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Betting on Earth's Future

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Before the 16th-century Scientific Revolution, it used to be more reasonable to hold the worldview that we humans were at the center of "life, the universe, and everything." According to the ancient Ptolemaic model of the universe, our planet was stationary, and the sun, moon, and stars revolved around us. But after Copernicus's 1543 book *On the Revolutions of the Celestial Spheres*, our planet was shown to be merely the "third rock from the sun."

And we have come to see in the centuries since — with Einstein, Hubble, and others — that the initial "decentering" of the Copernican Revolution was only the beginning. We know today that there are more than 100 *billion* galaxies in the universe. And each of those 100 billion galaxies includes billions of stars. Earth is merely one small planet, orbiting one medium-sized star toward the *edge* of one spiral galaxy that is only one among more than 100 billion other galaxies in the universe. The science of astronomy forces us to confront that we are not the center of the universe.

And in the 19th-century, Darwin's 1859 book, *On the Origin of the Species by Means of Natural Selection* decentered us further. Darwin's meticulous observations of the natural world challenged us to see that we humans are not "a little lower than the angels," but merely "a little higher than the apes" — and deeply interconnected with the ecosystem of this planet, which our UU Seventh Principle calls "the interdependent web of all existence." The freedom to embrace the full implications of this "decentered" worldview is one of the many reasons that I am drawn

to Unitarian Universalist as a religion that seeks to balance the wisdom of the world's religions with the insights of modern science.

Wrestling with this perspective from within the Christian tradition, theologian Sallie McFague in her book A New Climate for Theology: God, the World, and Global Warming has written that, "we human beings are the neediest of all creatures, able to last only a few minutes without air, a few days without water, a few weeks without the green plants. If we were to disappear tomorrow, no other creatures would miss us (except our pets), but we cannot live a day without other creatures" (37). This point of view that the Earth would not miss us if we were gone is the inverse of many traditional religious worldviews that see Earth as created for the benefit of humans, making us feel entitled to use and abuse this planet. Many of these worldviews also hold that this life and planet don't really matter compared to an eternal afterlife and "New Heaven and Earth" that are anticipated to be coming any day now with a divinely-sent apocalypse. (Of course, such an apocalypse has been predicted to be imminent for more than two millennia and counting.)

Along these lines, there was a New Yorker cartoon published about a decade ago that I've never forgotten. It shows a view from space with an anthropomorphized Earth (depicted as having a face — two eyes, a nose, and mouth — looking up at the planet Saturn (whose ring has been adjusted to have a head-mirror as doctors sometimes wear). The caption has Dr. Saturn diagnosing the problem of the ailing patient Earth: "I'm afraid you have humans."

In a sermon last year, we explored some about Elizabeth Kolbert's important book, The Sixth Extinction in which she studies the geologic history of the five previous mass extinctions in Earth's history and the evidence that we may well be at the beginnings of a new potential mass extinction on this planet. In the words of two scientists who have tried to consider what it looks like from a global perspective that our human population has septupled (increased sevenfold) in a mere two centuries — from approximately 1 billion in 1800 to more than 7 billion today — these two scientists said that it appears that humans are "One weedy species [who] has unwittingly achieved the ability to directly affect its own fate and that of most of the other species on this planet" (8).

That's a big demotion in a few centuries *from* humanity as the pinnacle of all creation (that the whole point of the universe was for humans to be here) *to* a more humble view of ourselves as merely one among many interdependent species on one far flung planet. But a more humble view of our place in the grand scheme of things can help begin to correct the imbalance in our relentless plundering of our planet's nonrenewable resources. Regarding the absurdity of the current worldview of many, one of my UU minister colleagues joked not long ago that, "A priest, a mechanic, and a corporation walk into a bar…two of them order a drink." Why only two? Because a corporation is not a person!

We need a fundamental reorientation *from* a worldview so perverted by the so-called "bottom line" of profit that a corporation has been declared by the Supreme Court to be equivalent in rights to a human being *to* a more interdependent worldview that accounts for the "Triple Bottom Line" in which *People*, *Planet*, *and Profit* are kept in balance. A focus on profit alone has led to the exploitation of human labor (people) and which is causing global climate change (planet).

For considering, how we should balance people, planet, and profit, my sermon title "Betting on Earth's Future" is inspired by a 2013 book from Yale University Press, The Bet: Paul Ehrlich, Julian Simon, and Our Gamble over Earth's Future by Paul Sabin, a history professor at Yale who brings his study of history to his decades-long passion for environmentalism.

Sabin was "born in March 1970, a month before the first Earth Day," and the environmental movement strongly influenced his family and early childhood. The emphasis was to not waste and on "hand-me-down clothes, haircuts at home, and reused paper napkins" was part of a conviction that, "In a world of scarce resources, we needed to consume less" (ix). Sabin's recent book uses the historical account of a famous bet between Paul Ehrlich and Julian Simon to inform our species's use of the limited resources on this one planet with our human population at 7 billion and rising.

