

Global Warming. Climate Change. Climate Crisis. Climate Emergency. Whatever label we use, we are facing one of the greatest challenges to the survival of life as we know it. To successfully stabilize our climate, we must simultaneously address the unmet human needs that keep us distracted.

Am I My Planet's Keeper?

Cooperating in the Midst of a Mass Extinction

By Johnny Townsend

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Johnny Townsend

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The Power of Positive Giving Up

(published in the *Salt Lake Tribune* on 19 January 2020)

Corporate and business leaders insist that to be successful, we must be positive. We're encouraged to read books on *The Power of Positive Thinking*, *The Magic of Thinking Big*, and *The Secret*. If we have doubts about a project, we're scolded for our weakness and bad attitude. If we fail to plan, we plan to fail. We can't win unless we play. We're told to make it happen, do more with less, that the difference between an obstacle and an opportunity is our attitude toward it. And yet these "leaders" are the first to say, "Medicare for All? Tuition-free college? Guaranteed childcare? A Green New Deal? You're asking the impossible! Be realistic!"

Managers tell their employees that only the insecure blame others for their personal failures. We need to take responsibility for our lack of success, they say, accept ownership, and do better. But pro-corporate Democrats routinely blame progressives when their lackluster moderate candidates lose.

During my seven years at a credit union, one of the other employees made the same proclamation every morning: "It's

the best day *ever!*” Other employees marveled at his good attitude. The supervisor praised him for thinking like a winner. But you can’t honestly have a better day every single day of your life. If things are going great on your 23rd birthday, what happens 20,000 days later? Will you have sixty billion dollars, a perfect body, and the serenity of Buddha?

It’s okay to have a bad day and to say so. It’s okay to be realistic.

But to claim that the programs we need are “too big to succeed” just means they aren’t banks and auto manufacturers.

If my coworker at the credit union had told our supervisor, “I’m not even going to try eliminating discrimination in the loan process. People just aren’t capable of that level of decency,” would the supervisor have praised him for his cannot-do attitude?

Having a positive attitude toward accepting injustice is to have a negative attitude toward creating justice. Having a positive attitude toward the wealthiest 1% is to have a negative attitude toward 99% of humanity.

One of the teachers at my Baptist high school quoted scripture regularly. “I can do all things through Christ which strengtheneth me,” he told the class one day.

“I can pass Algebra?” I asked.

“All things.”

“I can win the Olympics?” asked another student.

“All things.”

“I can jump to the moon and back?”

I wished I'd been the one to ask that. I'd certainly been thinking it.

“You have a really bad attitude, young man. You need to stop listening to Satan.”

Moderate Democrats insist we nominate bland candidates who won't offend Republicans. I can't think of a worse “winning” attitude. I've read *The Secret*. Nowhere does it advise aiming low and settling for only the smallest of dreams.

When I volunteered as a Mormon missionary in Rome, one of my mission leaders promised, “If you have faith even as small as a grain of mustard seed, you can baptize 40 people a month, 100 people. Every single one of you. If you have faith.”

With my bad attitude, and because I did pass my math classes, I made some quick calculations. With 120 missionaries in Rome, we'd be converting 12,000 Catholics a month, 144,000 a year, 288,000 by the end of our two years in Italy. Since there were four missions in the country at the time, that would mean 1,152,000 converts by the time we left.

A core principle of capitalism is eternal growth, higher sales every month, indefinitely. “We had the best quarter *ever*.”

Yes, some things are impossible. Other things that seem impossible are just hard.

For years, running a four-minute mile seemed a physiologically unattainable goal. Then someone did it. And thousands more runners have since beaten his time.

Other countries have *already* achieved universal healthcare. Other countries have *already* established tuition-free college, guaranteed childcare, and free public transportation.

When a job applicant tells us, “I simply can’t do what your job description says, and I won’t waste my time trying. When do I start?” we know not to hire that person.

And when the job is mayor, or city council member, or senator, or representative, or president, we don’t need a job applicant whose lifelong dream is to write the worst-seller *The Power of Positive Giving Up*.

Make Earth Great Again

(published in *LA Progressive* on 21 September 2019)

I was the only person on light rail carrying a protest sign. Mine was pretty tame: “What have you got against a stable climate?” on one side, with “The climate crisis is World War III” on the other. A few passengers glanced nervously my way. Was I one of those crackpot preachers carrying warnings about the end of the world?

I wasn’t far off, I suppose.

Fortunately, when I arrived at the Pioneer Square station just before 1:00 and stepped out into the transit tunnel, I spotted a couple of other people headed to the climate rally at City Hall.

We were deep below ground, and I noticed that both the first and second escalator were out of service, as was the elevator. Seattle’s not a poor city. Were these machines left unrepaired due to a lack of employees? Or had someone deliberately delayed work to make it harder for protesters to reach City Hall? I recognized my suspicions were probably unfounded, but when elected officials so often opposed

constructive action on climate, it was impossible not to wonder.

