

## **350! Artists for Climate Action**

**October 24, 2009**

*Remarks by Mary Christina Wood*

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We have been summoned here by the electrifying performances of 350 local musicians to show our commitment to tackling climate crisis. The music they give us today celebrates the power of human intention to visualize and create change -- for the sake of our loved ones, our descendants, for all of the glorious species, and for the Earth itself. By being here right now, you are manifesting your commitment to be part of the solution. Thank you for that.

On this very day, people are joining over 4,000 rallies and events across 170 nations to demand action on climate crisis. Citizens are climbing to the summit of Mount Everest, they are bicycling 350 miles down the coast of California, they are scuba diving to the bottom of the Great Barrier Reef to sign underwater resolutions – all to make a single demand on government, in different languages, but with one voice. Our demand is this: protect our climate. We need a stable climate to support life. It doesn't get more basic than that. Leading climate scientists now say the Earth is in "imminent peril"—literally on the verge of runaway climate heating that would impose catastrophe on generations to come.<sup>1</sup>

### **I. A Planetary Emergency**

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<sup>1</sup> James Hansen et al., *Climate Change and Trace Gases*, 365 PHIL. TRANSACTIONS ROYAL SOC'Y A: MATHEMATICAL, PHYSICAL AND ENGINEERING SCIENCES 1925, 1949 (2007), available at <http://www.planetwork.net/climate/Hansen2007.pdf>; see also Steve Connor, *The Earth Today Stands in Imminent Peril*, THE INDEPENDENT, June 19, 2007, [http://environment.independent.co.uk/climate\\_change/article2675747.ece](http://environment.independent.co.uk/climate_change/article2675747.ece) (last visited Jan. 8, 2009).

The greenhouse gas pollution that we send into the atmosphere each day is like a thickening blanket that the Earth can't shake off. It is rapidly heating our planet. We are trapped in a greenhouse of our own making, and this planet didn't come with an emergency exit.

Every day, Humanity spews 70 million tons of carbon dioxide into the Earth's atmosphere. Once in the atmosphere, carbon dioxide persists for 100 to 1,000 years. There's no magic way to suck it out.

Climate change is leagues beyond what our civilization has ever faced. It threatens to wipe out our planet's major fixtures, including the polar ice sheets, Greenland, the coral reefs and the Amazon forest. It's causing sea levels to rise and coastal areas to flood. It's triggering the kind of mass extinction that has not occurred on Earth for 55 million years. If our carbon pollution continues, scientists say that we will have a "transformed planet."<sup>2</sup> We are not able to live on a "transformed" planet. If our pollution triggers runaway heating, it could mean death for millions or even billions of Earth's citizens.

This isn't some far away issue that is going to unfold long after you and I live out our lives. The present tragedy of climate change is manifest in the bodies of Hurricane Katrina victims, in the 35,000 Europeans who perished in a searing heat wave, in the panicked faces of thousands of Californians who fled their homes with wild fire at their backs -- and it was manifest in the last, desperate grasps of two children swept away from their mother to their death during torrential rains that flooded Texas.

It does no one any good to sugar-coat this situation. Climate crisis is about a fight for survival. It is about tragedy. It is about incalculable loss. It is about genocide, eco-

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<sup>2</sup> Jim Hansen, *The Threat to the Planet*, N.Y. REV., July 13, 2006, at 12.

side, and extermination of our fellow species. It is about moral duty shared by all human beings living on Earth at this sacred moment in time – a time in which the future of life on Earth hangs in the balance of our everyday actions, most of which we don't even think about. It is about taking responsibility at last for absurd consumption and excessive driving.

This is no time for cowardice, or denial, or distraction. This is something that we have to face head on with all of the courage we can muster. We don't need doom and gloom, and we certainly don't need denial. We need passion, focus, and a sense of clear responsibility. We also need righteous anger that our government won't control a form of pollution that threatens to annihilate civilization on Earth.

The insidious thing about climate crisis is that, if we just keep on doing tomorrow what we did today, we will send this world over the edge. As James Speth, a former Dean at Yale University, says, if we continue Business as Usual, “the world in the latter part of this century won't be fit to live in.”<sup>3</sup> The latter part of this century. Think about that. That's just four decades from now. I am a mother of young children. At mid-century, my children will be about the age I am now. I wake up in the middle of the night – on most nights -- haunted by the knowledge that people across this country *will do* tomorrow exactly what they did today.

