

IT'S WRONG TO Wreck the World

A MORAL CALL TO PROTECT THE ENVIRONMENT

by Kathleen Dean Moore and Michael P. Nelson

WE ARE TWO MILD-MANNERED philosophers travelling the country, speaking in church basements, libraries, and school auditoriums about the moral obligation to prevent catastrophic climate change. We don't think our message is all that controversial. But often people find it shocking, even when they are sympathetic to our ideas. Here's what we begin by saying:

"It's not just stupid, it's wrong to wreck the world. To take what we need for our comfortable lives and leave a ransacked and dangerously unstable world for the future is not worthy of us as moral beings. Through indifference or uncaring, to let it all slip away — the billions of years it takes to grow the song in a frog and the purple stripe in a lily — that's wrong. And when, to enrich a powerful few, corporations threaten to disrupt forever the great hydrological and climatic cycles that support all the lives on Earth? This is moral monstrosity on a cosmic scale. We have a responsibility, individual and collective, to leave a world as beautiful and life-sustaining as the world that was left to us."

When we stand and speak these words, we can feel the air change in the auditorium, all the members of the audience slowly exhaling. It's like we've violated some taboo. There are, after all, certain things that you don't do in public. You don't talk about your underwear or your digestion. You don't forget to zip your fly. And you don't make moral judgments.

It's not that people disagree with us. When we ask for a show of hands, agree or disagree, every hand shoots up. That shared gesture — the auditorium filled with lifted arms — makes audiences laugh with relief. But when we ask how many of them would say these words in their workplace, their neighborhood, at Thanksgiving dinner, not so many hands go up.

This is a problem, this silence about what's right and what's disastrously wrong. Yes, global climate disruption is a technological issue that calls for our smartest and most far-sighted innovations. It is a scientific issue, calling for brave and honest research. It is an economic issue, calling for good thinking about meaningful, life-sustaining work and true wealth. It is a political issue, one that will inevitably involve contest and demand compromise. But we believe that climate change is fundamentally a moral issue, and it calls — it begs — for a moral response.

The lessons of history are clear: Almost every time this country has turned on a dime, creating a social and cultural transformation, it was because of a rising wave of moral affirmation. Think of the forces that created the American Revolution. "We hold these truths to be self-evident." What are those truths? Great moral principles about human equality and freedom. Think of the emancipation of the slaves. That was a terribly long time coming, but when it came it rose on a



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flood of conviction about what is morally intolerable. Think of the civil rights movement. "I have a dream." Of what? Not a dream of a growth economy. Not a dream of iPhones. A dream of justice and compassion and equal opportunities. Think of the chants demanding an end to the Vietnam War. "Hell no." Two words with clear moral force.

Preventing catastrophic climate change will require the same rapid cultural transformation. And that will take a sweeping affirmation of the rights of future beings and our duties of compassion and justice. And that will take a national conversation about what is good, and just, and worthy of us.

Is this so hard? Apparently so.

Speaking on the road, we look out at crowds of people — white-haired women and red-headed girls, a row of Hispanic students, young men in fleece jackets, elderly men in suits, slender mothers, always the passionate teenager in the back row who asks the first question. When they talk about what they value most deeply, the room becomes as energized as the dusty air at a tent revival. But they are reluctant to talk about other peoples' moral obligations, even though they faithfully honor their own.

It can be hard these days to speak with moral conviction. It's hard because the hosts of hate radio and television have caused a lot of people to mistake vile name-calling for meaningful discourse about morality, and rudeness for moral reasoning. It's hard because no one wants to be a moral bully, and because people do have the right to their own views.

(Although — and this is crucial — it does not follow that all views are right). It's hard because people mistake moral judgments for mere expressions of preference. Too many people are unable to distinguish, for example, between "Saving a drowning child is good" and "Chocolate ice cream is good." And also, what sort of thugs would insist that everyone share their preferences? Mostly it's hard because you can't prove that a moral judgment is true, anymore than you can prove that an economic theory is correct, or a technology is harmless. Everything is up for debate — as it should be.

