

Michael Foster

guest sermon at University Unitarian Church

Seattle, Washington
26 November 2017

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<http://www.uuchurch.org/2017/reflection-michael-foster-november-26-2017/>

1,761 words

Bold added for names of persons and groups

What would you do if you knew that all life to come depends on your action today?
Because it does.

One year ago I stood here with the **Plant-for-the-Planet** kids, thanking you for sharing a generous Sunday plate collection. Those are the kids who are suing the government — the State of Washington and federal government — for a climate plan to preserve their lives.

They told you their three-point plan to reverse global warming. Their three-point plan is pretty simple: Plant one trillion trees: that's how many they need to get ten years of pollution back into the ground. Leave the fossil fuels in the ground. (It *will* be the law someday; they can't wait that long, though.) And combat poverty with climate justice — and that really speaks to me and you: the wealthy, the educated, the people who have profited and comforted ourselves on the fossil fuels that we burn.

If we just do those three things, we preserve the web of life. We leave them a home. If we do less than that, we burn it all down.

So that's what we were here doing with the kids on Sunday morning in October a year ago. Two days later, Tuesday morning, I was arrested for closing the emergency shut-off valve on the Keystone 1 pipeline in North Dakota. That's the pipeline you've been reading about — I guess they opened it up again.

It *is* an emergency and I took emergency action, because those kids inspire me, and I believe what we're doing is a crime.

At the same time that I did that, four friends stopped the flow of oil coming in from Canada from the tar sands pipelines in four states: Washington, Montana, North Dakota, and Minnesota. The five of us, with bolt cutters, stopped 15% of the nation's oil supply for a day.

Jay O'Hara, who spoke¹ here in this room the night before, was making phone calls from Seattle to the pipeline companies to tell them, ten minutes ahead of time, that they needed to shut down the flow of oil and stop the pump stations.

Sam, a friend from Vermont, live-streamed me onsite so that the world and the pipeline companies would know this was not a prank.

I turned the valve. I felt with my two hands 590,000 barrels of tar sands oil come to a stop. I locked it shut and placed flowers on the chain.

What can one person do to save the world? A heck of a lot more than I ever imagined.

It's not enough — not yet. But I didn't act alone. I was only able to do what I did because of communities like this one. And when we act together, in civil disobedience, we become a force to change the laws.

In an emergency, the law to follow — the only law — is to preserve life.

The crime committed that day in North Dakota was when the pipeline company opened the valve and the flow of oil in the Keystone 1 pipeline resumed: a crime against humanity and nature, for a pipeline that should never have been built.

For one moment in my life (as somebody who has flown in airplanes, somebody who has owned twelve gasoline cars, somebody who has heated my home and fed my kids with food from around the world), for one moment in history, I stood on the right side of the law.

Now you and I decide whether what I did makes any difference: because you and I decide how long human history will go on.

My jury in North Dakota did try me last month and found me guilty of two felonies and a misdemeanor: mischief, conspiracy, and trespass. I was found not guilty of "reckless endangerment." Apparently I did not show disregard for human life.

I will be facing a maximum 21 years of possible risk. My sentencing is January 18. (You can follow the story online.)

I'm on a short timeline now — kind of like our planet, kind of like our home. And now I kind of know what it feels like to be hanging by a thread.

So speaking with you really matters. I'm counting on you. Your response determines what happens after my sentencing.

¹ Jay O'Hara's 2016 talk in Seattle is on youtube: "[The Moral Necessity of Climate Change](#)"

If you know any of the folks on the climate action team — I've seen a couple of them here this morning (and maybe they'll raise their hands, I don't know) — but you can usually find them out here in the social hall. They're really the reason why I'm here in this community in the first place, because of the amazing work that they've been doing in Seattle.

You can also find friends of mine at **350-Seattle** (another group that I helped start). They are doing the best work on climate anywhere on the planet. The "kayaktivists" came from Seattle. Shutting down the banks is ongoing right now. We have passed resolutions in City Hall to divest our city and many institutions from the fossil fuel companies that our tearing apart my childrens' home.

I can't think of a more joyful and purposeful way to spend time and meet new friends than in the common struggle that's taking place in church basements, in folding chairs, all over this continent.

Planning with friends for weeks and then months — friends who became family — is how we shut off the pipelines.

