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CONGREGATION OF FREDERICK
Spirituality · Community · Justice

Climate Justice, Courage, & Hope

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I've read quite a few books about climate change over the past year, but I want to share some highlights from one book in particular, published by our own Beacon Press, which is owned by the Unitarian Universalist Association. It's titled *Climate Courage: How Tackling Climate Change Can Build Community, Transform the Economy, and Bridge the Political Divide in America* by Andreas Karelas, who is the executive director of RE-volv, a nonprofit organization that promotes a shift toward clean energy.

I suspect most people tuning in for this sermon are familiar with the basic gist of our situation, as summarized by one climate scientist:

1. It's warming.
2. It's us.
3. We're sure.
4. It's bad.
5. But! We can fix it. (Nicholas 4)

Now, the extent to which we can “fix” the damage already done is subject to debate, but we likely can agree that we should do as much as possible to avoid making the situation worse. To quote Kate Marvel, another climate scientist: “Climate change isn't a cliff we fall off, but a slope we slide down.’ There is no bottom to the slope; **we will keep sliding until we put on the carbon brakes. Every inch of the slide we don't cede is a victory**” (Nicholas 101).

The reason I wanted to invite us to focus on Karelas's book in particular is that he has a framework worth considering about how we can best motivate ourselves to put on the carbon brakes. He underscores that even though the situation is dire, *despair is not enough*: "Despair cannot power the long-term sustained action we need to address climate change and build a better world. Instead, it overwhelms us with fear and anxiety." Instead, he emphasizes that, "**to break through this stalemate we're in, we need courage and hope, not discouragement and fear**" (xi).

What does that mean specifically? Karelas points us to the potential for increasing numbers of people to come to see climate change as at least as much of an *opportunity* as it is a challenge—an **opportunity to move even more rapidly than we already are toward a "zero emission, renewable energy-based economy."** The additional good news is that in many ways a green economy will "dramatically improve our lives, our communities, and our society" (1).

Many of us in UU circles have been ready for a Green New Deal for a long time. Some of you may have been ready since the first Earth Day, more than fifty years ago in 1970—or perhaps even before that. Others of you may have been ready since you first saw Al Gore's documentary, *An Inconvenient Truth*, more than fifteen years ago in 2006. Unfortunately at both those points too many people weren't yet ready to listen, complicated by cynical bad faith actors intentionally spreading misinformation (4). But in more recent years climate activism has become a bigger and bigger tent: the pope and a growing number of other theologically conservative religious leaders are "calling for climate action based on spiritual teachings, the Department of Defense lists climate change as a top security threat, and the clean energy economy boasts the fastest growing job sector in the U.S. economy" (5).

The even bigger elephant in the room is that whether any specific person or group likes it or not, our current fossil fuel-based society cannot continue. It's "destabilizing our climate and destroying our ecosystems, not to mention that there's only a limited supply left. Our...disposable, consumptive, throw-away economy, which turns the earth's resources into waste at increasing rates, cannot be sustained" (8-9).

Along these lines, many of you likely saw the headlines this past week that after more than a decade of climate activism against the Keystone XL pipeline, the project

was officially ended ([The Washington Post](#)). That's great news, but it is also too long in coming. Fossil fuel companies, U.S. government officials, and environmental scientists have known for more than fifty years—since at least the 1960s—that our use of fossil fuels has been creating an existential threat through “melting ice caps, rising sea levels, acidification of water sources...and significant changes in temperature,” but we've squandered the past few decades with far too much avoidance and denial (43).

As George Marshall wrote about in his important book *Don't Even Think About It: Why Our Brains Are Wired to Ignore Climate Change*, climate change is tragically easy for we humans to ignore because it is “abstract, distant, invisible, and disputed,” and we have evolved to focus on things that are “concrete, immediate, and indisputable—for instance, a car out of control driving right at you” (14). But the growing frequency of extreme weather events caused by climate change is feeling more and more like a car out of control driving right at us on a disturbingly regular basis. People are noticing and growing concerned that extreme weather—previously described as “**once-in-a-century**” events—are becoming “**once-in-a-mortgage**” problems, and they want to do something about it ([Holthaus](#) 96).

