**Dispelling the Illusions behind Our Current Crises**

Though I can’t bear to watch the news anymore, I stay up to date with what is happening. My subscription to *The New York Times* and information on online news outlets allow me to filter things a bit and keep my blood pressure down. **2** With the backdrop of the tragic fires in California, where so many have experienced the horrific reality of Global Climate Change, our President begins the official withdrawal from the Paris Accord. I just finished reading a couple of books – *Falter* by Bill McKibben and *The Uninhabitable Earth,* by David Wallace-Wells. **3** **Grim**. I’ll give you a quick list of the chaotic events they see before us. **4** Unbearable/unlivable heat, hunger, drowning, wildfire, natural disasters beyond what we’ve can imagine, loss of fresh water, dying oceans, unbreathable air, plagues of warming, economic collapse, and systems collapse.

**5** Is there hope? Yes, both of these authors express some hope, yet neither one of these are books you want to read before turning off the lights at night. We delight in Pope Francis who speaks out against our furthering of climate change and on behalf of refugees, many of whom are on the move because of climate catastrophes. And at the same time there are those bishops out there who are diligently working on trying to take him down.

I don’t mean to be a Debbie-Downer here. Yet, sometimes it all feels like it’s a bit too much, doesn’t it? There are times, many of them, when an almost overpowering feeling arises that would cause a rational person to run about crying, **6** “The sky is falling!”

Yet we stay the course . . . in hope. So rather than resembling Chicken Little, we hope to resemble a sparrow in another story.

***7*** *It was a chilly fall day when the farmer spied the little sparrow lying on its back in the middle of his field. The farmer stopped his plowing, looked down at the frail, feathered creature and inquired, “Why are you lying upside down like that?”*

*“I heard the sky is going to fall today,” replied the bird.*

*The old farmer chuckled. “And I suppose your spindly little legs can hold up the sky?”*

*“One does what one can,” replied the plucky sparrow.*

From *Chicken Soup for the Unsinkable Soul*

In June, Carol Dempsey reminded us that we need to understand **8** “how the Scriptures we love are contributing to those systems of thinking and acting that is causing discrimination and injustice in our world today. In other words, how are the Scriptures contributing to present-day patriarchy, kyriarchy, abusive hierarchy, racism, gender discrimination, heteronormatism, ethnocentrism, classism, ableism, anti-Semitism, imperialism, and marginalization in our world today.” We could add to her list Climate Armageddon.

It is important that we unpack not only the Scriptures, but **all** of our stories that have informed and formed us as to our purpose and place in the universe, and to apply a curiosity to them beyond our ordinary and uncritical understanding of them. This is not meant as yet another guilt trip; we are conditioned to believe and tell the stories as they have been given to us. It’s not about blame; it’s the way things are. But maybe they don’t have to stay that way. Or perhaps, *we* don’t.

As David Wallace-Wells puts it, **9** “. . . the roots of [our current] crises lie in the stories we have been telling ourselves, namely, the myth of progress, the myth of human centrality, and the myth of our separation from nature. All are more dangerous for the fact that we have forgotten they are myths.”

While David and others call these stories myths in a pejorative sense, we understand term “myth” in a very different way. Myths are powerful stories for us, and while not factual, they contain truths to live by, as long as we recall that they are *myths* and not fact. So, let’s look at these as “illusions,” and **10** unmask the falsehoods that have led us down this path – The Illusions of progress, of human centrality, and of our separation from nature.

We begin with . . .

**11 The Illusion of Progress**

We live in a society – worldwide, but particularly so in this country – where progress and growth are expected, even demanded. This is not simply the domain of corporations and their shareholders who expect ever-growing profits and return on investments. **\*** Ordinary folks, who presume that they are not so ordinary, are studying their genes to see how they can live longer. When a downhill ski resort’s runs no longer offer enough challenge, it’s time to hire a helicopter to drop you off at some remote slope – possibly across the world from you. More and bigger always seem to be better. Those McMansions that continue to be erected over modest homes are, in my humble opinion, a blight in what were once homey communities. **12** And cutting down forests so that we can eat more meat or build those McMansions is destroying the very air we breathe.

