

# The SUN

ISSUE 444

DEC  
2012

Personal. Political. Provocative. Ad-free.

THE SUN INTERVIEW

## If Your House Is On Fire

### Kathleen Dean Moore On The Moral Urgency Of Climate Change

by Mary DeMocker

*I first met nature writer and philosophy professor Kathleen Dean Moore in 2004. I had already dog-eared my copy of her first collection of essays, Riverwalking: Reflections on Moving Water, when she came through town to read from her next book, Holdfast: At Home in the Natural World. After the reading I stayed so long asking questions that she invited me to join her philosophy of nature class for a weeklong trip. That September I camped with a dozen college students half my age by one of Oregon's pristine Cascade Lakes. We gathered beneath the forest canopy to discuss the three questions Moore poses to all her students: What is nature? What is the relation of humans to the rest of the natural world? And how, then, shall we live? She sent us to seek answers among the ponderosa pines, in rowboats illuminated by starlight, and in frigid wetlands that sometimes swallowed us to our waists.*

*Born to parents she says celebrated the "fine art of poking around," Moore spent countless childhood hours walking over the slick stones of the Rocky River near Cleveland, Ohio. Years later she and her husband, biologist and fisherman Frank Moore, watched oil slicks burn on Ohio's Cuyahoga River. When they were ready to seek teaching positions, they wanted to go somewhere that still had abundant green space. They ended up in Oregon.*

*Over the next three decades Moore taught philosophy, raised a son and daughter, and wrote books about the natural world, including The Pine Island Paradox and Wild Comfort. Her intimate connection with the wild led her to feel increasing alarm over its destruction, and when salmon began disappearing from the rivers, Moore started to question the role of the writer in a wounded world.*

*Then one sentence from James Gustave Speth changed her life. The former dean of Yale's School of Forestry and Environmental Studies opened a climate conference by saying, "The only thing we have to do to be sure we will leave a ruined world for our children and our grandchildren is to do exactly what we are doing now." Moore later wrote, "To imagine [my grandchildren] wandering, hungry, in a barren land changed everything for me. I decided I would never do anything in my working life that doesn't at least try to make the world safe for bog lilies and hooting owls and laughing children."*

*Recently Moore examined the climate-change debate and found it long on science and short on principled reasons to do right by the planet and its inhabitants. She and her colleague Michael P. Nelson decided to ask a hundred visionaries whether humans have a moral obligation to act on behalf of future generations. Their responses became the seeds of the book Moral Ground: Ethical Action for a Planet in Peril, which Moore co-edited with Nelson.*

*I've stayed in touch with Moore since our week at the lake. Whenever I see her, she is calmly at work on several fronts: giving workshops, lectures, readings, and interviews, and collaborating with activists and climate scientists. She is currently a distinguished professor of philosophy at Oregon State University in Corvallis, where she teaches environmental ethics, philosophy of nature, and environmental leadership. She is also a senior fellow of the Spring Creek Project for Ideas, Nature, and the Written Word, which she cofounded. Most of the year she writes in a tiny studio her architect daughter designed so that it directs rainwater from the roof into a trough where deer come to drink. During the summer months she writes in her family's cabin on the edge of a cove in southeast Alaska.*

*On a recent sunny morning Moore and I spoke about the twin threats of climate change and corporate hegemony. Small*

and fair-haired with bright blue eyes, Moore radiated quiet strength, and she laughed often despite the gravity of her subject. While we talked in the den, two colleagues staying at her house finished up breakfast with her husband in the kitchen. I felt the presence of her clan: the activists at her table, the environmental writers whose books lined her shelves, the children and grandchildren whose photos adorned the walls.

**DeMocker:** For *Moral Ground* you gathered testimony from political and cultural leaders about our moral obligations in the face of climate change. South African Archbishop Emeritus Desmond Tutu wrote the foreword. President Barack Obama and Sheila Watt-Cloutier, former chair of the Inuit Circumpolar Council, made powerful arguments.

**Moore:** The strongest arguments in the book are the ones based on justice. Desmond Tutu writes with the moral authority of one who has worked steadfastly against apartheid. It's unjust, he argues, for some people to bear the burden of others' advantage. It's unjust that people in Africa — who don't reap the "benefits" of the reckless burning of fossil fuel — are suffering from droughts and crop shortages as a result of the West's consumption of oil. He knows from experience that it is possible to bring down entrenched institutions. He says there should be worldwide outrage at the injustice of climate change, as there was against apartheid.

