

# QUAKER ECO-BULLETIN

Information and Action Addressing Public Policy for  
an Ecologically Sustainable World

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## Earthy Activism—Changing the World with Head and Heart

Louis Cox

LAST MARCH Mary Gilbert of Friends Meeting at Cambridge, who has been faithfully representing QEW at the UN for the past several years, sent the following email to the Internet discussion list:

*"This is just a heads-up to say that some manner of burnout has come my way. I'm emerging from it, but for several days I wasn't willing to turn on my computer. Got dressed but read fiction. The negative load really got to me.*

*"So although I still feel I'm not doing nearly enough, I recognize that estimate is based on what some other, super-person might do in response to the world going down the tubes. I can't do more, and have to learn how to do less so I can keep on doing it. I also want a return of joy, which I clearly remember, to my life. ..."*

This Friend felt a bout of despair coming on and took precautions to give her bruised and overworked spirit some time off to allow some healing. This seems a healthier response than forging ahead with a stiff upper lip and risking a serious, debilitating breakdown. She also hints, however, at circumstances in which activists may need to step back and reassess their goals and methods.

Gilbert's experience echoes that of another Quaker, Lindsey Fielder Cook, who represented QEW at the latest UN climate change talks in Bonn, Germany in June. (p. 7) A number of times in her report she mentioned feeling, as did many others, "shocked," "angry," "deeply disturbed," "deeply disappointed," and "deeply frustrated" over the lack of urgency, the misplaced priorities, the empty rhetoric, and the stalling tactics that she observed during the UN sessions.

After this emotional buffeting, we can only hope she will have the heart to attend another UN climate session. Whether we are talking of veteran activists or enthusiastic but politically naïve newcomers, these stories of frustration and disappointment raise serious concerns about how the peace, justice, and Earthcare movement can protect its members from overload, disillusionment, and burnout.

Another activist, actress Kathryn Blume, who happens to be a neighbor of mine in Vermont, went to Copenhagen in December, not for the UN talks but to perform a one-person play about climate activism at the independent Klima Forum. Most of the Klima Forum's participants were there to envision bottom-up strategies and to speak truth to power about the radical changes needed in virtually every facet of life. The festive and upbeat atmosphere of the Klima Forum, in contrast to the relentlessly solemn UN sessions, illustrated the importance of solutions that are responsive to people's dreams and hopes for the future.



The inward journey is the other half of cultivating a "whole-world view."

It was interesting to hear Blume describe at a recent community gathering how she tries to immunize herself against activist burnout. She is very selective about the books she reads, the lectures she attends, and the videos she watches. "I want to know only enough to help me keep moving, and not so much that it weighs me down." She also has to reluctantly say "no" to many urgent calls to help with countless causes, in order to conserve her energy, health, and sanity for the long haul. One activity that she has said "yes" to wholeheartedly has been her town's participation in the global Transition Town Initiative (see sidebar p. 6).

Some people, on the other hand, go to the extreme of tuning out all unpleasant news. They are interested only in inspiring examples and listening to people who take a "positive" approach. But it's hard for me to imagine being effective in the world without a tracking in depth both encouraging and discouraging developments on the social, political, and environmental fronts.

**Quaker Eco-Bulletin (QEB)** is published bi-monthly by Quaker Earthcare Witness (formerly FCUN) as an insert in *BeFriending Creation*.

The vision of **Quaker Earthcare Witness (QEW)** includes integrating into the beliefs and practices of the Society of Friends the Truths that God's Creation is to be held in reverence in its own right, and that human aspirations for peace and justice depend upon restoring the Earth's ecological integrity. As a member organization of Friends Committee on National Legislation, QEW seeks to strengthen Friends' support for FCNL's witness in Washington DC for peace, justice, and an Earth restored.

**QEB's** purpose is to advance Friends' witness on public and institutional policies that affect the Earth's capacity to support life. QEB articles aim to inform Friends about public and corporate policies that have an impact on society's relationship to Earth, and to provide analysis and critique of societal trends and institutions that threaten the health of the planet.

Friends are invited to contact us about writing an article for **QEB**. Submissions are subject to editing and should:

- Explain why the issue is a Friends' concern.
- Provide accurate, documented background information that reflects the complexity of the issue and is respectful toward other points of view.
- Relate the issue to legislation or corporate policy.
- List what Friends can do.
- Provide references and sources for additional information.