We tell our audiences the same thing we tell our ethics students: Meaningful discourse about morality is a matter of giving and examining good reasons for moral judgments. In order to decide whether to accept or reject moral claims, people should assess the reasons that support them, much as people weigh the reasons that support scientific claims. You say that climate change will wreck the systems that sustain our lives? Show me your reasons. If they are good reasons, I'll accept your claim. You say we have a moral obligation to prevent catastrophic climate change? Let's look at the reasons to believe that is true.

To start a global conversation about the ethical foundations of climate action, we asked 100 of the world's moral leaders — people like Desmond Tutu and Wangari Mathai and the Dalai Lama — to tell us, in 2,000 words or less, why it's a moral obligation to prevent catastrophic climate change. We weren't looking for the one right answer. We were look-

YES, BECAUSE ALL FLOURISHING IS MUTUAL.

Yes, for the full
expression of
human virtue.

Yes, because the gifts of the Earth are freely given,
and we are called to gratitude and reciprocity.



YES, FOR THE SAKE OF THE EARTH ITSELF.

YES, FOR THE STEWARDSHIP OF GOD'S CREATION.

Yes, to honor the rights of future generations of all species.

ing for a great abundance of answers, so that no matter what views people bring to the discussion, they will find a reason that speaks powerfully to them. Do we have an obligation to prevent catastrophic climate change? Yes, these leaders told us, for these reasons and more:

Yes, because the survival of humankind depends on it.

Yes, for the sake of the children.

Yes, for the sake of the sparrows and seagrass, for newborn whales and tons of krill, for fish like confetti on coral reefs, for lingonberries and the pawprints of bears, for each of these and all the others.

Yes, because the gifts of the Earth are freely given, and we are called to gratitude and reciprocity.

Yes, because compassion requires us to reduce or prevent suffering.

Yes, because justice demands it.

Yes, because we love the world.

Yes, because our moral integrity requires us to do what is right.

IT FEELS GOOD TO STAND UP in front of an audience and say these words, the great flood of yes. We usually hear a murmur from the audience. Yes, humans do have beauty in them, and justice, and compassion. We do love the world. It is good to remember: This is who we humans are, when we are at our best. This is what can move us to act.

In this new and hopeful air, we make the full arguments.

WE MUST ACT, FOR THE SAKE OF THE CHILDREN. If climate destabilization will be manifestly harmful to children, and if we have a moral obligation to protect children, then we have an obligation to expend extraordinary effort to prevent catastrophic climate change.

At our first town hall meeting, a huge man planted his chest in front of our faces and said, "I don't care about ethics. All I care about is my daughter. And I am going to make as much money as I can, so that she can be safe and happy all her life." OK. Well, don't all people want a safe and happy future for their children? The irony, of course, is that we harm them even as (especially as) we try to provide for them. In the end, the amassing of material wealth in the name of our privileged children's future is what will hurt them the

most. And what our decisions will do to the children who are not privileged is not just an irony; it's a moral abomination. These children, who will never know even the short-term benefits of misusing fossil fuels, are the ones who will suffer as seas rise, droughts scorch cropland, diseases spread north, famine scourges lands that had been abundant. The damage to their future is a deliberate theft, a preventable child abuse.

Twelve-year-old Severn Suzuki, speaking at the Rio Summit, said, "Parents should be able to comfort their children by saying 'Everything's going to be all right,' 'It's not the end of the world,' and 'We're doing the best we can.' But I don't think you can say that to us anymore." The question, then, is what do we have to do, in order to honestly tell our children we're doing the best we can?

WE MUST ACT, FOR THE SAKE OF HUMANKIND. If environmental degradation threatens the foundations of human thriving, and if human thriving is a fundamental value, then we have an obligation to avert degradations that threaten us.

People in our audiences sometimes quarrel with the facts. Is it really as bad as that? they ask. And not everyone thinks that the human species is a positive force on Earth. Wouldn't the world be better off without us? they wonder. But all who accept the scientific evidence and affirm the value of human lives will not be able to sit on their hands and still call themselves moral beings.

