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Climate change articles see crisis as moral issue

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Eco Catholic

Two recent thought-provoking articles regarding climate change are well worth reading and pondering, so I am posting them here. Both see the crisis as being fundamentally a moral issue.

The first is by Bill McKibben, a longtime environmental writer and founder of 350.org, the activist group working to stop the Keystone XL Pipeline. He examines "the terrifying new math around global warming" in the latest issue of *Rolling Stone* in a 6,000-word article that looks at the greed and crookedness of fossil-fuel corporations and how their stranglehold on the economy continues to rule despite environmental activists' efforts.

"Climate change operates on a geological scale and time frame, but it is not an impersonal force of nature: the more carefully you do the math, the more thoroughly you realize that this is, at bottom a moral issue; we have met the enemy and they is Shell," he writes. "If enough people come to understand the cold, mathematical truth -- that the fossil-fuel industry is systematically undermining the planet's physical systems -- it might weaken it enough to matter politically."

"Global Warming's Terrifying New Math" has already been viewed 450,000 times and shared among 100,000 readers -- "more than ten times as many as the magazine's interview with President Obama, last month," McKibben wrote in a recent email from 350.org.

David Roberts' piece, "Why Climate Change Doesn't Spark Moral Outrage, and How It Could," appears on the Grist.org website. Roberts reports on a recently released academic paper, "Climate Change and Moral Judgment" by Ezra Markowitz and Azim Shariff of the University of Oregon Psychology and Environmental Studies departments.

Roberts, an energy and political reporter, writes: "Perhaps the single biggest barrier to action on climate

change is the fact that it doesn't hit us in the gut. We can identify it as a great moral wrong, through a chain of evidence and reasoning but we do not instinctively feel it as one. It does not trigger our primal moral intuitions or generate spontaneous outrage, anger and passion. It's got no emotional heat."

He asks, "How do you increase fellow-feeling toward those who are spatially and temporally distant? I mean, I'd love it Americans saw Bangladeshis as part of the human family. I'd love it if they saw the citizens of 2100 or 2300 as part of 'us.' But they don't seem to. Efforts in the past to grow fellow-feeling into a catholic, all-encompassing sentiment -- Jesus' efforts, for example -- don't seem to have succeeded very well."

Martkowitz and Shariff's study describes six ways communicators might confront these challenges.

Roberts' summary of the study is noteworthy: "As I was reading about all the psychological barriers to climate action, I kept thinking, one thing can overcome these: peer pressure! If people see others that they view as peers or leaders doing something, they will tend to do it too, and retrofit reasons for it after the fact. This is the essence of humans as social creatures."

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