Some say the world will end in fire
Some say in ice.
—Robert Frost, “Fire and Ice”

The covenantal worldview reconciles human existence and ecological integrity in one unified moral and natural order whose realization is both the precondition and the outcome of the unique vitality of each unique individual and life-form.

—J. Ronald Engel1

As if we needed yet another reminder of the grim planetary changes underway, welcome to the advent of “megafires”—wild fires that burn more than 100,000 acres. Many parts of the world are now in the zones of these dangerous and costly events. Devastation follows them, but the devastation that has preceded these fires is no less disturbing. Climate change has brought prolonged drought and high temperatures: 125 have died this summer in a heatwave in Japan, with the highest temperatures ever recorded in Tokyo; California has been swept by a record eighteen wildfires; fires near Athens caused ninety-one fatalities; a year ago sixty died in wild fires in Portugal.

Fire lives on fuel provided by dead wood and dry understory. Ecosystem disruption and human activities have spread tree-killing insects like mountain pine beetle and bark beetle. Highly flammable invasive plant species, such as the aptly named cheatgrass, are priming the Great Basin of the Intermountain region of the United States for combustion. The countryside in Portugal has been transformed from a diverse forest into a eucalyptus monoculture, also highly flammable. And changes for the worse are moving north. The Boreal forests, key to the planet’s atmosphere in so many ways, are a massive carbon sink and are increasingly subject to burning in which that carbon is released. As The Economist magazine aptly put it, we are living in a “fuel’s paradise”:

Three years after countries vowed in Paris to keep warming “well below” two degrees Celsius... greenhouse emissions are up again. So are investments in oil and gas... Subsidies for renewables, such as wind and solar power, are dwindling in many places and investment has stalled... It is tempting to think these are temporary setbacks and that mankind, with its instinct for self-preservation, will muddle through to a victory over global warming. In fact, it is losing the war.2

This is the kind of stuff that makes me want to go out on the street and remove peoples’ blindfolds, or knock their hats off.

In Moby Dick, Ishmael says that when he feels the urge to knock peoples’ hats off he knows it is time to go back to sea again. For my part, I try to find refuge and renewal—two of my favorite things—by forsaking social media and returning to old texts that I have never read or have not read for a long time. Hannah Arendt referred to this as “ransacking the archive.” Here is what’s behind it in my case: If we want to preserve the flourishing of our kind on a planet of diverse and resilient interdependent life, then relying on our “instinct for self-preservation” may be wide of the mark. What we need is not instinct but conviction—conviction critically arrived at and dialogically re-examined regularly with others and within ourselves. And the goal is not simply self-preservation but the preservation of a broader living connection in which each life matters and is an integral part—a thread in the tapestry, a gem in the mosaic. What text might help us find clues to the conviction and connection we seek?

For this purpose Moby Dick itself would not have been bad, but as it happens I went back a bit further and found a horizon earlier than Melville—a New England Puritan horizon that was never far from his thoughts and obsessions. I came upon “A Model of Christian Charity” by John
Winthrop, governor of the Massachusetts Bay Colony, who may have presented it as a sermon (later published) to his companions on board the Arbella during its voyage to a new world in 1630. I remember first reading it in college. In returning to Winthrop’s text recently, I was surprised to find some remarkably fresh and timely concepts and insights, together with the incomparable, but maybe less pertinent, rhetoric and homiletics of the great protestant theologians who shaped the New England mind of the seventeenth century.  

Before looking at those insights, consider the broader context within which Winthrop was writing. Winthrop was the leader of approximately seven hundred other emigrants sailing on eleven ships. The English colonial push into North America—beginning with Jamestown in 1607 and the Plymouth Colony in 1620—had many motives, including commerce, politics, and the religious hostility that intensified under King Charles I in the 1620s. Moreover, the colonists perceived that they faced an uphill struggle to survive in what they considered to be a wild land.  

There is another important factor in the background of this text that has received new attention from historians recently. This is the global climate change called the Little Ice Age, which took place between 1550 and 1700, with effects long felt after that—the Earth remained very cold until about 1850. The Little Ice Age had a variety of causes, including human activity, volcanic eruptions, changes in oceanic currents, and solar activity. Indeed, conditions during this time were so difficult in Europe—drought, shortening of the growing season, and decline in food production took a terrible toll—that climate change itself no doubt spurred the western migration of the seventeenth century. Those crossing the Atlantic knew what climate they were leaving but were not prepared for the climate they would find. It was thought that weather and climate were uniform along the same latitude. New England would then have roughly the climate of Spain. That was not the case. In the first year after Winthrop’s arrival, disease killed around two hundred of the Massachusetts Bay colonists. In the next five years, extreme heat, drought, two severe hurricanes, and bitterly cold winters also took their toll. Sound familiar?  

