

## “Capitalism, Climate and Compassion”

UUCGV Sermon by  
Richard Hyland

December 13, 2015

Never let a historian loose. Best keep him/her locked up in the academy with his books and lectures, where his mischief can be contained. Above all, never let him loose in the business world where he is likely to topple all kinds of sacred cows. And never, never let him anywhere near the solemn, sacrosanct realm of industrial management lest he ask embarrassing questions such as this to a refinery manager:

“Where is your cemetery?”

“What cemetery? Aren’t you here to evaluate plant performance?”

“Yes, but first I need to know where you have buried all the improvement initiatives that failed”

But it happened. After years of studying and teaching the history of the Industrial Revolution, the rise of capitalism and their impacts on the world, someone left the academy door ajar and I found myself, as a fledgling industrial management consultant, part of the story I had been teaching. That was 30 years, 5 continents and countless coal mines, power plants, oil refineries, natural gas plants, chemical plants, steel mills, and thousands of managers, engineers, MBAs, equipment operators and maintenance technicians ago. 30 years working within third world national corporations and first world transnational corporations. 30 years watching industrial capitalism transform itself and the world yet again through globalization of markets, finance and communications. A long time living in the belly of the beast as it were, learning and observing its behaviors, impacts and moral ambiguities from the inside out.

In 2010, I came back to the academy through the back door—as an adjunct professor at a University in Houston—and sought to pass on a bit of what I had learned through a new course on Global Energy. Through its development, I confronted the reality of climate change in depth for the first time. Looking back at the course, its purpose was ambitious:

*This is a course on energy and us, specifically how our species has found it, converted it to power and used that power to build and to destroy in the past, in the present and in the conceivable future. Our focus is on a moment in time --1800 to the present—when there was a major shift to fossil sources of energy. This shift changed the solar-based energy/power dynamic that had sustained human life up to that point. It enabled the massive and continuing expansion of power, production and population—the industrial revolution—that sustains us today. But at what cost? And for how long?*

*Only recently has our species begun to realize the magnitude of the impact of this fossil fuel-based expansion on the web of interconnections that make life possible on this planet and its biosphere. We will attempt to answer three questions:*

- *Determine how we as individuals and as country/regions are connected to this planet’s biosphere through our conversion and use of energy.*
- *Determine to what extent our fossil-fuel based expansion threatens this planet’s biosphere.*

- *Determine which strategy we as a global community and as country/regions should adopt to replace fossil-based energy with renewable forms of energy without destabilizing the modern world order as we know it today.*

Things we all should be concerned about, especially now. Here's where I would like to go in the balance of this sermon.

First, I want take up the theme of industrial capitalism again and offer some thoughts on what it has become and where it appears to be taking us as a species and as a planet. The context will be global and the thoughts general, both reflecting my experience. At points, this will intersect with themes raised by Pope Francis in his May 24, 2015 encyclical "Laudato Si" (Praise be to you) and by many others in recent years.

Second, I then want to shift focus to what we can do here in the Grand Valley to respond to what is happening to us, our communities, our earth. The context will be local and the thoughts specific, both reflecting my learning over the past year. In both parts, my intent is to help all of us develop a moral voice on these matters and to find the courage to use it as an act of compassion for each other and for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are part.

Some thoughts on global capitalism then and now:

- Restating and hopefully not oversimplifying what we all probably know, Capitalism is an economic system that arose in 18<sup>th</sup> century England, based on the notion that the factors of production are privately owned and money is invested in business ventures to make a profit. The assumptions were that
  - If free, people would work for their own good which in turn would drive progress
  - In a free market economy, enough goods would then be produced at the lowest possible price to meet demand (Adam Smith's "invisible hand")
  - Competition would force people to make a better product, thus benefitting everyone.

The moral center of this system was self-interest. The goal was profit. Pursuit of this goal would supposedly lead to increased innovation, improved technology, increased production and demand for raw materials, expanding markets and major changes in finance, transportation, agriculture, and communication. The Industrial Revolution that it shaped transformed the world of our ancestors and continues to transform us now. All of us have grown up in and have been shaped by this system and its values, whether we agree with them or not. We are all inside the beast.

- At one level, perhaps, this has been positive. Historically, all over the world, most businesses and landholdings have been small and rooted in local economies which in turn were linked to the land. Think our town of Grand Junction. There, buying and selling is on a face-to-face basis and the profit motive is tempered by a sense of reciprocity and caring for the well-being of the community and the land. Rural and urban are deeply connected and the excesses of the capitalist system are evident and can be controlled.

- But at another level, this has been negative. As small businesses and farmers have been bought up or forced out of business by larger corporate organizations, usually from outside the community, the profit motive is no longer tempered by a sense of reciprocity and caring for the well-being of the community and land. This problem is compounded by migration of displaced rural and small town folks into the teeming cities in quest of jobs and opportunities only to find themselves trapped in urban shantytowns even more marginalized than before. This rural to urban flow has intensified in the last 50 years to the point where most of the World's population now lives in cities. There, connections between people, the community, and the land are weakened or severed altogether and the excesses of capitalism are much harder to control.
- Viewed in this way, capitalist-driven economic development introduced a new mindset and value system that found itself in conflict with an older mindset and value system. The conflict was over use of the land and the nature of our connection to the earth and by implication, each other. Wendell Berry captures this well in his book, The Unsettling of America (1986) by describing these conflicting mindsets or value systems as the “extractive” and the “nurturing”.<sup>i</sup>

“The terms ‘extraction’ and ‘nurture’...describe a division not only between persons but within persons. We are all to some extent the products of an extractive society, and it would be foolish and self-defeating to pretend that we do not bear its stamp....Let me outline as briefly as I can what seem to me the characteristics of these opposite kinds of mind.