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There are plenty of disturbing developments, to be sure. Dwindling populations of honeybees, fireflies, amphibians, insects, and mollusks have formed a seemingly endless procession of ecological losses and wounds over the past few years. This summer came the grim news that methane, a powerful greenhouse gas, is being released at an accelerating rate by the Siberian sea beds—one of many dangerous “positive feedback loops” that may send global warming out of control. In July I read that late blight, an insidious destroyer of potato and tomato crops, may be spreading our way as it evolves to tolerate warmer weather!

It was recently reported that bat caves in six Western and Midwestern states have been closed to visitors temporarily in order to reduce the chance of contamination from the white-nose syndrome, a fungus that has been killing bats in the eastern United States. The white-nose syndrome (possibly climate-related) has hit New England so hard that cave bat counts here are down as much as 90 percent.

Seeing bats fluttering above our back yard at dusk used to be one of the joyful signs of Spring, as reassuring as the white Serviceberry blossoms and the calls of returning Redwing Blackbirds—so many losses and wounds in such a short time that we can't take time to mourn or reflect on their larger meaning.

AT A QEW-SPONSORED afternoon interest group at this year's FGC Gathering, Jim Crowfoot, who teaches in an interdisciplinary environmental studies program at the University of Michigan, spoke bluntly about the seriousness of the “absolutely radical, mind-bending” changes that are already afoot around the world. He described three main ways that informed, caring people have been responding to these changes:

- 1) Some are called to be on the front lines of resistance—writing letters, joining protests, etc.—trying to slow down the military-industrial juggernaut.
- 2) Some are engaged in deliberative public policy-oriented work.
- 3) Others are envisioning and bringing into being alternate ways of living on Earth.

Each of these paths, Crowfoot said, evokes strong emotions that need to be shared in a safe space. “*To ignore these emotions and just talk about ideas is to put us all at peril.*” Retreats, furloughs, peer counseling, support groups, nonviolence training, and numerous other tools can be helpful in addressing spiritual, social, and emotional stresses of activists.

One such tool is the “despair and empowerment” work of Joanna Macy, which has helped many people suffering from stress and emotional trauma to get in touch with their joy, sorrow, anger, loss, grief, and hope. These are feelings that people tend to keep hidden—sometimes even from themselves. They might fear that others would respond with indifference, rejection, or ridicule, which would only add to their pain. Instead of being worn down or dragged down, people in Macy's workshops often find that by confronting their despair and mourning their losses in an emotionally safe space, they can finally put that behind them and engage the future with hope.

In the atmosphere of safety that Crowfoot created in the FGC Gathering interest group, a number of Friends began to share some of the raw emotions coming out of their own peace, justice, and environmental activism. One Friend, part of a citizens group that had recently lost a battle to save a wooded tract from urban sprawl, expressed bewilderment over the millions who are “willing to drive 50 miles to work so they can live on 5 or 10 acres in the country.” Another lamented that the ecological disruption from gas and oil exploration in her region may be the reason she hadn't heard the call of a whippoorwill in 15 years.

Crowfoot said such comments illustrated “what everybody involved in the movement is carrying inside.” He said he was discouraged that few economists and virtually no political leaders are stepping forward to challenge the prevailing notion

of continuous economic growth, despite the indictments mounting against it. While there is great hope in a “Great Turning,” we are still in the midst of a “Great Unraveling,” which is evoking many creative as well as destructive responses, he said.

The trouble is that both the creative and destructive forces tend to reside in the dark recesses of our being where they can shape our moods, thoughts, and actions without our even being aware. Even those who acknowledge the existence of a “shadow side” often are not equipped to engage it at a conscious, rational level.

The above metaphor of “dark recesses” alludes to the actual caves into which early humans retreated, where they may have shared stories, songs, poetry, art, myths, rituals, etc., that served to connect their deeper fears and longings to their outer world.