We need to renew ideas and values that can help us understand and act in the face of global warming. Perhaps there are some lessons to be learned from rules articulated during a previous climate crisis of global cooling. For sustainable rules of living—what Winthrop called “rules whereby we are to walk one towards another”—the text of “A Model of Christian Charity” is a good place to look.  

There is one distinction around which Winthrop’s entire sermon pivots. He says, “There are two rules whereby we are to walk one towards another: Justice and Mercy... There is likewise a double Law by which we are regulated in our conversation towards another: the Law of Nature and the Law of Grace (that is, the moral law or the law of the gospel).”  

It is important to note that justice is not simply equated with the natural law and mercy with the law of grace. Rather, justice and mercy each form a part of both natural law and the connecting spiritual fabric of love that is given to human beings through the covenantal grace of God. This puts me in mind of what I think are two cardinal concepts to move us in the right direction today. I shall call these “natural duty” and a “covenant of living together.”  

Before turning to discuss them in my own terms, consider further how Winthrop himself deploys them and the immediate predicament he and his companions were facing. Winthrop was concerned above all to underscore the solidarity, cooperation, and sense of community that could sustain the emigrants in the face of many ordeals. In fact, the bulk of the “Model” is devoted to rather detailed rules concerning economic transactions, such as making and forgiving debts and the management of common provisions to see the community through times of want. Claims of property and rights were to be tempered by considerations
of equity and need. Overall, the protestant reformation may have fostered the development of capitalism, as Max Weber argued, but Winthrop and his followers on the frozen ground of the Massachusetts Bay Colony in the 1630s were not capitalists.

Perhaps most striking of all is the emphasis he places on love as the bond or “ligament” holding people together in a social body, much as God’s love is ontologically the connective power that holds physical creation and natural bodies together and enables them to function properly. It is here that Winthrop stresses the notion of a covenantal commission that God has given to the community in order that they may survive and flourish. If it follows the rules of justice and mercy, the laws of nature and grace, then the commission of the community will be fulfilled. But if the covenant of grace and love is broken, if the commission “to do justly, to love mercy, to walk humbly with our God” is not fulfilled, then God’s wrath will bring down a “shipwreck” upon the community. (A vivid image, considering his current circumstances.) Keeping the covenant is the end, and Winthrop brings his oratory to a climax with his metaphor of an exemplary city upon a hill, a graceful polity of reconciliation and caritas. Immediately before that image, though, he instructs his fellow human beings on how to overcome the dire straits of a harsh climate beating down flourishing life:

For this end, we must be knit together, in this work, as one man. We must entertain each other in brotherly affection. We must be willing to abridge ourselves of our superfluities, for the supply of others’ necessities. We must uphold a familiar commerce together in all meekness, gentleness, patience and liberality. We must delight in each other; make others’ conditions our own; rejoice together, mourn together, labor and suffer together, always having before our eyes our commission and community in the work, as members of the same body. So shall we keep the unity of the spirit in the bond of peace.

Other lines of theology notable in protestant Christianity, such as the sinfulfulness, vanity, and the depravity of human nature and conduct, are not central to Winthrop on this occasion. Preparing his fellows for survival in a harsh environment apparently called for a sense of trust, generosity, and cooperation rather than suspicion and fearfulness. The stratagems that Thomas Hobbes thirty years later would put at the center of the social contract are not central to John Winthrop’s covenant of life in an ice age.

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To any attentive person, recent work in Earth systems science, climate modeling, geology, and biophysical science should generate a strong sense of obligation and concern. Now that we know the extent of human influence, preserving something as close as possible to the Holocene climate becomes one of the most important tasks of human beings as a species and the strong, specific imperative of those who are positioned—by power, wealth, and influence—to respond to this necessity on a large scale.

The political economy of capitalism and colonialism has been the formation of institutional power and cultural belief driving human action toward degrading and disruptive effects on planetary support of life. Capitalism, by definition, is the most extractive, acquisitive, and accumulative institutional and cultural system ever devised. Some revel in this, some strive to grow beyond it. To me, it is grimly evident that these fundamental features of capitalism as a social and an attitudinal system—if not all aspects of its political economy—will have to be transformed before we can rein in greenhouse gas emissions. With all its exploitation, inequality, and violence, capitalism is not the most unjust social system on record, nor the worst that can be imagined. So the prospect—most likely the inevitability—of its transformation per se is cold comfort. The question is: transformation toward what, and with what ethical consequences?
All societies and economies, including capitalism, which rule by seeming not to do so rely on three basic mechanisms of social control—the authority system, the exchange system, and the persuasion system.⁸ These systems are symbiotic: although a given society may stress one, in reality all three are always operative to some degree. As the terms imply, authority shapes behavior by coercion, exchange shapes behavior through the pursuit of self-interest, and persuasion shapes behavior by appeal to moral ideals and reasons.