To start with one side of the bet (which I will get to shortly), Paul Ehrlich (1932-), is a professor of biology at Stanford University, and the author of the bestselling 1968 book The Population Bomb, which went through "twenty-two reprinting in the first three years" (10). Keep in mind about the year 1968 that "That same year saw Robert F. Kennedy and Martin Luther

King, Jr. assassinated, riots in Washington, D.C., Chicago, and Kansas City, and student rebellions in Paris and Mexico City. Meanwhile the death toll mounted in Vietnam" (10-11). In that context of social upheaval, came Ehrlich's ominous predictions about the needs of a rapidly growing human population overtaking the limited resources of this one planet.

In many ways, Ehrlich can be seen as a neo-Malthusian. The Rev. Thomas Malthus (1766-1834) had made similar predications almost two centuries earlier in his 1798 book *An Essay on the Principle of Population*. Malthus's late 18th-century predictions about the demand of a growing human population overcoming the limited supply of Earth's resources (what he called the "Iron Law of Population") were proved wrong — at least in the short term — by the Industrial Revolution, which produced inventions that created sufficient food to feed the growing number of our species.

But in the mid-twentieth-century, Ehrlich and other scientists saw our species as again beginning to affect the Earth in ways that were not sustainable long term. The Industrial Revolution may have saved us in the short run from Malthus's predictions, but the side effects of Carbon Dioxide emissions were causing global climate change on an unprecedented scale. According to their calculations, "an optimum population size for the planet would range from 1.5 to 2 billion people," which is a long way from the 9 billion were seem to be heading toward (21).

Moving to the other side of the bet on Earth's future that I will soon describe, Julian Simon (1932 - 1998) is a economist, who worked both at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, the University of Maryland, and at the Cato Institute (a libertarian think tank). Simon understands the logic of Ehrlich's neo-Malthusian position. It does seem to be a simple equation of addition and subtraction, supply and demand: a point presumably will be reached at which the limited supply of Earth's resource is overcome by the rising demand of an exponentially growing human population — such that eventually famine and wars will break out, competing over scare resources. But Simon holds that in this case

> commonsense is just plain wrong…. Common sense notices our use of resources but fails to see that our needs lead to the creation of resources — planting of forests, exploration of new oil fields and invention of ways to obtain oil from

> rocks, discovering of substitute sources of energy and nutrients, invention of new tools of all kinds" (123).

So whereas Ehrlich can be seen as a neo-Malthusian predicting dystopia if drastic corrective action isn't taken, Simon can be seen as a techno-utopian, who sees "necessity as the mother of invention." Simon's hope is that just as the original Industrial Revolution disproved the dire predictions of the original Malthus, so too a Green Revolution will save the day from the ominous predictions of the neo-Malthusians (221). But there is no guarantee that human ingenuity will always be able to save us.

To put their money where their mouth was regarding their competing worldviews, Ehrlich and Simon made a $1,000 bet in 1980 "that the cost of chromium, copper, nickel, tin, and tungsten would increase in the next decade." Ehrlich thought that decreasing supply and increasing demand would drive up prices. (Keep in mind that at this point the 1973 Arab oil embargo was still in recent memory, so the harsh implications of limited resources felt very real.) In contrast, "Simon argued that markets and new technologies would drive prices down, proving that society did not face resource constraints and that human welfare was on a path of steady improvement" (4).

A decade later in 1990, the results were in and Simon won resoundingly: "Despite a record increase in the world population from 4.5 to 5.3 billion people, the price of the five minerals…had fallen by an average of almost 50%" (181). Simon claimed a highly symbolic victory between these two figure heads of their respective movements. And Ehrlich conceded at least to the extent of mailing Simon a check for $576.07 — the percentage correct that he calculated Simon to have been of the $1,000 wager (181). But publicly Ehrlich retorted that his timeline had been premature — and that in the longer run, "Julian Simon is like the guy who jumps off the Empire State Building and says how great things are going so far as he passes the 10th floor" (184).

Although Ehrlich is still alive, Simon died in 1998. And what Simon did not have access to is the overwhelming consensus of the scientific community about global climate change that has strengthened with each passing year. (After all, Al Gore's documentary *An Inconvenient*

Truth, which was a turning point in public awareness of climate change was not released until 2006 — almost a decade after Simon's death.)

Simon may be right that there is hope in human ingenuity, but such hope is undermined by climate change deniers who refuse to recognize the clear facts presented by organizations like the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change. Necessity can't be the mother of invention if one is denying there is any necessity that requires invention!

Accordingly, a few weeks ago, on the 50th Anniversary of the Selma-to-Montgomery Marches, we looked back on the Unitarian Universalists who answered The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr's call to show up in that movement for racial justice. The year after Selma, Dr. King delivered the Ware Lecture before the annual UU General Assembly. His address was titled "Don't Sleep through the Revolution." This summer at GA, the Ware Lecturer will be the contemporary African-American professor, social prophet, and civil rights activist Dr. Cornel West. Dr. West spoke out this past week calling climate change a "planetary Selma." And just as with the original Selma fifty years ago, the question for us today with the new "planetary Selma" of climate change is that when faced with a deep imbalance in the "Triple Bottom Line" of people, planet, and profit — to the extent that corporations are declared people — will we stand up, will we speak up, and will we show up?

And it is not enough for that choice to be made individually. We need one another to collectively demand the systematic changes that will be required to return to right relationship with ourselves, with one another, and with this one fragile planet which we humans call home.