This mention of caves brings back fond memories of exploring a cave with a Quaker group during a Quarterly Meeting retreat at Devil’s Den State Park in northwest Arkansas in the early 1990s. About a tenth of a mile beyond the entrance to a subterranean fissure called Devil’s Den, our Quaker group arrived at long narrow passage that opened into a large chamber. But the only way forward was a vertical slit only about a foot wide. The children slipped right through, but it was a tough squeeze for most of the adults. As the last in line, I decided not to join the group, afraid that I would scuff my clothes. Through the slit I could hear laughter and joking about ghosts, witches, and robbers. They obviously weren’t in a hurry to leave, so I yelled through the slit that I was going to walk back to the cave entrance alone.

I didn’t have a flashlight, but I wasn’t deterred by the prospect of returning in total darkness. I knew that the floor of the passageway was fairly level, and I followed an impulse to see how well I could rely solely on my sense of touch during the 550-foot passage back to the cave entrance.

Stroking my fingertips slowly along the cool, moist walls and probing ahead with the tip of my right shoe, I covered uneventfully what seemed like a few hundred feet, then paused to rest and listen. At this point the meandering passage must have swallowed up all sounds of the Quaker group I had left behind, for I found myself not only in total darkness but in total silence. All I could hear was the blood trickling through capillaries in my ears, and the rustling of clothing as I moved.

I wasn’t feeling particularly afraid or lonely. In fact, this solitary game of “blind man’s bluff” was not an ordeal that I was anxious to have behind me. As I approached the cave opening and began to detect a faint glow of light filtering in from the outside, I felt a little sad that my solo adventure was about to end and I would soon resume my ordinary visual-social mode of engaging the world.

I remained in a contemplative mood as I watched the others emerge, still chatting about all they had seen and done in the cave, but offering very little about what they had felt. The main difference in our experiences was that they had been to the cave, and, at least for a little while, I had felt part of the cave. As I emerged, a part of me had been “reborn.”



According to some pueblo dwellers’ ancient legends, humans originally lived inside the earth.

**M**Y REACTION to the unlit cave was not typical for modern Westerners, who commonly fear and avoid darkness, which they have been taught to associate with danger and evil. Our language and culture are full of “darkness = bad” associations. Europeans were prone to giving sinister names like “Devil’s Den” and “Robbers’ Roost” to remote and wild places they encountered in America. How might the course of settlement have changed if the pioneers had been led to name that mysterious underground chamber in Arkansas something like “Gaia’s Womb”?

Modern religious sensibilities clearly have turned toward more light, physically and metaphorically. Worshipers flock to the Glass Cathedral in sunny California. Quakers refer to “walking in the Light” and take to heart (perhaps too literally) George Fox’s vision of an ocean of light’s ultimate victory over an ocean of darkness. Turn off the lights during morning worship to reduce reliance on fossil fuels and someone may get up to turn them on again. What would those at my Quarterly Meeting retreat have said if I had proposed holding meeting for worship down in the Devil’s Den?

But humans haven’t always shied away from darkness. For thousands of years, caves, sweat lodges, and other dark places have been choice sites for spiritual encounters. There are countless Paleolithic cave paintings around the world that appear to have been religious symbols linking Earth and spirit. Underground ceremonial chambers of pueblo peoples in America’s Southwest reflect the legends that humans originally lived inside the earth. Pilgrims have gathered in grottos to wait and pray for visions and signs. When people lived closer to the land, they appreciated the darkness of the soil where seeds germinate. They celebrated the return of the darkness of winter, echoed by the circadian rhythms of their bodies, as times of needed rest, regeneration, and rebirth. Pain, death, and other negative events were considered part of life, something to be borne with dignity without keeping them from moving ahead with their lives.



I AM INTENTIONALLY juxtaposing this reflection on physical and spiritual darkness with that of the January-February 2010 *Quaker Eco-Bulletin* (QEB 10:3), “Climbing to a Whole-World View.” In that QEB I had suggested that many of the problems in the world today are caused by, or made worse by, narrowly trained specialists in a variety of fields and walks of life who are prideful and largely ignorant of their own ignorance. In that article I encouraged Friends to cultivate a whole-world view, or “mountaintop,” perspective so that we can all better appreciate life’s infinite complexities and interconnections. This lofty ideal resonates with a Protestant hymn that I learned as a child:

*“Oh, lift me up and let me stand  
by faith on Heaven’s table land,  
a higher plane than I have found,  
Lord, plant my feet on higher ground.”*

But later reflection has shown me that this is only part of a larger truth. The danger of overspecialization often comes from highly verbal, visually-oriented people who are biased against forms of knowing that don’t fit into materialistic science. Cultivating only the left side of the brain—associated with the ability to reach out to and manipulate the environment—can also breed the assumption that humans are separate and exempt from the laws, cycles, and rhythms of nature. In the Christian scriptures, Jesus is shown the world from a mountaintop when Satan tempts him to abandon his calling in favor of worldly power.

