



Can Love Change the Wording of Laws? Can Concern For the Future Change the Outcome of Votes?

A Keynote address at the 2008 Regional Sustainable Energy Summit organized by Coop Power

Elizabeth R. Sawin, June 20, 2008

Tonight I would like to talk about acceptance and the kind of action that flows out of acceptance.

In particular, I would like to talk about accepting the reality of climate change, the size and scope of what we must accomplish to address it, and the shortness of the time we have remaining for that task.

There is a power that is unleashed in people when they accept the facts of climate change. That it is real. That it is big. And also that it is solvable. Should we summon the collective will to do so, we can take actions to avoid its worst consequences.

Deeply accepting these facts changes your world, your thinking, your priorities. You know this. In some way that is why you have chosen to be here tonight. Accepting the reality of climate change, you couldn't NOT be here.

Accepting the reality of climate change and the reality of our moment in time as one when we can still make a difference, changes us; it taps into our courage, our persistence and our caring, which is a very good thing, as these are the most powerful tools ever discovered for changing the world, tools that can be used to address not only climate change but also the deep habits of thought and action which have created it.

Tonight I would like to share some ideas about making full use of our courage, persistence and caring, but first I need to be clear about what I mean with all this talk of acceptance.

Accepting what?

Accepting the realities of climate change, as best we understand them, through the lens of science.

Accepting, first of all, of the fact that climate change is already here, not some distant future possibility.

The newspapers are saying that the flooding in the Midwest this month is a once in five hundred year event. What they aren't saying is that the incidence of major floods is up, dramatically up, on every continent. They aren't linking the flooding in the Midwest with the 12 out of 13 major disaster relief operations of 2007 that the UN says were 'climate-change related' or with the fact that last year saw record melting of the Arctic sea ice.

They aren't mentioning that in 2007 major insurance companies – like State Farm, Allstate and Liberty Mutual – stopped offering new homeowners policies along the entire coast of the Northeastern United States. Liberty Mutual. Allstate. State Farm. This is not the judgment of radical tree-huggers. This is the determination of sober, conservative, statisticians, who are projecting a rising tide of risk.

Accepting the reality of climate change means really taking in how much and how quickly we have changed the atmosphere. For the last 800,000 years (since the Neanderthals diverged from modern humans) levels of CO₂ in the atmosphere have stayed in a narrow range – between 180 and 280 ppm. When we developed our staple crops, CO₂ was somewhere between 180 and 280. When we settled coastlines and river deltas, CO₂ was somewhere between 180 and 280. When each of the hundreds of cultures on the planet adapted to particular geographies and patterns of weather, CO₂ was between 180 and 280. Accepting the reality of climate change means facing the fact that today CO₂ is at 385 ppm. We must accept that we

have already have created a different planet than the only one we have ever known.

At 385 ppm we have already surpassed safe levels of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere. Respected climate scientist James Hansen and his colleagues tell us that safety lies behind us, at 350 ppm or less, a level we zoomed through in the late 1980s. In the Earth's past when CO₂ was at 385 ppm, sea level was many feet higher than today – disaster for many of the world's largest cities. The alpine glaciers that provide drinking water for hundreds of millions of people today didn't exist on a world with sustained levels of CO₂ at 385 ppm. The Arctic didn't have summer sea ice at 385 ppm.

Every year spent above 350 increases the odds of triggering 'runaway' warming, where warming causes more warming in a cycle humans would be powerless to stop. Accepting the reality of climate change means facing the fact that if runaway warming begins, solutions that might once have been sufficient and successful will have become insufficient and doomed to fail. We must accept that climate change, not our wishes, other plans, or other needs, sets the timetable for action.

Accepting the realities of climate change also means accepting the judgment of science about what magnitude of change is required. James Hansen's group has run computer simulations that show it is possible to bring the Earth back to 350 ppm. We could do it in 100 years if we were to end deforestation by 2015, phase out the burning of coal by 2030, and refrain entirely from using low quality fossil fuels such as oil shale and tar sands.

I'll repeat that, because these numbers represent important signposts on the road to safety, signposts all of us need to recognize, signposts all of us need to point out to others.

Phasing out coal, starting today. Reaching zero in twenty-two years. No more coal burned, anywhere on Earth, in 22 years, on this planet where the current trend is towards new coal plants, lots of them, every month.

No more deforestation by 2015, seven years from now.

No use of tar sands, oil shale or methyl hydrates, anywhere, ever.

Take a moment to let these extra-ordinary numbers sink in. Phasing out coal, starting today, reaching zero in 22 years? Imagine that. Imagine ending deforestation in seven years.