Sheila Watt-Cloutier identifies climate change as a form of cultural aggression — people of one culture destroying the material basis of another. We've seen this story before in the U.S., when settlers killed the buffalo in order to kill buffalo-hunting Native Americans. And we're seeing it again as the rich nations create climatic conditions that are melting polar ice. Because the Inuit culture is based on a cold climate, Watt-Cloutier claims that her people have a right to ice. Those in the far north are suffering the most from the disrupted climate even as the effects spread to the rest of the globe. Climate change is damaging food supplies, spreading disease, and creating refugees, and it is poised to become the most massive human-rights violation the world has ever seen.

**DeMocker:** Nobel Prize-winning climatologist Paul Crutzen proposes that the planet has entered a new geologic epoch he calls the "Anthropocene," meaning the "era of man." It is characterized, he says, by mass extinction.

**Moore:** It's astonishing, isn't it? The philosopher Holmes Rolston III calls it a "hinge point in history." Our generation is witnessing the end of the old era and the start of a new one, when human culture will determine the future of the earth.

Theologian Thomas Berry said, "My generation has done what no previous generation could do, because they lacked the technological power, and what no future generation will be able to do, because the planet will never again be so beautiful or abundant." He points out that the Cenozoic, the era we are leaving behind, was when the earth was at its "most lyrical," when songbirds, flowering plants, and the great families of mammals flourished. At this peak of beauty and richness came humankind. We're now estimated to be responsible for the extinction of one out of every ten species that we know of and likely uncounted others that we haven't even identified yet. And we're about to change even the climate that sustains these lives and ours.

**DeMocker:** Something really powerful must have driven us to behave in ways so counter to our own interests. What was it?

**Moore:** We are the children of the Age of Enlightenment, and we have brought the world to the brink of ruin by acting under the delusion that humans are separate from the earth, better somehow, in control of it. We believe that humans are the only creatures of spirit in a universe otherwise made up of stones and insensate matter; that the nonhuman world was created for us alone and derives all its value from its usefulness to humanity; that we are the masters of the universe. Because of our technological prowess, we see ourselves as exceptions to the rules that govern the "lower" forms of life. We believe we can destroy our habitat without also destroying ourselves. How could we be so tragically wrong?

We're such a sophisticated species that we've even got words for these delusions. *Individualism* means humans are essentially isolated rights holders, fully separate from one another and always in conflict or competition with each other, even though we are born into a family and the first thing we do is seek out another human. Then there's *dualism*, which opens a deep crack down the center of creation: on one side are humans, who alone have spirit and value; on the other side is the inanimate material world that was created solely to serve our needs. *Human exceptionalism* is the idea that we are special in some way, able to exceed natural limits.

Ecological and evolutionary science tell us that this is false; that humans are part of interconnected, interdependent systems; that the thriving of the individual parts is necessary for the thriving of the whole; and that we are created, defined, and sustained by our relationships, both with each other and with the natural world. If we come to understand that deeply, we can invent new models of human goodness.

As I see it, cultural evolution is a series of experiments. We test a worldview, and if it's wrong, the world slaps us down. Because humans are stubborn, we hold on to repudiated beliefs for a couple of generations, but eventually we try something new. We've been holding on for too long to a worldview that allows us to think we are separate from the world, even as the world is slapping us with evidence to the contrary. A new experiment may yet emerge. It needs to happen soon.

**DeMocker:** Last year you set out to articulate a new ethic, convening an ad hoc brain trust of ecologists, philosophers, poets, theologians, social scientists, and musicians. What was the result?

**Moore:** I was working with the Spring Creek Project for Ideas, Nature, and the Written Word, a sort of think tank that brings together people with different backgrounds to reimagine our place in the world. We took seriously what conservation scientist Aldo Leopold said: any new ethic must evolve in the mind of a "thinking community." We tried to create that community, to crank up the rate at which our culture is evolving. We asked the twenty-four people assembled, "What will the next ethic be? What will it *have* to be?" Over thirty-six hours of intense discussion, debate, and drafting, we wrote the Blue River Declaration.