Attaining a “whole world view” means more than gathering objective information from a cognitive mountaintop. It is also about descending from time to time into the dark root zone of our essential kinship to Earth, using the full range of our faculties and senses, returning healed and refreshed to continue our role as Earth acting to protect itself. This is how Earth activism is transformed into “Earthy” activism—when we temporarily let go of “nature” as an object of scientific inquiry in order to experience it subjectively as a teacher and a portal to our innate inner wildness.

Children, it must be noted, do not ordinarily climb to mountaintops. They delight instead in building hideouts among bushes and rocks, free from prying eyes. They are developing a sense of self through a sense of place. A likely response to the trauma of mother separation, their nest-building creates secure stepping stones for exploration of the wider world.

Our timeless quest for authentic connection is expressed in a Native American song found in the Quaker Worship in Song hymnal:

*Ancient Mother, I hear you calling.  
Ancient Mother, I hear your song.  
Ancient Mother, I hear your laughter  
Ancient Mother, I taste your tears.*

THE INTERPLAY of outer and inner journeys brings to mind an article about the Earth Quaker Action Team (EQAT) by George Lakey and Sharon Cantor in the July-August 2010 QEB (10:4). During the FGC Gathering in early July, Lakey gave a plenary talk on “Conflict as a Gift of the Spirit,” in which he encouraged Friends to study the decades-long social-change movements of the ‘60s, ‘70s, and ‘80s, to emulate whatever it was that made them so effective.

One of the most significant features of those earlier social movements was that leaders like King, Gandhi, and Mandela spent many hours in solitary reflection and prayer, which helped infuse them and their followers with courage or “heart energy.” Their regular spiritual practice helped them discern when the time was right for confrontation, when it was time for dialogue, and when it was best to wait for different circumstances.

Later during the FGC Gathering I joined Lakey and about 20 other Friends in an EQAT-led vigil outside a local PNC Bank branch office, publicizing the parent bank’s financial involvement in mountaintop-removal coal mining. I was among those who cheerfully waved signs like “PNC Kills Mountains” at passing drivers.

But this action might have been more effective and empowering for me if it had been preceded by specific steps to ground us in Quaker values. An initial meeting for worship, ideally in a place of great natural beauty, might have made us more mindful of why we were there and what we wanted to achieve. A veteran of decades of protest movement, Lakey no doubt understood that our spiritual motivation, our love for that of God in all Creation, was key to that “virtue and power that takes away the occasion” of all mountaintop removal. But perhaps it was assumed that because we all identified ourselves as Quakers we had already done enough inward preparation to move into a public action.

This concern was voiced during vocal ministry at Burlington, Vermont, Friends Meeting this summer. A Friend who had spent much of her time in the 1960s and 1970s “stepping forward and speaking out” on a range of social issues, shared that “learning when



**Quakers publicize a banking giant’s financing of mountaintop-removal coal mining during the 2010 FGC Gathering in Bowling Green, Ohio.**

it is time to step back, wait, and listen is one of the great gifts that coming to Quakerism has given me.” Her message reminded me of one of the principles of Permaculture, in which one respectfully observes a site or situation before taking tentative steps to interact with it constructively and cooperatively. (See the sidebar below on *Permaculture*)

**W**E QUAKERS AND OUR ALLIES in peace, justice, and Earthcare are too few in numbers to change the world directly. Our activism is best seen as a form of spiritual leadership. Our goal is not only to inspire and inform others, but to lead us all to wholeness by engaging both head and heart.

If we are unconsciously projecting anger, bitterness, and frustration through our words and actions, this may be a sign that we are neglecting the inner work of grounding and discernment. If our actions have the unintended effect of triggering denial or defiance in others and pushing ourselves toward despair and burnout, we may be inadvertently reinforcing the old paradigm through short-term, “us-vs-them” thinking.