Daniel Quinn, author of *Ishmael*, explained the peril. "We are like people living in the penthouse of a hundred-story building. Every day we go downstairs and at random knock out 150 bricks to take upstairs to increase the size of our penthouse. Since the building below consists of millions of bricks, this seems harmless enough ... for a single day. But for 30,000 days? Eventually — inevitably — the streams of vacancy we have created in the fabric of the walls below us must come together to produce a complete structural collapse. When this happens — if it is allowed to happen — we will join the general collapse, and our lofty position at the top of the structure will not save us."

WE MUST ACT, BECAUSE JUSTICE DEMANDS IT. If people have inalienable rights to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, then the carbon-spewing nations are embarking on the greatest violation of human rights the world has ever

Yes, to honor and celebrate
the Earth and Earth systems.

Yes, because the world is beautiful.

seen. Uprooting people from their homes, exposing them to new disease vectors, disrupting food supply chains — it's a systematic violation of human rights. By whom, and for what? By the wealthy nations who can't or won't stop spewing carbon into the air. For what? For the continuation of wasteful and pointless consumption of material goods.

It's not just a violation of rights; it's also an injustice. Those who are suffering the most severe harms from climate change (at least in the short term, until it engulfs us all) are those least responsible for causing the harm. That's not fair.

Sheila Watt-Cloutier, the former chair of the Inuit Circumpolar Council, wrote of the human rights claims of northern-latitude people: "And we Inuit and other Northerners ... are defending our right to culture, our right to lands traditionally used and occupied, our right to health, our right to physical security, our right to our own means of subsistence and our rights to residence and movement. And as our culture, again, as I say, is based on the cold, the ice and snow, we are in essence defending our right to be cold."

WE MUST ACT, BECAUSE PERSONAL INTEGRITY REQUIRES US TO DO WHAT'S RIGHT. When we ask audiences at the beginning of the evening to rate their hope for the future on a scale of one (we don't have a chance in hell) to ten (nothing to worry about), they generally come in at about three to four on the hope-o-meter. They speak wistfully. "Let's face it," we hear. "Our options are limited, our cities and homes and transportation systems are disgracefully designed, destructive ways of living are skillfully protected by tangles of profit and power around the world, corporations are behaving like sociopaths, and we have run out of time. How can any reasonable person be hopeful?" And if you don't have hope, people tell us, then all you have left is despair, and the wholesale abdication of moral responsibility.

But to think there are only two options — hope and despair — is a fallacy of false dichotomy. Between hope and despair is the broad and essential expanse of middle ground, which is not acting out of hope or failing to act out of despair, but acting out of personal integrity.

Integrity: a matching between what you believe and what you do, which is wholeness, which is health, which is holy. To act justly because you believe in justice. To live gratefully

because life is a gift. To act lovingly toward the Earth, because you love it. The meaning of our lives is not in what we accomplish in the end, any more than the meaning of a baseball game is the last out. What makes our lives meaningful is our engagement in activities that embody our values, no matter what happens in the world.

What does integrity ask of us? First, to refuse to be made into instruments of destruction. With thoughtless decisions about what we invest in, what we buy, what we praise, what we value, what we do for a living, we volunteer to be the foot soldiers of corporate destruction. Soldiers used to say, "Hell no," to an unjust war. Isn't it time we say the same to an unjust, far more disastrous, way of life?

Integrity calls us to make our lives into works of art expressing our deepest values. As we live with integrity, we can escape the unsettled grief of lives that violate deeply held beliefs about right and wrong. As we live with integrity, we can imagine and bring into being new ways of living on the land that are bright with art and imagination, nested into families and communities, grateful and joyous.

The hand of the teenager in the back row shoots up as soon as we stop talking. "Okay," she says. "I don't have any power. So what I am supposed to do?" We hear a murmur of assent. Here is what we tell her, what we would tell you:

"The theologian Frederick Buechner wrote that if you are looking for your calling, you will find it at the place where your great joy intersects with the world's great need. All of us are overwhelmed by news of the world's great and desperate need. In that desperation, we forget to think about our great joy. But each of us has something we are passionate about. Find that joy. Find that need. Go to that intersection. Do that work." ■

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