**13** I wonder if those of us in religious life haven’t also been infected with this expectation of growth. In recent years we have reframed our conversation about our disappointment around the three D’s of religious life (death, decline, and diminishment) with more talk about legacy, and with more hopeful language about our reality and future. So, we seem to be not wringing our hands quite as much as we were about twenty some years ago. Perhaps we have made peace with our reality and are trusting that God really does know what she’s doing. Still, I believe we hold a deep disappointment that the “nones” are not interested in becoming nuns, and that all of the energy and work we continue to invest in justice yields such limited results.

Yes. We do rest in the hope – the promise of the Gospel – the Good News. Still, as participants in this culture, the storyline of progress and of achievement continues to run in the background of our thoughts. How can it not? So, it is important that we recognize it – that we name it.

The problem that living out of the illusion of progress – always better – always bigger – always more – is that it is not only *not* possible given our finite resources, but that acting out of this illusion corrupts and destroys the very resources we need for life. Moreover, it destroys the other lovely creatures with whom we share life on this precious planet. And they were never given any choices about this.

Now no one is cutting down the forests because they want to bring species to extinction or threaten our own quality of life, or that of their children. It is about unbridled progress. It is about consumerism. It is about more. It is about the bottom line – which is . . . an illusion.

**14** We should listen to the words of Greta Thunberg at UN Headquarters, “People are suffering. People are dying. Entire ecosystems are collapsing. We are in the beginning of a mass extinction. And all you can talk about is money and fairytales of eternal economic growth. How dare you!”

We dare because we are captivated by . . .

**15 The Illusion of** **Human Centrality**

In Derrick Jensen’s *The Myth of Human Supremacy,* he discussesthat “one of our culture’s most pernicious assumptions” is “that humans are the pinnacle of evolution and the supreme species on the planet.” Can you imagine where that kind of thinking takes us?

Let’s look at Scripture. **16** Psalm 8 says, “*What are human beings that you are mindful of them, mortals that you care for them? Yet you have made them a little lower than God, and crowned them with glory and honor. You have given them dominion over the works of your hands; you have put all things under their feet . . .” (Psalms 8:4-6)* If we look around us, it looks like we took *that* Scripture passage seriously.

Even if we adopt the stance of stewardship, rather than dominion, we still place ourselves self-importantly over all other creatures. We know what’s best, whether we truly do or not. Take kudzu, for instance. **17** Kudzu is a vine, native to Southeast Asia, that was promoted by the Department of the Interior in 1933 to curb erosion. It has been voraciously swallowing buildings and forests in the South ever since.

**18** (Just to explain this picture . . . these words hang over the entrance gate to Dachau. I believe similar signs were in place at all the concentration camps. The German words translate to “Work makes you free.”

I recently listened to an interview of Alex Hershaft, a holocaust survivor who, rather than addressing human rights, focuses on the justice issue of animal rights, comparing Nazi treatment of Jews to the treatment of animals in slaughterhouses. As he sees it, cruelty to human beings has its roots in cruelty to animals.[[1]](#endnote-1) If we can easily separate calves from their mothers **19** – if we can stand the sound of their wailing, it’s not so difficult to separate human children from their parents. If scientists can perform horrendous experiments on defenseless monkeys and beagles to test a new cleaner or cosmetic, it’s not such a stretch to consider human experimentation. Of course, it’s hard to see this when our only connection to those who suffer is a **20** packaged black forest ham or the newest shampoo in a pretty bottle.

This suffering that we don’t see has a devastating effect on the world we do see. Are we worried about fresh water? **21** “Producing one pound of beef takes an estimated 1,581 gallons of water, which is roughly as much as the average American uses in 100 showers.”[[2]](#endnote-2) Are we concerned about greenhouse gases? “Animal agriculture is responsible for 18 percent of greenhouse gas emissions, more than the combined exhaust from all transportation.”[[3]](#endnote-3)

Paul Farmer, a medical anthropologist and physician, said, **22** “The idea that some lives matter less is the root of all that is wrong with the world.”