The declaration calls into question the self-destructive practices of the old utilitarian, humancentric worldview. It looks at how we educate children, how we move from place to place, how we eat, how we exchange goods, how we relate to land and water and so-called natural resources. [*The full text can be found online at [springcreek.oregonstate.edu](http://springcreek.oregonstate.edu).*]

**DeMocker:** Is having a new ethic enough? I find it difficult to live by my chosen ethic within a culture that still adheres to a destructive one.

**Moore:** If the culture forces us to live in ways we don't believe in, then we have to change the culture. Given the urgency of the question, we may need to start with conscientious objection. There are things we must refuse to do, and there are costs for that refusal.

Many of us were alive when people said, "Hell no," to an unjust war in Vietnam. The question today is: Can we say, "Hell no," to an unjust economic system? Can we reclaim our humanity from forces that would prefer us to be mindless consumers? Every decision that we make — about where we find information, where we get food, what we wear, how we make our living, how we invest our time and our wealth, how we travel or keep ourselves warm and sheltered — is an opportunity for us to express our values both by saying yes to what we believe in and by saying no to what we don't believe in.

I love what Carl Safina, who writes about the ocean, says in *Moral Ground*: "We think we don't want to sacrifice, but sacrifice is exactly what we are doing. . . . We're sacrificing what is big and permanent to prolong what is small, temporary, and harmful. We're sacrificing animals, peace, and children to retain wastefulness." So many of us wake up in the morning and eat a breakfast of food we don't believe in and then drive a car we don't believe in to a job we don't believe in. We do things that we know are wrong, day after day, just because that's the way the system is set up, and we think we have no choice. It's soul-devouring.

Deciding we won't drive to that chain grocery store and buy that imported pineapple is a path of liberation. Deciding to walk to the farmers' market and buy those fresh, local peas is like spitting in the eye of the industries that would control us. Every act of refusal is also an act of assent. Every time we say no to consumer culture, we say yes to something more beautiful and sustaining. Life is not something we go through or that happens to us; it's something we create by our decisions. We can drift through our lives, or we can use our time, our money, and our strength to model behaviors we believe in, to say, "This is who I am."

**DeMocker:** The major paradigm-changing social movements in history — the civil-rights movement, the abolitionist movement, the independence movement in India — have mostly been campaigns against oppression. Who are the oppressors in the climate-change movement?

**Moore:** Transnational petrochemical industries, their leaders, their investors, and the politicians they control.

For a long time activists were unclear about this. The corporations were happy to claim that they were simply responding to public demand. Only recently has it become clear how much corporations have been manipulating public demand. They build and maintain infrastructures that force consumers to use fossil fuels. They convince politicians to kill or lethally underfund alternative energy or transportation initiatives. They increase demand for energy-intensive products through advertising. They create confusion about the harmful effects of burning fossil fuels. They influence elections to defang regulatory agencies that would limit Big Oil's power to impose risks and costs on others. And, whenever possible, they work outside of democracies.

If you own stock in a petrochemical industry, you've got to dump it. If you benefit from a fund that owns stock in a petro-

chemical industry — a university fund, a retirement fund — you've got to insist they dump it. No excuses, no delays.

**DeMocker:** Part of me wonders why people even need to be convinced that we have a moral obligation to protect the future of our planet.

**Moore:** There's a disconnect in our culture separating what people do from what they really care about. I love my children and my grandchildren more than anything else. I care about their future. I love this world with a passion. The thought that we might be losing songbirds, trading them for something I don't care about at all, like running shoes, makes me angry. And still I drive to the store and buy running shoes. I don't think I am different from other people in this regard.

**DeMocker:** What leads us to forget our obligation?

**Moore:** I don't know. But the fact is, many well-meaning people are blithely destroying the world on which their children's lives depend. Environmental activist Derrick Jensen says that if aliens landed and did to the planet what the industrial economy is doing, it would be considered all-out war. Yet instead of fighting them, we invest in our own destruction. We damage the ecosystem simply because we no longer recognize that we live in an impoverished world. But we also do it because we ask less and less of ourselves. We don't expect ourselves to be generous or openhearted. We think greed is OK. Even our visions of a better life are simplified and denuded and strip-mined.

