human nature but as greed gone haywire supported by an economic system that rewards greed.<sup>2</sup> Nathaniel Rich writes in his article that “All the facts were known (by the 80s), and nothing stood in our way. Nothing, that is, except ourselves.”<sup>3</sup>

Rich concludes that something called “human nature” kicked in and messed everything up. “Human beings,” he writes, “whether in global organizations, democracies, industries, political parties or as individuals, are incapable of sacrificing present convenience to forestall a penalty imposed on future generations.”<sup>4</sup> It seems we are wired, Rich writes, to “obsess over the present, worry about the medium term and cast the long term out of our minds, as we might spit out a poison.”<sup>5</sup>

Naomi Klein’s assessment is less bleak in terms of human nature. She thinks now is the time for change and sees young people making those changes by contesting the way we organize our economy and prioritize our values.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2018/08/01/magazine/climate-change-losing-earth.html>

<sup>2</sup> <https://theintercept.com/2018/08/03/climate-change-new-york-times-magazine/>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2018/08/01/magazine/climate-change-losing-earth.html>

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

They are mobilizing in the polls and making a difference. They are changing the way they live and make personal choices as well. Not only are they confronting big business; they are confronting their own reliance on fossil fuels. Klein finds hope in this, and so do I. But the despair of what we know does not escape us in what Rich calls our “Lost Planet.”

We have lost so much. An article from NASA tells us that the earth’s temperatures are rising, as is the ocean’s temperature, ice sheets are shrinking and glaciers are retreating, there is decreased snow cover and the sea is rising and extreme events are increasing.

According to Nathaniel Klein in his Lost Earth article, “More carbon has been released into the atmosphere since...1989, than in the entire history of civilization preceding it. In 1990, humankind emitted more than 20 billion metric tons of carbon dioxide. By 2017, the figure had risen to 32.5 billion metric tons, a record.

“Despite...the billions of dollars invested in research, the nonbinding treaties, the investments in renewable energy — the only number that counts, the total quantity of global greenhouse gas emitted per year, has continued its inexorable rise.”<sup>6</sup>

We can make changes now that will have an impact but many disagree that this difference will be significant enough to make a difference that matters. A difference that matters. I have thought of that for some time. What is a difference that matters?

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

I was an advisor to the scholars this past week at the Nantucket Project and one of the scholars, Isaac Baker, founded a company called Resonant Energy. He and his young cohorts work to make solar power more accessible to others. When I told him my despair about climate change, he scolded me and said, “Linda, there is so much to be done. We are getting out the vote, insisting that candidates not take money from the fossil fuel industry, putting pressure on politicians to make commitments to green energy just like California which is now one step closer to a 100% renewable future, one that aims to reduce pollution and cut carbon emissions, while increasing jobs in the renewable energy field. We do not have time to despair,” Isaac cautioned me.

The ambitious plan set forth by Senate President Kevin de León (D) would set limits on California's electrical grid hydrocarbon consumption and aim to gradually increase renewable energy consumption in the coming decades. It would set in place a goal to produce 60% renewable energy by 2030 and 100% renewable energy by 2045 within California's electricity grid.<sup>7</sup>

And in all of this, I take pause and ask myself, what is the question that keeps coming back to me? What keeps tugging on me as I walk out onto this diving board and open my arms to approach the swan dive into these waters?

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<sup>7</sup> <https://www.forbes.com/sites/trevornace/2017/08/01/california-goes-all-in-100-percent-renewable-energy-by-2045/#61aa9415570f>

The Reverend, Dr. Jim Antal, denominational leader in the United Church of Christ church, climate activist, author and public theologian, published a book called *Climate Church, Climate World*<sup>8</sup> in which he writes: “We must allow ourselves to become increasingly vulnerable as we take in the pain, suffering, and destruction of our breathtakingly wild and beautiful home....the more deeply we take in the lifelessness of drought and clearcutting, the choking exhaustion of heat waves, the helplessness of rising waters, the loneliness of extinction- the more receptive we are to the miraculous.”<sup>9</sup>

For Rev. Jim Antal, the miraculous is God’s love and our connection to that love. For me, the miraculous is our connection to one another and the capacity for that love to change us so deeply that we cannot come back from the change to the same self we were. That is what is at stake here, that we jump in so deeply into the pool of sorrow and loss of what has happened to our planet and our own morality in the process, that we drown our arrogance that we alone know the answers, that we alone can find a way out, that we alone can make judgments that will change these patterns. This game is up. We alone can do nothing that will make a difference. It is only together, with personal profit reassessed to include the thriving of our souls, the ground of our integrity and meaning, that a plan for sustainability lies.

