Letters from Our Readers

September 29, 2013

Dear BeFriending Creation,

Like most Quakers, I take stewardship of the environment seriously. I try to keep my carbon footprint small at home and in my workplace. I recycle, and I call my congressperson when there’s an important vote.

Then I attended a talk given by Bill McKibben at Swarthmore College in May 2012, which made me think about the need for a bold response to the problem of climate change. Our elected officials are not leading effectively on this issue. How could I be part of a force that would shift the public discourse, and create openings for leadership?

The movement to pressure universities and religious institutions struck a chord with me. I could see the value of this approach. Divestment alone will not turn the tide of over-consumption of carbon fuels, yet it can be a valuable piece of the puzzle. It’s healthy to put divestment proposals before the influential trustees of large institutions and invite them to take a principled position on investments. It brings the immorality of making profits by ruining the environment under scrutiny. One of the strongest reasons to get involved in the movement for divestment is that it has captured the passion and imagination of the next generation of young leaders. It’s great to back them up as they learn how to be powerful activists—we’ll need all their passion and skills in the decades to come.

By chance, I encountered another Friend, who was looking for someone to work with her on some divestment projects. Together we came up with the idea of figuring out how to use social media such as Facebook and Twitter as platforms for reaching alumni, including our own college friends. The voices of alumni in backing up the student call for divestment convey the depth, breadth, and seriousness of the movement.

I was way out of my comfort zone. I reasoned that as the climate changes, we’re all going to be out of our comfort zones, so I’d better face my discomfort and become adept at using social media. I invited a couple of younger colleagues from work to help me get started. I invite you all to “like” our page, "Alumni Supporting Fossil Fuel Divestment" (https://www.facebook.com/pages/Alumni-Supporting-Fossil-Fuel-Divestment/398342870264397?fref=ts). We’re using it to make suggestions to alumni for ways to get involved. Resources for alumni, and for students who want to work with alumni are nearing completion, and we’ll be using Twitter and Facebook to make them widely available.

I know the effort to address climate change will go on for many decades to come. I’m pleased with our first steps, and I look forward to seeing the divestment movement grow.

Warmly,

Nancy Sleator
Lansdowne Monthly Meeting
Lansdowne, Pennsylvania

To the Editor:

I admire the programs that Mt. Toby Meeting has instituted. The Dime-A-Gallon Fund is a simple way to raise money and to raise awareness at the same time. The Voluntary Carbon Tax Witness is a wonderful means to encourage fossil fuel frugality. Furthermore, I really appreciate the generosity of this Meeting who donated the money they raised to QEW—one of my favorite charities!
The authors, members of the Mt. Toby Friends Climate Witness Committee, finish their excellent article by pointing out an analogy. Slavery, they state, was deeply imbedded in our culture and economic system, and we as individuals and as meetings responded to overthrow this abominable practice. Quakers should now work together to prevent global warming more than 2°C by limiting use of carbon-based sources of energy.

Although I strongly agree that we should work to limit use of fossil fuels and to increase the use of renewable sources of energy, I find the analogy between obliterating slavery and becoming carbon neutral a bit more complicated than it might initially appear. Although I am not good at history, it seems that one of the reasons that slaves became less desirable was the Industrial Revolution. Work done by human muscle was replaced by work done by machines. The fuel for work went from food to wood and then very quickly to coal and other fossil fuels.

What, then, will replace fossil fuels? Renewable energy sources can go a long way toward this transition, but there are limitations to what they can replace. Furthermore, there are many people in the world who still use muscle (either their own or animals') to do their work. These people would love to have the privilege that we in rich countries have enjoyed for the past 200+ years of harnessing fossil fuels.

I remain optimistic that we can slow the production of greenhouse gases, and that Quakers can be leaders in this effort. But I also think that we should be realistic.

A study several years ago suggested that the least expensive and most desirable way to decrease carbon emissions is by decreasing the number of emitters. I don’t know too many people who want to consume less, but it is estimated that there are 222 million women worldwide who do not have access to modern contraception, but want to have control over their fertility. I am sorry to say that some of these women live in the USA.

QEW (and its predecessor, Friends Committee on Unity with Nature) has had a long-term concern about human population. As we work to decrease our carbon footprints we should also keep in mind the millions of people who have children by chance, not by choice.

Dick Grossman