This brings us to

**23 The Illusion of Our Separation from Nature**

It is only within the last few years that I started referring to this planet upon which we live as **24** ***Earth***, rather than **25** “THE earth.” I thank my friend Sharon Zayac at Jubilee Farm in Springfield for that understanding. Using “the” has a way of separating us from *it*. “The earth.” I can look at it, study it, dissect it, mine it, mess with its weather with impunity, because it is a thing. And if I go back to those earlier illusions, if I am separate from it and my life is of central importance, then I can do whatever I want with it. That’s not going so well for us. Is it?

The most recent thing that comes to mind for me are news stories about the radioactive soil that the U.S. created in the Marshall Islands, by testing atomic weapons there 67 times. When we were done, we gathered the mess altogether and encased it in concrete. According to a report from the Los Angeles Times, climate change is breaking it open. **26**

Remember that Chiffon Margarine commercial? <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ijVijP-CDVI> Ironically, that margarine with its hydrogenated oils, those trans fats that we created in some laboratory that we thought were so great at the time, well, they cause heart disease. Looks like we shouldn’t have fooled with Mother Nature. We need to do is heal our hearts.

If we truly understood, as the naturalist John Muir learned through his explorations in the wild places, we would know in the depths of our souls that, **27** “When we tug at a single thing in nature, we find it attached to the rest of the world.” Of course, since we are necessarily part of that world, every single thing in nature is attached to us, and we to it.

Last week I was at Jubilee Farm, and when I walked through the labyrinth, I enjoyed how high the prairie grasses were that guided the way. At one point I stopped and stared at the **28** dried goldenrods before me. The words that came to me were, “You are important. I don’t know what you do in the world, but you are important.” Later I recalled that goldenrod is an important food source for **29** butterflies, including the monarch. I am glad that there are places that promote the growing of the milkweed and the goldenrod. These “weeds” and the monarchs that depend on them are important.

After that I walked over to the spot where there are these big huge rocks with fossils of shells **30**. I remembered Arlene Flaherty coming to San Francisco, and asking me to take her to Muir Woods so that she could visit the ancestors – the redwood trees. So last week, while I was at Jubilee Farm, I reached out and hugged the fossils, the ancestors. There was a gnat walking on one of them, and I leaned over and told her “You are important. I don’t know what you do in the world, but you are important.” And as gazed at her, it was as if she echoed those very same words back to me, “You are important. I don’t know what you do in the world, but you are important.”

**31 The Illusion of Our Separation from God**

There is another illusion connected to all of these, and I’m sure you’re already thinking of it. As people of faith – as people who live out of their awareness of the Divine living through us, with us and in us, our current crisis also lies in the illusion of our separation from God. Richard Rohr states that **32** “the only thing that separates you from God is the *thought* that you are separate from God.” I would add to this that our thoughts and ongoing stories create separation between us and all of creation – separation even from our very selves.

Jesus knew that there was no separation between him and his Abba. He lifted bread, knowing that there was no separation between the bread and himself, nor between his disciples, with whom he shared everything, and himself.

I could name many other illusions under which we fall from time to time: the illusion of control, the illusion of certainty, the illusion of permanence. Just last week in Richard Rohr’s daily reflections he wrote, “For too long science and faith fell into the ‘sin of certainty,’ each claiming Truth only for themselves and ignoring the beautifully symbiotic relationship that exists between them.” As preachers of Truth, we Dominicans need to say that it is time to take off both our shoes of dominion and our robes of certainty, **33** for we stand on Holy Ground of which we occasionally catch glimpses of its Divine Nature.

On November 5th – just this year – a declaration, signed by more than 11,000 scientists, was released to the media. It stated that we are in the midst of – a planetary climate emergency, and that we humans will endure “untold suffering” if massive changes aren’t made to the biosphere. Rather than plunging us into despair, into guilt-ridden inaction, this intensifies our call to do what we can. Working together communally, nationally, and internationally we can face this moment with courage. Consider what the Dominican Sisters have done in initiating the Climate Solutions Fund. What other creative ways can we use our resources and our personal commitment? Let’s think and act beyond recycling!!

The document also states, **34** "Scientists have a moral obligation to clearly warn humanity of any catastrophic threat and to 'tell it like it is,'" What is our obligation as preachers of Truth?