**DeMocker:** Maybe we don't destroy so willingly. I certainly feel forced to in many ways.

**Moore:** It isn't easy to change. Our choices are all tangled up in nets of profit and entrenched patterns of environmental destruction. But if we understand exactly how skillfully we are manipulated, we'll get angry, and that will motivate us to make changes.

We are at a critical point. We have a very narrow window of opportunity to get it right, and to get it right, we first have to imagine a new world, story by story.

**DeMocker:** These problems can be solved by stories?

**Moore:** Historically that's what human beings use to explore our place in the world: we tell stories about it. Sometimes they're scientific stories. Sometimes they're philosophical stories. Sometimes they're songs or movies. Sometimes they're fables or morality tales. We need to tell new stories to describe who we are in relation to the land, to honor what's been lost, to help us understand our kinships, to affirm what we care about, to explore the difference between right and wrong, moral and immoral.

**DeMocker:** The word *moral* is a loaded one. Are you ever accused of "moralizing" in your lectures and writing?

**Moore:** Moralizing is foisting your beliefs onto others without using reason. That's different from moral reasoning, which is an essential social skill that we seem to have lost in all the shouting and piety on radio and television. Moral reasoning is a discourse in which people affirm what they think is true or good or right, and then they back up their claims with reasons.

When my colleagues and I host public events about environmental ethics, we gather people in small groups and ask, "What do you care about most? What would you be willing to spend your whole life taking care of? What would you die for?" Then we ask, "If you value this more than anything else, what should you do? How might you make that value evident in your life?" It's an invitation to a respectful dialogue in which both sides listen and might even change their minds. In civil discourse you test your beliefs against experience — your own and others' — and revise and improve them. Think of the conversations the Founders had about basic principles of human rights. We can do that too. We can talk reasonably about ethics.

**DeMocker:** Does having a discourse in moral reasoning mean we need to listen to climate-change deniers?

**Moore:** No. Perhaps a scientific discourse would engage deniers in a debate about the facts, but a moral discourse isn't about science. It's about right and wrong.

Debates about the causes of climate change have become distractions. If your house is burning down, you don't stand around arguing about whether the fire was caused by human or natural forces. You do what you can to put out the damn fire. You throw everything at it, and then you hold your breath, because there are people inside that house.

**DeMocker:** When it comes to getting people to change their behavior, is a moral argument the best approach? Why not a more pragmatic appeal?

**Moore:** I believe that a moral argument is the most pragmatic appeal, for several reasons.

Number one: Moral arguments speak to *all* people. Economic arguments speak only to a few. When Big Oil violates fundamental, universally agreed-upon principles of justice and human rights, that's something everyone can condemn.

Number two: Moral arguments are trump cards, whereas economic arguments can always be overridden by matters of principle. Yes, you might profit from keeping slaves, but it's wrong. Yes, you can profit from ruining children's futures, but it's wrong.

Number three: Moral arguments appeal to what is hopeful and good in the human spirit. God knows, we haven't done well by appealing to, and even glorifying, self-interest.

We have a chance to focus on the ethics of affirmation. Who are we, as human beings, when we are at our best? But environmental activists often dither about regulation, imposing limits and such. When the climate-change movement frames arguments, it is generally careful not to talk about obligation or duty or morality — all those ethics words. It will talk about patriotism or competing with China or getting jobs or profiting from green energy — anything but ethics. That's a terrible strategic mistake.

If you look at the times in American history when our society changed directions, you'll find that it was motivated by moral principle. Think of the Declaration of Independence, a statement about the rights of human beings. Think of the Emancipation Proclamation, a statement that slavery is wrong. Think of the opposition to the Vietnam War. Think of the civil-rights movement. Martin Luther King Jr.'s dream was not of profits or material comfort; his dream was of justice for future generations. The question isn't whether we should talk about ethics; the question is whether we can achieve the necessary rapid social change *without* talking about them.

**DeMocker:** Do you think people have trouble directing their moral outrage at the worst climate-change offenders because they feel culpable in the process themselves?