I conceive a strip-miner to be a model extractor, and as a model nurturer I take the old-fashioned idea or ideal of a farmer. The extractor is a specialist, an expert; the nurturer is not. The standard of the extractor is efficiency; the standard of the nurturer is care.

The extractor's goal is money, profit; the nurturer's goal is health—his land's health, his own, his family's, his community's, his country's.

Whereas the extractor asks of a piece of land only how much and how quickly it can be made to produce, the nurturer asks a question that is much more complex and difficult: What is its carrying capacity? (That is: How much can be taken from it without diminishing it? What can it produce *dependably* for an indefinite time?).

The extractor wishes to earn as much as possible by as little work as possible; the nurturer expects, certainly, to have a decent living from his work, but his characteristic wish is to work *as well* as possible.

The competence of the extractor is in organization; that of the nurturer is in order—a human order, that is, that accommodates itself both to other order and to mystery.

The extractor typically serves an institution or organization; the nurturer serves land, household, community, place. The extractor thinks in terms of numbers, quantities, “hard facts”; the nurturer in terms of character, condition, quality, kind....

The extractive always involves the abuse or the perversion of nurture and ultimately its destruction.”

If we suppose that these warring mindsets were in rough balance in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the shift to fossil fuel-based industrial capitalism and its rapid expansion over the last two centuries clearly upset that balance in profound ways; ways that we have historically celebrated as “progress”; ways that we have enshrined as core values of who we are as Americans and what we want the world to become. And the world has listened and is indeed replicating those values at an astonishing rate which is precisely what prompted Pope Francis to give moral voice to the nurturer mindset which is at the core of “Laudato Si”.

But there is more to this. What has upset the balance even more is the transmutation of industrial capitalism into financial capitalism, effectively reducing the connections between us and the earth to an abstract measure of value and performance—the price of stocks, bonds and derivatives of all kinds—tracked by the second and summed up in the quarterly report, the ultimate measure of success or failure. For others, the advent of Internet-based stock trading tools circumvented traditional brokerages and made it possible for millions to speculate directly on changes in stock value. At about the same time, the conversion of retirement funds from pensions to 401k stock portfolios has forced millions more into the game willing or not.

Indeed, as Paul Tillich taught us in his book, Courage to Be (1952), we may have found a new God in the last 30 years and built a secular religion around it. It is the God of the market, wise and infallible, whose gospel and worship will bring wealth and prosperity to all if we have faith. (Harvey Cox, “The Market as God: Living in the New Dispensation”, The Atlantic (March, 1999). Or at least wealth to some (Thomas Piketty, Capital in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century (2014). The possibility that this new religion of infinite resources, infinite consumption and “more for less” might be centered on a false God is heretical and is resisted vigorously, especially over the issue of climate change. For to admit that human activity could adversely impact climate is to question the infallibility of the economic system itself and the morality that informs it. It is also a direct threat to investments in fossil fuel-related assets which undergird most of our modern economy.

And so, the issue is joined: capitalism and climate are profoundly and inextricably linked. All reputable climate studies point to a tipping point in the volume of carbon-based emissions beyond which catastrophic changes beyond our control will occur. Apart from political rhetoric, there is little of scientific substance buttressing those who deny such a tipping point, but it is enough to block or slow down the search for solutions.

Clearly, the system is out of control; worse it is sick, very sick. Whether the sickness is terminal or not remains to be seen. The wild card is us, more specifically the growing numbers of us. And what we consume. And what those levels of consumption demand from the earth. So the issue comes down to each of us in our thousands, millions and billions: what we consume, how much we consume, how we live, how we either exploit or care for each other and our communities. It is time perhaps to stop living the ethic of “more for less” in favor of a new ethic of “less is more”.

Heavy stuff, I know, a lot to ponder. Before concluding and as a gesture of relief, I would like to share a few images taken from my Global Energy course. They should serve as a summary and bridge to what we can do.

[ Slide presentation ]

Some thoughts on what we can do here in the Grand Valley:

- We must find our moral voice. We must come up with a new narrative of progress / development based on a nurturing mindset. As UUs, we must not only cite our 7<sup>th</sup> principle, we must live it and proclaim it as an act of compassion. Laudato Si is a beginning.
- Using this narrative, we must develop a strategy for reconstructing our economy/society/region. We must do this from the bottom up tapping everything we have learned about living together in tough times and good times. The Grand Valley Vision 2020 study commissioned by the City of Grand Junction in 2001 is a beginning.
- As it happens, we are already working on such a strategy through the Western Colorado Congress in alliance with faith communities and other groups in the Grand Valley. The goal is to develop and work to implement a plan to:
  - Transition our regional economy and its energy use
  - From fossil to clean energy/power by 2030 or earlier if feasible
  - Without leaving anyone behind
    - Coal, oil and gas workers
    - Related service businesses
    - Dependent communities

Conceivably, if successful, we could be 21<sup>st</sup> century pioneers –leaders not followers—in the innovation and use of renewable energy/power in small communities, thus writing a new chapter on grit and self-sufficiency in the history of life and settlement in the Grand Valley. Why, even Chief Ouray might have approved as the descendants of the whites who stole Ute land finally learned the deep connective human-earth wisdom of the Native Americans.

- None of this will be easy. It will be a long, hard struggle against formidable odds. Nationally, regionally and even locally, trillions of dollars in fossil-fuel related investment are at stake. Opposition will be powerful and determined. After all, we are questioning our own state heritage built largely on extractive enterprise.
- Impossible challenge? Maybe. But there may be guardedly good news from the Paris Climate Summit that adjourned yesterday. And we have little to lose and everything to gain for our children, our grandchildren and generations to come in this beautiful canyon-rimmed land we call home.

---

<sup>i</sup> I have substituted the word “extractive” for “exploitive” used by Berry.