

# The Future Is Calling Us to Greatness

with Michael Dowd + 56 Experts



## The 350.org Message and Movement with Bill McKibben

Big ideas from this session:

- The 350.org story and the birth of a global climate activist movement
- Global warming's terrifying new math: 3 numbers that change everything
- How young people are taking leadership in the growing divestment campaign

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Michael: Bill, thanks so much for joining in this conversation series, *The Future is Calling Us to Greatness*.

Bill: My pleasure to be with you.

Michael: One of the things I'm asking all my guests to do is to first introduce themselves. Now obviously, I think everybody in this series is going to be familiar with you to some degree, but could you just please give us some background in terms of who you are, what you're most committed to, what you're best known for, and don't be bashful.

Bill: Oh, I'm Bill McKibben. I'm a writer. I wrote the first book about climate change. A book called *The End of Nature* back in 1989, so 25 years ago this autumn. I've written some more books, and I've gone on to help found [350.org](http://350.org), which became the first big international grassroots climate change campaign.

Michael: Yeah, exactly. And talk about your other books too.

Bill: Oh, well, there are a lot of them.

Michael: Especially *Eaarth* and *Oil and Honey*.

Bill: Yeah, the most recent one was called *Oil and Honey*. That's not really that great a book. It's sort of the frantic memoir because I've been pretty much running around the world for the last few years. That sort of tells about that some. The good parts of it are about time spent

with a beekeeper friend of mine here in Vermont. The book before that was called *Eaarth*, spelled wrong. E-double A-R-T-H, which is about the brand new planet that we're willy-nilly inventing.

The book before that, which was a good book, was called *Deep Economy*. It's about some of the bad choices, it seems to me, we've made and some of the good, interesting possibilities that are emerging now for new ways of living on this planet.

Michael: Yeah, that's great. Are you aware of—is *Deep Economy* available in audio?

Bill: Probably.

Michael: I'll check.

Bill: I'm not sure, but I think so.

Michael: Yeah, I'll check. Well, Bill, because you're on the cutting edge in terms of what [350.org](http://350.org) is doing around the world, could you give us a sense of what you see as hopeful, what are some things that you find encouraging, and what are some things that you find still discouraging or what needs to be done most immediately and most powerfully?

Bill: Well, I mean the discouraging stuff is easy. We're losing this fight on climate change in dramatic ways. I mean the fact that the summer arctic has lost most of its ice, that's pretty damn discouraging. The fact that the world's oceans are about 30% more acidic than they were four years ago, pretty damn discouraging. The news in May that the West Antarctic ice sheet has entered into a stage of irrevocable melt. Pretty damn discouraging. The stories that come in now from someplace in the globe every single day about record rainfall, record drought, all the manifestations of climate change that the scientists have warned us about. They're pretty damn discouraging.

And the failure of our political system to deal with it. Pretty damn discouraging. The fact that we've let the fossil fuel industry, the richest industry on earth, essentially buy up our political system and many others, pretty damn discouraging.

On the encouraging side of things, I think the main—well, there are probably two things. One is the growing understanding that we don't need to do this, that we have alternatives. The fact that the Germans managed to provide 75% of their power some days this past summer from sun and wind is a pretty good sign that it's not resources we're lacking. It's political will.

The other encouraging thing is there are some signs of that political will starting to assemble itself. Eight days ago, we had this big march on New York City, the People's Climate March. We were hoping that 100,000 people might appear in the event. 400,000 turned

up. It was a beautiful, solemn, joyful, calm, powerful day that marked, I think, the final emergence of this movement.

That evening, the Rockefeller family announced that they were ending all their investments in fossil fuels. The original oil fortune now deciding it was immoral and unwise to keep doing this. That struck me as a powerfully good sign. In fact, the events of that day made me think that the fossil fuel is over. The question is how quickly we can bring it to an end, and the answer to that question will determine whether or not we succumb to the effects as a civilization of climate change or whether we manage to keep it together through a very difficult century or two.

Michael: Yeah, yeah, amen. One of the things—I don't know how much you know about my ministry, but my wife and I have traveled North America for the last 12 years speaking on sort of where science, inspiration, and sustainability intersect. When we watched David Roberts' TED Talk two years ago, climate change went from the back burner to the front burner, so it's been pretty much our sole issue since then.

One of the things that I've been often asked because I speak—we've spoken to 2,000 groups over the last 12 years, and we're doing 100 speaking engagements this year along the route of the Great March for Climate Action, so we're sometimes a few weeks ahead or sometimes a few weeks behind them, but we're speaking along that route.

Bill: Yes.

Michael: People are always asking and I always, at the end of my program, I'll say, "What can I do?" Obviously, we can all do little things, but the one systemic thing that seems to me is most important is whether you call it a revenue neutral carbon fee and dividend or a tax and carbon or whatever, but to further that process. I quote Bob Inglis in terms of put all the cost and all the fuels and eliminate all the subsidies and then watch the free enterprise system work on the climate and energy problems. Is there anything else in addition to that? What activists? There are so many young people, especially, that really want to get engaged and it's sort of we're seeing this resurgence of activist energy. What would you advise people?

