

# Celebration of St. Francis

By John de Graaf

Earth Ministry's Celebration of St. Francis – Seattle, Washington

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What an honor it is to speak tonight for Earth Ministry's 20<sup>th</sup> annual St. Francis Day celebration! Congratulations to a great organization for two decades of remarkable service!

I want to start with a personal story that I've never talked about publicly before. You may know, we just celebrated the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Wilderness Act, signed on September 3<sup>rd</sup>, 1964, setting aside places where we can experience the land much as it was before we came and shaped it to our purposes, and where we can only visit but not remain. As a boy growing up in San Francisco, California, the city named for St. Francis, I spent part of each summer in the wilderness and it taught me lessons about the environment, about joy, about the need for time and about faith.

When we were in high school, some of my friends and I used to go backpacking in the Sierra Nevada for weeks without our parents. I think few parents would allow their children to do that now, but ours did, and for that I will be forever grateful. While we did this mainly in summer, occasionally we went during colder times of the year. So, at Thanksgiving break in 1962, two of my friends and I were planning a wintry adventure in the Desolation Wilderness near Lake Tahoe. There was one problem though, in my case. I'd been fighting a very painful sinus infection for several weeks, with constant headaches. It was a virus, and therefore, unresponsive to antibiotics.

I really didn't feel up to the trip physically, and, of course, my mother warned me not to go, suggesting that my illness might well turn into pneumonia. But word was that there was little snow in the mountains that fall and that snowshoes would not even be necessary for our hike to Lake of the Woods, and planned climb of Pyramid Peak, the highest in the area. And the weather outlook for the four-day weekend was excellent. So I went.

We camped at the edge of the Wilderness area the first night. As we'd heard, there was very little snow to cross, and hiking the next day on the trail to Lake of the Woods was easy. The distance was short, and by late morning we had set up camp on the shore of the frozen lake, and were ready to climb Pyramid. There were several small ridges to traverse and, traversing cross-country without a trail was slow, but we reached the final ridge of the peak by mid-afternoon and started up.

I was out of shape from my illness and fell quickly behind my fellow hikers. As we neared the top of the nearly 10,000-foot peak, the wind was fierce and bitter. I was

gasping for breath, and my head still throbbed with pain. We spent only a short time on the summit, and then headed back to camp the way we had come. By then, I was exhausted and struggling to keep up. My headache grew worse and I remembered my mother's warnings.

When we got back to camp, my buddies let me crawl into my sleeping bag while they prepared hot soup and cups of tea. Soon, it was dark, and despite the sinus pain, I quickly fell asleep.

In the middle of the night, I woke up suddenly and grabbed for my glasses. We were sleeping without a tent, covered only by tarps—we were crazy kids!—and I saw immediately that the sky was perfectly clear, a canopy of stars with a big moon in the middle. The entire area was bathed in brilliant moonlight; it seemed as easy to see as at mid-day. It was also perfectly still, without a breath of wind. Clear mountain nights are often very cold, but this one was surprisingly mild; it seems that a warmer front had blown in and the temperature was probably not much below freezing.

It took a moment, but I suddenly noticed something else. My head no longer hurt. After a couple of months of constant pain, I felt absolutely none. I couldn't quite believe it, but a peace and calm had fallen over me that I had never experienced before, nor ever since. I got up and walked over to a rocky point on the lakeshore in the bright moonlight. I stared quietly across the lake, still and frozen, to the dark ridge of Pyramid Peak beyond and the sparkling sky overhead.

It was the most profound spiritual experience of my life, and though I am not formally religious, it left me feeling that there was a purpose to the universe and to my life, and that things would turn out well if I placed my trust in providence. Like my sickness, other trials would pass and I was going to be all right. I remember grateful tears of joy streaming down my face as I looked out at this calm and perfect silent night around me. I will never forget that night and I know that it has shaped my life in ways I will probably never understand. Surely, it taught me that the best things in life aren't things.

You know, I have friends who have kind of given up on religion. They point to the rigidity and lack of empathy of the Christian right, or to the cruelty of radical Islam and suggest that religion is no longer a force for good in this world. But the work of Earth Ministry and organizations like it make clear the good that people of faith are still doing and will continue to do.