**Moore:** Yes, which is why the worst offenders are happy to implicate and entangle us in every possible way and make us blame ourselves for climate change. We have to do our best to shake loose of that entanglement and never turn our rage against ourselves or allow self-criticism to dissipate our anger toward the real culprits. Of course each of us should be using less oil. But when I hear people piously say, "We have met the enemy, and he is us," I say, bullshit. I didn't cut corners and cause an oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico. I didn't do my best to undermine the Environmental Protection Agency and every other agency that might have limited fracking. I'm not lobbying Congress to open oil drilling in the Arctic Ocean. I didn't cut funding for alternative energy sources. Big Oil is pouring billions of dollars into shaping government policies and consumer preferences. And what do *we* say? "Oh, I should be a more mindful consumer." Of course we should, but that's only the beginning.

**DeMocker:** Do you hope to reach politicians and oil-industry executives with your moral arguments, or are they a lost cause?

**Moore:** I don't think I'll reach them directly. But if you reach enough voters, it's possible to reach politicians. If you reach enough investors, it's possible to reach oil-industry executives. If you reach enough people who love the earth and want to save it, it's possible to reach both politicians *and* executives.

**DeMocker:** Gandhi set an example for his country when he embraced nonviolent disobedience, voluntary poverty, and traditional homespun clothing over Western attire. Is the climate-change movement waiting for someone to come along who challenges the system by completely sidestepping it?

**Moore:** I don't know what we're waiting for. I've heard people say we're going to need one big disaster. But we had Hurricane Katrina. We had the Gulf of Mexico oil spill. We had the worst fire season in history. We've had a massive die-off of forests. Or I've heard people say we need a leader. But we had Al Gore, and people laughed at him. We had President Obama, who spoke about the dangers of climate change when he was a candidate in 2008, but since then he's given climate change a pass. What are we waiting for?

**DeMocker:** Many of us are waiting until our lives feel less busy before we jump into activism.

**Moore:** Yes, we are busy. Probably too busy to avert a planetary disaster that will have the effect of an asteroid impact: killing off species, altering the climate, acidifying the oceans. Why are we so busy? Those who would prefer we not think about climate change and other injustices would like very much for us to stay busy. If we have to work two jobs to make a living, we're not going to be out in the streets protesting. If we are preoccupied with other parts of our lives, our attention is drawn away from the practices that are destroying the foundation of those lives.

I used to think it was enough for all of us simply to live our lives imaginatively and constructively. I don't think that anymore.

I think we have to find the time to be politically active. I don't want to cut anybody any slack on that. Are we going to let it all slip away — all those billions of years it took to evolve the song in a frog's throat or the stripe in a lily — because we're too busy?

The ransacking of the world is making the top 1 percent of the population very, very rich. As the writer Daniel Quinn points out, the rich are like people who live in a fancy penthouse at the top of a hundred-story building, and every day they send workers down to take some bricks out of the foundation to increase the size of the penthouse. The building has lots of bricks, so this seems harmless enough. But there will come a time when they will have introduced so many holes in the foundation that the building will collapse, and their position at the top of the tower will not save them.

**DeMocker:** You say you've become a "ferocious grandmother." What does that mean to you?

**Moore:** I agree with what my book's coeditor, Michael P. Nelson, says about getting older. He doesn't want to hear anymore about retirees being entitled to year-round perfect weather, an annual trip to Las Vegas, low taxes, easy Sunday crosswords, and reduced greens fees. Retired people often feel that, since they've worked all their lives, the world owes them a rest. That's outrageous. Old age is precisely when we need to pay the world back. Yes, we have worked hard, but our successes depended on a stable climate, temperate weather, abundant food, cheap fuel, and a sturdy government — all advantages that our children and grandchildren will not have if we don't act.

We elders are at the peak of our ability to help. We have a wealth of experience. Many of us have sufficient income. And we have that huge commodity: time. Most of all we have a ferocious love for our grandchildren. Wouldn't that love make us want to leave them the legacy of a beautiful world? To turn away from that into a kind of grouchy selfishness strikes me as tragic.

If your granddaughter has asthma because there is dust in the air, get out in the street and demand clean air. If your grandson is not learning well because there are toxins in the water, you should be at the city-council meeting. Their parents are busy making a home for these children, but you have the time and the ability to make a difference in their future. To love someone is to have a sacred obligation to protect them.

**DeMocker:** Most parents I know are worried about the environment, but they have difficulty shrinking their family's carbon footprint without depriving their children of various activities and comforts. What can you say to them?