It is physically possible to do this – physically possible to return CO₂ levels in the atmosphere to safety quickly enough to avoid the most dangerous consequences of climate change. Physically speaking it is a simple matter of leaving already sequestered carbon where it is, underground. The part that demands our smarts and our capacity to cooperate is the challenge of making arrangements to meet our needs by other means. Do we, in this country and around the world have the collective will to do this, quickly enough? On a planet with hundreds of millions in hunger and poverty, and in a country with a growing gap between rich and poor, do we have the collective will to share and help one another so that we all make this transition, all have our needs met?

When I talk about acceptance that's what I mean. Really absorbing that the things you care about, the things I care about, require from us actions of sufficient power and effectiveness that, in the next twenty-two years not only will new coal plants not be built, but also existing coal plants will be shut down, coal miners will be re-trained, and whole communities will find clean renewable ways to power themselves. It means facing the fact that the underlying forces of growth, consumption and poverty must be addressed. It means accepting that the change we need to participate in will transform our society and the world.

Hansen's computer runs are just one scenario for the road to safety. We could get there burning more coal if we were willing to curtail oil. We could give ourselves longer to save the forests if we were willing to cut the coal faster. The details are not what is important. What is important is the magnitude and the time scale of the changes needed.

Hansen's paper with the 350ppm target came out a few months ago. Its seriousness has been sinking into my heart ever since and has planted a question there. *Knowing all of this, how do I act?*

When I teach about climate change I find myself speaking calmly, in even tones, as I have here tonight, speaking normally about the most abnormal of situations. Talking about terrible tragedy unfolding and more tragedy that is not YET inevitable but could become so. Talking about a huge task to be accomplished in a short amount of time.

As I go from place to place I speak. People listen. They nod. They take notes. Many are moved to action, like the pastors of many churches in Massachusetts who are pledging to ring their church bells 350 times to spread the word that 350 is the safe level for CO₂ in the atmosphere. People form new alliances, work harder, do amazing and inspiring things. They go ever farther in their personal lives, walking, biking, growing their own food, installing solar panels, building cars that run on vegetable oil. They scheme about green jobs and make connections between social justice and climate change and launch new initiatives and start new investments.

It is all exciting and full of potential and has the power to become much more than the sum of its parts.

And still the numbers loom in my mind. Twenty-two years. No coal at all. Anywhere. Seven years to end deforestation.

And I wonder, do those folks ringing the church bells and running the petition drives and tinkering with their new PV installations feel like I do, excited by the real change happening, but feeling in the quieter moments between the actions and the events, that they are not quite being fully used? Feeling as though, this big truth they have seen and understood about twenty-two years to contribute to a global transformation is calling forth something from them that has not yet found its channel?

I would guess that most of you know what I am talking about. I would guess that you are feeling some version of this within yourselves and that that is why you are here tonight, some sense of courage gathering, of a new willingness to trust your own intuition that things are not right and that significant change is needed, some sort of energy, looking for an outlet, some willingness, maybe a lot of it, to keep doing the important things you are doing while also stepping forward into something new. Something big.

If you are at all like me, the intensity of what is stirring within you may be a bit surprising. It may be more than a little disorienting. Who am I – a middle-aged woman with children who need me, a house to keep, a farm I share the work of, a community that needs my participation – to be feeling like a warrior searching around for the battle? Who am I – trained as a scientist to value poise and objectivity – to feel the rising urge to create a ruckus and demonstrate in some way how much this matters, how much I love my kids and their future, how much I want us to address this challenge of climate change in way that is fair and just for our whole society?

Who am I, who are you, to think we have a role to play in ending the burning of coal around the world by 2030?

But who are we not to? I may not look like society's stereotype of the radical, but I'm feeling – like mothers do around the world and in every species – the pull to act to protect that which has been entrusted into my care. I'm sure I'm not alone in feeling that pull, and I know you do not have to be a parent to feel that pull. I know I am not alone in my commitment to the possibility of the society we could create if we trusted that pull, if we gave ourselves over to it.

Everything we are doing matters, and needs to keep going. The communities we are building, the farms and coops and bike lanes and community gardens and wind turbines and ballot initiatives and legislative lobbying. All of it.

But I feel within myself the need for something else, something different. I realized this most starkly on the day a few weeks ago, when the Climate Security Act was defeated in the Senate.

That bill wouldn't have been enough to bring us safely to 350 ppm, but it was a small step in that direction.

Few of the things I love and care about showed up in the debate that killed that possibility, and the reality of twenty-two years to wean ourselves from coal didn't show up, either. Yet national legislation sets the rules of the game that will determine the degree and the timetable for limiting fossil fuels and sparking the collective investment in a clean, fair, renewable energy system.

There are two pieces of a puzzle, sitting here right in front of our eyes, waiting to be hitched together.

The first puzzle piece is the deep personal need I feel, and which many, many others must feel, to do something that feels stronger than one more workshop conducted in a calm and reasonable manner, something more than one more step towards energy efficiency in my own life.

