Spiritual Ecology: My Journey and Our Journey

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Note: You can view the slideshow that goes with this paper here: http://www.quakerearthcare.org/node/550

I am deeply grateful to the SAYMA planning committee for bringing me here – and for asking me to talk about eco-spirituality and my personal journey. I’ve been asked to talk about what it has meant to me to connect on a spiritual level with the natural environment. I’m delighted to be in a place that is completely new to me, the Appalachians, and to have the opportunity to connect with Friends who love this region dearly.

My talk today has three parts:

· I will start by telling the story of my personal journey and the discovery of spirit in my life
· then I will describe my Meeting’s journey as we corporately became aware of the harm that our way of life was having on our environment
· and lastly I will talk about the stirrings within the Society of Friends to collectively speak truth to power as we face unprecedented global challenges.

I am especially grateful to have this opportunity to talk to you because I see kinship with the natural world as the growing spiritual edge for us Friends.

I am a member of Strawberry Creek Monthly Meeting in Berkeley, California. I am here to talk about Strawberry Creek and all the other natural spaces in my life that keep me creative, motivated and at peace.

I live in the middle of a large urban area that is interlaced and surrounded by strikingly beautiful natural resources. This is Strawberry Creek – a small creek that flows down from the Eastbay hills, flows straight through the center of the University of California’s campus, runs mostly underground through the city of Berkeley – then gushes out into San Francisco Bay, just about directly opposite of the Golden Gate Bridge. [Slide show concurrent with this part of the talk attached at photos.pptx] The rest of these photos represent the land and water that I personally connect with (I will show these pictures for just a bit of my talk, with great appreciation for my photographer friends, Kathy Barnhart and Charlie Blanchard). If you were to create your own photographic show, no doubt some of your images would overlap with mine, plus you would add pictures of many of the amazing sites that I was privileged to experience during the past two days when my husband and I explored the Smokies – we loved seeing why the mountains are called the Smokies, or Blue Ridge; we delighted in see blooming rhododendron and elk grazing at dusk; we had the pleasure of hiking in a lush hardwood forest at Chimney Cove. I want to show you why I do the work that I do, why I have spent most of my days for all of my adult life, working in one way or another on environmental concerns.

Howard Thurman poses this question:

Don’t ask what the world needs. Ask what makes you come alive, and go do it. Because what the world needs is people who have come alive.

I come alive in nature – walking, sailing, sitting in the sun, breathing forest air, seeing-feeling-hearing waves crashing on the rocks of a northern California beach, marveling at the infinite number of stars
in the desert night sky. I come alive in these settings because I get some tiny sense that we – you and I and all living beings and all ecosystems – are interconnected in a deeply spiritual way. This is how I have come to understand that life is more than the material world. Biology, chemistry, physics and ecology teach us that there is a vast physical web that interconnects all that we know of the universe. But, being in nature allows me to sense in an experiential way that, more importantly, we are connected spiritually – there is a presence in nature that is the same presence we connect with in a gathered Meeting. In fact, to me sensing that spiritual presence in nature comes easier than finding it during worship – although I have experienced spirit in both settings.

This is not nature worship, but rather, it is worship within nature. To me, a forest is like a cathedral or a traditional Meetinghouse, only better. I can use the space to feel centered, knowing with all my senses that the world includes all of nature, not just the manmade parts.

Here is how Thomas Berry describes his sense of awe in nature:

*If we go back to our primary experience of any natural phenomena – on seeing the stars scattered across the heavens at night, on looking out over the ocean at dawn, on seeing the colors of the oaks and maples and poplars in autumn, on hearing a mockingbird sing in the evening, or breathing the fragrance of the honeysuckle while journeying through a southern lowland – we would recognize that our immediate response to any of these experiences is a moment akin …to ecstasy.* …

Berry could have been talking about my childhood. Environmentally, I grew up in the best and worst of times, in the best and worst of places. At its best, Los Angeles is a city with the Pacific Ocean as a front yard and otherwise surrounded by the beautiful Santa Monica and San Gabriel Mountains, palm trees and brightly colored exotic flowers such as hibiscus and bird of paradise are everywhere – with near perfect weather all year long. But, the city is large and sprawling, cars are also everywhere, and the beautiful mountains and ubiquitous sunshine hold in the pollution and produce L.A.’s notorious extreme smog. The worst of the smog occurred in the 1960’s and 70’s when I was growing up – when ozone levels were often three times what they are today. The sun was shining almost every day, but the sky was more often white than blue. As children, we could play outside every day in the mild weather, but sometimes our eyes would sting because the pollution was so bad. Our lungs surely suffered from this kind of exposure.