We are here to honor one of those religious people who did good things--St. Francis, whose birthday actually falls on October 4<sup>th</sup>. Now we all know that Francis is sort of everybody's favorite saint...mine too. Let me tell you why. More than 40 years ago, I first saw *Brother Sun, Sister Moon*, Franco Zeffirelli's film about the life of Francis. Some of you may have seen it. In many respects, it was a typical movie, all Hallmark pretty;

every scene shot at the golden hour. Then too, Lady Claire always looked like she'd just walked off the set of a Lady Claire commercial.

Nonetheless, the film contained a valuable message. It spoke to the positive essence of religion. It portrayed Francis as a Christian rebel against the growing materialism of his day. Francis challenged his father, a very rich textile merchant whose wealth came from the exploitation of his workers, and whose life revolved around calculations of economic profit and loss.

"What's it all for--this business—this *busy*-ness--that so consumes my father?" Francis asked.

Instead, Francis called his peers to savor the wonder of creation and to care for it. To embrace Lady Poverty. He reminded them of Christ's words about the lilies of the field and the birds of the air, who neither sow nor reap yet are more beautiful than Solomon in all his glory. He warned them that they could not serve both God and money. And Francis asked them to take the time to discover what really matters. He asked them to slow down and be here now. And that was at a time, when by modern standards, they were all tortoises anyway.

The music in the movie was performed by the folk singer Donovan, and it was too sappy for most people's tastes, including mine. But the words to one of the songs have stayed with me all these years:

*If you want your dream to grow, take your time, go slowly. Do few things but do them well. Simple gifts are holy.*

We live in a very different world with ideas very different from those Francis was about. Our dream is a different dream. If Donovan wanted to write a song expressing *our* temporal values, it might go something like this:

*If you want your dream to grow...work all day, go faster...Do a lot, then do some more...Work should be your master.*

These days, it's not "Remember the Sabbath and keep it holy." It's "Remember the smart phone and keep it handy." I'm afraid that in America, Work has become our other deity, right up there with materialism.

In the fourth chapters of both Matthew and Luke, when Jesus was tempted by the Devil in the desert to prove his power by turning stone into bread, he responded by saying that we don't live by bread alone. And of course, we certainly don't. Not those of us who live in this world's richest nation. Yet if we think of bread in a different way, as a symbol of material possessions, then we are awash in breads of every variety—plastic bread and metal bread, bread of every shape and size. So it is in the consumer society.

If we think, on the other hand, of things of the spirit, of relationships, of love, of family, of healthy bodies and minds, of creation stewardship, of joy, of being rather than having, then I would contend we are growing hungrier by the day. We hunger especially for that which these things of the spirit require most--free time. Time unburdened by the demands of earning and spending, producing and consuming.

We are stuffed with things and starving for time. And yet, time is a family value, without which families crumble. Time is needed if we are to eat properly, exercise properly, and sleep long enough to be healthy and alert. Time is required if we are to be servants in our communities and stewards of creation. Time is necessary to love and to live. And we are running out of it.

I invite you to reflect on what has happened to our time in America. What has happened to your time? Why have so many of us come to feel so burdened by tasks we haven't time to accomplish? Why, for so many of us, has life become a rat race? Why are we Americans working more today than we were a generation ago? More than the citizens of most other industrial countries, leaving little time for leisure. It wasn't supposed to be this way.

My personal interest in this issue goes back some 46 years—to the fall of 1968. I was studying sociology in college in Wisconsin, and we were considering what important social problems would face American society at end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, problems we sociologists would be called on to help solve. Of course, there was racism—1968 was the year Martin Luther King was assassinated after all...and poverty...and real hunger...and war—we were at the time smack dab in the quick sands of Vietnam.

But then there was this *other* problem. A US Senate subcommittee had predicted that by the year 2000 we'd be working only 14 to 20 hours a week, with 7 to 10 weeks of vacation a year. Some of you probably remember those predictions. The conventional wisdom was that with automation, and "cybernation"—a popular word then to describe the computer revolution we knew was coming...with all the "labor-saving" devices we were creating daily... we'd have so much leisure time on our hands we wouldn't know what to do with it.

Now I have to admit this was a problem I thought I could deal with. But of course, the problem we now face is precisely the opposite. For many of us, the idea of leisure time is a distant dream, like winning the lottery. We are not worried about what to do with too much time; we are overwhelmed because we have too little.