Old and fat, I was already exhausted by the time I reached street level and trudged slowly up a very steep James Street to 4th Avenue. But here I was heartened. A huge contingent of marchers was coming down James from First Hill. Already, every spot along the impressive staircase leading up to City Hall from the street was filled with protesters. The entire plaza beside it was filled as well. Not a single free spot was left on the sidewalk in front of the building.

The street itself had a good hundred or so protesters, but there was plenty of room to maneuver. I stood in the middle of 4th Avenue, in the middle of the block, and held up my sign, flipping it every few minutes so people both in front and in back could see both slogans. Lots of photographers were about, most amateur but some carrying professional equipment.

“Let’s Care Harder” one sign encouraged.

“Don’t be a fossil fool,” chided another.

My husband Gary was supposed to be somewhere in the crowd. He was leading a small group from the Freedom Socialist Party and had started the day at 9:00 a.m. at Cal Anderson Park on Capitol Hill, where protesters rallied for three hours before starting their march downtown. I was grateful so many folks were present I couldn’t find him.

I was not up to standing for six or seven hours, and my diabetes made it impossible to go that long without a bathroom break. But I wanted my body to count at City Hall.

The Raging Trannies sang a few protest songs, followed by kids from the Sunrise Movement.

While the event was primarily a student strike, people of all ages milled about. I smiled when I realized another large surge of protesters was coming down James Street to join us. The crowd around me thickened. I couldn't quite see where the youth speakers were standing, talking about indigenous land and the effects of the climate crisis on all marginalized peoples, how action on climate was fundamentally tied to economic and racial justice. A balcony high above the plaza was filled with protesters and a man with large video equipment, but I saw no microphone or speakers.

When I still lived in New Orleans, my Mormon bishop had worked for Shell. I'd been interested in geology, but he'd told me the only way to make money with such a degree was to look for oil.

I'd studied Nathaniel Hawthorne instead and didn't make money.

I remembered waking up one night during my college days to a loud bang. When I climbed out of bed to investigate, I saw my father creeping down the stairs with a baseball bat. He thought someone had kicked in our front door.

An explosion at the Norco oil refinery fifteen miles away had killed seven workers and released 159 million pounds of chemical waste into the atmosphere.

Somewhere in front of me, I could hear students on the City Hall plaza introducing each other, a 15-year-old, a 13-year-old, some making hyperbolic statements that would offer easy opportunities for attacks by right-wing climate deniers. “The climate crisis isn’t something in the future. It’s right now! We’ll be dead in three years!”

Or something along those lines. Even in worst case scenarios allowing for billions of deaths, still decades in the future, there would nevertheless be millions of survivors. But the student had the gist of the problem—it was serious and needed addressing.

One of the students asked the crowd not to photograph her or post pictures of her online, to protect her safety. It seemed melodramatic, until I remembered recent posts right-wing folks had made about Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez and Ilhan Omar.

“We’re skipping our lessons to teach you one,” read a sign making its way through the crowd.

The word “Greed” had its “d” crossed out on another sign, replaced with an “n.”

Two young people walked by, wearing stickers on their shirts proclaiming, “I registered to vote today.”

A huge surge of marchers joined us from Cherry Street to the north. 4th Avenue was getting quite crowded. I had a flashback to Mardi Gras day on Bourbon Street and began feeling trapped.

I still couldn't find Gary.

Some unseen person at the microphone led everyone in chants and singalongs. I was never able to participate in such things, instead nodding in agreement and waving my sign. Passersby looked at my scribbled slogans, none of them very impressed. I'd have to come up with something better for the next rally.

"Seas are rising," I read on one sign, "and so are we."

"Replant the forests," said another.

Hey! Gary's head moved along next to that sign. He was the one carrying it. The other side read, "Free mass transit."

There were too many people between us for me to reach him.

Gary and I had just celebrated our twelfth anniversary a few days earlier, eating at a restaurant in our Rainier Beach neighborhood that had been a gas station in the 1940's, its façade made of round river stones. We'd had a great view of Lake Washington, but cars zoomed past through the entire meal, making it difficult to hear one another.

Gary had bought me light-blocking blinds for my home office. I'd bought him an energy efficient window for his. Our tiny house was 113 years old.

Another huge surge of protesters joined us from Cherry Street. Surrounded now by several hundred people, I squeezed my way to the sidewalk on the west side of the street and leaned against a plywood wall blocking off a huge excavation in the area below, space for a parking garage underneath the high-rise planned for the site.

"We've just been told the media are reporting 10,000 protesters here today!" another invisible person on the platform somewhere on the plaza announced.

As I'd left home earlier, I'd been afraid there might only be 60 or 70 people at the rally. But in a city of over a million, it was still disappointing a few more didn't show up. The superintendent of Seattle Public Schools had told all the students that if they skipped class to attend the climate strike, their absences would be considered unexcused.