Some of the famous environmentalists that I admire talk about how their upbringing led them to their calling. For instance, David Brower (longtime Sierra Club activist, co-founder of Greenpeace, and the Earth Island Institute) grew up in the Berkeley Hills close to where I now live, as did Galen Rowell the nature photographer. Both describe living in proximity to the beautiful Eastbay hills and San Francisco Bay, and having the freedom in their youth to hike those hills, plus camping and backpacking with family, were early childhood experiences that built within themselves an environmental ethic that we Friends would name a calling. How wonderful for them, and I hope all of you are raising your children so that they can experience at an early age the wonders of nature – some of my fondest memories are of camping trips and daylong nature excursions with my children. However, this was not my own experience growing up.

My family was not interested in nature, in sleeping on the cold, hard ground in a flimsy tent, in hiking long distances on steep hillsides, in expensive hobbies like skiing or sailing, in grubbing in the dirt to plant vegetables. They were first and second generation immigrants, barely scraping by financially, not at all interested in living close to the land.

But somehow, I found a spiritually deep connection with the natural world, just by doing what kids in L.A. did – hanging out at the beach and exploring our closest regional wilderness in the Hollywood Hills. At the time I did not know the language of spiritual ecology, but the land and water spoke to me in a way that I now understand to be mystical. I was drawn to these places, not just to be part of the teen scene, but more importantly, because when I was at the beach or in the mountains, I felt connected to something greater than myself, my family, friends and the material world. There was a sense of interconnection with all of creation. I felt it, even if I didn’t know how to describe it at the time.

I attended two universities to earn a bachelor’s and a master’s degree – I chose the first, the
University of California at Santa Barbara, for the best of reasons – it was on the beach! Imagine, every day I woke up with the Pacific Ocean outside my dorm windows. Much like this picture (see last slide in the slideshow), the entire campus was arrayed on a cliff, just about 100 feet above the ocean. Fall semester, my first, is an especially warm and lovely time in California – nearly daily, I walked on the beach before or after classes. And it was the best and worst of places to be. Next to the door of each dormitory on campus, there was a large can of kerosene and a rag. We all knew that after walking on the spectacular beaches of the south-central California coast, we were expected to clean our sandy feet with kerosene. Just two years earlier, in 1969, one of the world’s worst oil spills had occurred on the coast close to Santa Barbara, and the beaches were all covered with a persistent layer of tar. It was the largest oil spill in the United States at the time, and still is only eclipsed by the 2010 Deepwater Horizon and the 1989 Exxon Valdez spills. Like the Deepwater Horizon spill that occurred in the Gulf, the Santa Barbara spill was a result of drilling for oil from an offshore platform.

Something huge came out of the disastrous Santa Barbara spill that killed thousands of marine animals and gunked up beaches all over the central California coast for years – the media made a big deal about this disaster, much as they did during the Deepwater Horizon spill. With this being the largest oil spill at the time, it helped launch the second wave of environmental legislation and environmental activism. California’s Air Resources Board was formed in 1969, the Federal Clean Air Act was approved in 1970, and the Federal Clean Water Act was passed in 1972. The first Earth Day was held in 1970 -- I was one of 20 million participants in that first Earth Day, skipping high school classes to go to UCLA, one of thousands of campuses hosting teach-ins.

At this point, I was not an environmental activist and I did not yet know the language of eco-spirituality so that I could describe what I was experiencing in nature, but I was getting there.

Despite the lure of the Santa Barbara beaches, I moved north during my first year of college and finished at UC Berkeley. There, when I wasn’t buried in mathematics and a good sampling of the basic sciences, I spent my free time hiking in redwood forests and sailing on San Francisco Bay.

Hiking in forests stayed with me – I can lose myself in a forest – that is, I can forget about ego, and begin to feel attuned to the forest through all my senses – the smells, the moist air, the terrain, the million shades of green and brown punctuated by occasional bursts of orange mushrooms, red flowers, blue birds, purple oxalis. I felt a spiritual sense of connection with the forest before I knew the words to describe the sensation. The Japanese have a name for this kind of spiritual connection with the woods – shinrin-yoku – somewhat literally, forest bathing – they think that breathing the forest air and walking in the forest amidst the trees has the effect of making us more peaceful and more healthful. What a concept – taking a bath in the woods!

Some combination of spending lots of time in nature during my college years and the excitement of the early environmental movement led me to pursue a Master’s degree in environmental science. I wanted to learn as much as I could about the land, air and water that spoke to me so directly on a very deep, visceral level, and I wanted to spend my career working on these issues. This has been my work, my life’s calling for most of the past 30 plus years.

