

Channing Reflection for July 12 2009

by Don Mallinson

“In the beginning, God created the Heavens and the Earth.” The crew of Apollo 8 while on the moon experienced awe at the beauty of our planet rising above the bleak lunar horizon on Christmas Eve 1968. To share their experience, they read the opening lines of the Book of Genesis to the people of Earth, closing with the words, “good night, good luck, a Merry Christmas and God bless all of you – all of you on the good Earth.” Thanks to Frank Borman, James Lovell and William Anders, we saw the Earth in all its fragile beauty for the first time and began to realize we needed to act to preserve that beauty for future generations. Life on our planet has never been more at risk. Reflecting on the mission of Apollo 8 can inspire us to renew our efforts to save it.

In Al Gore's “An Inconvenient Truth” he makes note of a time in early space exploration when Carl Sagan, the famous astronomer, asked NASA to have a spacecraft that was on a mission beyond our solar system to take a picture of the earth from 4 billion miles away. What does our earth look like from 4 billion miles away? To help you see this picture as reproduced in this book, I've enlarged the size of the blue dot to this blue dot. (Show Blue Dot) Pretty insignificant isn't it?

Gore wrote that when Sagan saw the picture of earth, he “called it a pale blue dot and noted that everything that has ever happened in all of human history has happened on that tiny pixel. It is our only home. And that is what is at stake. Our ability to live on planet Earth –to have a future as a civilization. I believe,” Gore wrote, “this is a moral issue.”

The earth is traveling through space at 67,000 miles per hour on an endless journey around the sun. I think that qualifies us to think of the earth as a spaceship. Lets call it not the USS Enterprise but the UUA Channingprise.

Unveil the UUA Channingprise.

I want to return to the Book of Genesis for another quote. “And God said, Let us make man in our image...and let them have dominion over... all the earth....” We are dominant. We are in charge. Some noted 19th century philosophers have interpreted this verse as justification for exploiting the earth's resources. This interpretation was taken further by some saying if God gave us dominance, we can do no wrong. The earth's bounty is limitless.

As long as power came from water wheels, wind mills, domesticated animals, surfs, slaves, and gunpowder, little if any damage was done to the environment.

The development of the steam engine and the internal combustion engine ushered in the industrial revolution and its appetite for fossil fuels. The invention of electricity allowed energy produced in one place to be used someplace else.

Unfortunately a by-product of the use of fossil fuels is pollution. Pollution of the air we breathe, water we drink, water we swim in and boat on. Another by-product of the industrial revolution are chemical compounds that further pollute our environment. Rachel Carson in her famous book “Silent Spring” woke us up to the dangers of certain chemicals. A class of chemicals commonly referred to as plastics have created a blight on the landscape. Do you know there is a place in the Pacific Ocean that through a combination of ocean currents has an accumulation of flotsam and jetsam, primarily plastics floating at the surface. Estimates are that there is over a million tons of trash in this area which could be the size of a large state.

We hear a lot about carbon dioxide. We are a carbon based life form so we need carbon. We breath oxygen so we will die without it. Yet the two in combination in sufficient quantity in the atmosphere will prove deadly to all animal life forms.

Remember the exclamation broadcast by the Apollo 13 astronauts, “Houston, we've had a problem!” The out bound trip to a moon landing had problems with the leaking oxygen tanks and carbon dioxide buildup. Without a functioning system for removing the poisonous gas the lives of the astronauts were frankly doomed. The engineers in Houston assembled duplicates of the items that were on the spacecraft and

worked feverishly to put together the bits and pieces that the astronauts could assemble on board creating a makeshift solution so they could pass around the moon without stopping and return safely back to earth.

Here on earth, the two highest producers of CO₂ are energy production, power plants burning fossil fuels, and cattle. That's right, cattle. Other farm animal, too, but mostly cattle. They breath, just like us but they are much bigger. They also produce vast amounts of methane which is 20 times more harmful than CO₂.

Then there is the ethical issue of industrial feedlots. Confining tens of thousands of cattle or pigs or chickens into spaces so small they can't move, or even lie down. They are force fed unnatural foods like corn, (nature wants cows to eat grass not corn), and antibiotics to keep them from getting sick from their over crowded conditions. Farm raised salmon are fed corn and antibiotics. True, salmon are carnivores and eat other fish. But other fish are expensive and corn is cheap, so farmed salmon are treated as herbivores and raised on a diet of cheap corn.

Now about that corn. Congress subsidizes the growing of corn. The two dominant purchases of corn – ADM and Cargill – pay the farmer less than his cost to grow it. The feds throw in enough to make up the different and provide a profit for the farmer. To make sure he maximizes his yield the farmer uses extra fertilizer, more than is needed. The excess fertilizer finds it way into streams and rivers and on into the Gulf of Mexico. At the mouth of the Mississippi there is a 8,500 square mile dead zone. No fish. No shrimp. No crabs. No aquatic life because there is not enough oxygen in the water.

The Chesapeake Bay is dying from too much excrement run off from the chicken farms that populate the eastern shore.

Here in Newport we have our algae blooms that cause beaches to be closed. We have pollution in Narragansett Bay that closes shell fishing for weeks and months at a time.

If Roger Williams came back after being absent for 400 years what do you think he would observe? He would wonder what the brown haze on the horizon was. Why are

the fish so small? He would wonder where all the pesky lobsters were that would wash up on the shore after a big storm. Weren't there more stars in the sky back in 1650? What do you mean I can't drink the water in the pond? Why is it so hard to breathe on some hot summer days? No more whales? And what on earth is inorganic food? Isn't all food organic? [Twinkie story](#).

