

“The Gift of the Magi”: Slashing Living Standards*

*This posting is a simultaneous submission for “Climate Change and You: Putting a Face on Global Warming,” EcoRes Forum Online E-Conference #3, October 19-29, 2009. Further information available at www.eco-res.org.

*Lord, make me an instrument of your peace,
where there is hatred, let me sow love;
where there is injury, pardon;
where there is despair, hope;
where there is doubt, faith;
where there is darkness, light;
where there is sadness, joy;*

*O Divine Master, grant that I may not so much seek to be consoled as to console;
to be understood as to understand;
to be loved as to love.*

*For it is in giving that we receive;
it is in pardoning that we are pardoned;
and it is in dying that we are born to eternal life.*

St. Francis of Assisi

Live simply that others may simply live.

Mahatma Gandhi

In the short story “The Gift of the Magi” by O. Henry, the characters of Jim and Della lived in poverty. Neither had much money for a present for the other as Christmas time approached. Della decided to sell her extremely beautiful, long hair (which Jim loved) for \$20 so she could buy a fob for Jim’s pride and joy – his grandfather’s gold pocket watch. Unknown to Della, Jim had decided to sell the watch so he could buy her combs for her beautiful, long hair. The irony of the situation touches the reader’s heart, but O. Henry remarks: “O all those who give and receive gifts, such as they are wisest. They are the magi.”

Humankind can give a great gift to its descendants and to all life on Earth by reducing anthropogenic greenhouse gas emissions and reducing the threat of runaway climate change. Webster (2009) quotes Professor Kevin Anderson, Director of the Tyndall Centre for Climate Change Research: “The wealthier parts of the world . . . will have to seriously consider reducing their levels of consumption over the next 10-15 years while we put in place low-carbon technologies.” This message is one that most politicians fear to give their constituents, especially if an election is in the near future. Many citizens are so strongly against government intervention that dissent and lack of civility will impede global negotiations on global heating. Most people do not understand that the wealthy countries have exported much of their manufacturing to third world countries, which accounts, in part, for the rapid rise in greenhouse gas emissions in developing countries. Per capita emissions also show a vast difference – “20 tonnes per person per year in the US and 10 tonnes in Britain but only 5 tonnes in China and less than 2 tonnes in India” (Webster 2009).

Ardipithecus ramidus (“Ardi”), a current fossil find, indicates that hominids have been around for over 4 million years (Hale 2009). The genus *Homo* has been around for about 2 million years and *Homo sapiens* (humans) has been around for 160,000-200,000 years. Except for the last 10,000 years, when the Agricultural Revolution occurred, hominids appear to have been tribal – certainly *Homo sapiens* was. At present, in less than 100 years, political globalization must occur rapidly to avoid catastrophic, runaway climate change. No

signs show that this change is happening, but *Homo sapiens* has been a remarkably adaptable species, so it is capable of achieving the needed changes.

Humankind must slash its living standards, yet retain compassion for each other and other life forms, in order to leave a habitable planet for posterity. The world's population is now 7 billion – lifestyles must change so that humans fit into the finite carrying capacity of Earth. Undertaking the challenge is this generation's "gift of the Magi" as expressed by O. Henry.

LITERATURE CITED

Hale, M. 2009. The newest oldest ancestor tells her tale. New York Times 10Oct
<http://www.nytimes.com/2009/10/10/arts/television/10ardi.html>.

Webster, B. 2009. Rich countries 'must slash living standards' to fight climate change. Times Online 2Oct
<http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/environment/article6858326.ece>.