

Covenant Story



To care for our home, the Earth; To serve the family of humanity; To cherish each other as friends. These are the promises we make to one another each Sunday.

Today I'm going to tell you my story, and to tell you why our promises resonate so strongly with me and to point out why they are particularly important now.

Last year at my 50th High School reunion many of us reflected on how lucky our generation had been. We were lucky to be born in Canada, a land of freedom and plenty amid so many other countries, overcrowded, dry, and poor. Lucky to be born of parents who were able to provide the things we needed, who taught their children important values of fairness and family and society. We were lucky to live a rather protected life in our little town, where most of the children had the same advantages, good public education, teachers who shared the same values. We were lucky to attend university at a time when the world seemed to be exploding with possibilities, a time when we were free to protest against injustices, and lucky to be confident of finding our way into adulthood with a job, a job we could choose, and a life of comfort. At the time we didn't realize just how lucky we were, but after 50 years we had mostly figured it out.



One of the important influences in my lucky boyhood was Cubs and Scouts. In Cubs we learned to Do Our Best and to do a good turn to somebody every day. In scouts we learned to Be Prepared and we learned about nature. On canoeing and hiking camp trips we learned of our obligation to always leave our camp-site cleaner than we found it, to leave only footprints, to take only photographs. We had the attitude that if we did no harm the world could take care of itself. I was

prepared to implement these principles in all aspects of my life - to try and have a minimum impact on the world.

In 1962 Rachel Carson's book "Silent Spring" stirred up enough outrage that DDT was banned in spite of fierce opposition from chemical companies. In 1965 President Johnson was warned that CO₂ building up in the atmosphere could be dangerous and he seemed to take it seriously. In December, 1968, this photo taken from lunar orbit on Apollo 8 was published. It's called Earth Rise. Look how tiny and vulnerable our home is. Acid rain and ozone depletion were addressed with international treaties. In the USA, the EPA was strong and seemed to be successfully restoring natural assets like the Hudson River.



The environmental movement was strong. I was 20, planet earth was blue, and there was nothing I needed to do. Environmental problems could be solved, and other people were solving them.

I went on with my busy life, working, married, children, move to the end of the metro, busy with life, and not thinking that anything was going wrong. Walking or biking to work, Reducing, Reusing, Recycling. I'm not sure that my behaviour was for environmental reasons or was an echo of the cheap conservation attitude of my depression era parents. We enjoyed XC skiing, but even there I should have seen that changes were under way - we used to be able to ski anywhere in the Laurentian woods starting in late November, following the back woods trails marked out in the 1940's by Jackrabbit Johansen. By the early 1990's you usually couldn't ski comfortably until Christmas even on the prepared trails at our ski club.

In 1989 I read an article by Bill McKibben in the New Yorker called The End of Nature. The article laments the loss of the concept of wilderness. Nature is no longer a force independent of mankind. Environmental problems are no longer local like polluted rivers or acid rain. Mankind's impact on the world has become so powerful that the very concept of nature, that which is bigger than us, is over. The article upset me a lot but I wanted to know more so I bought the book. I found the book even more distressing and I could not finish it. I didn't understand its implications or its details. It stayed on my bedside table for about 20 years, calling me to finish it, but I couldn't bear it. On page 66 you can still see the indentation made by a paperclip that marked the spot where I gave up.

I believed what it had to say, but the problem was too big, what could I do about it, and so what if the ski season was a bit shorter. I still had a family to support, jobs to do, moves around the country, kids in university, so basically I stuck my head firmly in the sand.

Some years later, with both children officially launched after taking environmental science in university, my perspective changed a bit. I started reading books again, books about evolution, religion, history, science, and environmentalism, especially climate change, the big scary topic from that scary uncomfortable book still sitting on my bedside table. I read more and more about the topic, trying to understand it enough to hold my own in a discussion, trying to be sure that I wasn't being swept away by some cult or conspiracy. I read a lot but I still didn't act.



Then this. This is my granddaughter, Miriam, the day after she was born, so beautiful, so comfortable, so warm, so dependent, so tiny, and so fragile. Just like our home, the Earth. She needs me to support her, to protect her, to leave the world a livable place where she has a chance to live a life as nice as mine. She's counting on me. I want to be able to answer her when she asks me "Grandpa, if you knew it was so bad, why didn't you do

something?" I want to be able to answer that I did what I could.

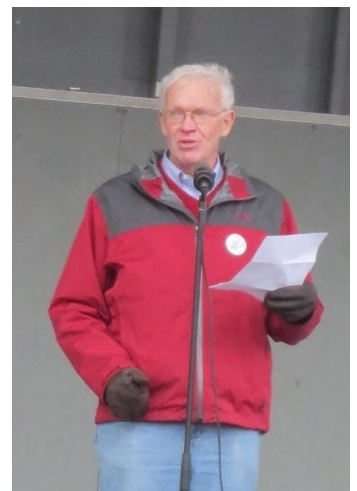
So I joined For Our Grandchildren in Toronto, a group whose mission is to inform Canadian grandparents of the dangers of climate change and to try and move them to action. At first I helped them with technology and attended their regular meetings, but gradually I got more and more involved, moving outside my comfort zone, writing blog articles on their web site, helping to organize events.

