

Hairball

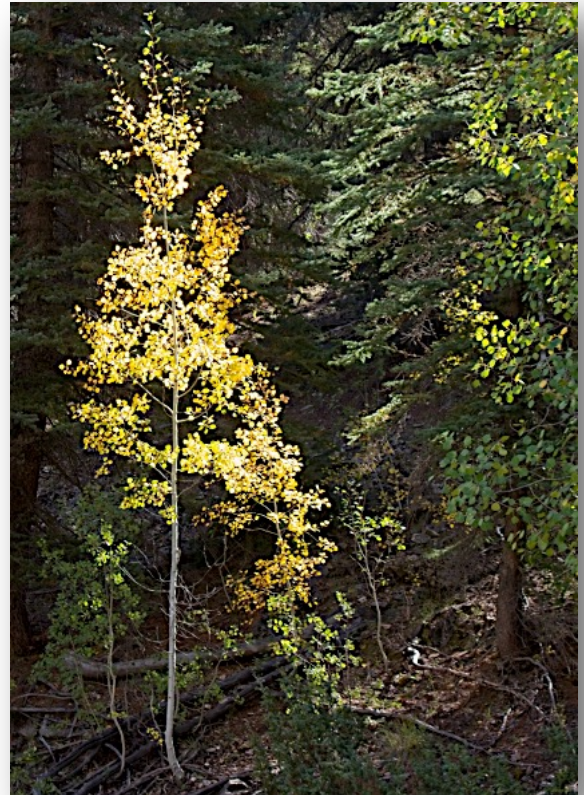
By Gary Gunderson

The wind from the second unprecedented hurricane in two weeks was still swirling through the trees. So I paid attention when the United Nations Climate report said we had a dozen years to fundamentally change our lives to avoid runaway melting with irreversible consequences. This wasn't about the polar bears (already toast), but my grandsons who would not even be out of high school before their prospects were radically diminished.

The UN report focused on the huge difference between stopping the warming at 1.5 instead of 2 degrees centigrade. Nobody you would recognize as human has ever experienced either one, since it's been about 100,000 years since the planet has been that warm. The scientists could not bring themselves to speak about the implications of 3 degrees, which would melt all of Greenland and the Antarctic shelves, raising the seas by a few dozen feet, altering every weather pattern since there have been mammals to notice. If the world implemented all of the Paris agreements that you-know-who considers too extreme, we would sail into the utterly unknowable range of 3.5.

This is not about the planet. Earth will do just fine once it coughs out us humans like a cat does a hairball. The carbon levels will mean we skip one or two glacial eras while things wobble back into order. But in a hundred thousand years or so, Florida will rise up out of the ocean again while a mile of ice scrubs Detroit off the granite. A few lawyers, rats and encapsulated rich people will have a chance to start everything over, which bodes poorly for the next grand experiment. Or maybe a more adaptive human variation will emerge, more kind, humble and given to wonder. But not me or any in my line.

This is not entirely new, except for the urgency and proximity of the cliff. The National Academies Roundtable on Population Health Improvement held a brave workshop on climate change more than a year ago. You may not have noticed. Every bit of the UN report was known except for the hook about how important it was to aim for 1.5 instead of 2 degrees.



Aspen on the North Rim.
I love this place.

Bill McKibben who has been the exquisitely eloquent prophet long before Al Gore was dismissed as a daft alarmist. McKibben wrote a [stunning piece](#) after the dystopian reality of the drowning of Houston last season pointing out that unlike most problems that can be fixed later, this one gets entirely out of control: *we lose entirely by going slowly.*

My house recycles like neurotic squirrels hiding walnuts. But that is mere symbolism compared to the *actual* damage to the planet resulting from my platinum frequent flyer status that comes from speaking all over the place about health. There will be no health for anybody anywhere, if we do not change. All of the process improvements by all of the hospitals in the world will amount to nothing, if we do not change.

You can learn a lot from the fellow living in the White House. Just do the exact opposite of everything he does, especially regarding the most important of all his duties—to protect the people.

Step one: Do not join the *what-the-hell-and-who-cares* team of millionaires who consider the survival of civilization to be inconveniently expensive--to themselves. They teach us that fear and greed makes one stupid and mean because it shortens our attention span. Do the opposite: don't be afraid and don't cling to our piles of stuff. Humanity can live—if we change our ways.