So what went wrong with those predictions of leisure? We got the technology. Our productivity per worker hour has more than doubled since 1968. More than doubled.

We *could* be working about half as much as we were then, and still have a material standard of living that would even today be the envy of two-thirds of the world. We could have taken part of our productivity gains in wage increases and part in more time. We could have, but we didn't.

Unconsciously or otherwise, we chose as a society to take all of our increased productivity and trade it for more goods and services...More bread, if you put it in biblical terms, instead of more time. We chose what all of our great religious traditions have warned us not to choose.

Of course, most of us didn't even get the stuff. As we are now increasingly aware, the lion's share of that went to the very rich, the one percent, if you will. And yet now we are told that to put people to work and lift others out of poverty, we must continue to "grow the economy," even faster. Even many of our progressive economists tell us that. The worship of economic growth is the glue that binds Democrats and Republicans who otherwise seem to have nothing in common.

But wait a minute. We are already on a collision course with the natural limits of the biosphere. We need to find a way of achieving well-being for all without constant growth. And rich countries need to curb their appetites to allow growth in countries that are truly poor.

The famous environmentalist David Brower used a powerful metaphor to point out the absurdity of our current faith in growth. He called it his "sermon," so it's appropriate that I mention it here, in a church. He compressed the age of the earth, estimated by scientists at some 4.6 billion years, into one week, the Biblical week of creation, if you will. When you do this, a day represents about 650 million years, an hour, 27 million, a minute, about 450,000 years, and a second, 7,500.

On Sunday morning, the earth congeals from cosmic gases. In the next few hours, land masses and oceans begin to form, and by Tuesday afternoon, the first tiny "proto-cells," of life emerge. In the next few days of creation, life forms become larger, more complex and more wondrous.

Before dawn on the last day—Saturday—trilobites and other strangely-shaped creatures swim by the millions in the Cambrian seas. Half a billion years later, in real time, we will be amazed by their fossils, scattered about the globe.

Around the middle of that very last day of the week, those gargantuan beasts, the Great Reptiles, some mild, some menacing, thunder across the land and fill the sky. The dinosaurs enjoy a long run, commanding Earth's stage for more than four hours, until a monstrous meteorite, landing in the Gulf of Mexico, makes the climate too cold, and ends their reign.

By the late afternoon and evening on Saturday, mammals, furry, warm-blooded and

able to withstand a cooler world, flourish and evolve, until, just a few minutes before midnight, on that final night of the week, *Homo sapiens* walks erect on two legs, learns to speak, use fire and create increasingly complex forms of organization.

Only about 10,000 years ago in real time, less than two *seconds* before midnight in our metaphor, humans develop agriculture and start building cities. At a third of a second before midnight, Buddha is born; at a quarter of a second, Christ. Only a thirtieth of a second before midnight, we launch the Industrial Revolution, and after World War II, perhaps *a hundredth of a second* before midnight in our week of creation—again, on the final night—the age of consumerism begins, the age of stuff, the age of what I call “affluenza.”

In that hundredth of a second, Brower and others have pointed out, we have managed to consume more resources than did all human beings all together in all of previous history. We have diminished our soil, fisheries, fossil fuels and who knows what other resources, by half. We have caused the extinction of countless other species, and we have dramatically changed the climate. Think about it; try to grasp in your mind what it means that we have done all of this in this blink of the geological eye.

There are people, Brower went on to say, who believe that what we have been doing for that last one-hundredth of a second can go on indefinitely. If they even consider the issue, they believe, without evidence, that application of new technologies will allow our continued hyper-exploitation of the planet’s resources. They are considered normal, reasonable, intelligent people; indeed, they run our corporations and our governments.

But in reality, they are stark, raving mad.

It will be hard to change their minds and hard to change our behaviors, but not nearly as hard as it would be to change the laws of physics. We simply can’t grow on like this. Yet what will we do as the new science of robotics renders more and more workers obsolete? We must grow even faster, many say, if we are to put them back to work.

Now, if you are like me, you were excited to see 400,000 people march in the streets of New York and another 2,000 here in Seattle to demand action on climate change on September 21<sup>st</sup>. Pretty hopeful, wasn’t it? But what can we actually *do* to stop climate change? Some suggest it’s all about changing technologies, weaning ourselves from fossil fuels, relying more on solar, wind and other alternatives sources of energy. And it is...in part. Yet, though new technologies, supported by carbon taxes, are necessary, they are not sufficient to allow continued consumption as usual.

