

"The Best Hope for the Future"
Unitarian Universalist Church of Sarasota
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Last July I read in the *Siberian Times* newspaper that a helicopter pilot had discovered a 300-foot-wide crater in Siberia. The crater is like the sink holes that we know and love in Florida, except that in Siberia outside the sink hole are rocks and other debris suggesting an explosion. In recent months scientists have spotted more sinkholes in Siberia, prompting calls for urgent research to confirm what is causing them.

I like to start my sermons with a joke or two, but when it comes to the issue of climate change there is not much to laugh about. However, on April first, the *Siberian Times* carried this article:

The team from the Russian Academy of Sciences used a satellite phone to report the discovery of an 'unidentified object resembling a space capsule' in one of dozens of craters to have been discovered recently in Arctic Russia. The scientists said the grey-colored object was made of a metal 'unknown on Earth'. They reported a 'hostile environment' at the 48-meter-deep crater but did not give further details before their call was cut. Experts from a leading Siberian university also requested an emergency evacuation from the crater site after an unexplained fault with their helicopter. At this moment their call ended, and we could not reach them again. When we sent a back-up helicopter to the site there was no sign of the three-man team,' said a spokesman for the Emergencies Ministry. 'They have vanished. The crater was empty. Searching will continue throughout 1 April.' Rescuers 'do not exclude that the men have been kidnapped.' The team had been investigating the cause of the mystery craters, and were taking detailed measurements at the site. – The *Siberian Times* April first 2015.

Of course, the alien space capsule and the mysterious abductions were an April Fools Day joke. However, the craters are real. Currently the Arctic is warming twice as fast as the rest of the planet. Frozen in permafrost is a tremendous amount of carbon and methane. As permafrost thaws, the carbon and methane are released into the atmosphere. Methane is more powerful at warming the planet than carbon dioxide. Therefore, it has the potential to accelerate global warming rapidly. Scientists believe methane gas, exploding when the permafrost thaws, created the sink holes.

At the other end of the earth, a team of scientists has discovered that shelves in the West Antarctic are shrinking faster than they realized. In a report published March 26, a climate scientist at San Diego's Scripps Institution of Oceanography said: "We are starting to lose more ice at a faster rate; we are accelerating." The rate of shrinking has increased by 70 percent over the past decade. The ice is like a wall holding back Antarctic water – and the wall is melting. If all of it melts, the ice in the west Antarctic could raise sea levels around the world by more than 9 feet.

Craters in Siberia and melting ice in the Antarctic. Although the first Earth Day was held forty years ago in 1970, the efforts of environmental groups to respond to climate change have so far only been modestly successful.

The United Nations has held a big climate meeting each year since 1995. The next meeting will be in Paris starting at the end of November. Many hope that the Paris conference will end with a climate protocol that will continue and even surpass the Kyoto Protocol of 1997.

Unitarian Universalists have been working on this issue for many years, and we do have some influence. For example, The President of the United States' grandmother was an active Unitarian Universalist and she had a profound and positive influence on the values of her grandson.

However, with a few hundred thousand members, Unitarian Universalists are a small religious association compared to the Roman Catholic Church. The good news is that the new Pope is providing strong, positive leadership on this issue. The Vatican announced this past Tuesday that it will hold a one-day summit on climate change April 28, featuring some of the world's leading climate scientists. Vatican officials call the conference "Protect the Earth, Dignify Humanity: The Moral Dimensions of Climate Change and Sustainable Development."

According to the Vatican, the summit hopes to "help build a global movement across all religions for sustainable development and climate change throughout 2015 and beyond," and to highlight "the intrinsic connection between respect for the environment and respect for people — especially the poor, the excluded, the victims of human trafficking and modern slavery, the children and future generations."

The one-day summit will also include participants from major world religions and aims to "elevate the debate on the moral dimensions of protecting the environment before

the papal encyclical" on Climate Change due to be published this summer.

Other religious leaders are also speaking out. The highest ranking woman in the Anglican communion has said climate denial is a "blind" and immoral position which rejects God's gift of knowledge. Katharine Jeffers Schori, presiding bishop of the Episcopal church and one of the most powerful women in modern Christianity, said that climate change is a moral imperative. The Bishop says, "It is much like the civil rights movement in this country where we are attending to the rights of all people and the rights of the earth to continue to be a flourishing place. It is certainly a moral issue in terms of the impacts on the poorest and most vulnerable around the world already."

An oceanographer before she was ordained at the age of forty, the Bishop said she hoped to use her visibility as a church leader to help drive action on climate change. As presiding bishop, she oversees 2.5 million members of the Episcopal church in seventeen countries, and is one of the most prominent women in Christianity. She says "I really hope to motivate average Episcopalians to see the severity of this issue, the morality of this issue. Turning the ship in another direction requires the consolidated efforts of many people who are moving in the same direction."

It is not just the Unitarian Universalists, the Catholic Pope and the Episcopal Bishop. Other religious groups are also speaking out. The Evangelical Climate Initiative is a campaign by conservative American church leaders calling for reductions in carbon dioxide emissions. More than 200 conservative Christian leaders have signed the Evangelical Climate Initiative statement.

