

SIMPLE SOLUTION

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No matter the eventual impact of Climate Week NYC, the news about the environment continues to be bad. On Thursday, the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration announced that last month was the warmest August since it began keeping records 174 years ago. The global surface temperature for the month was 2.25 degrees Fahrenheit above the 20th century average. Global surface sea temperatures hit a record high for the fifth month in a row.

June and July were also the warmest June and July on record – the warmest summer in the Northern Hemisphere and the warmest winter in the Southern Hemisphere. These increases are not trivial. As Karin Gleason, a climatologist at NOAA, put it, “We certainly are setting records that are significantly larger.”

I’m deeply grateful to the members and friends of All Souls who participated in the March to End Fossil Fuels here in New York last Sunday. Among the three top contributors to global warming – burning fossil fuels, cutting down forests, and farming livestock – fossil fuels top the list. It’s imperative that alternatives for energy production and transportation become widely available and affordable for everyone.

However, most of us don’t own oil companies, car companies, or power plants. The energy infrastructure of modern life is deeply embedded and hard to change, even when there’s a will to do so. As individual advocates and consumers, our leverage feels limited – even when 75,000 of us gather in the streets. What can we as individuals do that will have a more immediate impact on this existential threat?

Some years ago, during a grueling year of medical internship, my wife Holly Atkinson had a three-week vacation. Most of her fellow interns went to Club Med to blow off steam. Holly went to Indonesia to work with Dr. Jon Rohde, a Harvard-trained physician who led a Rockefeller-funded program to address the alarming mortality rate among infants suffering from diarrhea.

Dr. Rohde had previously worked in Bangladesh, where cholera swept through crowded camps housing ten million refugees from the 1972 Bangladesh liberation war. With mortality from cholera-induced diarrhea at about 30%, Rohde and his colleagues developed a treatment now known as oral rehydration therapy, or ORT. Water mixed with salt and sugar were given in large quantities for cholera victims to drink – up to 6 gallons per person per day. With this treatment, mortality from cholera dropped from 30% to less than 3%.

The British medical Journal *Lancet* described ORT as “potentially the most important medical advance of the 20th century.” Rohde himself described it as a “simple

solution” that saves lives. Ironically, when Rohde eventually returned to Boston, the Harvard hospital where he had trained was one of the only places still using IVs to administer fluids to children instead of ORT.

Following the development of ORT in Bangladesh, the World Health Organization worked to train people throughout the world to use this therapy. During Holly’s time in Indonesia, she helped with a program to teach women to make the simple solution for their babies suffering from diarrhea, the main cause of infant mortality. The use of ORT continues today.

Here’s the question: is there a simple solution to global warming. The answer is yes. By itself, this simple solution alone won’t fully address the problem, just as ORT won’t cure cholera. In both cases, however, the simple solution will curtail the most devastating consequences of the problem until a more comprehensive solution can be put in place.

Earlier this week, Marta Kozicka, an agricultural economist at the International Institute for Applied Systems Analysis in Austria, and Lini Wollenberg, who researches climate change and food systems at the University of Vermont, published the results of a study in the journal *Nature Communications*. As reported by the online magazine *Grist*, they propose a simple solution to the problem of global warming: eat less meat.

To feed the world’s growing appetite for meat, they say, corporations and ranchers are leveling forests and over-grazing grasslands to make room for pastures and fields of hay. As a consequence, the greenhouse gases unleashed by these activities mean food systems account for one-third of the world’s human-generated climate pollution.

They go on to say that swapping fifty percent of the world’s beef, chicken, pork, and milk consumption with plant-based alternatives by mid-century could effectively halt the ecological destruction associated with farming. If the status quo continues, demand for meat will continue to rise globally, and overall land devoted to agriculture will grow by 4 percent – an area the size of Germany – by 2050. But if people replace half of the meat and milk that they eat with food made from plants over the same time, land used for feeding and keeping livestock will shrink by twelve percent – an area twice the size of India. Sparing that land would also help limit biodiversity loss and conserve water.

Wollenberg concludes, “There’s enough evidence to show that if we don’t shift our diets, then we will not meet the 1.5 degree Celsius target by 2100. Agriculture has to be addressed.”

Raychel Santo, a food and climate researcher at the World Resources Institute, points out that previous research has found that just lowering the consumption of ruminant meat alone could halt agricultural expansion and deforestation. Many Americans have already replaced red meat with chicken in recent decades, mainly because of health concerns.

Will it be easy to convince the inhabitants of planet earth to cut their meat consumption by half? No, not at all. Human habits have proven fiendishly difficult to change, especially when they relate to food.