**Moore:** Parents have a parental duty to be clear about what their children need. Most important is a future. We've got to remember that the next generation will have to live in whatever is left of the world after we get done with it. We are planting time bombs around our own children: toxins in the water, radioactive waste in leaking tanks, acid in the oceans, and climate chaos. And we're too busy to protest because we have to buy the kids the right kind of shoes for the soccer tournament? What kind of love is that?

**DeMocker:** Tomorrow I'll drive three hours to my child's soccer tournament on the other side of the Cascade Mountains.

**Moore:** I'm sorry my answer can't be more gentle, but we are harming our children even as we believe we are providing for them.

It's ironic and tragic that the amassing of material wealth in the name of our children's future is precisely what will devastate their future. Consider the poisonous chemicals in the plastic car seat, the pesticide on the fruit, the coal-company stock in the college-investment portfolio, the carbon load of the soccer tournament. But that's not the worst of it. The harm that our decisions will do to the children who are *not* privileged isn't just ironic; it's reprehensible. These children who will never know even the short-term benefits of misusing fossil fuels are the ones who will suffer the most as seas rise, as fires scorch croplands, as tropical diseases spread north, as famine comes to lands that were once abundant.

**DeMocker:** What are some changes you've made in your own life?

**Moore:** I gave my hybrid car away. We still have a car we take camping, which I drive occasionally. Otherwise I walk or use a shared hybrid. I eat local foods, mostly organic vegetables. In the summers I live in a small cabin with hydroelectric power from a creek. I have learned to cook with a pressure cooker and residual heat. I have planted hundreds of trees and bushes and restored a little marsh.

This all makes me happy and brings me into contact with communities of friends and forests. That's important. But apart from the joy it gives me, it probably doesn't mean a damn thing, because I still fly cross-country to speak about climate change, and that undoes all my efforts. Where are the trains?

**DeMocker:** Do environmentalists fighting climate change share common ground with the Occupy Wall Street movement?

**Moore:** Absolutely. Both movements affirm the same moral principle: it's wrong to wreck the world. Aneconomic system that forces the majority to suffer the consequences for the reckless actions of a few is immoral. We're paying the costs of destructive industries with our health and our children's futures while the captains of industry make fortunes. That's not fair. And when that system threatens to disrupt the planetary cycles that support all life on earth — honestly, that is moral monstrosity on a cosmic scale.

Occupy Wall Street is linking climate change, toxic neighborhoods, financial recklessness, job loss, concentrated wealth, and pointless war. The dots all connect to one central social pathology: the buying and selling of elections and elected officials, mostly by corporations. We need to get the money out of politics so we can be a democracy again.

Plato had it figured, way back in ancient Greece, that every democracy eventually becomes a plutocracy — a government by the rich — because you can always buy votes. And every plutocracy devolves into anarchy, because poor people will only put up with so much. The U.S. has clearly moved into the plutocratic stage. The question is, can we return to a democracy, or will we devolve into anarchy? It's that serious.

**DeMocker:** What changes to the political system would help in the fight against climate change?

**Moore:** I would start with writer Bill McKibben's idea to require all congresspeople to wear jumpsuits and helmets emblazoned with the names and logos of their corporate sponsors, the way race-car drivers do. The bigger the donation, the bigger the patch.

Most of us are so deeply disgusted by the actions of corporations and politicians that we have trouble imagining how they might actually serve the public good. So let's work on re-imagining corporations and democracy. If corporations are going to be treated as persons, fine. I'm all for it. But persons need to conform to standards of right and wrong in their behavior. When they fail to do that, they are stripped of their rights. Let's imagine a corporation that can go to jail. Let's imagine a democracy where elections are publicly funded and all politicians get a decent salary and the public's respect for doing a good job of governing. Just imagine!

**DeMocker:** Does the climate-change movement in the U.S. need to revise its strategy?

**Moore:** Yes, as evidenced by the fact that this nation is doing almost nothing to prevent global warming. No prudent politician will even mention the words. Meanwhile the world is breaking records for greenhouse-gas emissions. We will know that the climate-change movement is making progress when it blinks out of existence and is replaced by a global human-rights movement driven by moral revulsion and a rejection of the fossil-fuel industries and their indentured politicians.