Teacher and author Roy Scranton grew up in a working-class family in Oregon, dropped out of college after his freshman year, and spent his early twenties wandering the American

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<sup>8</sup> Jim Antal, *Climate Change, Climate World: How People of Faith Must Work for Change* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2018).

<sup>9</sup> Antal, 34, 35.

West. In 2002, he enlisted in the US Army, serving four years, including a fourteen-month deployment to Iraq. After leaving the Army at the rank of sergeant, he completed his bachelor's degree and earned a master's degree at the New School for Social Research, then earned a PhD in English at Princeton. He wrote a book about climate change called, *We're Doomed, Now What?*<sup>10</sup> In an interview about the book he says, "[I]s not a book about weather patterns or the Arctic specifically...It's not about how we could build carbon scrubbers.

"The through lines of the book are these questions about how we tell stories that organize our lives in meaningful coherence. What are the costs of these stories? What are the limits of these stories? How can we think outside these stories when they don't match reality?"<sup>11</sup>

It is our souls we are in need of saving with new stories of compassion and meaning that offer life to ourselves and the earth. And then, we can arise from the ashes reborn to ourselves and one another, ready to commit to something we could not yet commit to because we could not see it, did not have the words for it, could not yet tell the stories around.

Climate change can be an invitation of rebirth, to be reborn as people who are able to live our values out loud. In which ways are your lives out of sync with your deepest values?

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<sup>10</sup> Roy Scranton, *We're Doomed, Now What? Lessons, Essays on War and Climate Change* (New York, Roy Scranton, 2018).

<sup>11</sup> <https://www.sierraclub.org/sierra/roy-scranton-calls-for-acceptance-future-defined-climate-change>

What could this mean to us as a people, as a Unitarian Universalist community? What might this be for us as a UU community here on Nantucket? What might living into our values more fully as people who cannot turn away from one another and our earth look like? What could we do more of, what might our mission of open doors, open hearts and open minds mean to us if we let it change our lives and the way we live them? What does it mean to be a religious people if not this, if not to step in front of the storm and pick up the hammer and build?

And why do we resent this phrase, religious people, so much? Religion, religio, means to bind. For us to be religious as Unitarian Universalists does not mean sacrificing our individuality to a god or minister or creed. It means understanding that we are bond by a history of resistance and love that continues to call to us as a communal people who understand that we are greater together than apart. To be religious calls us to ask and answers questions like: How do we use energy here in our Meeting House, where does the food come from that we eat together, how do we care for one another, judge one another, turn each other away or invite one another in? All of this, all of this is part of a response to climate change.

All of this, who we are as neighbors, as friends, as partners, as fellow humans on this earth- all of this effects this planet and our very souls. The question is not only how to save the earth. The question is: As this sculptor of climate change chips away at the earth and our souls, what self will it find in us?

What does it mean to open a door, heart and mind as our mission statement tells us we must, in the face of climate change refugees? In June of this year, diplomats from around the world met in New York and Geneva to hash out a pair of new global agreements that aim to lay out new guidelines for how countries should deal with an unprecedented surge in the number of displaced people, which has now reached 65.6 million people worldwide.<sup>12</sup>

But there's one emerging category that seems to be getting short shrift in the conversation..."climate refugees," who currently lack any formal definition, recognition or protection under international law.<sup>13</sup>

Since 2008, an average of 24 million people have been displaced by catastrophic weather disasters each year. As climate change worsens storms and droughts, climate scientists and migration experts expect that number to rise.

