

**“LOVE MOTHER EARTH,
TEACH ALL CHILDREN WELL”**

**a short homily by Rev. Preston Moore
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Royal Dutch Shell recently unveiled new global warming scenarios in international forums on the environment. These scenarios model three basic variables – energy supply, energy demand, environmental impact. Shell treats the energy demand variable as more or less a ‘hard reality’ – something we can’t change. The energy is “demanded” by our economy, of course, which continues to churn out a torrent of goods and services for us to consume. The question Royal Dutch Shell is either avoiding or overlooking is why are we not willing to reduce the consumption that drives global warming?

I believe there a spiritual reason for our unwillingness. I believe our voracious consumption of material goods represents a vain, tragic effort to fill a spiritual need that it will never fill: affirmation of self-worth, which is the first order of business for every human being.

Awareness of global warming is generally credited to a wake-up call from a Methodist Sunday school superintendent named Bill McKibben. In 1989 he wrote a book on the subject called The End of Nature. That same year, another insightful writer was trying to send out a wake-up call of his own about how much we consume. Here is the nutshell version of that wake-up call, by Laurence Shames, in a book called The Hunger For More (p.80):

Consumption without excuses and without the need of justification – the beauty part is that it finesses the irksome question of values and of purpose. Except for unmodern and sentimental reasons, there doesn’t have to *be* a purpose. [italics in original] The mechanism doesn’t require it. Consumption keeps the workers working, which keeps the paychecks coming, which keeps the people spending, which keeps inventors inventing and investors investing, which means there is more to consume. The system, properly understood, is independent of values and needs no philosophy to prop it up. It is a perfect circle, complete in itself – and empty in the middle.

Consumption has proven habit-forming as a way of chasing self-worth. The machinery of our society has become dependent on it. In January, the New York Times ran an article expressing serious concern about a decline in consumer spending. “Strong evidence is emerging,” the writers warned, “that consumer spending, a bulwark against recession over the last year even as energy prices surged and the housing market sputtered, has begun to slow sharply at every level of the American economy, from the working class to the wealthy. . . . The authors saw “mounting anecdotal signs that beginning in December Americans cut back significantly on personal consumption, which accounts for 70% of the economy.”

A month later, Robert Reich, Secretary of Labor under President Clinton, offered an op ed piece on the same subject, entitled “totally spent.” We’re sliding into recession, or worse,

and Washington is turning to the normal remedies for economic downturns,” he observed, warning that “the problem lies deeper. It is the culmination of three decades during which American consumers have spent beyond their means. That era is now coming to an end. Consumers have run out of ways to keep the spending binge going.”

Reich went on to offer his own creative suggestion for how to “keep the spending binge going” – “a larger earned-income tax credit, financed by a higher marginal income tax on top earners. . . . These measures are necessary,” he concluded, “to give Americans enough buying power to keep the American economy going.”

The message is clear: we “can’t afford” to consume less. . . . Now, what kind of crazy world is that to hand over to our children, standing here on the verge of adulthood? What are we teaching them by our example? And what are we NOT teaching them when we look at the world in purely material terms?

I say that the Royal Dutch Shell models are fundamentally flawed because they treat addictive consumerism as incurable. It is bound to appear so unless and until we look at it as a spiritual problem and begin to pursue a spiritual cure.

If we did that, we would begin to see that these models leave out a fourth variable -- an immense source of energy. It is the energy that flows through us when we become spiritually conscious. This untapped source of energy is every bit as real as all the energy reserves so carefully plotted in all those elaborate environmental models.

Think back. You have been in this spiritual place. You have had a feeling of being energized, of your self and your world seeming more capacious, so that everyday frustrations and indignities seem less significant, less of an obstacle to getting on with living. It was a feeling of having connected to a source of life energy and goodness that lies outside the shifting material circumstances of life – of breathing it in from somewhere other than the ambient air and then breathing it out into your life. When this feeling came, you and your world were just as beset by vexations as ever. But you glimpsed, at least briefly, the astonishing truth that you and your world are a creature and a creation of incalculable worth. And you didn’t need to go buy something to prove it.

If we could live from this spiritual place, rather than just visiting it in moments of epiphany, I believe this abundant life energy would translate into a radical drop in the material energy toted up in all those environmental models of our future. Can we live that way? I say yes. This answer is the bequest I want us to hand to those among us who are on the verge of adulthood. This is what it would mean to teach our children well.

Will, and Audrey, and Hunter, the time has come for you to go out into the world, just looking for trouble. If, in all the advice beamed at you in the next few months, someone tells you to stay out of trouble, don’t pay any attention to that. The trick is to get into the right kind of trouble – the life-altering, world-altering kind that rages against resignation and refuses to learn not to care so much. You can master that trick. And when you do, you will teach your parents well. AMEN.