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# Durban

## The Supplication of a Dead Man's Hand

By Vincent Di Stefano

**The UN Climate Conference held in Durban last December closed with a hollow whimper. No commitment to real action. No commitment to effective change. Just the continuing slow burn of business as usual.**

The only substantive decision reached by the Conference was an agreement to form yet another committee, the Durban Platform for Enhanced Action. The Durban Platform rests on the dubious ambition of crafting a global agreement on greenhouse gas emissions by 2015. This will serve to replace the Kyoto Protocol which expires at the end of 2012. The Durban Platform will lay out the terms for legally-binding global emissions reductions that will “come into effect and be implemented by 2020.”

Executive Director of Friends of the Earth (FOE) Andy Atkins offers his assessment: “This empty shell of a plan leaves the planet hurtling towards catastrophic climate change.” And Chair of FOE international Nnimmo Bassey gives his own verdict: “Delaying real climate change until 2020 is a crime of global proportions. . . . An increase in global temperatures of 4 degrees Celsius, permitted under this plan, is a death sentence for Africa, Small Island States, and the poor and vulnerable worldwide.”

Even during the first days of the Durban Conference, the Global Carbon Project released figures showing that global carbon emissions increased by 6% - the greatest yearly increase ever recorded - between 2009 and 2010. This surge occurred in the year after the Climate Conference in Copenhagen that many had hoped would be a turning point.

Commenting on the longer-term implications of the inaction at Durban, a group of independent scientists from Climate Action Tracker concluded that: “Global mean warming would reach about 3.5°C by 2100 with the current reduction proposals on the table. They are definitely insufficient to limit temperature increase to 2°C.”

This is not news. In August 2008, an article published in the UK Guardian noted that senior government scientists were projecting a 4°C rise in global temperatures based on existing evidence at that time. Of itself, such a temperature increase will affect hundreds of millions of people living in coastal areas. Such a temperature increase will likely produce a mass extinction event resulting in the loss of between 20% and 50% of all animal and plant species on the planet. Such a change in global temperature will also result in the widespread collapse of ocean ecosystems and food chains everywhere. Most alarmingly, such a rise in temperature increase will result in the painful and tragic reduction of human populations to below one billion people.

It is generally understood that even before global temperatures reach such levels, a number of tipping points will be crossed. These will push the planetary climate into completely unknown terrain. Yet this is precisely the scenario that the Climate Conference at Durban has sporadically agreed upon



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by refusing to set binding limits on emissions and choosing rather to delay action until 2020. The failure of Durban can only deepen the cynicism and frustration that have grown since the failures of Copenhagen in 2009 and Cancun in 2010.

We are a heedless and refractory species. It is not until, as Kurt Vonnegutt Jr. put it in 2006, “the shyte hits the fan” that any decisive (and by then largely useless) action is likely to occur.

### Crossing to Death's Other Kingdom

The problems that assail the present age reach far deeper than the oil deposits and coal seams that are fuelling an inexorable increase in carbon dioxide emissions. Carbon has become emblematic of our present crisis because its concentration in the atmosphere is by far the over-riding determinant of regional and global temperatures, ocean acidity, and global climatic patterns. Each of these factors in turn profoundly influences the web of interconnected energies that has sustained all life on this planet over time periods far greater than the two million years that *Homo sapiens* has walked the earth.

Industrial civilisation has been driven by far more than the extraction of fossil fuels, even though those fuels have enabled many of the signatory elements of the present times to be realised. These include:

- ✦ The enabling of transport systems that move hundreds of millions of people and hundreds of millions of tons of materials every day.
- ✦ The development of an agricultural system that has replaced small-scale integrated agriculture with broad-acre methods that make use of increasingly modified and genetically-manipulated seed-stock and produce increasingly chemicalised and vitiated soils.
- ✦ The creation of massive industrial infrastructures that have, since World War II, overseen the production and dispersion of over 80,000 new chemical compounds - many of which are highly toxic - throughout numerous ecosystems.



**ABOVE: Max Gerson instructed his patients to use only organically-grown fruits and vegetables for preventing and treating cancer.**

- ✦ The intensely energy-consuming and environmentally destructive extraction of minerals and metals on every continent.
- ✦ The clear-felling of vast swathes of the world's old-growth forests for timber and wood-chip production and the creation of new agricultural lands.

The problem is not simply one of reducing carbon emissions. It is more in the nature of attending to the numerous pathologies that have riven the body of a senescent and dying civilisation.

### The Valley of Dying Stars

North American physician Max Gerson was among the first to awaken to the insidious and damaging effects of agricultural chemicals on the processes that sustain all life. Gerson, who was described by Dr Albert Schweitzer as, "one of the most eminent geniuses in the history of medicine" is remembered for having independently developed a powerful nutritionally-based cancer therapy during the 1940s. In his introduction to *A Cancer Therapy. Results of Fifty Cases* published in 1958, Gerson wrote:

"The coming years will make it more and more imperative that organically grown fruit and vegetables will be, and must be, used for protection against degenerative diseases, the prevention of cancer, and more so in the treatment of cancer."

Gerson's prescient understanding has, however, been subverted and dismissed by the powerful corporate interests that control industrial agriculture, scientific medicine, the cancer establishment and the dominant media. Government health and agriculture departments have been fully co-opted in the corporate expansion of both chemical-based industrial agriculture and chemical-based cancer treatments.