And this in Seattle, a progressive city, in a state governed by Jay Inslee, whose presidential bid had been based on addressing the climate crisis.

"Make Earth Great Again" I saw on a new sign.

"We're HOT and bothered!" another read.

"My retirement plan isn't a 401k, it's 685 ppm of CO2."

Tammy Morales, Shaun Scott, and Kshama Sawant, local leaders and candidates, spoke of their commitment to address the crisis. Kshama belonged to a different Socialist party than Gary did, but she was the boldest member on the city council. I received emails from her all the time on rent control and other issues important to residents being priced out of the city.

A cute young man, thirtyish, walked past me, handing out flyers on the importance of increasing link light rail service and adding a subway line, now, not decades in the future. He hugged another young man he saw in the crowd.

Many gray-haired protesters were adding their energy, wearing buttons and T-shirts and hats with slogans. One carried a sign reading, "Make love, not CO₂," a message that probably resonated more with the older protesters than the hundreds of kids present.

A huge contingent of Amazon workers demanding their company do more to address the crisis milled about. I'd heard some Google workers were coming, too, but I couldn't clearly identify them. Many of the workers held signs demanding Amazon stop providing web services to fossil fuel companies. It took me a few moments to understand the "NO AWS FOR FOSSIL FUEL COMPANIES" signs. I'd thought they were asking me not to feel sorry for the demise of the fossil fuel industry. There was no danger of that.

Though I knew my nephew in Louisiana depended on a fossil fuel job to support his family. My cousin in Houston did, too.

Gary's white-haired head bobbed in the distance. He'd grown up Mormon as I had. We'd both volunteered two years of our lives as missionaries, in Rome of all places. We'd only met after I lost both my apartment and my job to Hurricane Katrina and been forced to relocate.

I wondered how many other climate change refugees were in the crowd today.

More were surely on the way, next year, and the year after, and the year after that. Hardly anyone in Seattle was even following the devastation Tropical Storm Imelda had just caused in eastern Texas the day before, 40 inches of rain in some areas. Internal immigration from our own country was going to be devastating in the coming years, much less what was about to happen in other parts of the world.

A protester waved a sign off to my right. "Treat the world as if we plan to stay."

It was 2:12, and I was getting tired. A few other people had begun wandering off, and I decided to join them. If I waited much longer, downtown workers would pack the light rail, and getting home would be miserable. As it was, once I reached Rainier Beach, I'd have to compete with all the students who'd gone to class today, making the bus ride up the hill unpleasant.

Besides, I had to pee.

I walked down James and then descended several flights of stairs to the platform. Four or five other people with signs

were also waiting to board. After finding a seat in the rear car, I casually positioned my sign so that other passengers could still read it as we headed south.

I just missed the 106 and didn't feel like waiting, so I carried my sign five blocks to Rainier Avenue. The 7 Prentice pulled up a few minutes later, a great bus if you could catch it, so close to the end of the line that only a handful of riders were still aboard. I could see the driver read one of my slogans as I stepped on. He looked me in the eyes and gave me a nod which I decided to interpret as approval.

I still had a five-minute walk from the closest stop to my house and, like the missionary I used to be, I continued to carry my sign high as I walked along Renton Avenue. Turning the corner when I reached my street, I saw Gary's truck in front of the house and smiled. He gave me a kiss when I walked in the door, and then we turned on the news. He was asleep within minutes, holding my hand as he always did while napping on the sofa.

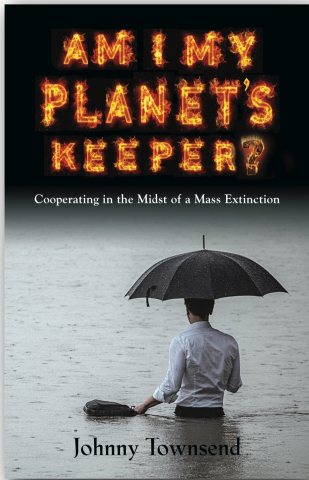
Four million people had attended 2500 climate rallies in 185 countries in the past 24 hours. Some of the protest signs featured on the news segment were "Losing Nemo," with a dying clown fish painted next to the words. Another movie reference featured a poster showing several burning trees. "Run, Forest." Yet another sign read, "Yo mamma's so hot she's about to experience desertification and rising sea levels."

I hoped the youth would be able to spur grownups to act our age.

I hoped they would get the job done even if the rest of us were too stupid or too lazy or too greedy to do it ourselves.

I watched as the news went to commercial, an ad for a major fossil fuel corporation appearing onscreen, an actor telling us what a responsible job the company was doing providing clean energy.

When Gary awakened a few minutes later, I squeezed his hand, kissed him on the cheek, and headed to the kitchen to start dinner.



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