The limits suggested by Brower and others often call forth a sense of “gloom and doom,” a sense that sacrifices for the sake of the biosphere will mean lives of poverty and misery for all. But the *good news* is that the world doesn’t have to continue the same patterns of economic growth and consumerism to attain high levels of human well-being and happiness.

For the past few years, I have been involved in the international pursuit of happiness. It's American as apple pie, this pursuit. Thomas Jefferson, who enshrined the right to the pursuit of happiness in our Declaration of Independence, also emphasized that helping its citizens be happy was the "sole orthodox purpose of government." But in recent years, the mantle of happiness champion has fallen on the tiny Himalayan nation of Bhutan, whose young king famously proclaimed that Gross National Happiness is more important than Gross National Product. Since its king made that statement some 40 years ago, Bhutan's call for a focus on happiness has been answered by thousands of researchers around the world. In January of last year, I was invited to Bhutan with others among these researchers to advise the government of Bhutan in its pursuit of happiness. What the researchers have done is confirm the wisdom of our faith traditions.

First of all, it is indeed better to give than to receive.

Money may not be the root of all evil, but neither is it the prime source of happiness. Poverty is not pleasant; I don't quarrel with that, but once people live with economic security and modest comfort, other things matter much more. Gratefulness, altruism, forgiveness, mindfulness, health, service, tolerance, meaning, appreciation of and access to nature, participatory government, and above all, social connection ...

What all of these things require is time.

My friend Jorgen Larsson at the Chalmers University of Technology in Gothenberg, Sweden and his colleagues have shown that reducing work hours leads to greater levels of perceived well-being. It's no accident that the world's happiest countries are those with the shortest working hours. But Larsson and the Swedish Environmental Protection Agency go further. Their research also shows that every ten percent reduction in work-time also results in a nine percent reduction in greenhouse gas emissions, the main factor in climate change. It's a win-win—for well-being and the environment.

You know, I think St. Francis would have approved of a politics of time, a politics of happiness, if you will; a politics based on quality of life instead of quantity of stuff. Here in Washington State, such a politics has begun with the recognition that when people have to work several jobs to make ends meet, they have no time for themselves or for each other. So raising the minimum wage and lifting those at the bottom up the arc of justice is an essential step. But we must not stop there.

A politics of time and happiness includes more direct initiatives toward reducing the demands and stress of work and opening new possibilities of freedom and autonomy. I ask you to consider one of those initiatives. State Representative Gael Tarleton introduced a bill into the Washington legislature this year that would have made our state the first to guarantee at least some paid vacation time for workers. Virtually every

other nation in the world already does this. Even the Commonwealth of Puerto Rico, whose residents are American citizens, mandates three weeks of paid vacation each year.

But no American state requires any paid vacation time at all.

It is a matter of justice. It's the poorest of American workers who lack vacation benefits and the chance to restore themselves and enjoy time off with their families and friends. Representative Tarleton's bill, which I helped draft and which she will reintroduce in 2015, provides only about two weeks of time off for most workers. But it is a start toward the recognition that all of us need time, and that we have a human right to leisure, a right enshrined in article 23 of the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights and recognized almost everywhere but in America. If we can win this, other states will follow suit. I ask your support for Representative Tarleton's groundbreaking legislation.

The other Francis, the new Pope in Rome, would agree. Among his ten recent tips for a happy life, Francis mentioned "a healthy sense of leisure," and "respect for the environment." He has consistently condemned the modern cult of busyness and productivity.

A politics of quality of life might also find some surprising bedfellows. In 1966, when my colleague, Vivia Boe, and I were making the PBS film *Affluenza*, we were curious about the response of the Christian Right to consumerism. One of the people we talked to was Reverend Ted Haggard, a charismatic minister who had been a leader of anti-gay initiatives in Colorado, always in the name of protecting "family values."

I had called Haggard to ask him if we might visit with him and get his take on materialism. "You're PBS, the liberal media," he replied dismissively when I told him what I wanted. "Why should I talk to you? You only want to bash us." "No," I said firmly. "We don't want to talk with you about the hot button issues like abortion or gay rights. We simply want to know what you think about the impact of consumerism and materialism on American families. Could you give us a little of your time?"

