

THE NEW PARADIGM

A sermon preached by Galen Guengerich
All Souls Unitarian Church, New York City
September 21, 2014

One of the scariest passages I've read recently comes near the end of Richard Preston's 1995 book titled *The Hot Zone: The Terrifying True Story of the Origins of the Ebola Virus*. I read the book over the summer as Ebola began to afflict West Africa. In the book, Preston observes that AIDS, Ebola, and other viruses live in the tropical rain forests, which "are the deep reservoirs of life on the planet, containing most of the world's plant and animal species. The rain forests are also its largest reservoirs of viruses, since all living things carry viruses."

When their natural habitat becomes ecologically damaged by deforestation or human settlement, Preston says, viruses leave the tropical biosphere in search of new hosts. "When viruses come out of an ecosystem, they tend to spread in waves through the human population, like echoes from the dying biosphere." Preston lists some of the emerging viruses: Lassa. Monkeypox. Dengue. The hantaviruses. HIV. Ebola Sudan. Ebola Zaire. Ebola Reston. And so on.

Then comes the scary part. Preston writes:

In a sense, the earth is mounting an immune response against the human species. It is beginning to react to the human parasite, the flooding infection of people, the dead spots of concrete all over the planet, the cancerous rot-outs in Europe, Japan, and the United States, thick with replicating primates, the colonies enlarging and spreading and threatening to shock the biosphere with mass extinctions. Perhaps the biosphere does not "like" the idea of five billion humans. Or it could also be said that the extreme amplification of the human race, which has occurred only in the past hundred years or so, has suddenly produced a very large quantity of meat, which is sitting everywhere in the biosphere and may not be able to defend itself against a life form that might want to consume it... The earth's immune system, so to speak, has recognized the presence of the human species and is starting to kick in. The earth is attempting to rid itself of an infection by the human parasite.

According to the standard model of the universe that has dominated Western history, this isn't the way the world is supposed to work. The book of Genesis in the Hebrew Bible opens with the story of creation. God creates day and night out of the formless void, and then in turn creates sea and land, animals and fish, and finally human beings, male and female. The story of creation ends as God pronounces creation good and confers a blessing upon the man and woman, saying, "Be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth, and subdue it: and have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over every living thing that moveth upon the earth."

By this account, human dominion over creation was the design from the very beginning. In more sophisticated moments, we usually call this feature of creation the great chain of being, with humans at the top.

There are two problems with this dominion doctrine: it's not true to the text, nor is it true to life. Ellen Davis, a professor of biblical and practical theology at the Duke University Divinity School, explains this passage in a recent interview with Krista Tippett on NPR. Davis translates the phrase "have dominion over the creatures" as "exercise skilled mastery among the creatures." She acknowledges that humans occupy a special place of power, privilege, and responsibility in the world. But, she says, "the condition for our exercise of skilled mastery is set by the prior blessing of the creatures of sea and sky that they are to be fruitful and multiply." She adds, "So whatever it means for us to exercise skilled mastery, it cannot undo that prior blessing."

In other words, the measure of our mastery as humans is the extent to which creation as a whole flourishes. If creation doesn't flourish under our mastery, according to the biblical account, then we lose the right to exercise our mastery. Indeed, by the sixth chapter of Genesis, human beings had already screwed things up so badly that God decided to wipe out all but a handful of humans with a great flood.

Whether this account is based on historical fact or storybook fancy, it suggests an enduring truth: human beings are a contingent element of the natural world, not a necessary element. And the more pressure human beings put on the rest of the natural world, the greater the chances that it will fight back and take us down, which is Preston's point. The earth has what Preston dubs an "immune system" that eventually will come to its own defense.

It's hard to look at the world today and argue that human mastery has enabled creation to flourish. All the evidence suggests the opposite. At present, we're in the middle of what scientists call the Sixth Great Extinction. Whether it's loss of intestinal bacteria from overuse of antibiotics, or insects from overuse of pesticides, or birds and animals from loss of habitat, the biodiversity upon which life depends is disappearing at an alarming rate. If past extinctions are a guide, between 70 and 90% of all species will be gone before this extinction ends. We may be among them.

In addition, sea levels are rising, deserts are expanding, and rain forests are shrinking. Oh, yes: and carbon dioxide levels also continue to climb. Skilled mastery

among the creatures? More like brute perversity, especially when it comes to the evidence of our negative impact, which continues to be a matter of heated debate.

In my view, people who quibble about environmental evidence today are like tobacco companies in the 1950's and 1960's. As long as they could point to a few people who smoked all their lives and didn't get lung cancer, Big Tobacco could insist that smoking didn't cause cancer. In so doing, the companies were technically correct in terms of logic, but utterly wrong in terms of everything else.

Today, we mostly know what's happening with the environment. We mostly know why it's happening. And we have a good idea of what we could do to solve the problems – or at least to mitigate them. Knowing enough isn't the problem.

Even so, we mostly persist in not acting decisively – and not because the problems are too complex to understand or the solutions are too new-fangled to implement. Though our problems may be relatively new, our perversity in the face of them is as old-fashioned as the book of Genesis. In the story of the flood, humanity was taken down not by ignorance, but by hubris, greed, and narcissism. Over time, our hubris, greed, and narcissism may take us down too.

