

On Receiving Harvard Medical School's Global Environment Citizen Award

by Bill Moyers

On Wednesday, December 1, 2004, the Center for Health and the Global Environment <<http://www.med.harvard.edu/chge/> at Harvard Medical School presented its fourth annual Global Environment Citizen Award to Bill Moyers. In presenting the award, Meryl Streep, a member of the Center board, said, "Through resourceful, intrepid reportage and perceptive voices from the forward edge of the debate, Moyers has examined an environment under siege with the aim of engaging citizens." Here is the text of his response to Ms. Streep's presentation of the award:

I accept this award on behalf of all the people behind the camera whom you never see. And for all those scientists, advocates, activists, and just plain citizens whose stories we have covered in reporting on how environmental change affects our daily lives. We journalists are simply beachcombers on the shores of other people's knowledge, other people's experience, and other people's wisdom. We tell their stories.

The journalist who truly deserves this award is my friend, Bill McKibben. He enjoys the most conspicuous place in my own pantheon of journalistic heroes for his pioneer work in writing about the environment. His bestseller *The End of Nature* <<http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/ASIN/0385416040/commondreams-20/ref=noSIM> carried on where Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* left off.

Writing in *Mother Jones* recently, Bill described how the problems we journalists routinely cover – conventional, manageable programs like budget shortfalls and pollution – may be about to convert to chaotic, unpredictable, unmanageable situations. The most unmanageable of all, he writes, could be the accelerating deterioration of the environment, creating perils with huge momentum like the greenhouse effect that is causing the melt of the arctic to release so much freshwater into the North Atlantic that even the Pentagon is growing alarmed that a weakening gulf stream could yield abrupt and overwhelming changes, the kind of changes that could radically alter civilizations.

That's one challenge we journalists face – how to tell such a story without coming across as Cassandras, without turning off the people we most want to understand what's happening, who must act on what they read and hear.

As difficult as it is, however, for journalists to fashion a readable narrative for complex issues without depressing our readers and viewers, there is an even harder challenge – to pierce the ideology that governs official policy today. One of the biggest changes in politics in my lifetime is that the delusional is no longer marginal. It has come in from the fringe, to sit in the seat of power in the oval office and in Congress. For the first time in our history, ideology and theology hold a monopoly of power in Washington. Theology asserts propositions that cannot be proven true; ideologues hold stoutly to a world view despite being contradicted by what is generally accepted as reality. When ideology and theology couple, their offspring are not always bad but they are always blind. And there is the danger: voters and politicians alike, oblivious to the facts.

Remember James Watt, President Reagan's first Secretary of the Interior? My favorite online environmental journal, the ever engaging *Grist* <<http://www.grist.org/>, reminded us recently of how James Watt told the U.S. Congress that protecting natural resources was unimportant in light of the imminent return of Jesus Christ. In public testimony he said, "after the last tree is felled, Christ will come back."

Beltway elites snickered. The press corps didn't know what he was talking about. But James Watt was serious. So were his compatriots out across the country. They are the people who believe the Bible is literally true – one-third of the American electorate, if a recent Gallup poll is accurate. In this past election several million good and decent citizens went to the polls believing in the rapture index. That's right – the rapture index. Google it and you will find that the best-selling books in America today are the twelve volumes of the left-behind series written by the Christian fundamentalist and religious right warrior, Timothy LaHaye. These true believers subscribe to a fantastical theology concocted in the 19th century by a couple of immigrant preachers who took disparate passages from the Bible and wove them into a narrative that has captivated the imagination of millions of Americans.

Its outline is rather simple, if bizarre (the British writer George Monbiot recently did a brilliant dissection of it and I am indebted to him for adding to my own understanding): once Israel has occupied the rest of its "biblical lands," legions of the anti-Christ will attack it, triggering a final showdown in the valley of Armageddon. As the Jews who have not been converted are burned, the messiah will return for the rapture. True believers will be lifted out of their clothes and transported to heaven, where, seated next to the right hand of God, they will watch their political and religious opponents suffer plagues of boils, sores, locusts, and frogs during the several years of tribulation that follow.

I'm not making this up. Like Monbiot, I've read the literature. I've reported on these people, following some of them from Texas to the West Bank. They are sincere, serious, and polite as they tell you they feel called to help bring the rapture on as fulfillment of biblical prophecy. That's why they have declared solidarity with Israel and the Jewish settlements and backed up their support with money and volunteers. It's why the invasion of Iraq for them was a warm-up act, predicted in the Book of Revelation where four angels "which are bound in the great river Euphrates will be released to slay the third part of man." A war with Islam in the Middle East is not something to be feared but welcomed – an essential conflagration on the road to redemption. The last time I Googled it, the rapture index stood at 144 – just one point below the critical threshold when the whole thing will blow, the son of God will return, the righteous will enter heaven, and sinners will be condemned to eternal hellfire.

So what does this mean for public policy and the environment? Go to Grist to read a remarkable work of reporting
<<http://www.grist.org/news/maindish/2004/10/27/scherer-christian/index.html>
by the journalist, Glenn Scherer – "The road to environmental apocalypse".

Read it and you will see how millions of Christian fundamentalists may believe that environmental destruction is not only to be disregarded but actually welcomed – even hastened – as a sign of the coming apocalypse.

As Grist makes clear, we're not talking about a handful of fringe lawmakers who hold or are beholden to these beliefs. Nearly half the U.S. Congress before the recent election – 231 legislators in total – more since the election are backed by the religious right. Forty-five senators and 186 members of the 108th congress earned 80 to 100 percent approval ratings from the three most influential Christian right advocacy groups. They include Senate Majority Leader Bill Frist, Assistant Majority Leader Mitch McConnell, Conference Chair Rick Santorum of Pennsylvania, Policy Chair Jon Kyl of Arizona, House Speaker Dennis Hastert, and Majority Whip Roy Blunt. The only Democrat to score 100 percent with the Christian coalition was Senator Zell Miller of Georgia, who recently quoted from the biblical book of Amos on the senate floor: "the days will come, sayeth the Lord God, that I will send a famine in the land." He seemed to be relishing the thought.

