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**EARTH DAY SUNDAY:  
“We Have Only Begun!”**

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Today, in recognition of Earth Day, I want to turn our attention to our relationship with our planet, Mother Earth.

Our Reading is a free-verse poem by Alison Luterman entitled, "Listening to Helen Caldicott on the Car Radio While Stalled in a Traffic Jam Downtown."

Helen Caldicott, for those of you who may be unacquainted with her, is an intense activist and a powerful speaker, as this poem suggests. She is a physician from Australia, although she has lived here in the United States for some years. (My wife Margaret and I were privileged to have dinner with Helen Caldicott back in the 1980s when we were involved in the nuclear disarmament movement together.)

Here, then, is "Listening to Helen Caldicott on the Car Radio While Stalled in a Traffic Jam Downtown."<sup>1</sup>

I like to drive.  
To use electricity, gas, fuel.  
To step on a pedal and roar forward,  
sixty miles an hour.

I like my car,  
little steel womb,  
from whose confines I view, if not rule,  
the world. I like my radio,  
which sings me songs and tells me stories  
when I turn it on, and here's this shrill

Australian woman  
yelling, scolding, haranguing.  
"My God!" she is saying.  
"The trees are your lungs - can't you see?  
They look just like a pair of upside-down lungs.  
The rivers and oceans are your arteries,  
your blood. The ozone your skin.  
Don't you get it?  
The Earth is not your mother - it is yourself!"

She is screeching  
through the unreal fog of traffic.  
I inch forward slowly, sweating.  
I could turn her off. With one flick of my wrist.  
I am that powerful.

I remember  
hearing her speak in a huge auditorium filled with people.

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<sup>1</sup> Luterman, Alison, "Listening to Helen Caldicott on the Car Radio While Stalled in a Traffic Jam Downtown," *The Sun*, September 1998, p. 40.

“How many of you,” she asked, in that steel sandpaper voice of hers,  
“would die to save the Earth?”

Some hands went up.

My husband, sitting beside me, raised his.

I could not.

He was crying.

Still I could not.

**EARTH DAY SUNDAY:  
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In her book, *The Rhythm of Compassion: Caring for Self, Connecting with Society*, published last year, Gail Straub describes what, for her, was a transforming experience. I invite you to picture this, to "experience" it.

For all my life I've felt reverence for the Earth, but until recently I had given little thought to my responsibility to the planet or how my lifestyle might be destructive to the fragile balance of life that I am part of. Up until the late 1980's I was deeply involved with world peace, citizen diplomacy, and other social causes. Like most people when it came to the ecological crisis I took the out of sight out of mind path. I knew it was important to recycle and I got involved with Earth Day but those were isolated gestures that hadn't really taken root in my heart. Then I had a wake up call. My husband David and I were invited to play the *World Game*, a remarkable experience conceived by the visionary Buckminster Fuller.

Bucky's genius was to provide people with a visceral experience of the actual distribution of our planet's resources. The *World Game* was played on a gigantic world map laid out on a gymnasium floor. The players were divided across the map according to the actual population density of each continent. Flash lights were distributed to represent energy, loaves of bread for food, and jugs of water represented drinkable water.

I ended up in Africa, a continent I love and have lived in. We were jammed together on our portion of the globe with a few measly sticks of bread, very little water, and even fewer flashlights. The gym went dark and everyone was asked to turn on our flashlights - glaring light in the Northern Hemisphere, almost dark in the South. Then we held up our sticks of bread - the North covered with bobbing loaves of nourishment while the entire continents of India, Africa, and South America appeared to have less food than the east coast of North America. And so it went with water.

Then we were asked to stand in silence and simply look around the room. Across the world I saw my homeland, the United States, full of space for people to stand, [and] so much bread, water, and flashlights [that] people could barely hold them all. Suddenly, the fact that we Americans are only a tiny five percent of the human family and yet we use an astonishing one third of our entire planet's resources, became heartbreakingly real for me. The longer I stood there the worse I felt - shame, injustice, rage, desire to run away, and finally deep sadness.

For weeks after this event I struggled with the outrageous inequality between the North and South. Why did I get so lucky and how did I get so greedy? How should I live now that I understood the preposterous consumption and waste in the United States? Should I move back to Africa and try to help out? At the deepest level I was asking myself how can I find peace of mind when such suffering and inequality abound in our world?<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Straub, Gail, *Tikkun*, Vol. 16., No. 4, p. 52, but excerpted from *The Rhythm of Compassion: Caring for Self, Connecting with Society* (Tuttle Publishing, 2001).