When is Earthcare also soul-care? Quaker educator Parker J. Palmer explores that question in his book, *Let Your Life Speak, Listening for the Voice of Vocation*:

*By surviving passages of doubt and depression on the vocational journey, I have become clear about at least one thing: self-care is never a selfish act—it is simply good stewardship of the only gift I have, the gift I was put on earth to offer to others. Anytime we can listen to true self and give it the care it requires, we do so not only for ourselves but for the many others whose lives we touch. ...*

*One sign that I am violating my own nature in the name of nobility is a condition called burnout. Though usually regarded as the result of trying to give too much, burnout in my experience results from trying to give what I do not possess—the ultimate in giving too little. ... When the gift I give to the other is integral to my own nature, when it comes from a place of organic reality within me, it will renew itself—and me—even as I give it away. ...*

*Go far enough on the inner journey, they all tell us—go past ego toward true self—and you end up not lost in narcissism but returning to the world, bearing more gracefully the responsibilities that come with being human. ...*

*Why must we go in and down? Because as we do so, we will meet the darkness that we carry within ourselves—the ultimate source of the shadows that we project onto other people. If we do not understand that the enemy is within, we will find a thousand ways of making someone “out there” into the enemy, becoming leaders who oppress rather than liberate others.*

## Permaculture Activism

PERMACULTURE was originally Australian gardener Bill Mollison’s answer to industrial agriculture, which through its domination mind-set, destroys land, communities, and natural systems. He devised a basic set of principles—since elaborated by others—to guide people in maximizing both the utility and the ecological health of a piece of land, primarily by looking for ways to imitate and cooperate with nature.

One of the principles is to take time to observe the land, identifying where water and energy flow and how other elements are arranged so that you can become an ally of those natural processes, rather than waging a frustrating campaign to make the land do what it isn’t naturally inclined to do. Permaculture also closes ecological loops so that waste from one process becomes food for another.

In 2001, around the time of growing public opposition to economic globalization and the proposed Free Trade Area of the Americas (FTAA), American activist Starhawk and others began to apply Permaculture principles to a wider social and environmental agenda. Just as good gardeners try to be sensitive to what the land wants to be, Permaculture activists begin by cultivating a shared vision of a more healthy, just, and sustainable world. “There are many young people today who don’t like the direction the world is going and want to change it,” Starkhawk notes, “but many of them don’t know what they want to change the world to,”

Permaculture activists initially work behind the scenes to identify natural allies and to gauge which way the wind is blowing before discerning what actions are appropriate. They also look for ways that community resources can be organized and brought into focus. The basic goal of Permaculture activism, says Starhawk, is to help create “a rich, regenerative environment for those with the least power and resources.” This process may begin with community gardens in inner-city neighborhoods without access to fresh food, and move on to confronting, creatively and energetically, the powers that are standing in the way of employment, education, healthcare, a clean environment, and decent housing.

But it’s not about educated, privileged people coming in and showing local residents what to do. She says, “It’s about transferring skills and building capacity—a sense of ‘gardening the community’ and not just the land.”

Significantly, the community-building aspect of permaculture activism doesn’t require immediate success to be rewarding. There is joy to be felt just from creating and sharing. Solidarity and earthy-hands-on activities reduce the risk of burnout. As one community activist in Portland, Oregon, put it simply, “Permaculture makes you happy.”

<[transitionculture.org/2008/07/23/an-interview-with-starhawk](http://transitionculture.org/2008/07/23/an-interview-with-starhawk)> and <[www.permacultureactivist.net](http://www.permacultureactivist.net)>.

Palmer also helps to dispel the misconception that activism and contemplation are polar opposites and that time spent in thought, discussion, and nurturing the spirit wastes time and energy that should be channeled into action:

*The gift we receive on the inner journey is the knowledge that ours is not the only act in town. ... We learn that we need not carry the whole load but can share it with others, liberating us and empowering them. We learn that sometimes we are free to lay the load down altogether.*

COUNTLESS PEOPLE around the world—teachers, scientists, inventors, artists, theologians, elected officials, etc.—are racing to repair the storm-wracked vessel of civilization, to steer it away from the rocks, and to chart a new course. Some are mending rigging and scoping the horizon. Others are pumping the bilges down in the dark hold. All are valued.