Thirty years ago, I hadn’t yet discovered the language to describe living a spirit-filled life. I felt spiritual in my connection with the natural world, I was led to choose a course of study and work in connection with the natural world, but I didn’t have the words to describe what this meant, nor did I even understand the concept of spirituality in an intellectual sense – I felt it experientially, but I couldn’t describe it nor did I even know that there was something to be described in these feelings. Psychologists, anthropologists, evolutionary biologists and others have found that complex language sets us apart from other animals and allows us to think abstractly. In a similar way, at this stage in my spiritual development, I could experience eco-spirituality in the moment, but I had no concept of what that experience meant beyond the moment. There was no larger context for the experience.
It took me up to my mid-thirties to find Quakers. My seeking did not have anything to do with any kind of spirituality and the experience of the divine – these concepts, at least on the surface, were not meaningful to me at the time. After working for several years as a peace activist, I was looking for a community that shared my values on war and peace issues. I found that and so much more! Worshipping with Strawberry Creek Friends led to mind- and heart-expanding discussions in a spirituality study group that I joined, which led to my newly acquired and heavily-laden shelves of fascinating books on mysticism. Much like the historic Axial-age from 800-200 BCE when many modern religions evolved, this was my personal Axial-age. I first read Gershom Scholem’s book, Jewish Mysticism - starting with my religious roots. My upbringing did not include serious religious study, so all of this was new to me. Then I read God and the Big Bang, by Daniel Matt – more about Kabbalah and the cosmos. From there, I found much meaning in Jacob Needleman’s Christian Mysticism and Marcus Borg’s Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time. Does any of this seeking sound familiar to you? Eventually, I found Rufus Jones who brought it all together for me with his description of Quaker mysticism. He speaks of my condition:

“...when the inward weather is just right; when selfish impulse has been hushed; when the clouds and shadows … are swept away and genuine love makes the whole inner atmosphere pure and free from haze, then I know that I find a beyond which before was nowhere in sight and might easily not have been suspected.”

This is what I grew to experience in Meeting, just as I had already experienced on my own in nature.

Soon after this explosion of spiritual study that I am calling my Axial age, I joined the board of the Quaker publication, Earthlight Magazine. For the first time, my experiential sense of nature became interconnected with my new-found understanding of spirituality.

Several years before my time with Friends, Marshall Massey raised a prophetic cry at both Friends General Conference and Pacific Yearly Meeting (and probably many other places, as well) to call us to witness to the world on our relationship with nature. Perhaps some of you were there, or heard him in other venues. This Quaker prophet’s words inspired many Yearly Meetings to set up Unity with Nature committees and he inspired the formation of what is now called Quaker Earthcare Witness – formerly known as Friends Committee on Unity with Nature. At Pacific Yearly Meeting, his words inspired the creation of Earthlight Magazine.

The Magazine had a run of 17 years, bringing together inspirational poetry, art, stories, and essays – all weaving together our growing sense of revelation that life, land, air and water are interconnected materially and spiritually. We are meant to live in harmony with all of creation, in kinship with other species and our planet.

During the five years I served on the Earthlight Board in the middle of its publication run, I learned so much from the talented writers, artists and activists who filled our pages with wisdom, art and inspiration. This is where I first heard of Teilhard de Chardin, Thomas Berry, Wendell Berry, Brian Swimme, Mary Evelyn Tucker, and Miriam MacGillis and the sisters of Genesis Farms. All of them, and of course, many other talented magazine contributors, expanded my world view – I began connecting my earlier deeply felt connection with nature and my activist background with my growing sense of mysticism and spirituality. Wow – what had seemed like disparate experiences – my love for the beaches and the forests and my zeal to clean up the environment and my readings in the Western tradition of mysticism – came together in what we Friends call a leading. My religious life and my professional life and my fun life became one; much like the way that our growing understanding of the natural world and ourselves leads to the inevitable conclusion that we are all one.
I worked as an environmental scientist for much of the past 30 years, with a focus on air quality. At the same time, I’ve been active and served on the boards of several Quaker environmental organizations – Earthlight Magazine, followed by Quaker Institute for the Future (QIF) followed by and concurrently with Quaker Earthcare Witness (QEW). Last December, I joined the staff of Quaker Earthcare Witness as General Secretary.

I have to be engaged at this level – my religious, professional and just-for-fun lives have merged, and there is nothing I would rather be doing at this point in my life. I just started a new job and I am feeling younger, refreshed and full of new ideas. My plea to all of my age-wise peers, and all of you looking for a direction to start your life’s work, and all of you in mid-career, is to follow Howard Thurman’s advice and find what makes you come alive and do it. My hope is that you feel as passionately about our connection to the natural world as I do, so that you will join me in creating a world where eco-justice and environmental integrity are the new norm.

So, what does my journey mean for You?

First, I want to say a few words about our Simplicity Testimony. My understanding of Quaker simplicity goes beyond thoughts about clutter or having too much stuff. My understanding is that we are meant to live and witness in the world as closely as we can in accordance with our core values. What makes our heart sing out, full of spirit? What are we called to do today? This is what we should be doing and how we should be living.

Thomas Kelley guides us with these words: Life is meant to be lived from a Center, a divine Center...a life of unhurried peace and power. It is simple. It is serene. It takes no time, but it occupies all our time.

At this point, I’d like to read a poem by Hafiz, a Sufi Master, that gives words to what is in my heart, from the book, The Gift: Poems by Hafiz, The Great Sufi Master (Translations by Daniel Ladinsky)

The Sun Never Says

Even
After
All this time
The sun never says to the earth

"You owe
Me."
Look
What happens
With a love like that,
It lights the
Whole
Sky.