We live amidst a planetary emergency, and yet few people have awakened to it. They hear the politicians talk about reducing carbon by 2050. But we won't have a 2050 that is recognizable to us unless we take serious action to reduce carbon this year, and

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<sup>3</sup> See JAMES GUSTAVE SPETH, *THE BRIDGE AT THE EDGE OF THE WORLD: CAPITALISM, THE ENVIRONMENT, AND CROSSING FROM CRISIS TO SUSTAINABILITY* x (2008); see also Mark Lynas, *Why We Must Ration the Future*, *NEW STATESMAN* (Oct. 23, 2006), at <http://www.newstatesman.com/200610230015> (last visited Jan. 8, 2009) (“[I]f we go on emitting greenhouse gases at anything like the current rate, most of the surface of the globe will be rendered uninhabitable within the lifetimes of most readers of this article.”).

next year, and every year thereafter. The head of the UN climate panel said in 2007, “If there’s no action before 2012, that’s too late. What we do in the next two to three years will determine our future. This is the defining moment.”<sup>4</sup>

We are rapidly slipping towards a climate tripwire -- a point of no return that climate scientists call the tipping point.<sup>5</sup> President Obama’s top science advisor, John Holdren, recently said global warming is like being "in a car with bad brakes driving toward a cliff in the fog." The tipping point is that cliff.

The heating caused by our carbon pollution has triggered dangerous feedbacks in Nature that are already working to unravel the planet’s climate system. If they keep intensifying, these feedbacks themselves can cause runaway heating. The forests are dying and burning, and when they do that, they no longer absorb our carbon pollution; instead the wildfire emits carbon pollution. The oceans are becoming saturated with carbon, and they can no longer take up our pollution. Some oceans are now so acidic from carbon saturation that shellfish can’t survive – the acid erodes their shells. You know, it’s a very bad sign when shellfish can’t survive in the ocean. And vast expanses of permafrost are now melting, releasing methane and carbon dioxide to the atmosphere.

Even just two years ago scientists had thought that the tipping point was somewhere around 450 parts per million of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere and that we had 8-10 years before reaching it. But two years ago, the polar ice sheet collapsed in the Arctic, and scientists now believe the planet faces disaster if CO<sub>2</sub> concentrations in the

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<sup>4</sup> Elizabeth Rosenthal, *UN Report Describes Risks of Inaction on Climate Change*, NEW YORK TIMES (Nov. 17, 2007) (quoting Rajendra Pachauri, head of UN Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change).

<sup>5</sup> For general explanation, see Goddard Institute for Space Studies, *Research Finds that Earth’s Climate is Approaching ‘Dangerous’ Point* (May 30, 2007), [http://www.nasa.gov/centers/goddard/news/topstory/2007/danger\\_point.html](http://www.nasa.gov/centers/goddard/news/topstory/2007/danger_point.html). See also Fred Pearce, WITH SPEED AND VIOLENCE: WHY SCIENTISTS FEAR TIPPING POINTS IN CLIMATE CHANGE 238–39 (2007).

atmosphere remain above 350 parts per million. So, that's the number voiced around the world in these climate actions today - 350. 350 represents the bottom line for the planet. But do our leaders know about this? I challenge you to call your state legislators and ask them to explain the tipping point and 350, like I just did. I'll bet only a handful of them can, and the rest will be at a complete loss. Nobody should be sitting in a government position today if they don't know the number 350.

And 350 doesn't stand alone. It's a long-term target. You need a clear yardstick of carbon reduction to actually hold officials accountable. The Union of Concerned Scientists has said we need 4% annual reduction in carbon dioxide emissions per year to avoid dangerous human interference with climate.<sup>6</sup> That 4% is tied to the former goal of 450 parts per million, so we now need *more than* 4% reduction a year. Still, that's a prescription you can take to every single elected official. More than 4% reduction a year -- simple to express. But be wary of politicians who say they've already taken action on climate crisis. I guarantee, they'll always say they did something. Remember, the carbon reduction all has to add up to Nature's requirements. A rescue rope that is too short is no good at all. You need to ask them: "Did you put into place the laws to ensure at least a 4% reduction a year?" They haven't.

Now, for some bad news. We are already at 390 parts per million and climbing fast. So, we have already overshot the 350 target and careened the whole planet into an extreme danger zone. As NASA climate scientist Jim Hansen said a year ago, "We are now on the hairy edge."

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<sup>6</sup> AMY L. LUERS ET AL., UNION OF CONCERNED SCIENTISTS, HOW TO AVOID DANGEROUS CLIMATE CHANGE: A TARGET FOR U.S. EMISSIONS REDUCTIONS 3 (2007), available at [http://www.ucsusa.org/assets/documents/global\\_warming/emissions-target-report.pdf](http://www.ucsusa.org/assets/documents/global_warming/emissions-target-report.pdf).

But there is still hope. Many scientists believe that massive carbon reduction can avert the worst of the catastrophe. If we can stop dumping more carbon dioxide into the atmosphere, then forests and oceans will slowly suck it out of the air and return us to safe levels -- eventually. But we should be honest about the fact that it will take centuries to bring our atmosphere into safe balance again. This planetary crisis is one that all foreseeable generations of Humanity will inherit and have to struggle with – all because we took for granted and squandered the climate stability that we inherited.