Most Friends today believe we need to carry our witness for a peaceful, just, and sustainable world to state, national, and inter-

national bodies. But legislative processes and treaty negotiations, for all the good they may accomplish, do not feed and restore the individual soul. It is important, when we send Friends into those often dark chambers, to offer appropriate soul care and to help them discern what vocation they are led to at this time.

QEW has support groups for its representatives to FCNL and the UN Commission on Sustainable Development. We should ensure that their debriefings include opportunities to share feelings about what they have been doing and to encourage other emotional care, such as support committees in their Monthly Meetings.

We also need to nurture those who are called to nonviolent direct action and those who are experimenting with different ways of being in the world (along with recovering lost skills and wisdom). They too can suffer from the world's indifference and scorn. We can start by listening and trying to understand. Permaculture activism and Transition Towns are on today's leading edge and good places to start (*see sidebar below*).

## **Transition Towns—Activism Based on Permaculture Principles**

WHAT IF the place you call home was really prepared for a post-carbon world? What if people in your town or section of your city gave the TV a rest and got together regularly for local foods potlucks, discussions about sharing resources, listening to speakers and watching films, making music, and having fun? What might that look like? Can you imagine bringing people together who are from different political viewpoints, different incomes, and different educational backgrounds?

If you are hard put to imagine such things, maybe you need to join the Transition Town movement. I live in Charlotte, a small, rural community of 3,800 just south of Burlington, Vermont. We have farmers and farm workers, lawyers, doctors, retail clerks, and a whole mix of incomes and outlooks.

For the past five years small groups of neighbors have been studying the Northwest Earth Institute curricula to help understand the global environmental crisis and to learn what can be done. Those of us who wanted a more town-wide effort started the Charlotte Sustainable Living Network (CSLN). We brought in interesting speakers, showed videos, led workshops, and provided lots of information about local foods.

A little over a year ago, we who were most involved in CSLN were ready for real action and decided to start the process of becoming a Transition Town.

The Transition Town movement began in England, using Permaculture principles to equip communities for the dual challenges of climate change and peak oil. Their methodology has a lot to do with tapping into the inherent wisdom of a community—just as Permaculture gardeners tap into the inherent wisdom of natural communities. They believe that ordinary people have a lot of creative problem-solving capacity—as long as they know what the problem is.

The Transition Town movement currently has member communities in many countries worldwide <[www.transitionnetwork.org](http://www.transitionnetwork.org)>.

I love the Transition Town idea of building resilience. What will the world be like when oil is no longer cheap and abundant? Can we adapt to that and still have rich, full lives? One of the steps of following *The Transition Handbook: From Oil Dependency to Local Resilience* by Rob Hopkins is to create a positive vision of the future of your town. The handbook is divided into three sections; “The Head,” “The Heart,” and “The Hands.” The beauty of this division is its positive, localized approach so that problems don’t seem overwhelming. In my work as QEW General Secretary I need to keep informed about the state of the world, and it could easily lead me to despair. But because of my other work within my community, especially with Transition Town Charlotte, I am able to get up each day with hope and joy.

The Transition Town Charlotte steering committee is now planning a “harvest potluck” supper for September where we’ll give 10 families backyard composters, plus how-to books and weight scales to show how much organic matter is not going into the landfill. We’ll also provide a workshop on composting. We already have trained “energy visitors” who go into neighbors’ houses to look for potential energy savings.

We are currently doing a survey of the resources and skills available in our town. We work with our town’s conservation commission and energy committee and hope to include more town commissions and committees as allies. Our plans for the coming year are to create “conversations” throughout the town to listen to fears, hope, and plans, and to discuss our future.

How can I be anything but hopeful when surrounded by such committed, enthusiastic, and caring people?

—Ruah Swennerfelt



# QEW Rep Feels Frustration and Hope at UN Climate Talks

The following is a condensation of a report to the QEW UN Support Working Group that Lindsey Fielder Cook, an American Quaker living in Bonn, Germany, filed after attending the latest UN FCCC climate talks in that city last June. (The U.S. and European Union are among the “Annex I” countries.)