Let’s take a few minutes for silent reflection. Remembering the beautiful photos I shared earlier of places that speak to me on a visceral level, out of the silence I invite you to envision a place in nature that speaks to you personally. Where is it that you have fallen in love with the divine and felt a sense of awe and connection?

Our query: Where in nature do you feel a connection with spirit? Where do you return to for comfort, solace and inspiration?

Let’s take a few minutes for reflection on this query.

**My Meeting’s Journey**

Welcome back, Friends.

Hold onto that image or images and keep coming back to it as we enter the second and third parts of my presentation, on eco-spirituality in my Meeting and within the Religious Society of Friends.

I’m excited about my Meeting’s evolution and our development of an Earthcare Testimony. In this second part, I want to share my Meeting’s story with you, and I hope that later I will hear your stories. We have much to learn from each other! My Meeting’s journey led a poet to deliver this message during a Meeting for Worship:

Even
The exhausted blade of grass
That breaks through the concrete
Listens
To the Wind’s Song
And
Knows that it would be foolish
To do otherwise

Strawberry Creek Meeting has followed a trajectory similar to my own evolution, in embracing
eco-spirituality as the leading edge of Quakerism. This is a journey we all need to take in our own way - me and you, our Meetings and the whole of the Religious Society of Friends, if we are to come out the other side of the global environmental crises we are facing with a livable home planet. Our Meetings serve as containers for our growing sense of spirituality and they provide a way to deepen our spiritual connections. In addition, Meetings are corporate expressions of our growing sense of spirit and witness in the world. To create a livable planet, we need the container of our Meetings to nurture and encourage eco-spirituality, and to hold us accountable for our actions.

About 10 years ago, my Meeting began exploring what it meant to embrace eco-spirituality and to live our lives in accord with right relationship with the natural world. We began with learning something about Quaker history and teachings.

Our first lessons came from William Penn, from 1693:

“It would go a long way to caution and direct people in their use of the world, that they were better studied and knowing in the Creation of it. For how could [they] find the confidence to abuse it, while they should see the great Creator stare them in the face, in all and every part of it?”

And John Woolman taught us:

“I have known landholders who ... being intent on paying their debts by raising grains, have in too much tilling, so robbed the earth of its natural fatness, that the produce thereof hath grown light ... The produce of the earth is a gift from our gracious Creator to the inhabitants, and to impoverish the earth now to support outward greatness appears to be an injury to the succeeding age. “

It was rewarding and comforting to find support for living sustainably in these early Quaker prophets. But we knew that these old words needed to be updated and spread amongst us to create our own vision of living in right relationship with each other and the natural world.

As a Meeting, we wanted to make manifest what we knew in our hearts -- living sustainably was what we needed to do and what we wanted to do -- we needed help and community support to make changes in our lifestyle to get there.

A more recent Quaker teacher, Marjorie Sykes, said it very well in 1970:

We are a part, a dependent part, of a living whole. There can be no true health ... in humanity unless, at the same time, we look to the health of the whole earth-family of living creatures. For far too long in our blind selfishness, we have misused the verses in Genesis and the Psalms which tell us how God gave man “dominion” over the works of his hands. Our “dominion” has become a power-drunk tyranny.

We began to see how important it was to reduce our carbon footprint – with growing awareness of
climate change, it was clear to us that we wanted to live in integrity with our desire to reduce carbon in the atmosphere. One of the biggest hurdles to changing one’s lifestyle is knowing where to start and feeling supported along the way. Corporately, our Meeting created the Dime-A-Gallon project as a tool to work on changing our lifestyles together.

This is how the Dime-A-Gallon Project works. Individuals or households agree to make a contribution to the Dime-A-Gallon Fund, according to how much energy is being used by the household. It is a token donation – not meant to represent the true cost to the environment for our carbon use, the way an ideal carbon tax might. The rate of this suggested donation is the equivalent of a dime for each gallon of gas that you use -- in fact, it would be more than a dollar a gallon, if we were to pay the true cost. We provided handy conversion factors for energy use other than the obvious gallons of gas, such as for miles travelled by airplane or Btu’s used to heat your home. Friends were invited to evaluate their own energy use and work on reducing it.

We conducted informal energy audits with Meeting households, to see where we were spending our energy resources. One of the most interesting results of these energy audits was that airplane travel constituted 1/3 to ½ of our average household energy use - but Friends did not want to give up going to FGC, Quaker board meetings, family visits, exotic travel, nor could those who traveled on business imagine giving up all those conferences and important meetings. This is indeed a challenge!