I want to focus on the political and social ordering system of persuasion. How much mileage can we get out of it? In so doing, I don’t intend to discount the importance of authority and exchange relationships, coercive laws, or voluntary self-interested bargains. But the persuasion system may be the point of leverage we seek. In the interest-group democracies of capitalist nation-states, the social control provided by the authority system depends on legal and regulatory choices made by policy elites that are tolerated by their electoral constituencies. Similarly, in the neoliberal global economy of finance and trade, the social controls of the exchange system depend on choices concerning investment, debt, and technological innovation. Finally, the motivational, normative, and epistemological dimensions of what the citizenry tolerates and what the private investor risks—the social controls of persuasion—stand behind the dynamics of the authority and the exchange systems. Factual belief, trust, conscience, hope, a sense of right and wrong—the convictions and contentments of human agents—are the stuff of both social cohesion and social dynamism.

Governance is the art of persuasion—genuine persuasion, that is, not simply rhetorical manipulation and strategies of disinformation and hacking social media.⁹ The persuasion system of social order is only as good as the fit between the knowledge, values, wisdom, and judgment it can muster and the reality of people’s lives and the needs of the time. I think that the persuasion system, especially in the United States, needs new forms of argument using concepts that reach areas of life we no longer seem able to discuss. We need to recover, or devise anew, a vocabulary of renewal and aspiration, a grammar of hope and possibility amid a dispiriting rhetoric of denial and misprision. One of the rules of such a grammar that can guide us is what the philosopher Hans Jonas referred to as the “imperative of responsibility,” and it seems to me, as I think Jonas himself was well aware, that this imperative or rule needs to be interpreted with the help of a number of ideas and meanings that have been lost or discredited in contemporary discourse.¹⁰

Some signs of recovery are evident when terms like “relational,” “common,” and “public” are taken seriously and gain renewed vigor. What might the prospects be of strong communitarian chords—natural duty and ecological covenant—in a secular key? Chords akin to those sounded theologically nearly four centuries ago by Winthrop, facing a cold and unfamiliar shore, much as we now face a burning one. I believe and hope that we are headed for a time when our political discourse will have creative recourse to these ideas, with their potential to enrich the moral imagination and redirect democratic citizenship and collective action, as they eventually came to do in Boston and the Commonwealth of Massachusetts.

By natural duty I mean two things: first, natural duty encompasses the duties inherent in human species-being but which must be self-consciously recognized and acted upon; and second, natural duty encompasses the duty to care for and sustain the natural world. I believe that all creatures have natural duties to some degree and in some sense. In the case of humankind, however, the relationship called for by natural duty is not biologically obligate, but culturally open. The pattern of symbiotic living called for by natural duty, therefore, is particularly important as a normative orientation for human conduct. The human capability
for intention, evaluation, and choice expand the fulfillment of natural duty, but these same capabilities also make it possible to violate those duties. The arc of natural duty is generally along the egalitarian lines that Winthrop himself envisioned: “We must be willing to abridge ourselves of our superfluities, for the supply of others’ necessities.” Although creation in God’s likeness conferred special ontological status on human beings for Winthrop, I see no reason to presume that the morally relevant “others” to whom he refers cannot be non-human. His vision is so thoroughly theocentric that it has no room for anthropocentrism. Natural duties are the ligaments of life; with them a plenitude and a “liberality” of sharing biotic space and evolutionary time with other organisms on a living planet crowds out rapacious conduct willfully blind to the limits inherent in ecologies of living.

It must be said, however, that an ethic of natural duty can take two different forms or faces. The first face takes it to be a natural duty to embrace technological interventions that reduce the stress that human activities place on natural systems. Here, natural duty, or the imperative of responsibility, doubles down on human artifice and fabrication as the solution for anthropogenic destructiveness. This face of ecological responsibility calls upon humanity to redirect human power over natural systems, and even to increase it through technological innovation, so that it is used beneficially rather than destructively for sustainable ecological and Earth system function, integrity, and resilience.

The second face of natural duty holds that human technological power, which is largely dependent on fossil carbon energy, must be bridled, and our dependence upon it must be reduced, not augmented. Only in this way can the pace and scale of human extractive and excretory economic activity be kept within sustainable bounds, even after a transition to a new energy system based on renewable sources and net-zero utilization systems is made. The second face of natural duty doesn’t erase power and technology from the relationship between humans and nature, but it does take pride of place away from the power to “force nature” to accommodate us, as Francis Bacon said, in favor of judicious accommodation by us within biotic communities and geophysical systems. It seeks to restructure the relationship between humans and nature by lowering the profile of human power so as to hear the voice of non-human being—what systems biologist Denis Noble calls “the music of life”—and better attune ourselves to it.  

