



A reflection by Jon Cooksey

April 27, 2008

HOW TO BOIL A FROG

Good morning. The Earth was [4.5 billion years old](#) on Tuesday. They wanted to give her a cake, but they couldn't find enough candles, so they set [200,000](#) acres of rainforest on fire. I'm kidding. They do that every day.

I didn't really think about it at first, but this is an exceptionally lousy time to be asked to speak on Earth Day. I googled the phrase "earth good news", and my computer actually broke down in tears. Several hours later it finally gave me 1 hit that there's good news for the [Sonoran pronghorn](#), which as some of you may know is North America's fastest mammal. I assume that's why the pronghorn is doing so well, because he's able to outrun the [global warming](#), [West Nile Virus](#), [drought](#), [sea level rise](#), [food riots](#), [depleting oil](#), [mass extinctions](#), [dead zones](#), [toxic waste dumps](#), [pine beetles](#), [Chinese air pollution](#), [Peruvian glacier evaporation](#), and [starving polar bears](#) that are right on his furry little tail.

The [second hit](#) was the Church of God Daily Bible Study. It said, and I quote: "The good news, the Gospel, is that everything that is wrong with the world is going to be made *right*. The earth is destined to become a literal *paradise*, and you can make it there, if you choose."

And I was like, dang, that is good news! Not only is everything gonna be okay, but it sounded kind of like a treasure hunt, which is a lot cooler than buying more compact fluorescent light bulbs. But then it turned out to be about [Satan](#).

But we all know it's not Satan who's to blame, don't we. I think we've all gotten the message loud and clear. It's us. We're bad. Bad bad bad. Especially us North Americans. No matter how many [energy star appliances](#) we buy, no matter how much money we give to the [World Wildlife Federation](#), no matter how much we [recycle](#) or [bicycle](#), even if we just spit on a Kleenex and wipe ourselves off instead of taking a hot shower, we still suck. We are the [Hannibal Lecters](#) of the natural world, skinning Mother Nature and wearing her like a [Gucci wrap](#).

We can't help it. We live in the so-called First World. If we'd been born [Masai](#), they'd've knocked out our two front teeth, and we'd've been happy living in a hut with zero carbon emissions. We'd never have heard the words DVD player or laptop or [lamb souvlaki](#), or any of the other things we can't live without. We wouldn't be driving to church. We'd be living on cow's blood, but at least we wouldn't have to

get dirty looks from some eco-Nazi, who may be living right in our own home, every time we forget to compost an apple core.

But we're here, and we're us, so what are we gonna do? I can only tell you what I've tried. I started with the most popular strategy, which was complete denial. Look, there's air. Didn't you see that tree outside? What is everybody bitching about? Denial pretty much got me through my twenties, so I really recommend it to young people.

Then in my early 30's, I made the mistake of reading a bunch of books about the environment. I moved on from denial to the second of the three D's, depression. Man, I was depressed. The news was bad. And this was 15 years ago! The ozone layer! Loss of biodiversity! Overpopulation! Deforestation! Global warming! I was depressed about that way before it was popular. And it really worked for me. I still wasn't doing anything, but man, I was knowledgeable. I could cause mass suicide at parties.

But even in my depression, there was still that glimmer of hope, you know, that pressure to act based on the idea that there was still time to turn things around. We only had 10 years left to do it – this was 15 years ago. So I had to wait out that 10 years, and it was tough. But finally, the deadline was past, and I could move on to the third D – despair. It was a big weight off my shoulders, now that it was too late. I could really indulge my gloom without that annoying sense that I should be taking action. Those were good times.

But I'd made one little mistake. About the same time I read those books, I had a kid, who's now a teenager. And if any of you have had teenagers, or been a teenager, you know they blame their parents for everything. It wasn't bad enough that I tried to be cool in front of her friends – now I'd killed the planet. I used up all the oil, melted the Arctic, put Bisphenol-A in her friggin' baby bottle – great, Dad, why don't you just get a gun and finish off the last Sonoran pronghorn! Jerk.

Fine. So now I was going to have to do something. Didn't she know I was busy? Didn't she care that I had to work to make the rent and pay the Visa bills? Didn't she care that I get like ten thousand emails a day, and I have lots of important adult...things to do? Am I supposed to put all that on hold just because there's six times more plastic in the ocean than plankton and the entire food chain is about to collapse? She had no sense of priorities. But hey, that's okay. The stress may kill me, but maybe she'll appreciate me when I'm gone.