And why not? There's a constituency for it. A 2002 TIME/CNN poll found that 59 percent of Americans believe that the prophecies found in the Book of Revelation are going to come true. Nearly one-quarter think the Bible predicted the 9/11 attacks. Drive across the country with your radio tuned to the more than 1,600 Christian radio stations or in the motel turn some of the 250 Christian TV stations and you can hear some of this end-time gospel. And you will come to understand why people under the spell of such potent prophecies cannot be expected, as Grist puts it, "to worry about the environment. Why care about the earth when the droughts, floods, famine and pestilence brought by ecological collapse are signs of the apocalypse foretold in the Bible? Why care about global climate change when you and yours will be rescued in the rapture? And why care about converting from oil to solar when the same God who performed the miracle of the loaves and fishes can whip up a few billion barrels of light crude with a word?"

Because these people believe that until Christ does return, the lord will provide. One of their texts is a high school history book, America's Providential History
<<http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/ASIN/1887456007/commondreams-20/ref=nosim/> .

You'll find there these words: "the secular or socialist has a limited resource mentality and views the world as a pie...that needs to be cut up so everyone can get a piece." However, "[t]he Christian knows that the potential in God is unlimited and that there is no shortage of resources in God's earth..... while many secularists view the world as overpopulated, Christians know that God has made the earth sufficiently large with plenty of resources to accommodate all of the people." No wonder Karl Rove goes around the White House whistling that militant hymn, "Onward Christian Soldiers." He turned out millions of the foot soldiers on November 2, including many who have made the apocalypse a powerful driving force in modern American politics.

I can see in the look on your faces just how hard it is for the journalist to report a story like this with any credibility. So let me put it on a personal level. I myself don't know how to be in this world without expecting a confident future and getting up every morning to do what I can to bring it about. So I have always been an optimist. Now, however, I think of my friend on Wall Street whom I once asked: "What do you think of the market?" "I'm optimistic," he answered. "Then why do you look so worried?" And he answered: "Because I am not sure my optimism is justified."

I'm not, either. Once upon a time I agreed with Eric Chivian and the Center for Health and the Global Environment
<<http://www.med.harvard.edu/chge/> that people will protect the natural environment when they realize its importance to their health and to the health and lives of their children. Now I am not so sure. It's not that I don't want to believe that – it's just that I read the news and connect the dots:

- I read that the administrator of the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency has declared the election a mandate for President Bush on the environment. This for an administration that wants to rewrite the Clean Air Act, the Clean Water Act and the Endangered Species Act protecting rare plant and animal species and their habitats, as well as the National Environmental Policy Act that requires the government to judge beforehand if actions might damage natural resources.
- That wants to relax pollution limits for ozone; eliminate vehicle tailpipe inspections; and ease pollution standards for cars, sports utility vehicles and diesel-powered big trucks and heavy equipment.
- That wants a new international audit law to allow corporations to keep certain information about environmental problems secret from the public.
- That wants to drop all its new-source review suits against polluting coal-fired power plants and weaken consent decrees reached earlier with coal companies.
- That wants to open the arctic wildlife refuge to drilling and increase drilling in Padre Island National Seashore, the longest stretch of undeveloped barrier island in the world and the last great coastal wild land in America.
- I read the news just this week and learned how the Environmental Protection Agency had planned to spend nine million dollars – \$2 million of it from the administration’s friends at the American Chemistry Council – to pay poor families to continue to use pesticides in their homes. These pesticides have been linked to neurological damage in children, but instead of ordering an end to their use, the government and the industry were going to offer the families \$970 each, as well as a camcorder and children’s clothing, to serve as guinea pigs for the study.
- I read all this in the news.
- I read the news just last night and learned that the administration’s friends at the international policy network, which is supported by ExxonMobil and others of like mind, have issued a new report that climate change is “a myth, sea levels are not rising, scientists who believe catastrophe is possible are an embarrassment.”
- I not only read the news but the fine print of the recent appropriations bill passed by Congress, with the obscure (and obscene) riders attached to it: a clause removing all endangered species protections from pesticides; language prohibiting judicial review for a forest in Oregon; a waiver of environmental review for grazing permits on public lands; a rider pressed by developers to weaken protection for crucial habitats in California.

I read all this and look up at the pictures on my desk, next to the computer – pictures of my grandchildren: Henry, age 12; of Thomas, age 10; of Nancy, 7; Jassie, 3; Sara Jane, nine months. I see the future looking back at me from those photographs and I say, “Father, forgive us, for we know not what we do.” And then I am stopped short by the thought: “That’s not right. We do know what we are doing. We are stealing their future. Betraying their trust. Despoiling their world.”

And I ask myself: Why? Is it because we don’t care? Because we are greedy? Because we have lost our capacity for outrage, our ability to sustain indignation at injustice?

What has happened to our moral imagination?

On the heath Lear asks Gloucester: “How do you see the world?” And Gloucester, who is blind, answers: “I see it feelingly.”

I see it feelingly.

The news is not good these days. I can tell you, though, that as a journalist, I know the news is never the end of the story. The news can be the truth that sets us free – not only to feel but to fight for the future we want. And the will to fight is the antidote to despair, the cure for cynicism, and the answer to those faces looking back at me from those photographs on my desk. What we need to match the science of human health is what the ancient Israelites called “hoema” – the science of the heart...the capacity to see...to feel...and then to act...as if the future depended on you.

Believe me, it does.