"Oh why not?" he agreed.

Vivia and I met Haggard for the first time without a camera. He allowed us to record the conversation on audiotape. When we arrived at his office, he told us his time was very tight. We met him at 11 a.m. and he said he needed to leave by 11:45 for a lunch appointment. "But it doesn't matter," he said, "because I doubt you'll be very interested in anything I have to say." We were dismayed by his smugness, but refrained from comment. He agreed that Americans were too materialistic, saying it not only had a bad impact on family life, but was leading to excessive debt and stress, even among his parishioners.



He turned out to be well-informed and offered long answers to our questions, so much so that the minutes flew by. I found myself looking at my watch and worrying that we didn't have time to get to some very important questions we wanted to ask. But just before he had told us he had to leave, Haggard asked us to excuse him for a minute while he made a phone call. "I'm sorry, I can't make lunch," he told the person he had called. "Something came up. We'll have to reschedule."

Our conversation with Haggard lasted for another two hours, at which point Vivia and I had to leave for another appointment. Haggard seemed energized by the conversation, which he took into many other areas. It became clear that he was a complex man, especially where the environment was concerned. While most of the Religious Right dismissed environmental concerns like climate change and even took the position that it didn't matter how badly we treated the Earth since the Second Coming was imminent, Haggard confessed that he sometimes felt "just like those Greenpeace folks."

"I think it's sad," Haggard said, "that those of us who believe that the Earth is God's creation have done less to protect it than the people who think it's an accident." I am not making this up. That's what Ted Haggard said to us. As a television producer, I was practically salivating. I live for sound bites like that. "Would you say that on camera?" I asked eagerly. "Absolutely not," Haggard replied. "Why not?" I wondered. "Because my congregation wouldn't understand," he said.

When Vivia and I had to leave, Ted Haggard followed us out to our car in the church's immense parking lot. His arrogance had been replaced by a boyish earnestness and a willingness to let us into his own inner sanctuary. We were coming to like him. "This is the best conversation I've had in years," he gushed as we said goodbye. "I'm sure you say that to everyone," Vivia replied, laughing. "No, no, I'm serious," he said. We believed him. When we asked if he would appear on camera, he agreed readily and told us he would allow our photographer to shoot anywhere in the church if we wanted to videotape a sermon.

"And would you like it if I made the sermon be about the dangers of materialism?" he added. We replied affirmatively. When the time came, Haggard made good on his promise. He quoted the Bible admonition from the Book of Timothy that "the love of money is the root of all evil." "We've never been this prosperous as a nation," he said (this was early in the Clinton-era economic boom), "and we've never had so much dissatisfaction."

Ted Haggard did follow up on his environmental concerns a few years later when he became the president of the National Association of Evangelicals and led the organization to speak out for action to fight mercury pollution and climate change. And the fact that he was indeed a complex character surfaced soon after that, when he admitted to buying sex from a male prostitute and was forced to leave his church. Haggard, the champion of anti-gay initiatives now confesses to being bi-sexual.

Having met Haggard, I was not about to join the chorus condemning him. I only wished he'd been more open to his deeper self. It is one of the tragedies of life that ideologies, both religious and political, lead so frequently to dishonesty. I tell this story only to illustrate that we never know from whence support might come and we should never write anyone off. A politics based on quality of life has a chance to reach outside the choir.

Let me end with another story.

On a cold January day in 1912, thousands of workers, most of them women and most of them immigrants, walked out of the textile mills of Lawrence, Massachusetts, striking for a small increase in wages from 16 to 18 cents an hour and a decrease in their working hours from 56 to 54 a week.

It is said that they carried a banner as they marched through Lawrence. On it were the words: WE WANT BREAD AND ROSES TOO! The bread was the symbol of money; indeed the pay raise they demanded would have meant four more loaves of bread on their tables each week. But as poor as they were, these women knew that they could not live on bread alone. The roses were the symbol of shorter working hours; more time for their families and friends and community; more time for art and beauty and nature; more time to smell the roses. Time for the non-material things in life that are worth so much.

We need a change in values in America. We need to value these things just as those poor women did. For decades bread *and* roses, higher wages and shorter hours were the demands of the American labor movement. But as the consumer society grew after World War II, the demands focused more and more on money and the roses were left to wilt.

It's time to water them again.

Thank you.

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