The Methodists are also taking a stand. The United Methodist church, the third largest denomination, dumped coal companies from its pension fund.

The United Church of Christ is stepping up. They have voted to divest its investments in fossil fuels.

The World Council of Churches is stepping up. It has pledged not to invest in fossil fuels.

The Unitarian Universalist Association has also voted to divest its investments in fossil fuels. Our own church Endowment is invested in the UUA common fund. Therefore, this church does not earn income from fossil fuels.

The Pope hopes to address the United States Congress during his visit to America in September. And this is exactly where the pressure needs to be focused. One barrier to a

comprehensive deal in Paris is the United States Congress' inability to enact climate and energy legislation that limits greenhouse gases in the United States. Without a commitment from the United States, other nations are reluctant to set their own limits.

Our climate negotiators do not want to negotiate a treaty that the Senate will not support. Our nation has already been down that road with the Kyoto Protocol of 1997, which the Senate never ratified. Under our constitution, the Senate, by 2/3 vote, must approve treaties.

However, the views in the Senate may be changing in response to the changing views of the American people. In Florida, for example, there are already parts of the state, especially southeast Florida, that are complaining of beach erosion, more frequent flooding of neighborhoods, and saltwater intrusion into groundwater supplies. In a new study, in Florida, 56 percent of citizens said that they believe climate change is at least partially caused by humans.

This opinion can be found in other states. In Colorado 58 percent of citizens say global warming is at least partly human caused. In Nevada, 57 percent of citizens say global warming is human caused. This is true also in Wisconsin, Texas, Arizona, Pennsylvania, North Carolina, and Iowa. I mention all these states in particular because Senators from each of these states, when asked to vote on the question, "is global warming mostly caused by humans" voted "no." These senators supported the view that human do not cause climate change. However, Senators are sensitive to the opinions of the people of their states. If the people put on pressure in letters and e-mails, even political conservatives will start dealing with the problem.

Support is shifting away from Climate Change deniers. For example, the Conservative policy group the American Legislative Exchange Council or "ALEC" has seen an exodus of some of its best-known corporate members, including Google, Facebook, Yahoo and Northrop Grumman. Google publicly connected its decision to stop funding the American Legislative Exchange Council to the climate change issue. In another example, Southern Company in Atlanta, Georgia the country's fourth-largest electric utility, recently decided to drop its funding for Dr. Willie Soon, a physicist who has challenged the consensus view that links recent climate change to man-made greenhouse gases. Like doctors in the 1950s whom the tobacco companies paid to say smoking did not cause lung cancer, Dr. Soon's research has been funded largely by fossil-fuel interests, which provided over \$1.2 million in funding over 10 years. Now Dr. Soon is losing part of his funding.

Leaders in China have been another stumbling block to dealing with the issue. The 2009 talks in Copenhagen ended with many delegates blaming China for blocking progress toward a binding agreement. According to news reports, this may be changing. In November 2014, the President of China and the President of the United States made a joint pledge on reducing pollution and carbon gas emissions. China is already the world's largest wind power user.

According to news reports on March 20, Todd Stern, our country's top climate negotiator, expressed cautious optimism about sealing a new global climate change pact by the end of the year, stressing growing cooperation between the U.S. and China to limit carbon emissions. Mr. Stern told reporters that the world's major carbon emitters including the United States and China are working more closely in the lead up to United Nations climate negotiations scheduled for November in Paris. Mr. Stern said there was a "greater measure of realism" among participants. As President Obama said, when China and the United States, the world's two largest economies, cooperate, it makes a difference.

Two months ago a radio interviewer asked me if we have reached a positive climate change tipping point. I replied that the thing about a tipping point is that we do not know for sure it has occurred until we look backward. Nevertheless, I see hope everywhere.

- The Pope is getting involved in a big way.
- Other religious leaders are speaking out.
- Public opinion in conservative states like Florida is shifting.
- The leaders in China appear to be moving in the right direction.

Finally, the numbers simply no longer add up in the old fossil fuel model. The costs of new coal and oil plants are becoming unmanageable, while the costs of solar energy and battery storage are dropping.

On the cover of the order of service is the image of a hundred and a sixty-year-old statue, called the guardian demon, on the top of Notre-Dame Cathedral. The statue looks out over all of Paris. It is part-human and part-beast, and part-angel. In my imagination the statue is looking out on a beautiful day on earth and is wondering whether or not we humans will get our act together. In late November the statue will overlook The Paris United Nations Conference on Climate Change. The conference may be a tipping point. It is, I think, the best hope for the future.

The earth is a beautiful place. Look at the grounds of our church this morning. Wonderful color is all around us – the green leaves, the white birds, the yellow butterflies, the smells of spring, the feel of the warm Florida air against our skin, the taste of orange juice – life on this earth is a wonderful miracle. Let us enjoy this miracle and care for it so that our children and our grandchildren can also feel the joy that we feel. Let us lift up our voices and sing in celebration of the miracle of the earth all around us.