Even without participating in the World Game ourselves, I suspect we are all at least dimly, if not acutely and painfully, aware that we live in a world of huge disparities. I have quoted some of these statistics before, but please consider the following:

- 1.3 billion people – that’s almost one-quarter of the world’s population – are living in abject poverty on less than \$1 per day;
- Another two billion people – about a third of the world’s population – are barely scraping by on a little more than \$3 per day;
- One company’s annual sales – Wal-Mart’s – is larger than the entire economic output of 85% of the world’s countries;<sup>3</sup>
- The combined wealth of more than one-third of the *entire world’s* population is surpassed by the combined wealth of just 358 people;<sup>4</sup>
- And, finally, 19,000 people, mostly infants and children, are dying each day from largely preventable hunger and malnutrition.

Jean Mayer, former President of Tufts University, an expert on hunger, and a Unitarian Universalist, says, “It’s the rich – in a relative sense, the people less likely to starve – who wreck the environment. Rich people occupy much more space, consume more of each natural resource, disturb the ecology more, ... and pollute more land, air and water with chemical, thermal and radioactive waste.”<sup>5</sup>

Not only are there huge disparities in the consumption and distribution of the Earth’s resources, and not only are we implicated in one way or another in those disparities, but it is becoming increasingly apparent that our voracious appetites are actually changing our natural environment and are at least beginning to exhaust some of our precious natural resources. We hear news reports of dying coral reefs, collapsing fisheries, shrinking forests, eroding soils, melting glaciers, rising sea levels, rising carbon dioxide levels, and rising temperatures.

Indeed, Lester Brown, the head of the highly regarded Worldwatch Institute, suggests that we are in the early stages of the greatest extinction of plants and animals since the dinosaurs disappeared 65 million years ago.<sup>6</sup>

## II

Now, how do we responsibly accommodate to these realities? In other words, how do we make sense of this information and still go about living our lives without going absolutely nuts, without going stark raving mad?

I think it must be especially difficult for young people, teenagers and young twenty-somethings, coming of age in a world that contains these unsettling and depressing realities. What a shock it must be to hear for the first time some of the statistics I just quoted, especially knowing that we ourselves are contributing to it. What kind of world is this, anyway?

So, again, how do we responsibly accommodate to these realities?

Do we just try to toughen ourselves up and say, “Well, that’s just the way the world *is*?” We need to be mature about this. Put our blinders on, try to get a good job, and mind our own business? Is this perhaps

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<sup>3</sup> Anderson, Sarah and Cavanagh, John with Lee, Thea, *Field Guide to the Global Economy* (New York: The New Press, 2000), p. 67.

<sup>4</sup> Gilbert, Richard S., “Walking Around the World in Wal-Mart: Moral Challenges in Globalization,” *op. cit.*, p. 4.

<sup>5</sup> Mayer, Jean, cited by Gilbert, Richard S., “Living Lightly on the Earth,” Vol. X, No. 16, April 30, 2000, pp. 3-4.

<sup>6</sup> Brown, Lester, book excerpt “Rethinking Economic Progress: The Dow May Be Up Over the Past Decade, But Cod, Aquifers, Topsoil, Fisheries, Forests and Coral Reefs Are Down,” [www.TomPaine.com](http://www.TomPaine.com), 1/20/2002, p. 1.

at least a part of what feeds our cultural appetite for so much drug and alcohol consumption – the need to anesthetize ourselves, to mute the harsh and sad realities that impinge on our consciousness? I note that even the quintessentially serious *New York Times* unveiled a new section in its newspaper this week. It's called "Escapes."

Instead of alternating between toughening ourselves up and escapes to accommodate to the harshness of the world, another tack is to try to emulate the Albert Schweitzers and Mother Therasas of the world – that is, to try to find a way to serve, to devote one's life to the poor or to the environment.

But what if we are not as gifted as Schweitzer or Mother Theresa? That is, what if we want to serve, what if we want to be a part of the solution instead of the problem, but don't see any good ways to do it? Because good ways to serve are not that obvious, are not that readily available. What do we do then?