Most of us were eager to alter our lifestyles in other sometimes significant ways, however, and lots of incandescent light-bulbs got switched out to fluorescents, old, worn out energy-hog appliances were replaced with energy-saving new one, some households acquired solar panels while others added insulation and double-paned windows, Friends considered gas mileage when they purchased new or used cars, Friends were pleased to ride their bikes or walk, as they were able; carpooling became the norm to attend distant meetings, such as our annual retreat and our yearly meeting. It felt good to be doing something, and it felt good to have these values supported by members of the Meeting.

Did the Dime-A-Gallon Project actually help Friends change their lifestyles? It was probably one of several factors that led to significant changes; other factors included a growing awareness in the larger community of the dangers of climate change and the realization that the Gulf wars were waged to control the flow of oil. Personally, it was tremendously important to me to know that my spiritual community embraced the notion that we corporately carry a concern for the environment and we acknowledge the ways that our lifestyles contribute to the problem.

But, how significant were the changes most of us made compared to the overall problem of carbon emissions and energy use? And, how much could we impact carbon emissions and energy use, acting household by household?

The next step in my Meeting’s evolution towards a corporate witness on the environment came about due to our growing understanding of the geo-politics of oil production, the disproportionate impact of environmental damage to the poorest people on the planet and the 2007 report from the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, which shocked the world with its dire predictions (and which now seem mild in comparison to the findings from the 2014 report). We recognized that environmental concerns were not just about cleaning up trails and preserving parkland –
environmental degradation affects all of us, the poor more than the rich, and the environment is critically linked to issues of war and peace.

In true Quaker fashion, we formed a committee – actually, we renamed and re-directed our existing Peace and Social Concerns committee, and called it the Peace, Earthcare and Social Witness committee. We deliberately joined these concerns in one committee because we were beginning to understand that you can’t have peace without equity, you can’t have equity without the right sharing of environmental resources, and you can’t have earthcare without peace.

We started to ask ourselves, are we living a testimony on Earthcare? If so, according to our Quaker tradition, we need to proclaim this to ourselves and to the world.

Our Peace, Earthcare and Social Witness committee began a discernment process to see if we were clear to write a testimony on Earthcare. Recognizing the connections between the traditional Quaker concerns of peace and justice with the enormity of the environmental crisis, we were absolutely compelled to continue our work on Earthcare. We were beginning to understand that beyond politics and economics, our sense of compulsion to work on these issues comes from an enlargement of the traditional Quaker ideal that there is that of god in everyone, to the idea that there is that of god in everything. The divine can be found in all of creation; all of creation deserves awe, reverence and gratitude.

First, we had to figure out what the word “testimony” meant to Friends. We learned that what we modern Friends call testimonies – the SPICE acronym for Simplicity, Peace, Integrity, Community, Equality – is an easy mnemonic for First Day School and for new Friends, but it is not meant to be a static collection of precepts or a catechism. Testimonies are a short-hand way to describe Quaker values as they exist today. They are changeable – we no longer have a “hat” testimony, for example, but the sentiment behind the hat testimony, that all people are equal, is still with us.

Our Quaker traditions, our Faith and Practice, guided us. I experienced some of the finest examples of Quaker process during the year it took to discern whether or not we had a corporate message and what that message was to be. Our Peace, Earthcare and Social Witness committee met monthly, each session carving out a good chunk of worshipful time to discern way forward. Each month a pair of writers was chosen to listen for a sense of the meeting and bring back to the group in the following month a revised version of our statement. Here is how we described our process in an article in the bi-monthly magazine, Western Friend:

At times it felt like light was descending upon us as we labored to make this decision. We came together month after month with new vision and fresh understanding of how our lives are intertwined with Earthcare. Silence was a guide, and so was recognizing that each of us had something special to offer in this process. We nurtured each other as we sought to nurture the Earth and promote right-sharing of resources. Instead of feeling drained, we often left a committee meeting feeling enlarged with a greater understanding for each other and for our place in the natural world.

We asked ourselves many questions as part of the discernment process:
· Are we transforming our lives to respect the environment?
· Do we contribute to the right-sharing of resources?
· Do we feel connected to the commonwealth of life on Earth?
· Are we open to the light of a world that is not dominated by humankind?

Approved in 2010, this is, in part, what my Meeting is declaring to the world:

We seek to live our lives in reverence for all life on Earth, encompassing right-sharing of the world’s resources amongst all people and all species. Friends are called to enter into right relationship with Earth and the community of life it supports. Friends see that of God within all life. ... We strive to find solutions to environmental damage that include peace and social justice for those people most affected by unequal sharing of the world’s resources.... We feel a sense of urgency to bring our lives into right relationship with the community of life on Earth. We are called to be faithful to continuing revelation in these matters, to be transformed in our habits as our hearts and minds are opened.

Our Journey

What does all of this mean for us, for you and me together, for all of us as Friends? – In this third and final part of tonight’s talk, let's turn from my Meeting’s journey to the whole of the Religious Society of Friends.