Gerson's insight arose during the course of developing treatments for chronic diseases, including cancer, during the 1930s and 1940s. His treatment program requires, among other things, the consumption of large quantities - nearly 10 kilograms daily - of fruits and vegetables in the form of freshly expressed juices. Gerson observed that several weeks after starting treatment using conventionally-grown fruits and vegetables, virtually all of his patients, regardless of the nature of their cancer, began to develop severe yet near-identical symptoms. He went on to discover that this new pattern of symptoms was due to the toxic effects of

chemicals - mainly chlorinated hydrocarbons - that were used universally in the industrial-scale agriculture that produced most of the fruits and vegetables available in North America at the time.

Gerson instructed his patients to thereafter use only organically-grown fruits and vegetables. Within a short time, the distressing symptoms began to disappear and patients continued to improve. Gerson was later to write:

"The soil and all that grows in it is not something distant to us but must be regarded as our external metabolism, which produces the basic substances for our internal metabolism. Therefore, the soil must be cared for properly and must not be depleted or poisoned; otherwise, these changes will result in serious degenerative diseases, rapidly increasing in animals and human beings."

This comment, made in 1958, presaged the observation made by Thomas Berry in 1991:

"It should be especially clear in medicine that we cannot have well humans on a sick planet. Medicine must first turn its attention to protecting the health and well-being of the Earth before there can be any effective human health."

Herein lies the essence of the problem. The health and well-being of the Earth will not be restored simply by capping carbon emissions, continuing to fuel industrial civilisation using "clean" nuclear energy, or implementing Promethean geo-engineering projects. Great damage has already been done and continues to be inflicted on the earth's forests, soils, lake and river systems, ground-waters, and marine environments.

This has been evident to the more visionary among us for decades. While Max Gerson was among the first to alert us to the effects of agricultural chemicals on human health, Rachel Carson went on to document the effects of both agricultural and industrial chemicals on wildlife ecosystems in the 1960s. She gave the ominous title of *Silent Spring* to her report in acknowledgement of the widespread decline in health of bird populations due to the effects of agricultural chemicals.

Soon after the publication of Carson's seminal work, we began to learn of the unexpected effects of industrial and agricultural chemicals on the hormone systems of numerous species throughout the ecosystem. The dispersal of immense quantities of such chemicals in



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the environment has already resulted in numerous reproductive abnormalities. During the 1970s, salmon stocks in the Great Lakes of North America exhibited a range of endocrine changes including thyroid enlargement, precocious sexual maturation in males, and poor egg survival (less than 15%). Bird species feeding on Great Lakes fish exhibited reproductive loss and early mortality of hatchlings.

Right across the US and throughout the UK, large numbers of the fish that inhabit freshwater rivers and lakes now show intersex characteristics. It has also become apparent in recent years that many frog species are undergoing extinction at an alarming rate while frog populations globally continue to steadily decline. On yet another front, bee populations continue to decline catastrophically throughout North America for the fifth year in succession in the phenomenon that has come to be known as Colony Collapse Disorder.

The tragedy of Fukushima has served to reinforce what is clearly understood by those like Helen Caldicott who have looked deeply into the human consequences of the nuclear project. While engineers and politicians blithely reassure us that there is nothing to fear in the increasing levels of background radiation resulting from the unearthing and processing of radioactive elements, internal emitters such as Caesium-127 Strontium-90 Uranium-235 and Plutonium-239 are silently incorporated into our body tissues to actively seed mutations that will eventually produce cancers or will - if lodged in testes or ovaries - irreversibly alter the DNA of sperm and egg cells and project the dark shadow of industrial civilisation into the lives of future generations through the influence of genetic mutations.

Despite endless soft-soaping by the International Atomic Energy Commission and the nuclear industry, we now know that over a million people have already died as a result of Chernobyl. Thomas Berry has spoken clearly and prophetically about the consequences of pursuing a nuclear future:

“One of the most ominous expressions of the natural world has to do with nuclear energy. When we go deep into the natural world and penetrate the inner structure of the atom and in a sense violate that deepest mystery for trivial or destructive purposes, we may get power, but nature throws at us its most deadly consequences. We are still helpless with regard to what to do once we have broken into the mysterious recesses of nuclear power. Forces have been let loose far beyond anything we can manage.”

## Voices Singing in the Wind

Beyond these issues which bear down increasingly in the present time, the nature and viability of a civilisation is equally reflected in the institutions, philosophies and practices that underlie it and give it direction. There is little to inspire confidence when one looks closely at the militarism, inequality, corporate greed, valueless production and commodification of nature that have come to characterise the present style.

The problems that now confront us are as much moral as practical, as much philosophical as pragmatic. The myth of endless growth that has so driven Western economies over the past two centuries is now confronted by the reality of a seriously damaged world. We have failed to honour our duty as stewards of an exquisitely beautiful planet but have rather treated the created world as an endless commodity into which we can project our technocratic fantasies and unload the toxic detritus of industrial activity without thought of consequence.

While governments dither and corporate behemoths evade and obstruct the growing collective will for a more conscious participation in our fate, we are more likely to be herded towards the flames than guided towards more appropriate ways of living on the earth in this time of growing troubles.

Let us continue individually and collectively to work towards the creation of enduring communities, to cut through the destructive effects of greed and ignorance, and strive to preserve and perpetuate those sources of wisdom that will enable future generations to avoid the tragic errors that presently unfold around us. ✨



### ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

**Vincent Di Stefano is a retired osteopath and author of "Holism and Complementary Medicine. History and Principles" published by Allen and Unwin in 2006. His blog "Integral Reflections" can be viewed at <http://thehealingprojectweblog.blogspot.com/>**