I AM WRITING THIS from the Meridian Hotel in Bonn, setting of the latest UN climate change talks under the United Nations Framework for the Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC). I live just a mile away, though I am here as an observer for Quaker Earthcare Witness. And though it is my first climate conference (my background is humanitarian aid), I am already finding the experience both fascinating and deeply disturbing.

For those of you who are unfamiliar with the UNFCCC, it is an international treaty created with the objective “to achieve... stabilisation of greenhouse gas concentration in the atmosphere at a level that would prevent dangerous anthropogenic interference with the climate system.” The UNFCCC Secretariat (based here in Bonn) supports the institutions involved in these processes. The UNFCCC Treaty was followed by the Kyoto Protocol, which created legally binding measures for developed nations. By 2012, a new and more demanding framework must be negotiated to replace the Kyoto Protocol. At present, the United States of America is the only Annex I country which has not ratified the Protocol. This has slowed progress dramatically.

## Part 1: Observations and Contacts

EVEN WITH FIRST IMPRESSIONS, I could identify very serious bottlenecks, including:

- The old definitions/division of developed and developing countries is now used as an excuse for inaction.
- Using the method of human politics to solve a scientific challenge which will shift with action, but not compromise.
- A stunning lack of leadership.
- Approaching this as a trading or economic issue, rather than as a science-based crisis.

- Annex I countries playing a game of, “if you do it, I’ll think about following.”
- Annex II countries were full of mistrust, a sense of unfairness and a longing for Annex I countries to take “historical responsibility.” But this can also be used as an excuse for inaction.

I was shocked by the following:

- The lack of a sense of urgency or passion, except with the Island countries and radical left (Bolivia).
- The focus on money/cost, not science.
- The lack of discussion over immediate measures to counter emission rises (taking personal responsibility for lifestyles, in both Annex I and Annex II countries).
- The desire for a solution without material sacrifice or political disturbance (usually a concern of democratic countries).

My two favorite quotations were:

“We must focus on the structural causes of climate change, and decide if we are to save capitalism or save the planet.” (Bolivia)

“The most difficult conflicts to solve are those without an enemy.” (Mediation Beyond Borders, noting that our lifestyles are the enemy)

In the first days of negotiations, there were countless references of the need to rebuild trust after Copenhagen, to be constructive. By the second week there was a sense of desperation and bottlenecks political stands resurfacing.

In the first days I, the newcomer, was waiting for delegates from the Annex I countries to list how their countries were reducing pollution and natural resource depletion. I was obviously naïve. I found the absence of this kind of discussion deeply disturbing.

In the first day I found myself writing, “It’s all about money.” Delegations called for solutions coupled with economic growth. I did not hear a debate concerning the effectiveness of cap & trade, despite questionable performance. There was no mention (in my presence) of decreasing personal consumption in view of depleted natural resources.

**Temperature targets.** The emphasis on “adaptation” appeared to reflect an acceptance that serious emission cuts will not be made, and therefore vulnerable countries must prepare. Talk of “1 degree, 1.5 degrees, or 2 degrees” seemed to happen ingenuously, as if everyone secretly knew the political will was absent and temperatures would be higher. This fatalistic tone was strong with the U.S. mission. Bolivia and Micronesia continued to speak with urgency.

**Emissions reductions.** Again, in my newness, I was shocked by what had not been achieved. The discussion often focused on improving the efficiency of the “rules.” This was a source of deep frustration. As a negotiator from South Africa stated, “After four and a half years of discussions, we have spent too much time discussing and not deciding. Imagine if, from 11 June to 11 July, we spent the whole World Cup discussing the rule for the length of the football field, rather than playing. That is what these talks feel like.”

**Shared scientific information.** In the second week, I followed an argument that appeared so obvious in need that its controversy was heartbreaking. It concerned scientific, technical and socio-economic aspects of mitigation of climate change.

It is both good to see the small and vulnerable countries expressing such a strong voice and disturbing how surreal these talks can be. Science is only rarely quoted in the negotiations, and getting solid data to the parties via the Secretariat is a potential struggle. The EU representative expressed being “deeply disappointed that we have not reached an agreement. ... We have no more time to waste.”