Is my Meeting an isolated example of left-coast thinking, or are we Friends evolving as a whole? In my travels amongst Friends I am indeed finding that we are no longer seeing Earthcare as a special interest, but rather it is becoming an integral part of our faith. This growth couldn’t come at a better time, as the twin problems of global climate change and mass species extinction pose an immediate threat to our well-being and the viability of life for the poorest and most vulnerable people.

Fellow Californian and member of Pacific Yearly Meeting, Friend Anthony Manousos describes his take on spirit and witness in the world:

When the invisible, yet omnipresent Divine Light is refracted through the silent, centered worship of a meeting or an individual, it becomes visible through action.

For me, eco-spirituality is the leading edge as I explore my connection with spirit, and I use it as a guide for where and how I witness in the world. Within the Society of Friends, I have spent 20 sometimes fruitful and sometimes frustrating years raising up the issues of environmental sustainability, ecological justice, and our spiritual/mystical connection with nature. Much like my upbringing in Los Angeles and my early connections with nature, we are now in the best and worst of times within the Society of Friends. Everywhere I go, Friends are recognizing and embracing witness on sustainability –in their own personal lives, in their Meetinghouses and in their political and social justice work. It feels like we are on the verge of a spiritual breakthrough – we are beginning to make the connections between seeking a livable planet, right sharing of natural resources, and taking away the occasion for war.

But, this awakening amongst Friends is frustratingly slow and the environmental crises that we are
facing are enormous, unprecedented and urgent. We need to wake up and face these crises. To help us find our way, we have at our disposal 350 years of experience in continuing revelation, a practice that grounds us in spirit and gives us the ability to take spirit-led action.

Seattle's former mayor Mike McGinn, spoke these words about divestment from fossil fuels, but they go much further than that one particular tactic for dealing with climate change:

“We're the first generation to see the effects of climate change, and the last generation who can do anything about it. To refuse to use every tool at our disposal in this fight—to embrace inaction—is to endorse a trajectory that will lead to suffering, privation, and calamity. We owe it to those who our institutions and investments serve and will serve in the future to do everything we can to prevent this crisis.”

And another quote from a contemporary hero:

“While the citizens of the rich world are protected from harm, the poor, the vulnerable and the hungry are exposed to the harsh reality of climate change in their everyday lives. Put bluntly, the world’s poor are being harmed through a problem that is not of their making. The footprint of the Malawian farmer or the Haitian slum dweller barely registers in the Earth’s atmosphere.”

— Archbishop Desmond Tutu

There is no way to prevent the environmental crises of climate change and habitat loss already underway. The impacts are felt with every species that goes extinct (currently about 1,000-10,000 per year, dozens each day, with some estimates of 30-50 percent of all species going extinct by mid-Century). The impacts are felt with each extreme storm and drought – in my home state, we are experiencing the worst drought in 500 years. This year, here in the Southeast, as you well know, winter ice-storms were extreme, and on the Great Lakes the extent of ice was the second highest in the past 40 years. Colorado experienced 1000-year floods in 2013. Global sea-level is rising faster than ever – up to 3 mm per year.

Prominent scientists, such as James Lovelock and David Suzuki, warn that even though the planet will survive, we humans along with countless other species may not survive the planet’s changes as a result of climate disruption. In fact, scientists refer to the current era with the informal geologic term “anthropocene” meaning that human activities are impacting the planet at a level that previously only geologic forces had been able to do. It is very hard not to succumb to either denial or to choose “ignorance is bliss” when faced with seemingly insurmountable environmental crises.

Except, our faith teaches us we cannot ignore these environmental crises – we believe in Faith and Practice, Contemplation and Action. I remain a Friend because we walk our talk, we witness in the world, we are in the world but not of it. We seek out spirit to guide us, and we act based on that guidance, even when we are led in ways that are in opposition to the prevailing norm. Claiming ignorance when it comes to the environmental crises is no longer acceptable within the Society of Friends. There is no longer time for denial or hiding from these facts:

- The amount of carbon already in the atmosphere will continue to cause worsening climate change for many years to come;
- the best scientific evidence shows that 80% of the carbon fuels now in the ground must stay there, if we are to succeed in preserving a livable planet for our own species and our home ecosystem;
- However, fossil fuel companies are still planning to extract as much fossil fuel as they can; and
some of what remains in the ground is especially dangerous to extract and significantly more polluting.

Friends’ relationship with nature and ecology has evolved from the time when I first found my Meeting, more than 20 years ago. Then, we had a small Unity with Nature committee that sponsored hikes and picnics – most Meetings had or still have such a committee. Over the years, this interest developed into a focus on lifestyle changes – how we could bring our lives into integrity with our core values of right relationship. Again, most monthly and yearly Meetings have some kind of Earthcare committee that is committed to this work. Now, we are beginning to embrace the totality of Right Relationship – how this concept is an over-arching guide to our testimonies, or witness in the world, and how we must challenge ourselves to move beyond our comfort zones to work towards both personal growth and a corporate transformation of the larger community, if we are to address the environmental crises.