They'll tell you it is already lost, so what the hell? But it is stunning how quickly the natural order rebounds given any chance at all. The [Earth Island magazine](#) tells us the lessons from the Elwha River, which for most of the past century was blocked by two high dams; the salmon long extinct as the river ecology warped beyond hope. And then, improbably, a tenacious group managed to get the dams blown up. I remember when it was proposed and thought it was a preposterous thought not worth wasting any hope on. And then it was gone.

Everyone—even the optimists--assumed it would take decades for the salmon to find their way upstream and for the accumulated muck to wash out. Actually, the sockeye headed upstream *in weeks* as if they'd just been waiting for the humans to do the right thing. It's not all healed; but they are breeding like, well, salmon and seem to be enjoying themselves. And only three years later the silt has already built a new half-mile delta where once was stone. The whole river and coastal ecosystem is working. Of course it is; that's how life works. Living systems are radically adaptive and hopeful, never ceasing to watch for an opportunity to explode into life.

This brings me to the second point: we must follow the path of wonder for the world that God so loves. This love is the only thing strong enough to carry us to and through the changes we must make. Only love makes us brave enough.



What could be more amazing than river mud after flood?
Canning River 2018.

As I become older and ever more aware of the threats to the world, I find myself more filled with wonder at how it is so wondrously made (Psalm 139). I am overwhelmed by the astonishments on the wing, and not just the arctic snowy owl, but the sparrow out our bedroom bird feeder. In Alaska I was awed by the Brooks Range mountains, but just as much by the countless wonders of the billions of stones in the Canning River in endless varieties of beauty. I can watch the miles of Appalachian hardwoods sway in the breeze for hours, but neither can I look away from the intricate patterns of grain in the cherry burl. I turned a bit of it for a ring on my finger and see new things in it every day. We will only be brave for what we love; so we must pause and fall in love with our melting planet in all its immediate and intricate detail.

Fall in love with place you already are, especially. This summer I was on the Arctic coast of Alaska. I've hiked the Grand Canyon seven times. Table Mountain over Cape Town, too. For that matter, I've never hear of a place I didn't want to go see, taste, listen and feel. But I live in one of the most beautiful places on the earth already. So do you. My brother Ron has fallen in love with an acre of overgrown suburban land next to his church, his love drawing in hundreds of others now aware they live in the amazing Chesapeake watershed.

Follow the stream near you up to the ridge and see your place whole and complete. Notice what is alive and then look beneath into the soil and down into the rocks. We live where Africa once connected, the collision and separation rippling up the Blue Ridge and leaving agates in the streams. Amazing enough to love. Lovely enough to protect.

Thirdly—and hardest for me: Hurry up and slow down. The deadly melting of our planet is driven partly because of our ceaseless urgency. "Ain't got time for a fast train;" not when Amazon can get my latest desire to my door tomorrow, or Delta get me to a half-day meeting in DC by 9am. Go slower and then add by subtracting. Don't go at all.

The scientists say we must choose life now. You can't change everything right away. But *every and any* human choice can change in a few years, if I, you, we accelerate our turning now. I've got air travel booked some months out, but by Winter you should see a different pattern in my life. I promise to shut up entirely, if I'm still Platinum next year. I'm going to learn Amtrak and how to travel within the range of a 200-mile electric car. No more Arctic; more Yadkin. Probably better.



No big deal shot that could be taken anytime ... of a hundred miles of amazement below Fancy Gap, VA.

These are choices of global consequence. And they are choices we have a chance to make by voting for those who can and will heed the science. It's way too much to expect of you-know-who. But anyone running for any office in the land should be asked how their lives and how their decisions will be shaped by the new climate urgency. This year in Forsyth County a friend and colleague [Terri LeGrand](#) is running for the NC House District 74. She's a longtime environmental activist laying it all on the line against an entrenched do-the-same-ol-thing person who has basically wasted her elective office on piddle. Terri has come out of nowhere to make it a dead heat with a few weeks to go. She's like a salmon who poked a hole in the ancient dam by herself! There are people like that all over the nation this year, running for our lives. Before you go buy an electric car, make sure you send them a bit of money and tell your friends to vote for them.

I do not believe that we are made for suicide.

We gotta change. And we can.

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