**Side presentations.** I attended a presentation by Mediation Beyond Borders. A former member of the Swedish negotiating team stood up and said that in fact the talks desperately did need help. He then noted my presence and said, “The role of the Quakers on UNCCD was of capital importance. ... [It was] one of the conditions for success. ... [T]he work the Quakers did in these cases is essential and should be considered (mediation, quiet diplomacy, etc.) as having a role in these negotiations. ... Just getting the word ‘mediation’ into the text was not enough, these negotiations need help.”

**Press conferences.** In the U.S. mission’s presentation, delivered by Jonathan Pershing, I had to remember that, as a Quaker, I did not see violence as an answer. Yet I felt such anger, that I took a break from the negotiations on the following day. Jonathan Pershing talked about the “marriage between science and pragmatism,” adding that the U.S. Administration could not do more at this moment with emission targets because “politics at home don’t allow that.” I found no leadership or risk or courage in their stand. Overall, Pershing appeared to accept that much of the damage cannot be stopped.

**Klima Forum.** Following the U.S. mission’s press conference, the Klima Forum discussions were a breath of fresh air. They focused on personal action (in this case, Germany/Europe), starting with a debate as to whether growth cannot be maintained at the present level. The debaters asked, “Do we wait for a crash or prepare a shrinkage policy?” The discussions overall, though led by politically progressive and often ideologically left speakers, were exactly what I found missing at the UN climate talks, specifically on what must we do to live sustainably on this planet.

There was hope here for movement, in view of public outrage over the oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico. These seasoned observers saw the missions as more constructive but saw no resolution of the “crunch issues” at this meeting.

## ***Part 2: Negotiating Our Future***

THESE CLIMATE NEGOTIATIONS are different from anything I’ve ever experienced, and are arguably the most complex and important negotiations of our lifetime. If the negotiations fail, it is not just a region that will fall apart. It is our ability in the long term to live on this planet.

There is truth to my early observation that “it’s all about money.” The developing countries want to know how much money they will get to develop clean energy and adapt to the consequences of climate change. The developed countries, called Annex I countries, whose fossil fuel dependant economies are responsible for the majority of emissions, wonder how much (little) money they need to commit, and how to reduce emissions while still making money (a cap & trade system rather than a carbon tax).

The Kyoto Protocol commits Annex I countries to legally binding cuts, but not (yet) the rest of the world. China is not an Annex I country, though it is now one of the biggest polluters. The U.S. uses this example as an excuse for its own inaction. There is a strong presence here of oil companies and big business, as well as environmental and social justice groups.

Member State delegates talk of word choice and finance measures and data processes on emission graphs. This makes the discussions somewhat surreal. Urgency is expressed mainly by the countries in the climate change firing line, that is, the island states which are a few feet above sea level. There is an increasing call for delegates to refer to the actual science of climate change, which might seem obvious, but it is shocking how few delegates refer to science. In the second week, a simple request for the UNFCCC Secretariat to prepare a report on scientific information already undertaken was rejected by most OPEC countries. Thankfully, the U.S. and the EU did not object, Venezuela backed down, and the proposal remains “on the table.” But it is shocking.

Is this the best forum for negotiations? Most delegates are positive about the role of the UNFCCC. The most vulnerable countries (usually the poorest and smallest) say that in this forum they can be heard. But the UN is not the sole forum in which to seek reversal of climate change. Environmental NGOs stress the crucial importance of encouraging our national capitols to take a serious stand on climate change. Thus, when governments come to the UN Climate Change negotiations, they can offer substance.

Climate change is an unprecedented challenge in our human history. The chance to halt a global temperature rise to 1.5 degrees is nearly gone and the chance for a 2-degree rise (as suggested in the non-binding Copenhagen Accord) is at serious risk. Higher temperatures will also lead to a greater melting of permafrost, which in turn releases methane gas and adds drastically to global warming. Such global warming will cause unimaginable suffering if not bring into question our long term ability to live on this planet. There is not much time. We have the science, we have the chance, what we need is the political will.

What can we do? A lot. These negotiations need a sense of urgency, and it is not coming from our politicians. So let us get off our comfortable chairs and speak out. Then, when our children say, “Mom, what did you do? Where was your courage?” we will have an answer.

—Lindsey Fielder Cook, Bonn, Germany