But what to do? Let's see, I know....absolutely nobody who's connected to anything green. I have no special knowledge. I'm shy. In fact I try to avoid leaving the house if I can, and discourage most human contact. So basically I'm the least qualified person on the planet to try to save the planet. Great.

So I started with what I do. I write for TV. I tried to think up a TV series idea about global warming, but it was too frigging depressing to think about by myself, so I did something I never do. I called a stranger, an author of a book I'd read, and asked

him to think with me. And he did. And for some reason I asked him if I could interview him. And for some stranger reason, he said yes.

And then I did another thing I don't do, I asked an [acquaintance](#) – not somebody I knew well – if he'd help me interview that author. In Boston. And he said: "Okay."

I'm gonna run that by you again. I called somebody I didn't know, out of the blue, and I asked for help from someone who became a friend. Everything else that followed came from those two things.

I probably interviewed 50 other people before I got to that author, whose name is [Ross Gelbspan](#). I started a website to promote a movie called "[How to Boil a Frog](#)" that I still have no idea how I'll make, though I seem to be making it anyway. I listened to all those people and read more books and thought about things and came up with a big picture of our situation that made sense of everything, but was still simple enough to remember – 5 problems, and 5 solutions to go with them.

I made up symbols to represent them, and little stamps so you can stamp them on your fingers and remember what they are, because it's fun. If you're good, you can come up after the service and get a stamp. But this isn't a rock concert. Only visible body parts, please.

I'll give you an overview of the kind of solutions I think are meaningful in our present predicament. Except for the first one. Gotta save something for the movie.

The second solution, then, is about what we can do on a personal level – what's usually called the "consumption" level. Now the problem here is that buying stuff is a big part of what's causing problems for the earth, but let's face it, we really like buying stuff. So I took an idea from a [woman](#) who was writing about [permaculture](#) – she said, don't use up new stuff, just take from the waste stream of society. I thought OK, I'll buy as much stuff as I want, but I'll [buy it used](#).

Has anybody here been to the [Salvation Army store](#) in North Vancouver? Or the [thrift store on the next block down](#), that donates all their profits to help foster children? They are awesome. I've bought most of the stuff for the movie there – I wanna read you the shopping list from my first trip there. 12 great Hawaiian shirts – it was like taking a vacation without the strip search! -- a t-shirt, a [funeral](#) suit (don't ask), a [disco](#) jacket (definitely don't ask), 2 pairs of pants, a really cool sweater, 3 shirts for my wife and daughter, and 4 movies on video. Total cost: \$129. Total CO2 output: nothing. Total damage to the earth: none. Total economic injustice committed against the [indigenous people of Borneo](#): nada! A guilt-free shopping spree!

The next level of solution is about ass-kicking. At the risk of destroying your child-like innocence, it turns out corporations are in business to make money, and politicians want to get re-elected and stay in power. They don't necessarily want to exterminate all life on earth, but, y'know, everybody's gotta prioritize. So the bottom line is, we have to make taking care of the planet their top priority by any

means necessary. Personally I enjoy mocking everyone around me, so I make [funny videos](#) about things that piss me off and put them on the website. But I also – get ready for it – call strangers out of the blue, and ask friends for help. When BC Hydro was going to build [coal-fired electricity plants](#), my friends and I took a basket of coal to the CEO of BC Hydro for Christmas. Just a few months ago we made up an [organization](#) to address the problem of peak oil in Vancouver – made up a name, and started -- and now it's a [real organization](#)! If I'd known how much fun it is to make trouble, I'd've started way earlier - I think you'll like it.

The next level after that is getting local. A big part of the solution to peak oil and global warming and a lot of the other problems we face is to start turning our neighborhoods back into villages. I'm talking about all of us starting to grow our own food again, in our backyards, or window boxes, or [community gardens](#). I'm talking about making friends with our neighbors. I'm talking about getting ready for a time – maybe a lot sooner than you think – when [driving and flying](#) are things that only rich people can afford to do. I'm talking about learning to make things again, to build things, and sew, and cook, and play musical instruments. I'm talking about helping each other. Basically I'm talking about becoming [Amish](#), but with better clothes. And I'd like to keep my wi fi. And my DVD player. And lamb souvlaki. So, movie-wise, it would be sort of "[Witness](#)" meets "[The Jetsons](#)", if that were a movie.

