From a Distance
A Sermon by Dr. Philip M. Cook

Christians are called to exercise humility but sometimes it’s hard to do. This is one occasion when the first person singular can’t be avoided. But God is still speaking and when we listen as individuals, there comes a time when we are obliged to share what we hear with others. There is no real beginning and no real end to this story about distance, perspective, and the need to find pathways for change; but let’s start with one small event that seemed to move me more than I ever would have expected.

Late last February I was struggling to finish a report for the Energy and Climate Work Group of the UCC Environment and Energy Task Force. It was to be submitted to the 26th General Synod on the 50th anniversary of the United Church of Christ. Justice and Witness Ministries created the UCC Environment and Energy Task Force as a result of two resolutions on the environment that were accepted for action in June 2005 at the 25th General Synod in Atlanta. One of those two resolutions was concerned with fossil fuel depletion and associated environmental effects like climate change. It started right here at Peace Church – one congregation daring to seek others to join in addressing our concerns about the future.

Understanding the gravity of all the energy and climate related problems is relatively easy for task force members. But taking the first steps toward establishing pathways for the Church to contribute to effective solutions is difficult.

Writing the first UCC energy and climate report turned out to be a challenge because, as volunteers, we are at a beginning of a process, uncertain of what is needed, much less of what is possible.

Acceptance of the adverse consequences of continued exponential growth and consumption of non-renewable resources is required to energize a transition to more sustainable and just global conditions. And probably commitment to effective change requires more than intellectual awareness – perhaps spiritual awareness and moral certitude are essential for meaningful action on these difficult issues.

So the report deadline had arrived but the report was not completed. I needed a couple more days, but could not contact anyone who might assure me that such was possible under the necessarily tight schedule leading up to the grandest UCC General Synod ever. I sat at the top of the stairs in our little house in the woods of Lake County. On that day we were more isolated than usual by the second blizzard in a week to dump three feet of lake effect snow in our remote location.

Attempts to send E-mail pleas had failed and call after call on our little cell phone did not connect with far off people who might provide assurance that the report would be accepted for printing although a few days late. I even wondered if our internet satellite and telephone antennae had been blown away by in the fierce wind driven white out rushing by our windows. Or perhaps our connection to others was just temporarily lost due to the storm’s heavy snowfall and thick clouds.

Then the sound came softly up the stairs: the music first, followed by the words. An intense wave of emotion took me by surprise. Although I’ve had similar moments since following the path in 2005 that our Peace

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Church initiated resolution required, this time it seemed really intense: the perfect storm of concern, stress, and perceived distance from those that might help.

I heard the phrases over and over “God is watching us, God is watching us; God is watching us from a distance.” And I began to cry. A flash of light, probably lightning at a distance amplified by the blowing snow, added to the effect. I sat there a long time listening and thinking. Why did the words and music seem so important and moving? At that moment I think the phrase “from a distance” was not so significant, but “God is watching us” in repetition seemed both comforting and challenging.

Good songs can have multiple meanings depending on the mind sets of the listeners. “From a Distance”, written by Julie Gold in 1985 and first recorded by Nancy Griffith, seems to be such a song. My mind was on trying to accomplish something with my task force friends that I felt might help the UCC prepare for a resource and climate constrained future. A future in which well being would no longer be measured by how much we can consume, but rather by how much we can give. Apparently many others have also been moved by the song but with a variety of different interpretations.

Surprisingly, this song received a “Minute Man Award” from the United States Army for inspiring the troops during the first Gulf War. This seems so incongruous to me. Consider the verses:
“From a distance you look like my friend, even though we are at war. From a distance I just cannot comprehend what all this fighting is for” and “From a distance there is harmony, and it echoes through the land. It’s the voice of hope, it’s the voice of peace, it’s the voice of every man”. How can these words of peace, and the realization that God watches all, support use of war and violence as a primary tool for gathering resources and power?

Dwight D. Eisenhower, no stranger to military force, wrote:
“Every gun that is made, every warship launched, every rocket fired signifies, in the final sense, a theft from those who hunger and are not fed, those who are cold and not clothed. This world in arms is not spending money alone. It is spending the sweat of its laborers, the genius of its scientists, the hopes of its children. This is not a way of life at all in any true sense. Under the cloud of threatening war, it is humanity hanging from a cross of iron.”

The song, “From a Distance”, is also the subject of many videos posted on You Tube. Some contain images of war combined with Christian viewpoints that conflict with our UCC sense of stewardship and justice. Is God really watching from a distance as Armageddon approaches according to a divine plan? Or is it important to ponder alternative interpretations of the song that may be closer to God’s speaking through Christ?

For those of us who truly believe that the world is moving toward more disastrous conditions and that all share responsibility, it would seem logical to be concerned by the existence of faith based viewpoints which separate us. Perhaps there is a common ground if we persistently seek it within the context of our fears for the world and our fundamental basis for faith.

In contrast to the “God controls all events including war” perspective, one finds another quite opposite body of opinion that “From a Distance” is meant to depict a God that is detached, even uncaring. Why else would God be just watching terrible things happen from a distance? Why isn’t God stopping war, poverty, hunger, disease, climate change, and destruction of ecosystems?