In 2012, FWCC – Friends World Committee on Consultation – came together in unity to issue the Kabarak call for Peace and Ecojustice, a far reaching epistle to the world, proclaiming: *We are called to be patterns and examples in a 21st century campaign for peace and ecojustice, as difficult and decisive as the 18th and 19th century drive to abolish slavery.*

Will we recognize that environmental integrity is not just one of many issues to work on, but a concept that brings together all of our current testimonies? Will we allow spirit to guide us along this path before our actions and those of business as usual come crashing down on us in environmental catastrophe?

More than 12 years ago, Friend Keith Helmuth brought up these questions in an essay he wrote, later published in Friends Journal and the QIF booklet, *It’s the Economy, Friends*:  

*the magnitude of our dilemma encompasses the whole adaptational stance of our culture, it reaches deeply into our spiritual life: It reaches right into the center of our understanding of our place within Creation and, for people of faith, our relationship with the Divine. …*

*Can we transcend the special-interest view and the simplistic lifestyle response? Can we find a renewed sense of spiritual purpose in the task of reweaving all our justice and peace concerns into a truly ecological worldview? Can we provide leadership in addressing public policy on behalf of the integrity of Creation?*

We are not alone. Our Friends across the pond have been asking themselves the same questions. Friend Pam Lumm delivered the 2011 Britain Yearly Meeting keynote address, entitled *Costing not less than everything: sustainability and spirituality in challenging times.* She said:

*For me the central and underlying question for us as Quakers is this: are we content to be merely a support group for people on their individual spiritual journeys or are we able to rediscover a solidarity as a people of God?*

The Britain Yearly Meeting 2011 Epistle reflects Pam’s keynote address:

*We can no longer ignore the fact that our planet is finite. We have not only inherited the earth from our ancestors: we have borrowed it from our children and from their children. We see the connection between changing the way we live and growing in the Spirit. What is God calling us as Quakers to be and to do? Early Quakers were seen as radical religious extremists, living beyond the ordinary in their simplicity and their direct engagement with the divine. Are we, on the other hand, sliding into ordinariness? Can we reconnect with our roots, to live a religious life and proclaim a message the world needs to hear?*
With joy, our Yearly Meeting has made a commitment to becoming a low carbon sustainable community.

The Britain epistle goes on to say that this commitment to sustainability needs to be met on both individual and corporate levels.

Please reflect on that word, “ordinariness” – I know none of us wants to claim that label. Historically, Friends were willing to stand out from the ordinary, as pacifist and abolitionists. British Friends have taken a bold stand on right relationship with the nature – are we willing to do the same?

While Britain YM is finding their path forward, I want to emphasize that there is no one-size-fits-all solution. Each person, each Meeting, each region and each country needs to find the path, or more likely, the paths we need to take. To complete this third part of today’s talk, I want to tell you some of the stories I hear through my work with Quaker Earthcare Witness – stories about what individuals, Meetings and Quaker organizations are doing to face the challenge of climate change. I hope these stories inspire you and allow you to creatively use these ideas to fit whatever situation you are in.

1) **Divestment is a growing movement:** Several Meetings have approved Minutes or Epistles calling on Friends to divest from fossil fuels. I have been working on this issue in my work with QEW and personally as an alum of UC Berkeley – QEW dedicated the fall issue of our newsletter to the topic of divestment and we have opened our website to a Friends’ divestment group so we can easily exchange ideas and resources.

Meetings are pulling out funds from Friends Fiduciary (which currently has some holdings in the fossil fuel industry) or moving their funds to Friends Fiduciary’s new Green Fund. In fact, encouraged by these early minutes and epistles, Friends Fiduciary set up their Green Fund to specifically not invest in fossil fuel; they are weighing further action.

One story: Before Friends Fiduciary set up their Green Fund, Friends Meeting of Cambridge received a million dollar bequest. Traditionally they had invested their holding with Friends Fiduciary. When this bequest was made, Cambridge Friends spent a year learning about climate change, the effects of the fossil fuel industry on our environment and the investment criteria that Friends Fiduciary employs. In November of last year, Cambridge Friends approved a minute instructing their Finance committee to invest the million dollar bequest with the New England Pooled Fund, a fund that uses an environmental screen (including screening out the fossil fuel industry) with its investments.

2) **Some Friends are engaged in Direct Action:** EQAT-Earth Quaker Action Team - has been organizing for the past 4 ½ years around the issue of mountain top removal, with an emphasis on direct action. Their creative actions include dumping a load of dirt in the lobby of PNC bank to publicize PNC’s role in financing coal extraction. They are based in the Philadelphia area – this year they sponsored an action in Tampa with Southeastern Yearly Meeting and they plan to sponsor their largest action yet in Pittsburgh during the upcoming Friends General Conference Gathering.
And Another kind of direct action: Some of us Friends will be marching in New York City this September, along with several other faith groups and 350.org, leading up to a climate change summit going on at the United Nations following the march. QEW is a co-sponsor of the march.