And the final level of solution is the hardest one of all to tackle – that's the spiritual level. I came to spirituality late in my life – in fact I doubt I would've come to it at all without my father's help. He was an unusual guy – after he and my mom got divorced, he ended up going out on a date with a woman – and her mom, maybe she was underage or something – anyway, he ordered lobster, and when it came he said to it: "Little lobster, if in the next life our roles are reversed, I hope you enjoy me as much as I'm about to enjoy you." He didn't get a lot of second dates. But it wasn't his unusual outlook on the afterlife that finally rubbed my nose in spiritual matters, it was his drinking.

He started out as a globe-trotting lawyer for an international oil-drilling [company](#), with a beautiful second wife – I guess he didn't order the lobster – and a beautiful little daughter, and gradually lost everything. My dad had a decision to make -- find some kind of way to change, on the inside, and live, or keep on doing the same thing and die. He never did find a way to make that change, and his alcoholism killed him when he was 65. He had a big black hole on the inside, and he never found a way to fill it with anything but [scotch](#), and he passed that black hole on to me. I blame Satan.

No, I don't blame anybody. In fact, I'm grateful, because dealing with that black hole my father left me gave me the only real qualifications I had to get into the planet-saving business, even though I didn't realize it when I started. I'd been depressed, and realized I could survive it. I'd seen how people could be afraid to change, and empathize 100%. Most of all, I'd known since I was a little kid that something really really bad was eventually going to happen, and finally I found it! We're screwed! I [knew](#) it! That was awesome.

In fact, I was so happy about that that it catapulted me into saving the planet. My daughter got me this wristband – STOP GLOBAL WARMING – and I was gonna do it! I'd get up every morning and strap it on – Yeah! Today is the day! I'm going to STOP GLOBAL WARMING! That lasted for about 6 months, until I realized it wasn't gonna happen. Turns out global warming is big. And it's happening much faster than anybody thought. And the chances of me personally preventing my daughter from ending up on an ice floe with the last penguin were slim. Well, none. Back to the [Three D's](#).

That was by far the lowest point I've ever been at. But if I despaired, why am I still wearing this wrist-band? Because my only alternative was to keep on doing the same thing and die, like my dad. So I changed the only thing I really could change, which was my attitude. There's a saying in [Al-Anon](#), that you don't create a crisis, but you also don't prevent a crisis that's in the natural course of events. It seemed to me that there is a crisis coming up that's in the natural course of events. I'd wanted to make sure my daughter's future would include everything I have, plus [flying cars](#). But if I give her everything I have, that's gonna include 1.1 billion people who live on [one dollar](#) a day. It's gonna include [30 billion tons](#) a year of global CO2 emissions. It's gonna include the [death](#) of half the species on the planet by the year 2100. And yet Dick Cheney will still be alive.

Closer to home, it's going to include working 50 or 60 or 70 hours a week – talk about unsustainable. It's going to include going into debt as the only way to reach your dreams. It's going to include buying [genetically-modified](#) Frankenproduce at the supermarket and never knowing how to nurture the life of a seed. It's going to include moving around until she lives thousands of miles away from her best friends, and never having the time to get to know all the new best friends that are living right next door. It's going to include stress and worry and ten thousand emails a day, and I want better than that for her. I want her to have a clean world, and a loving community around her, and the knowledge that she is enough – that she can get by, and be happier than ever, with a simple life.

So in some ways, maybe this crisis we're in is good. Things are going to change, and they need to change. And on some level we need to get out of the way.

Not that I think it's going to be all sunshine and roses. I know the news is grim – so why do I still believe we can make something better out of all this? I'd like to quote a philosopher I admire – when asked to define freedom, she responded: “Freedom is being alone, trapped in a dark place, surrounded by pain and being able to close your eyes and imagine the world as it is outside and around you, and being able to see its beauty and forget everything else.” What I think is brilliant about that is that she instinctively chose a kind of freedom that's available to anyone, anywhere in the world, under any circumstances. That philosopher is my daughter.

Earth Day was never supposed to be a day to get together and review how much more lost the cause is than last year. It was supposed to be a day to get together and talk about how much less we suck than last year. And I'm not saying I no longer suck, but I suck a lot less than I did last year at this time. That feels good. I hope you have that feeling too. And if you don't, then let this be my phone call out of the blue – I need your help. Join me and become my friend. The only real obstacle we face is the walls we've put up between each other, and that's an obstacle I know we can overcome. Thanks.