

Chapel Talk
Peter K. McLean,
22 April 2005

Wake Up on Earth Day

You all, in one hour, 1500 acres are made into a desert and five species are lost, ones we typically know nothing about. They might hold treatment for malaria, multiple sclerosis, or for pain; for example, aspirin is derived from the black willows there at the Pond's edge. But, we shall never know because the loss is permanent. Unlike natural extinctions, these human-caused extinction rates are 1000 faster than ever recorded; moreover, as never before, habitats are destroyed or altered, often permanently. CO₂ from our cars and factories and activities has resulted in an unprecedented warming trend that is raising sea levels, melting glaciers and ice caps. Just days ago, over 1000 of the world's leading scientists released a report indicating the bleak news that "over the past 50 years, humans have changed ecosystems more rapidly and extensively than in any comparable period of time in human history, largely to meet growing demands for food, fresh water, timber, fiber, and fuel. This has resulted in a substantial and largely irreversible loss in the diversity of life on Earth". Our numbers grow geometrically: 2.5 billion just 50 years ago, over 6 billion now and expected to double in the next 50 years; imagine our community of 300 swelling to 600 and having to share this chapel, the same dining hall, corridors and bathrooms. Since 1980, population growth has exceeded grain production; we now have over a billion hungry or malnourished people. Topsoil is eroding faster than it forms on one third of the world's cropland, including on the School's farmlands just east and west of us. Noxontown Pond and the Appoquinimink River suffer from sediment and nutrient and bacteria overloads which threaten their long term health and ours. There's a chronic water shortage for over a billion people and many of the world's rivers go dry for at least part of the year or are severely polluted; because of dioxin and other toxins, the state recommends eating no more than one fish from the Delaware River just a few miles downstream from us. Social strife (wars, terrorism...) increases as we struggle over shriveling natural resources. Air and water pollution cause millions of dollars in costs of healthcare and lost productivity...more than a billion people live in urban areas where the air is unhealthy to breathe. We are out of touch with what surrounds us; we easily recognize 1000 corporate logos, but

less than 10 species: a redbud, white oak, a mayapple. Sprawl compromises our landscape, covers fertile farmland...look around Middletown where traffic sometimes reminds of what we encountered last weekend near the Lincoln Tunnel. What will our children and grandchildren say about our decision to permanently remove some of America's most fertile land from cultivation?

We consume at unprecedented rates. We use 70 times more resources than our counterparts in developing countries, especially in terms of what we eat. Eric Schlosser in *Fast Food Nation* argues that we have a public health crisis:

- 2/3 of adults in US are obese or overweight
- The obesity rate among 6-8 year olds has increased three times
- The poor are most affected
- Rates of asthma, cancer, depression, heart disease (all linked to diet) among children also are up
- one of three children develop diabetes because of diet
- Foods are highly processed and flavored (including using for flavoring, a ketone that also is used to clean oil-drilling equipment)
- Children are bombarded with ads...even very young children... chicken nuggets in the shape of teletubbies
- every American drinks on average 56 gallons of soda per year; one Big Gulp contains 50 teaspoons of sugar
- coffins are super-sized.

All, perhaps reminiscent of the last years of the Roman Empire where, we learn from Gibbon's *Rise and Fall of the Roman Empire*, there was "a bloated and overextended military, widespread economic and political corruption, addiction to and dependence on foreign resources, and where there was prevailing public apathy and hedonism."

As Jared Diamond writes in *Collapse*, civilizations that fail historically **failed to recognize** or anticipate problems, **failed to recognize** trends. On Easter Island, a civilization prospered for over 1000 years then disappeared with the last tree in the late 1500's. What were these Polynesians

saying when they cut down that last tree..."a need for more study... technology will solve the problem..."

In other words, you all, our current path is not just, it is not equitable, not responsible, nor is it sustainable...

We can continue to ignore the facts, ignore the science, and even try to alter it as our current administration does. We can continue to borrow from our children and continue to spend the natural capital, live absolutely high on the hog, using up that which provides our soil, cleanses our water and air...and gain a few more years, but life afterwards for all and for all around us would be jeopardized; for us, intellectual discussions, our recitals, our gallery openings, a walk in the woods, lacrosse, crew, baseball, even great community moments celebrating one of our own like we did last Saturday evening.