Indeed, the world contains some unsettling and depressing realities, and it is hard to know exactly how to responsibly accommodate to these realities. Sometimes I think the sane thing to do would be to do what the Old Testament prophet Jeremiah once did 2600 years ago. (I think it was Jeremiah.) In the face of his society's gross wickedness and injustice, he once stripped naked and ran through the streets prophesying doom, and warning his people to repent, to return to the ways of their God, Yahweh. Or else! (By the way, lots of luck if you try this option, although I suppose you could tell the cops that you heard it here in church.)

### III

Lester Brown of the Worldwatch Institute has a new book out called, *Eco-Economy*, which is subtitled: *Building an Economy for the Earth*. In this book Brown takes us back to the year 1543. That was the year that the Polish astronomer Nicolaus Copernicus published his book that challenged the Ptolemaic view that the sun revolved around the Earth, arguing instead that the Earth revolved around the sun. With this new model of the solar system, Copernicus stimulated a wide-ranging discussion among scientists, theologians, and others that eventually led to a revolution in thinking about our place in the universe.

Today, Brown suggests (and I think he is right) that we need a similar revolution in our thinking. We need to rethink the relationship between the Earth and our economy. Capitalism and its economists essentially see the natural resources of the environment – the air, the water, the minerals, the gas, and so forth – as a subset of the economy, the environment and its resources (its natural capital, if you will) thus serving the economy. The ecologists, on the other hand, would like to see this relationship reversed or at least be more reciprocal. That is, we are living in a world in which we need to have the economy serve the environment or at least respect the environment, not the other way around. In short, as with the Copernican revolution when people came to see that the Earth was no longer the center of the universe, so, too in our time, we can no longer afford to see the economy as the center of our world, and around which everything else must revolve.

All life, including all economic activity, Brown argues, depends on the Earth's eco-system. Millions of species co-exist in an intricate balance, woven together by food chains, nutrient cycles, the hydrological

cycle, and the climate system.<sup>7</sup> The time is past when we can allow the economy to just gallop along, gobbling up our natural resources without our having to pay the piper sooner or later.

So, the time has come to build what Lester Brown calls an “eco-economy.” An eco-economy would be designed and built both by economists and ecologists working together. The goal would be to achieve a sustainable economy and a sustainable environment. It is hard to know exactly what this might look like, but somehow or other we need to take the environment into consideration when calculating the costs of doing business economically. For example, when buying a gallon of gasoline, we presently pay to get the oil out of the ground, to refine it into gasoline, and to deliver it to the local gas station. But what about the costs of polluting the environment in producing, transporting, and burning the gasoline? What about the health care costs associated with treating respiratory illnesses that may be caused or aggravated by air pollution? What about the costs associated with climate changes?

In this new century, hopefully, with each of us doing our part, a balanced “eco-economy” will emerge that will be beneficial both to the economy and to the environment.

#### IV

It’s hard to know this Earth Day Sunday just how to responsibly accommodate to the worrisome realities of our life together on this paradoxically fragile and yet remarkably resilient planet.

There is so much in bud. There is so much that is possible. Martin Luther King called for a revolution in values. Lester Brown is calling for a revolution in our thinking about the relationship between the environment and our economy. When we put our minds to it, we *can* make a difference!

As for me, I don’t like the pain, the brokenness of the world, any more than you. Like Jeremiah, I sometimes just want to go nuts and run naked through the streets. Well, maybe not....In any case, it may be important for us to stay open to the pain of the world, so that we can work for change, so that we can be reminded to do our part to welcome the revolution in values, to do our part to welcome the eco-economy, to do our part to welcome new, simpler ways of being together in the world.

In the words of the poet Denise Levertov:

We have only begun to love the Earth.  
We have only begun to imagine the fullness of life.  
How could we tire of hope? – so much is in bud....  
We have only begun to imagine justice and mercy,  
only begun to envision how it might be to live  
as siblings with beast and flower, not as oppressors.  
Surely our river cannot already be hastening into the sea of nonbeing? Surely it cannot drag, in the  
silt, all that is innocent?  
Not yet, not yet – there is too much broken that must be mended....  
We have only begun to know the power that is in us if we would join our solitudes in the communion of  
struggle.  
So much is unfolding that must complete its gesture,  
so much is in bud.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid., p. 2.

<sup>8</sup> Levertov, Denise, *Singing the Living Tradition* (Boston: Beacon Press and the Unitarian Universalist Association, 1993), #648.