**DeMocker:** Some environmentalists feel that nonviolent protest and civil disobedience will not bring the needed transformation in time. Would you condone violence on behalf of the planet?

**Moore:** No, violence is what we are opposing. You can't ever stop a behavior by engaging in it. Using violence only increases its power.

The reason nonviolent methods haven't worked is because we haven't really tried them yet. We haven't tried massive protests and civil disobedience. We haven't tried boycotts. We haven't harnessed the power of the global religions. Somewhere near half of us don't even vote. Here and there, sure, we've tried nonviolence, but not on the scale we need. Let's give it a go.

Oren Lyons, faithkeeper of the Turtle Clan of the Onondaga Nation, suggests that we need a global council of elders, people like Jimmy Carter and Nelson Mandela and Sheila Watt-Cloutier. They could get together and choose one company to be the target of a global boycott. Every environmental organization, every organization for social change, every church that honors God's creation could call on its members to join the boycott. How many points would the targeted company's stock have to drop before it entered into negotiations and transformed itself? Then the council of elders could choose the next company, and the next.

**DeMocker:** You mention enlisting the aid of religions, but you're not a believer. You describe yourself as a "sacred secularist." What does that mean?

**Moore:** It means that I believe the world is extraordinary and mysterious, beautiful beyond human imagining and grand beyond human measure, worthy of reverence and awe. The word we have for something like that is *sacred*. You don't have to believe in God to know that when you go out the door in the morning, you walk on sacred ground. A friend from New Zealand who had never seen a rufous hummingbird once said to me, "That's the kind of creature that makes you believe in God." And I said, "Or that's the kind of creature that makes you believe we can't let this world slip away." If God doesn't have his eye on the sparrow, somebody else had better, and that somebody is us.

**DeMocker:** You often address faith communities. Does your lack of belief affect how they respond to your message?

**Moore:** When I tell people of faith that I don't believe in a divine Creator, I think they feel sorry for me. They believe I am dragging a ball and chain that keeps me from doing this work as joyously or as effectively as I might, that I have given away a source of strength. All this may be true. But they don't turn away from me, because they agree that the glory of the universe, whether it comes from God or nature, has a value beyond its usefulness to humans. No matter if you're a member of a church or not, you can appreciate that glory, which calls us to action.

**DeMocker:** I once heard you read "The Call to Forgiveness at the End of the Day," your piece in *Moral Ground* written from the perspective of an imagined future in 2025, after you have witnessed the extinction of songbirds, bats, frogs, and salmon. In it you wonder how your grandchildren can forgive you for not acting fast enough to save these beautiful creatures. After you finished reading, the audience sat in stunned silence. Is this the reaction you hope for?

**Moore:** Yes and no. I don't pretend to know what a writer's duty is in these times. And nobody wants to write something that breaks people's hearts. But I did want to help others see one possible future, a world without owl calls and frog song. If we can't imagine what probably lies ahead, how will we gather the courage to turn in a different direction? Maybe more writers should tell stories about possible futures, the beautiful ones and the ones that will break our hearts. It's cowardly to shy away from sad stories. As songwriter Leonard Cohen says, even when our hearts are broken, we have to sing the "broken hallelujah."

**DeMocker:** Can't thoughts of devastation also paralyze?

**Moore:** Our civilization has rituals that help us draw strength from grief, get our courage back, and continue forward. Maybe that's the primary function of religion. Surely it's an important function of art. The philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche wrote, "We have art in order not to die of the truth." Can we turn our grief toward positive action? We need creative ways to acknowledge loss and extinction. If there are trucks going down the road in the countryside pouring poisons on wildflowers, there ought to be a hearse following them and a string of cars with their lights on to acknowledge the deaths. If construction crews are bulldozing a marsh for a parking lot, there should be a choir there singing a requiem. If you poison your lawn, you should post a sign that says, "Not safe for children and animals." At the site of every clear-cut there should be a little shrine like the ones families put up for a young person killed in a car wreck. Erect wooden crosses on stumps. Organize people to wear black and to stand along the line the seas will reach in 2050.