Some of you know of my fondness for the music of the punk band Bad Religion. Greg Graffin, the lead singer and songwriter for the band, has a PhD in the natural sciences from Cornell University. He has also published several books along the way, including his most recent book, *Anarchy Evolution: Faith, Science, and Bad Religion in a World without God*.

The band's most recent album is a truly commendable body of work titled *True North*. One song on the album that I find especially compelling is titled "Crisis Time." It begins:

There's a feeling about myself that I can't understand
It's a foreboding sense that I see all around the land
When the wheel of fortune turns progressively depraved
It's the manifestation of a biospheric decay

The chorus follows with this warning:

Keep yourself in line, there's no design
The new paradigm is crisis time

The decay of our biosphere, Graffin observes, has come about because the wheel of fortune has turned progressively depraved – the depravity of hubris, the depravity of greed, the depravity of narcissism. And we rightly feel a sense of foreboding as a result.

Why the foreboding? As Graffin succinctly puts it, there's no design – at least not one that ensures human beings will flourish. There's no God in heaven to guarantee that, as the scripture puts it, "all things work together for good," either in this world or

the next. Nor is the biosphere set up to preference human life over other forms of existence. There's no design. We have to keep ourselves in line.

By accepting that humans are contingent and not necessary, we enter a new paradigm, which Graffin terms "crisis time." The word "crisis" comes from an ancient Greek verb that means to make a judgment or to decide. In classical Greek usage, it was often used to mark the turning point in the course of a disease, the moment when the patient took a turn either for better or for worse. In that sense at least, the song is right: this is crisis time. We're at a turning point in the health of the planet.

If we decide to keep ourselves in line, we need a clear sense of where we as human beings fit into the biosphere as a whole. We tend to think of ourselves as independent beings, self-sufficient and self-reliant. In fact, the opposite is true. As humans, we are utterly dependent upon the people and world around us. We depend upon parents to conceive us, plants and animals to give their lives for our daily nourishment, trees to reverse our cycle of taking in oxygen and giving off carbon dioxide, the sun to warm the atmosphere and light our path. We depend upon the air for breath and the sea for water. In every respect, we are utterly dependent.

Our dependence on the people and world around us has a flip-side: they also depend on us. We have a responsibility to sustain the people and the world that sustain us in return, which I call the ethic of gratitude. Simply stated, it insists that because we personally take what we need from the people and world around us, we need to take personally what the people and world around us need. Either we're all part of the great flourishing, or we'll all be part of the Great Extinction.

My hope is that our presence here today signifies our collective decision to take personally what the people and world around us need. The problem, of course, is that they need a lot. Looking at the evidence, especially the environmental evidence, it's easy to get overwhelmed and discouraged.

Allow me to suggest optimism as an antidote. Voltaire's witty and exuberant 1758 novel *Candide*, subtitled *Optimism*, recounts the adventures and misfortunes of young Candide and his optimistic tutor Pangloss. Endowed at the start with everything necessary for a happy and successful life, Candide suffers the opposite: every conceivable misfortune, tragedy, and form of abuse. At the end of the tale, however, Voltaire suggests how one can, as he puts it in his most famous phrase, crush the horror. He says, "We need to work our fields," or as it is often translated, "make our gardens grow."

According to Voltaire, saving the world is like growing a crop. We need to work our fields. We don't need to work other people's fields, or fields in different or better locations, but our fields. And we don't need to ponder our fields, or exclaim how weedy they are, or how poor the soil is, or compare them with the best possible fields or the worst. We need to work our fields. The root meaning of the Latin word optimism is "ops," which means power. Optimism comes from the power we have to do the work that is ours to do.

For many among us, today's work involves participating in the People's Climate March. For my part, I'm heartened by the first word of the title: it's the people's march.

I was reminded by my wife Holly of another people's campaign, the International Campaign to Ban Landmines, or ICBL. Twenty years ago, more than 100 million landmines smothered large swaths of the globe in a blanket of death. When six non-governmental organizations launched a worldwide campaign to ban the mines, most government and military leaders, including those from the United States, thought their goal was naïve and utopian.

The people in power turned out to be wrong. Jody Williams, the ICBL's founding coordinator, explains why: "The [NGO community] did not wait for anyone to appoint them leaders on the issue," she says. "They saw that a critical problem had to be addressed and they took it up."

Within five years, the ICBL achieved what many had said was impossible. In 1997, representatives from 122 governments traveled to Ottawa to sign the Mine Ban Treaty. A few weeks later, Jody Williams and the ICBL jointly received the Nobel Peace Prize. In conferring the prize, the Nobel Committee pointed out that the ICBL won not only because it had achieved its lofty goal, but also because of the remarkable model it had used to realize its vision, relying on the power of the world's people to demand that their governments act, rather than vice-versa.

We can do the same for the environment – if we take the needs of our environment personally, which we should. It's time to do the work that is ours to do. Wield the influence that is ours to wield. Walk the march that is ours to walk. Conserve the energy that is ours to conserve. As Clarissa Estes puts it in today's Common Meditation, "Ours is not the task of fixing the entire world all at once, but of stretching out to mend the part of the world that is within our reach."

One way or another, this marks a turning point. It's crisis time – time for us to decide.