In today’s Old Testament scripture reading, we heard God’s words as spoken to Ezekiel concerning the sins of the Israelites in Jerusalem. In Ezekiel 22 verse 30 God seeks people to prevent destruction of the city by standing before God in the breach (or “the gap”) to counter the immoral state of human behavior; that the city might be saved from destruction. The gap is potentially a powerful metaphor for our modern condition. Thus, today we might appropriately paraphrase God’s message in verse 30 as:

“And I sought people among them who should come forward and stand in the gap before me to sustain life and peace on earth that they would not be destroyed; but I found too few”
What a radical concept emerges! Our perception of God watching from a distance is but a mirage caused by our egocentricity. The distance in reality is our collective creation through behavior that contradicts the Commandments and Christ’s Sermon on the Mount. We do come to Church to be closer to God and it works. But again, God asks us to do more: stand in the gap and work for its’ elimination.

Many people of different faiths visit the gap and contribute, but few are strong enough to stay there. The tension between being there and our modern, sophisticated consumer identity is too great. But being in the gap part of the time is surely better than not at all. And while we are there, especially if we are working together, perhaps we can feel the distance shrinking.

So who are we when we’re outside the gap and who are we when we’re in the gap working to eliminate it? In America and other developed countries it seems like people today are often classified, in the order of assumed importance first, as investors, developers, consumers, and workers. Viewed cynically from the outside, people in the gap may be regarded as do-gooders, peaceniks, tree huggers, pessimists and “doomers”. Sometimes there are other names too disrespectful and ugly to say. But perhaps those in the gap would reply: “If you haven’t been here, you can’t know what we are”.

Many of us who are concerned about climate change, energy, and limits to growth identify with the “doomer” characterization. We do need to honestly describe possible apocalyptic consequences of our present inability to conserve energy and resources. However, we know that these alone provide just a mirror image of the “End Times” apocalyptic core of Judeo-Christian mythology. In reality, most “doomers” are actually trying to temper essential descriptions of future consequences with more emphasis on the choices we face as every day goes by – choices for getting off the paths to apocalypse.

The gap concept leads to many interesting and relevant philosophical questions, such as: how many people need to be working in the gap to meet God’s expectations? And, how can solutions to our problems better be defined by integrating issues and joining efforts in the gap? Has anyone ever thought and talked about these considerations? If not, perhaps it’s time to do so, while recognizing the complexity and multidimensionality of the gap concept.

The emerging global problems associated with fossil fuel depletion and climate change, if not addressed, probably will greatly increase the distance across the gap. On the other hand, these problems are very graphically defined by predictions of future declines in socioeconomic, justice, peace, and ecological conditions. This may offer a final chance to mobilize people’s minds to acceptance of the need for prospective, preventative actions on a global as well as community scale. New, more emphatic personal and group commitments to cooperation and sharing necessary changes could emerge. We should hope and pray for this because it is essential.

Too often the word “hope” is casually tossed at our peace and justice concerns. Much has been said in recent years about “authentic hope”. Dr. Eleazar Fernandez, in his sermon here last April 29, spoke eloquently, in the context of hope, of our Philippine partner’s struggles with repression:

“In desperate times we crave for some visible signs of hope. I suspect that despair is partly due to a common misunderstanding of what hope is. Despair may be the opposite of hope, but it appears that the greatest enemy of hope is not despair but optimism.

Optimism wears a false smile. It can not survive the darkest moments of our lives and society. Authentic hope can not be swallowed by despair because it does not hang or fall based on optimistic signs around us. While our hope is oriented toward the coming of a new tomorrow, it is as much a journey as a destination.”

Eleazar does not mean to discourage optimism. Rather, optimism based on authentic hope is appropriate. To work effectively in the gap requires such authentic hope. Those that visit the gap with false hopes come and leave as tourists at best. At worst, they may leave behind a dissonance that confuses the authentically hopeful actions we seek.
Last June in Hartford, Connecticut, the United Church of Christ celebrated its’ 50th anniversary as planned. During a scheduled “speak out” time for Synod attendees, a Connecticut woman named Dorothy came to the microphone on the floor of the Hartford Civic Center. As she spoke, she held a copy of our UCC environment task force report on energy and climate above her head - the same report that in February was but words in a lap top computer out in the woods of northern Minnesota under a swirling blizzard.

Dorothy had obtained the report while attending a day long workshop provided by our task force the day before the General Synod began. To the several thousand UCC members present, she passionately appealed for the Church to address the climate change and fossil fuel depletion challenges described in the report. Then she closed by reading and endorsing the slogan printed on the cover of the report: “The next 50 years: sustaining our faith and promoting peace and justice while using resources wisely to care for creation”. Her voice and passion gave real meaning to those words.

Dorothy dared to be in the gap and invited all to join her. And God was watching; God was watching – watching with us, rather than from a distance. May we all find ourselves together more in the gap. And, perhaps when we hear the song “From a Distance”, we will be reminded of our need to be there - together.