I went to Al Gore's Climate Reality training where I learned more of the facts, and more important, learned techniques for communicating with others about the reality and discussing the possibilities. I felt prepared to face the world and gave the Al Gore presentation a bunch of times, but I found it complicated with CO2 equivalents, GHG, PPM, Gigatonnes, and it's too scary and negative with storms and droughts and floods, and it's too short on possibilities for action. So I boiled it down to this simplified message: 1) The world is getting hotter; 2) the cause is us; 3) the impact is bad news; 4) we've got to act. 5) there are things we can do that can help. So now let's get to work. Let's act.



When I moved to the Peterborough area four years ago I found a very supportive community and together we formed a local 4RG chapter. We have held rallies, organized presentations, met with politicians, written letters to the editor. I have created my Captain Climate Change alter ego, and had a beer in Wales with the Welsh Climate Change Commissioner who boiled down our mission to Inform, Motivate, and Mobilize grandparents. But the highlight so far for me was an invitation to speak before David Suzuki to a crowd of 25,000 in Ottawa last October. What a thrill, and what a long way from the shy Boy Scout

who just didn't want to make a mess.



So, that's my story. What's it got to do with our promises, our covenant? To care for our home, the Earth; To serve the family of humanity; To cherish each other as friends.

I like to think that the first promise is first because it is the most important, and that the third promise includes the promise to support each other in keeping our promises.

Why is it up to us to care for the earth? Thomas Berry explains: “What is happening in our times is not simply another historical transition or simply another cultural change. The devastation of the planet we are bringing about is negating some hundreds of million, even billions, of years of past development on Earth. This is a most momentous period of change, a change unparalleled in the four and a half billion years of earth history. All indications suggest that we are, in a sense, a chosen group, a chosen generation. We did not ask to be here at this time. Some of the prophets, when asked to undertake certain missions, said, ‘Don’t choose me. That’s too much for me.’ God says, ‘You are going anyway.’ We are not asked whether we wish to live at this particular time. We are here. The inescapable is before us.”

This inescapable call to action is where we all need support, the support that we promise each other every week. The problem is too big to take it on alone like Don Quixote, dreaming the impossible dream, tilting at windmills while people think you’re insane. We need to help each other.

I would just like to make a little aside about the stages of Climate Change Denial. Stage 1) It’s not true - there have been no changes for 14 years; Stage 2) It’s not caused by humans - the climate has changed before, it’s sunspots or volcanoes. Stage 3) It won’t be so bad - there will be less snow to shovel, more time for golf. Stage 4) It’s too hard (expensive, big, inconvenient, etc.) Stage 5) It’s too late, let’s just party on.

Canadian society as a whole has been stuck somewhere in the first 3 stages until quite recently. It’s not unanimous, but most of that denial has died away. Public awareness and acceptance have changed dramatically. Just looking at it locally, when I moved here 4 years ago the Examiner’s attention to Climate Change was limited to Ezra Levant’s columns. In the lead up to the federal election last fall they covered the candidates debate on the topic with the words Climate Change on the front page in the biggest font I’ve ever seen. We are now finally discussing the actions that we must take, but many are still in the form of denial that says it’s too expensive or too hard to fix.

We, especially my generation, our generation, have all been lucky, and have attained a level of material wealth and comfort mostly because we have burned so much oil to make so much stuff for ourselves. We’re all responsible for the mess we are in. We’ve all got to do what we can whether at the personal, neighbourhood, community, municipal, provincial, federal, or world level; we all have an obligation to act.

I have a bonus, a specific suggestion for how we can act now. The Leap Manifesto’s tag line “A Call for a Canada based on caring for the earth and one another.” echoes our own covenant. The Leap Manifesto contains 15 demands that call for action on many aspects of society that all must be changed if we are to have a chance of limiting

the damages of Climate Change. My suggestion is to join forces with one of the working groups in the Leap Manifesto - Peterborough. There are some Leap brochures on the table, and I would be happy to get you in touch with them at their next meeting on June 22.

The problem before us is huge, the individual actions that we can take are insignificant, but we can all help in our own way and our individual actions will add up to make a difference. We must fulfill our covenant to care for our home, the Earth in this monster challenge - our duty is inescapable.

I now have Samuel, Le Petit Prince, tiny, fragile, dependant, beautiful. He's my new reason to press on in my own mission to increase awareness of the possibilities for action and to embolden citizens to give our leaders the courage to do what they know needs to be done.



Knowing that my friends from this fellowship are working with me and are supporting me gives me the courage I need to go on.

Thank you.

Guy Hanchet
Unitarian Fellowship of Peterborough
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