Meanwhile, climate impacts that unravel over time, like desert expansion and sea level rise, are also forcing people from their homes: A World Bank report in March projects that within three of the most vulnerable regions — sub-Saharan Africa, South Asia and Latin America — 143 million people could be displaced by these impacts by 2050.<sup>14</sup>

What does this mean in terms of how we look at and respond to immigration? The developed world, responsible for the greatest amount of global climate change, is now

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<sup>12</sup> <https://www.npr.org/sections/goatsandsoda/2018/06/20/621782275/the-refugees-that-the-world-barely-pays-attention-to>

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

shutting its doors as climate refugees knock. The U.S., the 2<sup>nd</sup> after China in total CO2 emissions, pulled out of the migration compact in December, citing concerns that it could impede the Trump administration's immigration agenda.<sup>15</sup> What does this mean to us? How do we respond as a people bond to a history of justice and resistance and one another?

Climate change calls us to be more moral, more hopeful, more ethical in all of our exchanges, relationships, actions.

Cornel West, an American philosopher, political activist, social critic, author, and public intellectual, in his interview in Sun Magazine called "Prisoner of Hope" says, "I am a prisoner of hope. I don't believe in optimism or pessimism. I believe in wrestling with despair and trying to generate enough energy to remain Socratic and prophetic in my own life, deeds and thoughts...the world is always a mess."<sup>16</sup>

People do not all agree about what comes next for the planet and what outcomes our actions might have on the earth now. The outcome of our actions on our souls now cannot be in question.

Who we are, how we act, in accordance with which morality, in response to which values, in harmony with which community, with which doors open and which closed, matters.

Which humanity lives or dies is not irrelevant and even if this is the end of times, as some

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> <https://www.thesunmagazine.org/issues/513/prisoner-of-hope>

say it is, who are we now in the face of that? That we live even more impeccably, more aligned with our values and truths, more therefore whole and wholly ourselves, more transparently available to ourselves and others because that is what it means to be a religious people, to show up with integrity and vulnerability and to risk something.

When Roy Scranton, the author of *We're Doomed* was asked how he copes with an outlook as bleak as his, he says that he asks himself, "What can I do today to increase compassion in the world?" "What can I do to make something in the world a little better? What can I do right now to mitigate or heal some of the damage that is inevitable and that is just going to keep increasing?"<sup>17</sup>

If we have been a destructive people who cannot act out of anything but self interest, we are also a people of great capacity for love and hope and creativity and the building of community. How wide can we open our doors, minds and hearts and what will that look like? What must it look like now?

There is a group of young people called the Sunrise Movement gathered to stop climate change and create millions of good jobs in the process.

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<sup>17</sup> <https://www.sierraclub.org/sierra/roy-scranton-calls-for-acceptance-future-defined-climate-change>

Their website states: We're building an army of young people to make climate change an urgent priority across America, end the corrupting influence of fossil fuel executives on our politics, and elect leaders who stand up for the health and wellbeing of all people.<sup>18</sup>

*We are not looking to the right or left. We look forward. Together, we will change this country and this world, sure as the sun rises each morning.*<sup>19</sup>

*These are guidelines of our movement which we all commit to uphold.*

1. We are a movement to stop climate change and create millions of good-paying jobs in the process.
2. We grow our power through talking to our communities.
3. We are Americans from all walks of life.
4. We are nonviolent in word and deed.
5. We tell our stories and we honor each other's stories.
6. We ask for help and we give what we can.
7. We take initiative.
8. We embrace experimentation and we learn together.
9. We take care of ourselves, each other, and our shared home.
10. We stand with other movements for change.
11. We shine bright.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> <https://www.sunrisemovement.org/who-we-are/>

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> <https://www.sunrisemovement.org/principles>

I love these principles, especially the last one: We Shine Bright.

Let's be a source of renewable energy, each one of us. Let's shine bright my dear friends as we leap, head tucked, no need to look up because we trust this way we have forged for centuries as a Unitarian Universalist people: Knowing interconnection shapes us all, that when we unite, we can make a difference, and that compassion can still save us all.

Amen.