**DeMocker:** Do you imagine this as a kind of grieving or as a political protest?

**Moore:** Both. I was in Laramie, Wyoming, in 1998 when Matthew Shepard, a young gay man, was murdered in a vicious hate crime. The University of Wyoming homecoming parade that year turned into an outlet for grief and outrage. After the marching band and the girls on horseback went by, people poured off the curbs and marched, crying and shouting, through town. The community was profoundly changed. People in the Middle East have taught the world how quickly a funeral procession can become a political protest. In the U.S., civil-rights activists showed that people walking out of a church holding hands and singing can be a powerful political statement.

**DeMocker:** My friends often say they don't want to give fear or negativity too much of their energy. Our culture's desire to focus on the positive is a pretty serious roadblock for activists wanting to confront these issues.

**Moore:** Yes, and if I were an oil-company CEO, I would take heart in that. I would design strategies that build on that aversion to what is unpleasant or horrifying or sad. If you give people a chance to turn away, they will. If you give them a distraction, they will take it.

Let's face it: our culture is hooked on cheap oil and consumer goods, and we exhibit all the self-destructive behaviors of addicts. We devote our days to the pursuit of the next hit. We have developed enabling behaviors to allow our addictions to go unchallenged, to deny that they do any harm.

I think the addiction to consumer goods is a response to the loss of community, self-sufficiency, meaningful work, neighborly love, and hope. When these things are taken from us, we look for the cheap fix, which is turning out to be very expensive indeed.

**DeMocker:** You work directly with students and witness their struggles. Can young people hungry for real change work toward it without risking their personal futures?

**Moore:** Students face a serious dilemma. They know that the real risk to their future is climate change, and that they have the power to stop it. But they've also been told that they need jobs to pay off their student loans, that they won't be able to

compete in the job market if they are distracted from their studies, and that they won't get a job if they have an arrest record. We see the plutocracy at work in this, undermining public education, increasing student debt and unemployment, and tightening the constraints on free speech. People ask, "What is the end of democracy going to look like?" I think it's going to look a lot like this.

**DeMocker:** You and your students have a "hope-o-meter" for the future of the earth, with a one meaning very little hope and a ten meaning no worries. Where are you on your hope-o-meter now?

**Moore:** Honestly? I'm about a one. I see feedback loops in the natural world that are going to make climate change much harder to address. As ice melts, it frees methane, a potent greenhouse gas. As forests are destroyed, they release carbon dioxide. By every measure global warming is increasing more rapidly than the most horrifying predictions of the past. And I can see the political feedback mechanisms kicking in: the more politicized the issue becomes, the more money will be thrown into debating it instead of addressing the crisis. It will be hard to get out of this one.

**DeMocker:** So why do you try?

**Moore:** People tend to think that we have only two options: hope or despair. But neither one is acceptable. Blind hope leads to moral complacency: things will get better, so why should I put myself out? Despair leads to moral abdication: things will get worse no matter what I do, so why should I put myself out? But between hope and despair is the broad territory of moral integrity — a match between what you believe and what you do. You act lovingly toward your children because you love them. You live simply because you believe in taking only your fair share. You do what's right because it's right, not because you will gain from it.

There is freedom in that. There is joy in that. And, ultimately, there is social change in that. That's the way we respond to a lack of hope. A person could be at zero on the hope-o-meter and still do great, joyous work. Even — *especially* — in desperate times, we can make our lives into works of art that embody our deepest values. The ways of life that are most destructive to the world often turn out to be the ones that are also most destructive to the human spirit. So, although environmental emergencies call on us to change, they don't call on us to give up what we value most. They encourage us to exercise our moral imagination and to invent new ways of living that lift the human spirit and help biological and cultural communities thrive.

Over the weekend I sat for an hour in a warm pond in beautiful sunshine with my one-year-old grandson on my lap, splashing and scooping. I've never seen a child so happy. I don't know if I've ever been so happy. That type of immersion in the world is a lesson in responsible caring. We can find the ongoing strength to do this work if we keep in mind that it is powered by love.

**A Good Deal. A Great Gift. [Give The Sun as a holiday gift](#) and save up to 35%.**

[http://www.thesunmagazine.org/issues/444/if\\_your\\_house\\_is\\_on\\_fire](http://www.thesunmagazine.org/issues/444/if_your_house_is_on_fire)

---

✿ What is to give light must endure burning. — *Viktor Frankl*

Copyright © 1974–2012 The Sun Magazine. All rights reserved.