This is where religion enters the picture. In a book titled *Food and Faith: A Theology of Eating*, Duke Divinity School professor Norman Wirzba writes:

What would it mean to eat with deep appreciation and with a sense of food's theological significance? What we need is a sense of life's fragility and gratuity, a taste for the world's giftedness and grace contained in every bite. Rarely considered in our eating is the truth that food, which is the necessary means for the continuation of our life, is not itself the source of life. To thoughtfully bite into an apple is to realize that even as it nourishes us, the apple has its own nurture beyond itself... Eating makes our life possible, but food is not itself the 'liveliness' of life. Eating invites us to commune with others, but it also invites us to discover and commune with the source and sustainer of all life.

This deep connection between the sources of our sustenance and the source and sustainer of all life is why dietary guidelines — some as customs, and others as laws — are part of the spiritual practice of most religions. As backdrop to these dietary guidelines, it's worth noting that in the Garden of Eden as described in the book of Genesis in the Hebrew Bible, God provided food for humans, animals, and birds in the form of plants. The human practice of eating animals, birds, and fish developed only after humans disobeyed God and were cast out of the Garden. Once fallen into sinfulness, human being began to exercise their stewardship of the earth — the Hebrew word for stewardship was devastatingly mistranslated as “dominion” — by eating animals and pillaging the earth.

As religious guidelines concerning food began to emerge, some appear to have been put in place to safeguard the health of individuals. In others, the guidelines focus on the wellbeing of the food source itself. In still others, the guidelines take into account the impact of food consumption on the overall environment.

To safeguard human health, for example, the ancient Israelites prohibited people from eating pork. The conventional explanation for this prohibition stems from the fact that pork is easily infected with the parasite *trichinella spiralis*, which can cause a fatal disease in humans. While ancient Israelites may indeed have died from the disease, the discovery of the disease process didn't happen until the 19th century, so it's not clear that the ancient Israelites would have made the link.

Another factor may have been the arid land and nomadic lifestyle of the Israelites, neither of which were well-suited to pig rearing. Pigs like shade, and they need lots of water. They also like the same kinds of food that humans like. A prohibition

against eating pigs would have ensured that resources and effort would not have been wasted on raising pigs.

To minimize the suffering of animals raised for food, both Jewish and Muslim traditions have laws governing how animals must be slaughtered. The question of whether the prescribed techniques in fact minimize suffering has been much debated, but the motivation of the ancient laws is clear. Animals should not suffer unduly because human beings need to eat.

Abdul Baha'i, an early leader of the Baha'i faith, went one step further. Echoing the guidelines for the Garden of Eden, Baha'i said, "But now coming to human beings, we see that we have neither hooked teeth nor sharp nails or claws, nor teeth like iron circles. From this it becomes evident and manifest that the food of human beings is cereals and fruit. Some of our teeth are like millstones to grind grain, and some sharp to cut the fruit. Therefore, we are not in need of meat, nor are we obliged to eat it."

Early Seventh-day Adventist leader Ellen White expresses the same sentiment in her 1905 book titled *The Ministry of Healing*. She says that those who eat flesh are eating grains and vegetables secondhand, when it would be better to eat directly what God had provided.

While vegetarianism is not required by contemporary Adventism, many Adventists practice it. As result, Adventists on average live longer and healthier lives than other Americans. The city of Loma Linda, California, home to many Adventists, is one of the so-called blue zones, one of seven locations around the world where people live significantly long lives. In Loma Linda, Adventists live up to a decade longer than average Americans, and they remain far healthier while doing so – and for good reason. Over the past several decades, medical research has shown that meat, loaded with saturated fat and animal protein, is a major contributor to the chronic diseases plaguing us – heart disease, cancer, diabetes, and the like.

The simple solution to global warming – reduce meat consumption by at least half – turns out to be a simple solution all around. It's good for the planet, it's good for animals, and it's also good for our health and wellbeing as individuals. As people of faith, our goal should be to reduce suffering and enable flourishing everywhere we can.

If you find this prospect daunting, think of it as spiritual practice and not merely as dietary preference. Remember where we as human beings fit into the grand scheme of things. We often think of ourselves as independent beings, self-sufficient and self-reliant.

In fact, the opposite is true. As humans, we rely completely upon the people and world around us. We rely upon parents to conceive us, plants and perhaps animals to give their lives for our daily nourishment, trees to reverse our cycle of taking in oxygen and giving off carbon dioxide, and the sun to warm the atmosphere and light our path. We depend upon the air for breath and the sea for water.

Our reliance upon the people and world around us has a flip side: they also rely on us. We have a responsibility to sustain in return the people and the world that sustain

us. It's a responsibility I call the ethic of gratitude. Simply stated, it insists that because we personally take what we need from the people and world around us, we need to take personally what the people and world around us need. Either we are all part of the great flourishing, or we will all be part of the great demise.

It's essential for us to pause from time to time to reflect on these realities and to renew our experience of being connected to everything: all that is present in our lives and our world, as well as all that is past and all that is possible — an experience I call the experience of God. This awareness keeps us focused on the work that is ours to do.

My prayer on this Climate Week Sunday is that our spiritual practice as people of faith will help fulfill our mission to reduce suffering and enhance flourishing everywhere on this precious planet we call home.