3) **We are Working in Coalition with each other:** Several other activities are planned for this September - in addition to the large march, a climate forum for the faith community will be held at Union Theological Seminary, and a meeting of the World Council of Churches will take place just prior to the UN summit. FCNL, QUNO and QEW are working together to coordinate our efforts.

4) **Some of us are Lobbying Congress:** FCNL -Friends Committee on National Legislation- has launched the Inside/Outside program as part of their energy and environment work – On the inside they are continuing to lobby congress on climate change issues; on the outside they are organizing interfaith coalitions to put pressure on their congressional delegations with regard to climate change.

5) **We are facilitating International agreements:** The Quaker United Nations office -QUNO- in Geneva is leading an effort of “quiet diplomacy” on climate change negotiations. This follows several years of effort by QEW to bear witness to these concerns at the international level.

6) **We are joining Interfaith groups:** Many Friends Meetings are associated with Interfaith Power and Light – joining with other faith groups to primarily work on greening places of worship. Green Faith is another coalition of religious groups committed to divestment of fossil fuels and greening places of worship.

7) **We are Re-envisioning Economics:** Friends are having lively discussions, especially within QEW, Philadelphia Yearly Meeting and QIF, about rethinking our economy and the current economy’s incessant need for growth - growth that is no longer sustainable and leads to economic inequity. The Quaker Institute for the Future will sponsor a series of such discussions in Philadelphia next week.

These are all worthwhile activities, many moving beyond our personal lifestyles to address the need for systemic change in our larger communities. Remember when I talked about my Meeting’s dime-a-gallon fund and how personally we were stuck when it came to limiting travel? My Meeting learned that we can’t do this alone, acting household by household. We had found more energy-efficient ways to travel locally, but there are fewer choices when it comes to long-distance travel. Most of us are not willing to severely limit or forego travel – it will take a societal response to expand travel options.

Today, I have told you my story, my Meeting’s story, and stories from throughout the Quaker world. As I begin to finish this talk, I hope that I have told you through these stories that much of the work that needs to be done has to go beyond personal, lifestyle changes, if we are to address the problem. Here is a final story from my local community to illustrate this point.
I live in a small city – 1 square mile – within a very large, urban community. My town, Albany, like many towns and cities today, has a government-sponsored Sustainability committee and a requirement to develop and implement a Climate Action Plan. Our goal, locally, was to reduce our citywide carbon footprint by 25% between 2004 and 2020. Much to our surprise, when the numbers were recently analyzed my city had already achieved a 15% reduction, but energy efficiency and less driving only accounted for half of that improvement. Where had the rest of the reduction come from?

My state, California, isn't always known for political efficiency and non-partisan governance. However, a rare instance of agreement between the democratically-controlled legislature and the former republican Governor created the Global Warming Solutions Act of 2006. This Act allows the state to enact controls on greenhouse gas emissions at a statewide level, requiring our electric utilities to increase their use of renewable energy sources. That increase in renewable electricity, plus the Obama-backed increase in fuel efficiency standards for automobiles is helping my city meet its goals – something we would be unlikely to do without state and federal regulations.

So please remember, it is great to change your own lifestyle and even better to work on a local level, but the problems are so large and so immediate that we must find ways to address them at all levels, personal, local, state, federal and international.

I started this talk with my personal journey. I first described how I found a sense of spirit in nature – we all know this sense of spirit from our experience in Meeting for Worship, and many of you, I’m sure, share my ease with finding spirit in nature. Then I described how my Meeting recognized our growing spiritual edge and proclaimed it in our Earthcare Testimony – many of you have similar stories to tell about your Meetings. I’ve ended this talk with a description of stirrings within the whole of the Society of Friends to adopt eco-spirituality, and I explored what it means for all of us to witness for an ecologically just and sustainable world.

Our paths to the future are still in question – we can choose to seize the opportunities that arise out of crises and create an equitable and sustainable way of life for ourselves and our children. When I feel frustrated and depressed about the enormous task ahead of us, I reconnect with my colleagues and friends within QEW’s network and in my Meeting, people who have dedicated themselves to creating this equitable and sustainable way of life – they boost my spirits and the creative juices begin flowing within me too. It is tremendously helpful knowing we are all in this challenge together.

Even better, we know how to call upon spirit to guide us. Are we bold enough to open ourselves up to spirit in unity with nature? Are we more than ordinary? Can we, as a religion, open ourselves to continuing revelation? Until we find our own sense of spiritual connection with nature, we will continue to address the problems of climate change and mass extinctions piecemeal and following the lead of others.

Whether we are worshipping in a forest cathedral or our own Meetinghouses, I am looking forward to Friends boldly opening ourselves up to spirit, seeking way forward. I know we are not ordinary, we are in the world but not of it. Together, we will find our core, strengthen it, and build a peaceful and just society that is in right relationship with the natural world.
Thank you for giving me this opportunity to be with you today.

Shelley Tanenbaum

June 20, 2014