Nevertheless, we must keep a tight focus on today. Climate action isn't about what we can do by 2050. It's about what we do right now. We have to slash carbon *today* to stay on the safe side of the tipping point. The good news is that we have the human imagination, the resources, the legal tools, and the bureaucracy to tackle this challenge head-on. We always have. We created the pollution, so we can end it. But to do so, we have to hold our government, our fellow citizens, and ourselves responsible.

One basic problem is that citizens in this country still approach the climate threat as a political issue that their leaders may -- or may not -- choose to address. I am asked all the time, "is 350 politically possible?" Well you might as well ask whether our continued survival as human beings on this Earth is politically possible. I can assure you, as of now, it is not. Your representatives in Congress and most state legislatures are failing at their most basic duty – to protect our health and welfare. They might as well put up signs in their offices saying "out to lunch." Now, I can tell you, there are hundreds of thousands of heroic and talented staff people sitting in government offices across this country who can dive in with their ingenuity and our tax dollars to slash carbon. They are waiting for signals from their bosses, the political leaders that we elect.

But they ought not wait much longer. I have yet to see a job description, outside of the fossil fuel industry that is, that couldn't make carbon reduction a priority. Bureaucratic entrepreneurs in government can make a lot happen. Public servants, go for it!

But, the political clock is ticking down. In just 43 days, world leaders will convene in Copenhagen, Denmark to negotiate a climate treaty. The U.S has nothing to put on the table. I have a law student named Tim Ream working over at the United Nations right now, and here is what he wrote in an email to me two days ago: "My thought now is that the U.S. has all but killed hopes for a full agreement in Copenhagen."

Let's think about this. Our nation emits nearly 30% of the carbon pollution on the planet. The carbon footprint of an average American is 20 tons a year -- three times as high as the average European, and our quality of life certainly isn't the better for it. Every nation on the face of the Earth has the responsibility to reduce carbon. If any one nation does not accept its share of carbon reduction, it will sink all other planetary efforts. In order to save this planet, we must not let any government sit on the sidelines -- most importantly, our own. This also means that all states, cities, and counties in the United States must carry their burden -- at least 4 percent reduction a year. And then when we realize that cities and states are made up of individuals just like us, we can no longer escape own personal responsibility to slash carbon pollution.

So what is needed here? A global atmospheric defense effort on a level far surpassing even the scale of WWII - one that involves every governmental agency, leader, and citizen on Earth. So what is your role? I ask you to do two things.

## **II. The Climate Victory Speakers**

First, help mobilize this nation. There are many people in this country – perhaps the majority – who are concerned about global warming but are taking no action at all. They are not deniers. They are simply distracted. When these citizens are confronted with the truth of what is happening, they will feel a moral imperative to act, and they will force their leaders to act. This is a psychological leap forward happening all over the world at once. But it doesn't happen without catalysts like you.

The greatest mobilization this country has ever known occurred in WWII through the efforts of 100,000 citizens who were called the Victory Speakers. These were average citizens who would give five-minute speeches at theatres, clubs, town halls, schools -- any forum they could find – to convey the nature of the threat to fellow Americans.

Today, we need Victory Speakers for climate crisis -- people just like you who can convey the urgency of carbon reduction and inspire extraordinary action. Climate Victory Speakers also have to ask governmental officials to re-localize society by creating local food, transportation and energy systems. In WWII, this country produced 40% of the domestic food supply in victory gardens that were tended by households and schools across the nation. 4J School District, we don't need more artificial turf fields. We need more school gardens. Climate Victory Speakers, I made a handout for you on the back table, and you can go to the 350 website where you will find prepared talks and slide shows.

### **III. The Great Family Turning**

The second thing I ask you to do is to live tomorrow in a much different way than you did today. Scientists are clearly telling us that, if we don't change our lifestyles

dramatically, our world won't be habitable for much longer. It is time for Americans to *question convenience*. If we can put a man on the moon, surely we can figure out how to stir our coffee without using a plastic spoon. I ask you to commit to ambitious personal change by slashing your carbon emissions 50% this next year -- and then showing your friends and family how you did it. The handouts on the table offer strategies like eating local food, planting a garden, eliminating packaging, driving 50% less of the time, and not flying.

And now, let me address all of you who are parents. We parents love our children and want the best world for them. But, we've fallen into a pattern of high-carbon parenting where we shuttle our kids in minivans from activity to activity – soccer, and piano, and chess club, and what not, on a daily basis. It is ironic, isn't it, that through our very devotion to our kids, we are actively killing the world they need for their survival. Every gallon of gas burns puts the equivalent of 20 lbs of carbon dioxide into the air.

