

CLIMATE CHANGE CHRONICLE 33

On an Earth Vocation

I turned eighty last December. With a bad family health history and two different battles with cancer I never thought I'd make it this far.

These days I think more and more of a biblical expression: "*Your old men shall dream dreams and your young men shall see visions.*" (Acts 2:17). I've been doing a lot of dreaming in the hope that it can help those coming after us to develop their visions and climate change vocations.

I've always had a strong sense of my vocation (a word from the Latin "vocare" meaning a call.) I was raised in a Roman Catholic family and from an early age I felt I had a vocation to become a priest. So in my early teens and with the permission of my parents I left home, went down to the United States and entered a minor seminary. It was run by a monastic community called the Passionists. Their mandate was to preach about the death of Christ. Eventually thirteen years later I was ordained and worked for a few years as a priest.

In 1967 I was invited by my community to go to Paris and work on a degree in theology. While there I also worked as a student chaplain. I lived across the street from a huge campus residence with forty national houses for students from different countries around the world. I became fascinated by the different cultures, especially when the student riots broke out in May 1968. It was an invaluable experience and prepared me for my future work in indigenous cultures.

In 1969 I returned to the United States to get a degree in communications at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee. By this time, though I was deeply grateful to the Passionists for my spiritual development and my education, I found myself on the wrong side of a number of the teachings of my church. So I left my community and the priesthood. My wife and I met, we married and my vocation changed. I was now a husband and eventually a father of three children, but I needed a job.

At the age of twenty-nine, I'd worked with people but never had a real job. I was worried about this but eventually found work as a community organizer. The Lutheran Church gave me a job developing programs for street people in Milwaukee's east side counter culture drug community.

Many GIs were returning home from the war in Vietnam with heroin problems. There were riots in the streets and on one particularly violent night I found myself with a group in a crash pad. A young hopped up kid came into the room screaming about what he was going to do to "the pigs". He was holding a pearl handled revolver with a shaky

hand just a couple of feet away from my face. At that moment after four years of street work I decided that I needed a career change.

We moved to Canada. For the next few years I worked on a number of jobs. I was a management consultant with an architectural firm in Vancouver working on criminal justice projects. Then we moved to Houston in northern British Columbia and for five years I worked in resource towns as a health centre administrator.

In 1980 we moved again, this time to Baffin Island in the High Arctic where I worked for the Government of the Northwest Territories. I became the superintendent of social services. I worked there for three years, traveling in and out of a dozen remote small communities. We then moved to Yellowknife in the Western Arctic. I set up my own management consulting firm. For the next twenty years I worked back and forth between NWT Indigenous Dene communities and the communities of what eventually became Nunavut, the Inuit homeland in the Eastern Arctic.

It is hard to describe the profound impact living in these indigenous communities had on me and my sense of vocation. When I started working on Baffin Island I thought I was just the person the Inuit had been waiting for. But I needed a context—management by objectives, zero-based budgeting, performance management or something similar.

When I held community meetings to get feedback on our services the elders would get up and say in Inuktitut, “Learn from the land.” Listening to the elders through an interpreter I respected what they were saying. But I thought their words were quaint and totally irrelevant to the task at hand. Meanwhile my contexts were bombing and I was thinking about another career.

My superiors in the GNWT headquarters had told me to go out there and help the Baffin communities to develop. But in a short time I realized that the people I was to develop had been developing themselves for many centuries in the most severe climate on the planet—and without any help from the Kaduluna (white guys). Headquarters was constantly asking me about my success in teaching the Inuit how to develop the approved services. One time I responded to my superiors, “*The GNWT wheel is still turning but the gerbil is dead*”. This didn’t endear me to them.

But one day things changed. I picked up one of Thomas Berry’s books. He was a well-known cultural historian and we knew each other because he was also a Passionist. He said, “*The universe is the only text without a context. We are not a collection of objects, we are a community of living subjects.*” **And that is when the lights went on.** He was saying what the elders were saying but I had been unwilling or unable to understand. I now had the context I was looking for and my vocation finally became clear. I felt called to create a bridge between the wisdom of the elders and the insights of Berry and his colleagues.

We left the North in 2007 for Comox on Vancouver Island. For a number of years I worked as a volunteer on environmental projects but in the last five years I have focused totally on climate change. I consider this my new vocation....an Earth vocation. It's all about creating new visions for new community cultures.

Now at an advanced age I don't try and tell people what their Earth vocations should be. But I'm trying to do what the Indigenous elders and Thomas Berry did for me—help folks change their thinking about their relationship with Earth. If they can do this they will quickly learn what their Earth vocation must be.

For the rest I can only repeat this advice from South African Nkomi Johnson....

*Do all you can
With what you have
In the time you have
In the place you are.*

He was born with AIDS and died at the age of twelve.

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