Don't misunderstand me, I'll keep giving the workshops and working on my personal carbon footprint. But I'm looking for that other mode of action, the one that is bold enough and brave enough to honor my level of concern and my conviction that a much better future is possible if only we'd get down to the collective work of it. I'm looking for ways to act that acknowledge the shortness of time and the failure of polite requests to impact the laws that are being written or the public investments that are being made. I'm looking for some action consistent with the depth of my caring.

The other puzzle piece is the clear need to provide more support to state and national elected leaders so that they can stand for the long-term public future, even when such a stance is in opposition to the interests of the fossil fuel lobby. To keep elected representatives from being pushed over by the special interests there must be an equivalently strong push in the other direction, prodding them toward a strong national policy that commits us to what the science says we need to do – phasing out coal by 2030, committing in international negotiations to the target of 350 ppm.

When I put these two puzzle pieces together here's what I see:

I see myself and others walking into the places where the most important decisions are being made about the future of our atmosphere, armed with nothing beyond our understanding and acceptance of the significance of this moment and our caring for future generations, other species, and the people in our own country and around the world who are most vulnerable to the consequences of climate change. I see us carrying not signs of protest or angry demands, but visible representations of what we love and what is at stake. I see us gumming up the business as usual workings of the political machine by the sheer power of our love and conviction, and I see us getting in the way until we have what survival demands – a policy consistent with what the science says we must do to avoid the most dangerous consequences of climate change.

I think of the way that Kentucky Senator McConnell, in the debate over the Climate Security Act, blocked movement towards 350 and safety by insisting that the entire bill be read into the record (it took eight hours) and I see myself and others using the force of our caring and concern to block movement towards disaster, instead. I picture hundreds of ordinary people showing up in Senate offices before critical votes, each of us carrying our own scripts, humble one-page statements describing the people and places we treasure, the reasons to act on climate change. Isn't there something astounding and beautiful about that image? About using our little everyday loves and our big long-term hopes, our words about grandchildren, seacoast neighborhoods, forest slopes, and alpine glaciers to take up space, slow down the rush to disaster, turn policy towards sanity? Call it a new version of the filibuster – the love buster. Our presence would be a reminder of what is at stake, and of the ethical responsibilities of today's decision makers to future generations.

Could a few of us doing this make a difference? Or even hundreds of us? I don't know. Love and concern may be fragile tools to take on the \$35 million dollars the coal lobby is spending on

public relations this year. But love and concern and the hard-wired desire to protect the future are evolutionary forces that have shaped millions of years of life on this planet. If we are smart and thoughtful about planting self-organizing seeds in the minds of the many others we will never meet who are feeling the same excruciating disconnection we are between what needs to happen and the ability of our leaders to get it done, we just might tap into that evolutionary force. I'd like to see that happen.

I know that even if we never changed a single line of a single law, we'd provide some comfort to our fellow citizens who right now doubt their own assessment of danger because nobody is acting very bothered. "You aren't crazy," we'd say, by our actions. "You are sane. You can trust yourself." And we would be paying ourselves the very great respect of trusting our own judgment.

At the very least, if some of us try something like what I am imagining, we will provide ourselves with a better answer for the next generation when they ask us what we did during this crucial decade.

When I put these two puzzle pieces together I see something else as well. Because there is something that is very freeing when you accept the needed scale of change. "No more coal in twenty-two years" and "business as usual" are just not compatible ideas.

Accepting the reality of climate change means accepting the inevitable reality of social change. The beautiful thing about that is the way it opens up your creativity.

Once you stop believing that we will solve this problem without changing some of the

foundations of our world, you can begin to see all the ways that a world that has addressed climate change could be so much better than our polluted, violent, inequitable one. You can see the cleaner air once the coal stops burning. You can imagine city children who will breathe so much easier and the Appalachian mountains that will keep their tops. You can see the green jobs for youth from communities of color, you can see the healthier people on the streets of walkable cities and the vibrant local economies thriving all around them.

Those visions of possibility are the final thing I see us bringing with us to the halls of power, along with our acceptance of current reality and our tokens of all that we love. Once we read our statements about what's at stake, if we haven't yet been arrested for trespass, I see us starting to read those portraits of the possible.

So that's where my mind is going lately. We'll see what comes of it, whether I find the courage to try, whether others feel called to try, whether anyone can help to strategize about when and where and how to use our love and concern and vision of the possible as tools that can change the outcome of votes and the wording of laws.

I would love to hear your ideas about actions, drawn out of our concern and love, that could make a difference in the places where these decisions are being made that will affect all of us and the generations yet to be born. Better than that, I would love to hear your news of the actions you take, using the power of your love to move our leaders, and our society, onto a new path.

Thank you very much for your attention.

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