

September 2025

Essay. Journey to the Most Fundamental Thing

I want to tell you the story of two realizations I've had. They were like slow motion epiphanies, and I regret they took so long.

It was when I left the busy world and joined academia that I came to the first of these realizations. As I began teaching and researching for my courses, I concluded that 35 years after Earth Day we were actually in worse shape than when we began in 1970. American environmentalism was failing. We were failing—and we still are. Air and water pollution are better, but due especially to climate change and biodiversity loss, we are on the cusp of a ruined planet.

That realization led to a big shift for me: I became a writer—writing book after book and article after article on what went wrong and what we should now do. Three of the books were published by Yale Press, one at MIT, and one at Routledge. So, serious stuff.

As I worked harder and harder with the data, and harder at understanding, I became more and more concerned about our future. Both our environmental problems and our social problems, I concluded, are so challenging because they are outgrowths of our terribly flawed system of political economy. Because of that, deep and difficult change is needed.

And, so, I became rather radical in my views, somewhere a bit leftward of Pope Francis and Pope Bernie. My favorite banner at the climate demonstrations I attend is: "System change, not climate change," and I often quote the Rev. William Barber: "What we need is transformative change."

My books and articles are full of policy analysis and policy recommendations. Mostly my writings pursue the design of a new system of political economy, one which would give clear priority to people and place and planet.

This work did not ignore the imperative of value change as part of system change. Indeed, some of my books quote the compelling and highly instructive Earth Charter at length.

Eventually I came to the second realization, another epiphany-like one. I concluded that value change is not just part of the equation of the future, it is the most fundamental thing. I stated this realization at a conference and that quote quickly went viral. Indeed, it is the only thing I ever wrote or said that has gone viral. Here it is.

“I used to think the top global environmental problems were biodiversity loss, ecosystem collapse, and climate change. I thought that with 30 years of good science we could address these problems. But I was wrong. The top environmental problems are selfishness, greed, and apathy, and to deal with these we need a spiritual and cultural transformation. And we scientists and lawyers don't know how to do that.”

Without serious value change, attractive policy ideas will languish. Climate action will stall, or move in reverse, as it has.

I have expanded on this realization in a poem. Here it is.

New Consciousness

Decades of discourse
scientists, economists, lawyers,
and here we are. Stuck.
That discourse cannot do

what must be done:
Reach to the human heart.
The core problems are
greed, arrogance, and apathy,
our dominant values astray.
What we need now is
not more analysis but
a spiritual awakening
to a new consciousness.
So, bring on the preachers and prophets!
The poets and philosophers!
Bring on the story tellers, musicians, artists!
The teachers of ancient wisdoms!
Call them to strike the chords
of our shared humanity,
of our close kin to wild things.

So, let's agree that a transformation in values is now essential. But what new cultural values are needed? What new consciousness is needed? Here is my take on that.

- Instead of viewing nature as something "other" to be dominated and exploited, we will see ourselves as part of nature, as offspring of its evolutionary process, and as wholly dependent on its vitality and the services it provides. We will see the natural world as holding intrinsic value and as having rights that create for us the duty of ecological stewardship.
- Rather than tolerate gross economic, social, gender, and political inequality, we will prize and demand a high measure of equality and social justice in all these spheres, a real democracy.

- Materialism, consumerism, and the primacy of ever-more possessions and economic growth will give way to a culture that grants priority to family and personal relationships, learning, experiencing nature, service, spirituality, music and dance, sports, the arts, and play.
- Instead of today's corrosive individualism and narcissism, we will foster a powerful sense of community and social solidarity, in all venues from local to cosmopolitan (from me to we).
- We will no longer discount the future by focusing so intently on the short term, but instead take the long view and recognize our duties to human and natural communities well into the future. We will develop ways to give future generations political standing in the present.
- Violence will no longer be glorified either at home or abroad, nor wars easily accepted, and peace will be a priority.
- The spreading of hate and invidious divisions will be rejected. We will move from racism, sexism, and nativism to tolerance, an embrace of cultural diversity, and protection of the rights of all.

I want to stress that value change in these directions is not something we simply wait on to happen, taking its own sweet time. We know a lot about how to transform our culture and values, and we'd better get on with it.

How then do we escape the fetters of anthropocentrism, materialism, militarism, and creeping authoritarianism—and do it before it is too late? Here are eight things that can change social values and have done so in the past:

- Crises. Crises can and will delegitimize the status quo. Crises happen. We must be crisis-ready.
- Social movements. Social movements, protests, and demonstrations are all about raising consciousness.
- Leadership and storytelling. We need a new story, a new dream, and we need leaders from many communities to tell it, again and again.
- The faith communities. They can reach more people faster than anyone, and they speak with credibility, from the heart.
- The arts. Here I mean all forms of artistic, creative expression. See above poem.
- Instructive models. We need to join in seeding the landscape with communities and individuals living the new values every day. When crises come, people will look up and see examples of a better way.
- Education. Of course. Schools must not shy away from teaching about social ethics and cultural values. Education happens in many ways, including social marketing.
- New triggers. Tamp down the endless invocations to wrong values like materialism and consumerism. Let's face it: advertising is a scourge.

So, we are called in this moment to big things.

We are motivated by our dreams. We are sustained by our hopes. We are nourished by our companions. Here is my dream.

Independence Day

If I could be what I'm clearly not,
I would lay my hands upon the world,
call down a blessing of peace and freedom
from hunger, pain, illiteracy and oppression.

I would sing hosannas to Pope Francis,
Thomas Berry and Reverend Barber,
and to 21 kids who sued for climate
against government by failure.

I would appoint an ambassador
to every living species and grant them
plenipotentiary powers of protection,
just as I would grant such powers to all
mothers for their children and charges.

I would call upon the Devil,
for who would know better,
to disclose every rancid scheme
and deplorable machination
of the rich and powerful, including
those hiding under corporate shells.

I would pardon all those unjustly
imprisoned or prosecuted. And
I would forgive all those gullible
and duped, or simply uninformed,
not requiring their repentance but
merely a promise to use good sense—
while we all remember the truth
self-evident at the Founding
that we are all created equal.

My best to you, Gus