If the first face of natural duty looks to technological substitution for ecosystem function, the second seeks to integrate technologies within the pathways offered naturally by ecosystems so that they can be drawn upon without being depleted or degraded unduly. The first perfects, enhances, and redefines natural necessity, while the second creatively adapts to evolved nature and its limits, achieving a co-existence and a co-evolution with it.

Each face of natural duty acknowledges the human architectonic ability and the drive to re-fabricate (remake, correct) the world, but only its first face wholeheartedly embraces that drive, while its second face evinces a greater openness to restoring rather than remaking. The second face of natural duty aims to embed humanity in the living and material world more profoundly and in new ways, in part by relying on technological innovation, but primarily by relying on the value and benefit that human beings can derive from interacting with non-human species and biophysical systems in ways that recognize and respect the moral standing of the non-human other.

Which face of natural duty should we try to accentuate? Both probably have an important contribution to make in the future politics and discourse of global ecological governance. Yet if we begin to bring the notion of covenantal relationships and community to bear in our thinking, I am inclined to believe that the second, restorative interpretation of natural duty may be the most telling. It is closer to Winthrop’s “familiar commerce together in all meekness, gentleness, patience
and liberality.” In the same conversation stands contemporary theologian J. Ronald Engel, who points out that:

If there is a redemptive plot line weaving its way over the tortured course of human history it is the struggle to make the covenants of civilization more deliberately responsive to the true life-sustaining relationships of our existence, more inclusive in their membership, more respectful and caring of the integrities of their members, more holistic in their grasp of the multiple moral concerns that must be met for communities to survive and thrive.12

For an individual or a larger community, a political and moral imagination contains many substantive principles and values, but it is usually informed by a small number of root ideas about human possibility and flourishing. These root ideas play an important role in the persuasion system of a political, social, and economic order. Historically in the West, at least, two modes of bonding and binding connections between individuals and among peoples have powerful meaning and resonance in this way. The older of the two is the idea of covenant; the more historically recent and currently predominant is the idea of contract.

Both covenant and contract emphasize commitments, relationships, and bonds that are entered into voluntarily, underscoring recognition of the importance of human agency and parity of recognition within relationships that are mutually beneficial. In many other respects, however, the two ideas diverged and now may be said to represent distinct assumptions about sociality.

In the historical transition from an emphasis on ascribed status and hierarchical position to an emphasis on achieved status and greater individual social mobility, the idea of contract reinforced individuation, deracination, and autonomy. By contrast, the covenant idea conveys a less atomistic participant whose ongoing social embeddedness and interdependence are embraced and enhanced through the agreed-upon commitment, rather than being conditions that the commitment allows one to escape from.13 In his work on conventual ethics within the domain of the professions, theologian William F. May expresses this difference between a contractarian and a covenantal perspective as follows:

Contracts are signed to be expediently discharged, covenants have a gratuitous, growing edge to them that nourishes rather than limits relationships... There is a donative element in the nourishing of covenant—whether it is the covenant of marriage, friendship, or professional relationship. Tit for tat characterizes a commercial transaction, but it does not exhaustively define the vitality of that relationship in which one must serve and draw upon the deeper reserves of another.14

A contract has primarily instrumental value to the participants and creates among them only transactional possibilities of mutual self-interest and advantage. A covenant can be seen as a much more constitutive and fundamental moment in the life of those who enter into it. The covenantal commitment is intrinsic, a new significance in one’s life, an end in itself—not something that is delimited by its utility-producing consequences alone. Therefore, entering into a covenant can be seen as embarking on a quest rather than merely a journey—a quest of human self-realization and moral growth for the participant (whether that be an individual or a whole community). One can readily see how this covenantal quest resonated with Winthrop and his circumstances in 1630. A contract is a tool of successful doing; a covenant is constitutive of enhanced being.

John Winthrop spoke of a city on a hill, having in mind a visible exemplar of doing our duty and accepting the promise of community, as well as keeping the covenant and receiving the gift of grace. He might have said instead a city in a hill—a human community accommodating itself within a bioregion, a watershed, a complex web of social and natural interdependencies sustaining life. To face the cold, John Winthrop taught
that our doing must be just, our mercy loving, and our walking humble—with God and amidst his creation. To face the fire already here and coming, we urgently need teachers of a new covenant of life and lessons in how to serve and draw upon the deeper reserves of the world around us and ourselves. By now we should have learned the consequences of breaking the promise and shunning the gift.


NOTES