**35** The scientists who signed the document did not do so with an attitude of despair and resignation. They believe that it is still possible to take actions to meet this challenge. What are the ways that we can partner with others? And where do we find hope? One voice of hope is Rebecca Solnit. In *Hope in the Dark* she writes not of certainty, rather, she says, “Hope is a story of uncertainty – a coming to terms with the risk involved in not knowing what comes next, which is more demanding than despair. In a way, more frightening, and immeasurably more rewarding.” So, I guess you could say, if we want to be people of hope, we must be people of great courage.

She also writes, **36** “Authentic hope requires clarity – seeing the troubles in this world, and imagination – seeing what might lie beyond the situations that are perhaps not inevitable and immutable.” Wow! “Not inevitable and immutable.” That is great hope, seeing what lies beyond. It reminds me of the 12th chapter of Hebrews, where after reading of the many acts of faith in the ages before, that we are encouraged to remember that we are surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses, which I now believe to include other earthlings besides human saints, and fix our eyes on Jesus who draws us into a future we don’t know.

This is the reason I’m putting this out here this evening for our reflection. We need to see with clarity, the severity of the situation before us. We need to see with clarity, the illusions that have made this crisis possible. We need to see with clarity our own part in this mess. (Again, this is not for the sake of a guilt trip.) We need to speak up and speak out. We need to learn from others about what we can do, where we are. Again in the words of Rebecca Solnit, **37** “Problems are our work; we deal with them in order to survive or to improve the world. And so, to face them is better than turning away from them, than burying them and denying them. To face them can be an act of hope, but only if you remember that they’re not all there is. Hope is not a door, but a sense that there might be a door at some point.”

We of all people, we Dominicans, are people of hope. When discouragement and fears arise, when the current crises just seem too overwhelming, I wonder, as the farmer did, how these spindly little legs could possibly do any good. Then I recall the words of one of my teachers. **38** “Wait, wait, listen, listen. Forget the ‘I.’ You’ll know what to do.”

We need to find this waiting place, this place of contemplation. Cathy Bertrand wrote, “Contemplation is more than just sitting quietly. It involves getting in touch with the Spirit within, and that takes some discipline. When we can keep going to our deepest core with all its passions, that perspective changes our priorities, it changes our behaviors, it changes our beliefs. A contemplative approach to life is a way of being and if we embrace it, it can change everything.”

Retreats. I’ll bet all of you can remember some gems from some of yours. Of course, there was last week’s goldenrod. And I recall the first retreat I attended as a Dominican Sister of San Rafael . . . it was a Mary O’Driscoll retreat in 1994. One particular gem was a poem she read by Wendell Berry. It is entitled, **39** “February 2, 1968,” which was, by the way, the time of the Tet Offensive.

*In the dark of the moon, in flying snow, in the dead of winter, war spreading, families dying, the world in danger, I walk the rocky hillside, sowing clover.*

The times that I have gone on retreat at Jubilee Farm, I enjoy joining the sisters for morning prayer. Last week we were reading Psalm 119, from *Psalms for Praying* by Nan Merrill. **40**

*This is how the veil is lifted,*

*how the soul is filled with*

*truth and light.*

*Then we will not judge others, and*

*we will radiate love and healing*

*to the world.*

*For as we develop the capacity to*

*bless others*

*we will lighten the fears in*

*the world.*

*Uphold us according to your Promise,*

*that we may love;*

*let not fear and illusions find*

*a home in us.*

*Even should we go astray and wander*

*far from You,*

*You will ever love us.*

**Amen.**

1. “I think that the oppression of animals is the gateway drug to oppressing humans because when a child is first told that a dog is to be loved and cherished, whereas the pig on his plate is to be abused, killed, dismembered, and eaten for food, that’s the first time we instill the notion of in a child’s mind that it is okay to discriminate between two living beings that that basically look and seem alike. The basis of all forms of oppression is basically telling one living being that he can live, and another that he must die“ *The Plant Based News Podcast*, “A Holocaust Survivor, Now Vegan Activist – Is There a Line between Animal and Human Suffering?”, June 21, 2017 [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. <https://www.farmsanctuary.org/learn/factory-farming/factory-farming-and-the-environment/> [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. <https://www.cowspiracy.com/facts> [↑](#endnote-ref-3)