WE CAN’T FULLY ADDRESS A TRANSITION from fossil fuels to renewables without limiting fossil fuel extraction. That is the message delivered in countless street actions (including 30,000 people during an art-inspired march on a perfect California day) and unofficial workshops held throughout the Bay Area, first as part of the worldwide Rise Up for Climate, Jobs & Justice mobilization on September 8th, and then as a response to the Global Climate Action Summit in San Francisco a few days later.
Limiting fossil fuel extraction is a dilemma faced by activists, technical wizards, and politicians, whether they were meeting in the restricted zone of the official Global Climate Action Summit (GCAS) at the Moscone Center, in the numerous affiliated and unaffiliated workshops, or on the streets in protest. When it comes to supporting renewable energy (wind, solar, geothermal and small-scale hydro), California is a world leader, with ambitious goals for increasing our renewable electrical energy portfolio, and electrifying as much as possible. However, the state government has not done much to limit fracking or deny oil and gas permits. Of course, this is a state that threw out a former governor when he tried to increase gas taxes. Politically, the path to promoting renewables is still a struggle, but is still much more doable than directly confronting the monumental oil and gas industry or the gas-driving public. It was a struggle to get the CA legislature to approve a bill calling for 100% renewables by 2045, but it passed after a two-year challenge, and Governor Brown signed it into law just prior to opening the Global Climate Action Summit.

As part of my work with Quaker Earthcare Witness, I helped promote interfaith events alongside the GCAS. I co-led a workshop at Grace Cathedral on bringing about a spiritual transformation on our relationship with the Earth community. Instead of choosing between raising up progress on renewables or protesting lack of progress on keeping it in the ground, I dug deeper. Do we embrace the wisdom of indigenous communities (and many of the early teachings of other religious traditions) that say “we are all related” or do we continue to see the natural world as a “resource” that is available for extraction?

I co-led this workshop with Sara Jolena Wolcott, a Friend and an ecotheologian, starting with a physical reminder of where we live. We displayed and passed around water from the mountains and pine cones from California native trees. We talked about the ongoing fires (still burning at the time that we met) throughout the west, and how a reductionist, controlling mindset formerly practiced fire suppression rather than allowing some fires to burn, as western forests are adapted to regularly occurring natural fires. We led this interfaith group in Quaker worship-sharing with the queries: What spiritual gift or gifts does your faith bring to the challenges of the Anthropocene? What spiritual practice or belief does your faith currently retain that is a barrier to facing the challenges of the Anthropocene?

Faith communities are hungry for this kind of dialogue and are on the verge of making this kind of spiritual transformation. Over 85 people attended our workshop; the high number of participants and their enthusiasm pointed to the clear need for more space where people can dig into their own faith traditions, engage with the challenges therein, and find solutions together in both cross-denominational and multifaith spaces.

An interfaith service was held in European-like Grace Cathedral (Episcopal) on the eve of the GCAS. Green Men* on stilts led each faith tradition as they processed down the long aisles. Faith leaders described their love for the Earth community and made commitments for ongoing actions. Our workshop, on spiritual transformation, attracted a committed group of engaged and committed leaders. Will this change come soon enough?

*The Green Man is a mythological figure in European paganism, who embodies the spirit of the forest. At the interfaith service, the Green stilt walkers were of indeterminant gender.

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