There are lots of statistics that illustrate this growing shift in awareness, but I'll limit myself to two representative ones (Karelas 49-52). First, among U.S. citizens, “73 percent now believe global warming is happening and 62 percent correctly understand that it's caused by humans” (16). And while we can wish those numbers were even higher, I'm grateful to see them well over 50%. And even more important from the perspective of shifting toward a green economy:

A large majority of registered voters (85%)—including 95% of Democrats and 71% of Republicans—**support requiring utilities in their state to produce 100% of their electricity from clean-renewable sources by 2050.** Nearly two in three conservative Republicans (64%) support this policy. (52)

It is very good news that 85 percent of registered voters support the shift to a zero emission, renewable energy-based economy.

What might that mean specifically? According to a team at Stanford University, in the United States one likely energy formula is:

- **50% Wind** (both on-shore and off-shore)
- **45% Solar**
- **5% Water** (including hydro, geothermal, wave, & tidal)

The percentages would differ from state to state, but those are the overall averages.

This model also “doesn’t include any nuclear power, carbon capture and sequestration, or biofuels,” which other potential models do use (74).

So how do we motivate ourselves to make this dream of a green economy into reality by 2050? Speaking for myself, I’ll readily confess that I have learned a lot from the more fear-based response to climate change, such as David Wallace-Wells’s powerful book *The Uninhabitable Earth* that we’ve explored in a previous sermon. But my main takeaway from Karelas’s book *Climate Courage* is that an arguably more effective strategy to reach the most people may be to emphasize the positive (22). We need to harness the same spirit that allowed us to launch the Apollo program which achieved the monumental feat of landing a human being on the moon (Holthaus 96).

There is no guarantee that we will succeed as a species in mitigating climate change, but Karelas highlights many reasons to be hopeful. And to me—as I know is also true for many of you—this proposition is not abstract. I’m forty-three years old. (You can each adjust what I’m about to say to for your situation.) If I’m fortunate to have at least an average life expectancy and live into my mid-80s, I’ll hopefully live at least until the mid-2060s to existentially experience what we have or haven’t achieved in regard to climate justice. I want to look back and be able to say that I did all I could to ensure this planet has stabilized its climate at no more than approximately 1.5° C warmer than the one our ancestors occupied. And regardless of our individual ages, most of us have people we deeply care about who will likely live into the late twenty-first century or even into the twenty-second century (Nicholas 247). I feel led to do all I can to allow future generations to inherit a planet as beautiful and full of life as the one I inherited.

But, of course, this movement is about so much more than me. As many of you have heard me say before, the most important advice I can give you if you are feeling

overwhelmed as one person trying to take on huge, systemic issues like climate change—or any of the related social or economic justice issues—is to **“stop being one person”** (Moore 292). **Join a network of activists. We are stronger together.**

In addition to the many national and international environmental organizations, there are a number of local organizations you can join such as:

- MACS (“Multi-faith Alliance of Climate Stewards” of Frederick County)(more information available at macsfrederick.org.)You can see links on their website for their ongoing projects, what you can do, readings, partner organizations, and more.
- At the county level, I also encourage you to pay attention to the important work being done by the Climate Emergency Mobilization Workgroup, authorized by the Frederick County Council, the Mayor, and the Board of Aldermen through the Climate Emergency Resolutions adopted in 2020 (<https://frederickcountymd.gov/8113/Climate-Change-Workgroup-Information>).
- I know many members of this congregation and I were part of those advocating to help get that group created at the county level. Here at UUCF, we also have members who are part of a Climate Change Working Group (<https://envisionfrederickcounty.org/climate-change-working-group/>). So those are three—among many other—ways of getting involved.

I’m grateful to be on this journey toward climate justice with all of you.