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Climate change: the elephant in our living room

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Eco Catholic

Why does it take an enormous tragedy like Hurricane Sandy to drive home the reality of climate change? The late Fr. Thomas Berry, cultural historian and geologist, predicted this might be the case.

People would have to suffer before realizing that exploiting the earth brings terrible consequences. We would have to become hungry, wet, cold; our homes under water or on fire; and at last count, 110 of us dead in New York and New Jersey before connecting these miseries to our unsustainable "mysticism of progress" and our fixated preoccupation with fossil fuels.

In *The Great Work*, Berry writes:

A person can only marvel that scientists generally seem never to have reflected on or explained to the community why the petroleum is buried in the earth in the first place. Even the slightest reflection would reveal that nature has taken great care to bury the vast amounts of carbon in the coal and petroleum in the depths of the Earth and in the forests so that the chemistry of the atmosphere, the water, and the soil could be worked out with the proper precision.

This needs to ... be thoroughly respected lest anyone intrude into this delicate balance by extracting and using the petroleum or the coal, or by cutting down and using the great forests of the planet without consideration of what will happen when these forces will not longer be able to fulfill their role in the integral functioning of the Planet.

Berry often posed the question; "After we burn our lifeboat, Earth, how will we stay afloat?"

Last Monday, our lifeboat sustained a horrific whammy to its hull when Hurricane Sandy roared into the U.S. Northeast. Much of the positive realization of climate change reaction in its aftermath reminds me of

an alcoholic's bottoming out, when he or she gets sick and tired of being sick and tired, admits to addiction and seeks healing. Healing and realization -- these are good things. May there be more of them, from the people who are connecting the issues and want to do the right thing.

In some situations, however, there is an invisible companion on the scene, known as the elephant in the living room. This happens when the addict, the addict's family and friends appear to live in states of denial. "This is not happening, but if it is, we are downplaying it to maintain our comfort zones, money, reputation, relationships, fear of change," they say. This happens even when everyone else sees the dysfunction and wonders silently, "What is going on here?"

Until Sandy's appearance, many environmentalists and scientists knew the elephant named Climate Change was not recognized. And they wondered mightily about it, because it was not taking place within most sectors of our U.S. administration. President Barack Obama until very recently has not said much about this pressing issue. It never came up during the presidential debates, though website petitions demanded the moderators include it in their list of questions.

But just five short days before the election, the Nov. 1 issue of the UK newspaper *The Guardian* talks about our climate-change elephant and how it has taken over in the U.S. political living room.

Suzanne Goldenberg, U.S. correspondent, writes at length about what happened in "Revealed: the day Obama chose a strategy of silence on climate change." Warning: this might make you very angry. It did me.

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In her piece, the bottom line is: By not keeping climate change in the forefront, the White House lost a great educational opportunity.

An Eco Catholic sum-up: Once upon a time, in the spring of 2009, the White House invited some of Barack Obama's allies in the environmental movement to a big meeting around plans for getting a climate change law through the then-Democratically controlled House and Senate. Among the guests were Bill McKibben, now of 350.org movement; Betsy Taylor, president of Breakthrough Strategies and Solutions, an organization that works with philanthropic and nonprofit clients; and many other earth-friendly activists.

They came away extremely disappointed. They had been given a piece of paper filled with polling data and talking points, Goldenberg writes. Climate change was not to be discussed because of the struggling economy and financial collapse.

"With everyone struggling, how do we connect with the public and build political support when everyone's mind was on the very scary economy," Taylor said.

"The answer was clear," Goldenberg wrote. "Climate change was not a winning message. Raising the topic would also leave Obama open to attack from industry and conservative groups opposed to intervention in the economy."

Taylor recalls taking away "an absolutely clear understanding that we should focus on clean energy jobs and the potential of a clean energy economy rather than the threat of climate change. (The latter) became a second-tier issue."

"I thought it was a mistake and I told them," McKibben said. "... Sooner or later you are going to have to talk about clean energy and green jobs in terms of climate change. Because if you want people to make the big changes that are required by the science, then you are going to have to explain to people why that is necessary, and why it's such a huge problem."

In all fairness, the *Guardian* reporter notes that campaigning groups agree Obama continued to push the climate agenda, even if he did so below the radar through EPA regulations and supplying funding for green measures such as high speed rail, public transport and weather-proofing low-income homes. "However, the White House silence on climate change gave some in industry and on the right of the political spectrum to discredit climate change."

The Guardian article concludes with a quote from Larry Schweiger, president of the National Wildlife Federation. "It's really hard to sell clean energy. Clean energy has gotten garbled. You can't have a clear conversation and the reason there can't be a clean conversation is because of this elephant in the room which is climate change."

Because of existing climate change dangers, I will be supporting Obama and hoping that as a lame-duck president, he will finally step out in courage to lead in the healing of our planet. Obama is a member of the United Church of Christ, whose motto is "God is still speaking." I hope he remembers what "God is still speaking" might mean in terms of environmental issues.

Finally, in closing, we do not need any more dysfunctional elephants in the living room of our dear planet. Mother Earth is our only home -- for both Democrats and Republicans.

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