Or we can combat the onslaught especially if we truly care about each other, about others in this world, about tsunami victims, about the millions without water and food, about the other life that provides the water and food. There is much we can do. Ask Jane Goodall who has courageously campaigned to save chimps and other animals and their habitats around the world. Or ask Jimmy Carter, who welds a hammer for habitat for humanity and travels the world to ensure free elections, peace, and the rights of humans. Ask William McDonough, ecoarchitect and *Time* hero of the year, about making buildings and Nike shoes as nature does, that is, with no waste, waste as food. Ask the students at Exeter where the equivalent of environmental RL's host pizza parties for corridors that recycle the most. Ask the students at Hotchkiss where wind energy supplies some of the school's energy needs. Ask Allison, Adam, Eric, Ashley, David, Laura, and other environmental club members what needs to be done and why they contribute.

The possibilities abound:

-read and encourage your teachers to assign readings from Wendell Berry, Wallace Stegner, Aldo Leopold, John Muir, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Scott Russell Sanders, Henry David Thoreau, MacArthur Genius grant recipients Paul Ehrlich and Wes Jackson, and David Orr.

- fulfill our adopt-a-highway service and organize a roadside cleanup competition as Becca did for us recently
- call L.L. Bean and other catalog companies as Courtney and others did to eliminate duplicates and save energy and paper
- single-handedly go after it, as Greg Doyle did to give us clean-burning four-stroke engines for our water craft
- work with our receptive dining staff to, among other things, encourage buying from socially-conscious companies like Ben And Jerry's, Newman's Own, and Stonyfield, and to encourage use of locally and organically produced food as Alice Waters does, feeding 10,000 school children with her edible schoolyard
- turn off your lights and stereo when you leave your room
- recycle voraciously; offer to help others who do, like Shabazz, Mary Jo, and Katie
- contribute to the Zen garden
- go sailing and canoeing
- meet with Mr. Roach and the Board to express your concern about energy efficiency in our buildings, our street lights, or about having a hybrid vehicle like a Ford Escape or the Mein's Prius as one of ours, or about a mission statement that would better reflect environmental stewardship or about how at Lawrenceville and elsewhere leadership in energy efficiency and other environmental matters translates to saved money, increased donors and donations, increased interest in admissions
- plant trees as the Geiersbach family and Luke and Tyler and Dan and Shaefer did last weekend.
- join the organic garden group, one of the best things going this spring, where, with guidance from Mike and Joy and Candy, students, alums, faculty members and their children work together to produce wholesome produce without pesticides and other chemicals, teaching us that care of land is commendable, that labor has dignity, that nature is beautiful and full of intrigue
- enjoy the outdoors, take long walks, go camping along the shores of Noxontown Pond as Mr. Duffy does with his advisees... Go hiking with noted botanist Julian Campbell this afternoon or with us this weekend in Shenandoah National Park

So what will you do?

- will you considerately walk from the service to the food and appreciate it and the great distance and care devoted to getting it to us?

-will you remember as we were taught in kindergarten to push in our chair, to return borrowed items, to clean up our mess?

-will you create signs like Becca and Ashley did to remind us to appreciate our food and conserve and be considerate of others?

-will you write a letter tonight to help promote energy efficiency and protection of ANWR, or of threatened grizzlies and wolves, or of urging DuPont to take care of piles of dioxin along the Delaware River?

-will you order a tote bag to help us buy wind energy for every member of our community?

-will you help us correspond with students at Sidwell Friends, Lawrenceville, Exeter, Harvard, Cornell, Tufts, UVM, Duke, Middlebury to share what works best in terms of energy efficiency and environmental consciousness?

-will you write an article for *The Cardinal* after interviewing Mike and others in the kitchen, so that we better appreciate them and the food they prepare?

-will you listen to Kevin Lyons next Friday and learn about sustainability at Lawrenceville and Rutgers, where they grow delicious tilapia and tomatoes with waste water?

Although the problems are many, the possible solutions are endless. We simply have to wake up you all; we have to get with it. God has endowed us with great reservoirs of consideration, compassion, and love, and we are asked to be responsible stewards of our natural world. Given what we know, what will you believe? What will **you, not the person beside you, what will you** contribute? The need is urgent. We'll be watching and listening for your response.