There is a better way. Families all over this nation are turning to a way of life and parenting that focuses on urban homesteading and self-sufficiency. Instead of being family chauffeurs, they bike or bus their kids to activities. Moreover, parents are working side by side with their kids to plant gardens, raise chickens, and store food for the winter. This is a Great Family Turning underway, which trades in the high-carbon lifestyle for enrichment on the home front. Just at a time when experts are telling us that kids have natural deficit disorder – they don't see nature, don't know where their food comes from, are addicted to video games and eat junk food – this offers a better life way for children. These kids grow up creative, self-sufficient, confident, and engaged in their

communities. And they know how to grow food – that’s going to be a crucial skill in their future.

#### IV. Claiming Our Moment

I want to finish by pointing out the obvious that most people don’t yet see. We are in a different world now than we were in even just a few years ago. There is no time to waste. We face a civilizational challenge that requires a war-like effort to transition to a carbon-free, relocalized society. As Paul Hawken has said, “There is nothing in the world that doesn’t have to be remade.” But as President Roosevelt told citizens of this country in WWII: “Let no man say it cannot be done . . . . Speed will save lives; speed will save this Nation which is in peril; speed will save . . . our civilization . . . slowness has never been an American characteristic.”<sup>7</sup>

I’m counting on you – each one of you, personally. I can’t save this world alone, and neither can you, but the world can’t be saved without us. As David Orr says, this is “all hands on deck time.” Here in this community, people are throwing themselves into the effort. Charlotte Anthony started a Victory Garden movement that is growing like bean in all of Eugene’s neighborhoods.<sup>8</sup> Two Eugene boys created an urban homesteading video that is motivating households across the world and will have an audience in Copenhagen.<sup>9</sup> Mayor Kitty Piercy gave a carbon challenge that has inspired thousands of Eugene citizens to slash carbon -- including my own family.<sup>10</sup> And two University of Oregon music professors organized this 350 event. They will never know

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<sup>7</sup>President Roosevelt, 1942 State of the Union Address, <http://janda.org/politxts/state%20of%20union%20addresses/1934-1945%20Roosevelt/FDR42.html>.

<sup>8</sup>See Victory Gardens for All!, <http://www.victorygardensforall.org/>.

<sup>9</sup>Green Prodigies, A 12-part Webisode Series, WITNESS, at <http://hub.witness.org/GreenProdigies>.

<sup>10</sup>Sustain Eugene Carbon Challenge, [http://www.sustaineugene.com/mayor\\_challenge.cfm](http://www.sustaineugene.com/mayor_challenge.cfm).

how far their efforts will spread.

The world today needs such can-do people – millions of them -- to activate government, communities, and neighborhoods. The can-do people will save this planet and they will have fun doing it. There are can-do people in every corner of the globe, and there are can-do people standing in every part of this room. Whatever your position is in life, this is *the time* to do something, anything. Just don't do nothing. Let me quote Kelsie, a 7<sup>th</sup> Grader at the Village School. In her passion project on global warming she says: “The time to act, the time to change, . . . the time to pull together as one people is NOW.”

So, are we willing to take action? Everyone under 15 years old – I want to see you raise your hands with Kelsie and keep them up in the air. You're going to lead us in some clapping to stir things up. Everyone else, look one of these children in the eye – they are carrying the future on their shoulders. Everyone, get your clapping hands ready!

- Clap your hands once if you love any other human being (doesn't matter who) on the face of this Earth.
  
- Clap once if you love this planet.
  
- Clap once if you don't want our planet transformed.
  
- Clap if you love the salmon.
  
- Clap for the rivers.
  
- Clap for the forests.

- Now clap if you'll help *protect* the salmon, the rivers, the forests and the people.
- Clap if you think we can change this community.
- Clap if you think we can change this nation.
- Clap if you think we can change this world.
- Now Clap if you think you're a *part of that change*.
- Clap if you'll make it part of your job.
- Clap if you'll make it part of your life.
- Clap if you'll call a Congressman.
- Clap if you'll call a principal.
- Clap if you'll talk to a neighbor.
- Clap if think you can drive less.
- Clap if you'll plant a garden.
- Clap if you'll eat local.
- Ok, now, we're going to ramp it up—do you know how to stomp?
- Clap and stomp if you'll bring *passion* to this crisis.
- Clap and stomp if you'll face it with courage.
- Clap and stomp if you'll have some fun too.

- Clap and stomp if you'll keep a clear focus.
- Clap and stomp if you won't give up.
- Again, Clap and stomp if you won't give up.
- Now, everyone, keep clapping and clapping, and stomping and stomping to show the Power of the People. THE POWER OF THE PEOPLE! Keep clapping and stomping! Keep it up. Keep it up everybody! KEEP IT UP! Thank you very much!