There are some folks who are not concerned about just protecting the earth from further degradation. They want to turn the environment back to what it was when Roger Williams lived. What you consider today is good or at least not too bad, really isn't good. We do not know any better. Today, not yesterday is our standard for comparison.

Our viewpoint distorts our relativity. Turning on the tap water at the sink sure beats going to the community well for a bucket of water. And who among us wants to exchange our flush toilet for an out house? In January? Yet most of the people in the world today don't even have these options.

By the way, our farm policies have effects beyond our border. We have so much extra cheap corn we ship it to Mexico. Corn was Mexico's leading crop. Subsidized, cheap corn from the US has driven the Mexican farmer off the land and out of work. Some immigrate illegally to the U.S. looking for work which creates an illegal immigration problem for us. The solution to the immigration problem may cost more than corn subsidies.

I don't mean to say that all this degradation hasn't brought many benefits. It has. Many of us on the UUA Channingprize wear stylish clothes, live in spacious houses, drive statement cars, eat in fine restaurants. If all six billion crew members lived at this level we would need an estimated 3 more planet earths to supply the necessary resources.

There is a cost that we do not pay at the time of purchase. There is a true cost and then there is the selling price. When you pay \$4.00 for a pound of hamburger. Or \$2.50 for a gallon of gasoline. Or \$2.00 for a Big Mac. None of which are on special sale, aren't you paying true cost? No! Nor are you paying the true cost even when you pay

\$1.00 for a pint of water from a vending machine. Neither are you paying true cost for the electricity you bought to run your household even though here in Rhode Island it was half again as expensive as the national average.

The hamburger came from a cow raised on subsidized corn in a feedlot that requires the use of antibiotics to keep the cows healthy in such over crowded conditions. The typical feedlot's manure and other waste products is the equivalent of a small city, yet is not regulated so it piles up in huge lagoons and piles polluting the surroundings. Proper treatment would drive up the cost of that hamburger. As would the transportation costs if proper tail pipe pollutants measures were taken. This month there is a movie at the Jane Pickens Theater. I urge you to see. It is called "Food, Inc." A small title for a movie with a big, eye opening message.

Gasoline costs do not reflect their contribution to environmental degradation either in exploration, refining, transportation, or usage. Oil companies are subsidized by the government. Exxon the worlds most profitable oil company, receives billions of dollars in federal subsidies and tax credits every year.

Most of the ingredients in the Big Mac, from the meat to condiments to the bun all use subsidized corn products or by products such as cattle feed and high fructose corn syrup. By the way, paying the true cost of food would reduce consumption and might have the advantage of reducing the average citizen's waist line.

That pint of water for \$1.00 works out to paying \$8.00 for a gallon of water. Water out of the tap is pennies per gallon. You have also contributed 8 plastic bottles to the trash. Now you are polluting the environment and subsidizing the producer. Handsomely, too.

As for the electricity you use, when it comes from places like Brayton Point in Fall River, you are not paying for the extensive air pollution from the burning of fossil fuels used to generate the electricity. Nor are you paying for the pollution to Mt Hope Bay due to the plants need for water from the bay that is sucked in to cool down the turbines and then returned to the bay so hot it has destroyed the marine life in most of

this large bay. Scrubbers and cooling towers cost money and would drive up your electricity costs. So what that the bread winner can no longer earn his living fishing in the Bay, let him collect unemployment insurance. And your kid has asthma? Take him to the emergency room. Its free.

True cost? Don't look too close else you be shocked.

There use to be a commercial for an automobile filter with a tag line that went something like “You can pay me now or pay me later.” It is after all, cheaper to address the issue now rather than later.

People have been cutting down forests and polluting water and land for centuries, but it is the burning of coal, oil , and gas that has brought our the UUA Channingprise to the brink of disaster. As ice melts, storms get more violent and deserts spread; our major cities now face being overwhelmed by the elements and people.

If one of the earth's systems vital to mankind's existence gets corrupted where is our “Houston” to provide a solution? In my opinion, we are our own Houston's. You and I and everyone else on the UUA Channingprise are the solutions to mankind's environmental problems. Of course, the easiest solution is to prevent the problem.

Like the Apollo 13 crew, time is of the essence.

If we are Houston, what are we doing? What should we do to save our UUA Channingprise?

Individually we can use less energy from fossil fuels. Here are some everyday things you can do: change light bulbs, drive less, walk more, eat organic foods, buy local, change your thermostat settings, eat less meat, recycle more, have energy audits and the list of individual actions goes on and on. In fact you can double your affect by participating in a walk or run for charity. Don't drive to the gym. Run or bicycle. All to the benefit of not only you but your children and grand children.

Individual efforts are not only important but necessary. Alas, they will never be enough to get us where we need to go.

Systemic change is also necessary. Changes at the community, town, state,

country and even global levels are much more profound. We must actively support energy efficiency and environmental legislation at all governmental levels. Interestingly all the ingredients except one are readily available. We have the technology to produce all the energy we need without polluting the environment. Wind turbines are a proven technology, as are solar panels and geothermal wells. We have the money, too. It is just a matter of allocation.

So what is the missing ingredient? Will power. We lack the will to do what is necessary. To know the problem and have the solution but avoid a decision is a moral issue. This is why I agree with Al Gore. This is a moral imperative.

Some of you believe you inherit the planet earth from your forefathers. I prefer to believe that I am borrowing the earth from my seven children and 13 grandchildren..