Three of the five valve turners happen to be UUs [Unitarian Universalists]. A fourth is a UU who is facing trial for making a call to the pipeline company from Minnesota.

In this same room, in this pulpit, I heard **Kathleen Dean Moore** speak² and teach me that when your house is on fire you don't argue whether it's natural or human-caused. When your house is on fire you throw everything you've got into putting out that fire, and you wake the neighbors. Because there are lives — there are lives in there that depend on you and me putting out that fire.

There are half as many creatures on Earth, she said, as on the first Earth Day. That's my lifetime. She said that everything I do to privilege my children is making their futures unlikely. Now, how am I to deal with that, as a parent?

There is no sitting on the sideline anymore. We are either poisoning or protecting everything we love. She called this "the hinge decade," when eleven or twelve thousand years of human civilization has evolved to this incredible moment where our technology and our science will help us decide what happens for the next ten or eleven thousand years — and whether life and civilization will be anything like what we know.

In this room I heard **Tim deChristopher** describing³ his time in prison for civil disobedience that stopped an illegal land auction of oil and gas leases in Utah. He brought up **Martin Luther King's Letter from Birmingham Jail**: "When a person challenges an unjust law and is willing to face the punishment, it arouses the conscience of the community and shows ultimate respect for the law."

² A version of Kathleen Dean Moore's 2013 talk is on youtube: ["If Your House Is on Fire"](#)

³ Tim DeChristopher's talk is on youtube: ["The Power of Civil Disobedience"](#)

I want to thank also a member of this community, **Richard Gammon***, a scientist UW [the University of Washington], who worked on the first United Nations' climate science report many years ago. His testimony in the civil disobedience trial of **the Delta 5** in Everett, Washington, for blocking an oil train for eight hours moved the jury — shocked and informed them of the dire emergency they face.

I also want to thank **UU Reverend Fred Small** in Boston who taught me that the economy in the U.S. is as entangled in the fossil fuels today as it was in slavery in the 1850s. Now, slavery was wrong before it was illegal. Right? We can all agree on that.

Someday what we're doing will be illegal, but not soon enough for our kids. Burning fossil fuels today is deadly, genocidal, child abuse. We are addicts, hopelessly unable to stop ourselves from poisoning and destroying everything we love.

This intergenerational trauma is something I can't live with anymore. I can't participate in it. I've stopped the flying. I don't eat meat. I sold my car, I sold my *electric* car. I stopped buying stuff.

I'm not going to profit from destroying everything I am, every memory I have, every relationship.

It's all *here*. This is *home*, and *we are it*.

So what do I need from you? Live the three-point plan. Plant your fair share of trees: it's about 150 per person on Earth (makes a trillion). Keep the fossil fuels in the ground — any way and every way you can think of, every day: personally, socially, professionally. And combat poverty with climate justice. Because people are dying, a million people are dying each year from climate-related problems. We hear about refugees, we've seen what's happening in Syria: these are all climate-derived disasters.

So we are either the slave owners or the new abolitionists.

Does life go forward? Or is it too late?

You and I decide — right now.

Pogo in 1970 (the Sunday comic strip character) said, "We have met the enemy and he is us." Well, we've been polluting the planet for a long time.

****Carl Sagan** years ago said, [that] you are alive at the most important moment in the history of life. Anything else you're interested in is not going to happen if you can't breathe the air and drink the water. So whatever you want to do, don't sit this one out. Do something.

Carl is no longer with us, to do something. It's you and me. And I say, we are nature defending itself against us. Our lives are hanging by a thread, and we depend on each other.

Thank you very much for inviting me here.

[huge applause]

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NOTES:

<http://www.uuchurch.org/social-justice/climate-action/cat-archives-2016-2017/>

* **Richard Gammon** is an Emeritus Professor of Chemistry, Oceanography, and Adjunct Professor of Atmospheric Sciences at the University of Washington. He will describe recent scientific findings that are likely to prompt amendments to the 2013 forecasts of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC).

Dr. Gammon's contributions to climate science include measuring atmospheric carbon dioxide at a global network of monitoring sites for NOAA, publishing dozens of articles on greenhouse gas cycles in relation to climate and climate change, and many impactful presentations on climate topics for scientific and lay audiences. He is a member of UUC.

****Carl Sagan** - [need to find exact quote and citation]