Bill: Well, I mean I think you're right that a price on carbon is one of the two or three cynical unknowns of progress here. It's not like, in a certain sense, it's not intellectually controversial. Every economist, left, right, center has been saying it for 25 years. It makes no sense to allow this one industry to use the atmosphere as an open sewer for free. It distorts all our thinking and decision-making.

There are a couple other things that need to happen. One is, at this point, a pretty much all out sort of World War II style effort to deploy renewable technology that we have. The third is a real commitment to assistance from the rich north to the poor south in this world to

allow those countries to leapfrog the fossil fuel age and go straight to renewables. That's only practical from our point of view because if they don't make a change our necks are in the news too. But it's also the only moral thing to do, having filled up the atmosphere ourselves and gotten rich burning carbon. We can't very well say to other people, "Well, you just find something else to do." We're going to have to help in that process.

Michael:        Yeah.

Bill:            Those are the three things that are important to do. None of them can happen, however, without breaking the power of the fossil fuel industry. Our work is mostly centered around that. That's why we march. That's why we go to jail. That's why we try to block pipelines. That's why we've built this divestment movement that's become—and if there was one place where most people could easily help out, it's with that divestment campaign.

[Gofossilfree.org](http://Gofossilfree.org) is the website, and there you'll find out if your church, your alma mater, your pension fund is doing the right thing yet or not. It's a very good place for all of us to apply pressure.

Michael:        Yeah.

Bill:            It's the fastest-growing such divestment campaign in history, even more than the anti-apartheid one 30 years ago led by many of the same people, the most stirring calls for action have come from Desmond Tutu. They have been heeded increasingly by churches. The World Council of Churches divested this summer. The Unitarians, the United Church of Christ have divested. The University of Dayton, which is I think the biggest or one of the two or three biggest Roman Catholic research universities in the country divested this summer. It's very good to see that happening.

Michael:        Yeah, I agree. I speak about how we dishonor the past prophets if we think that they were channeling other worldly beings or predicting the future. The prophets have always been those who spoke on behalf of reality and did so with unflinching authority. Then I cite people who I see playing prophetic roles in this society such as yourself and James Hansen. I know you probably would not use that language for yourself, but nonetheless, anybody in my opinion who's speaking the moral truth about reality and doing so in a way that's designed to help humanity come back into alignment with reality, whether you use secular or religious language like God to speak about reality, I think, is doing prophetic work.

Your Rolling Stone article a couple years back really just succinctly put this idea that now the IPCC also has, of course, made mention that somewhere between 75% and 80% of the known fossil fuel reserves need to stay in the ground otherwise we will create a totally hellish condition. How do you see that or how might you see that—how can we sort of break the back of this idea that we think that coal and oil and gas are cheap and you've got a few companies getting

really, really wealthy at the expense of everyone else? How do you see that happening, because it clearly has to happen?

Bill: Well, I think that we're spreading the word and people are starting to understand that the IPCC, the World Bank, the International Energy Agency—you see even President Obama sometimes using some of this language, but that doesn't do much given the political power of these companies. They have all the money. I mean I'm no theologian. You're a theologian, but I'm not. These guys put—in my Sunday school teacher's opinion, these guys have more money than God, you know?

So we're not going to match them dollar for dollar. We're going to need different currency to work in. Those are the currencies of movements and passion, spirit, creativity. Sometimes we need to spend our advice. That's what we've got to do. We've got to build that movement faster and bigger, and that's what's starting to happen. At a certain point, and I don't know where it is, that will add up to more than the money power that these guys can bring. Then our political leaders will have the guts to stand up to them, but not until then.

Courage doesn't seem to be a huge part of the politician's make up, so we need to give them—either give them some courage or instill a little healthy fear of the rest of us in them.

Michael: Yeah, exactly. I mean this brings in the whole moral issue. I mean one of the people that I interviewed in this series was Kathleen Dean Moore.

Bill: What a great, great human being!

Michael: Yes, truly, truly!

Bill: And a terrific fighter, by the way.

Michael: Yes, I know. Believe me. Well, I consider you are too, but yeah, one of the books that I recommend to all churches is Moral Ground because there's a study guide, and it's designed to help see that there are many different ways of seeing this as the biggest moral issue in human history, and it's our responsibility to use moral language of praise and condemnation for what is deserving of praise and condemnation. I think that if anything is deserving of condemnation it's pursuing our own pleasure, comfort, or wealth at the expense of future generations.

Bill: I think the Hebrew Bible may have talked about the powers in principalities, and these are the powers and principalities of our time. It's not pharaoh. It's Exxon. That's where the fight is.

Michael: Yeah, amen. I mean one of the things I'm constantly trying to do in religious circles is reframe some of this religious language. Instead of it being sort of spooky spirits out

there, that these are personifications of social, economic, political realities that we need to incorporate that into our language today.

Bill, speaking of faith, how do you stay in the face of some really scary stuff? What is it either about science, the epic of evolution, or your religious faith? What gives you sustenance? Where do you find the support to wake up on a day-by-day basis and do what needs to be done?

Bill: Well, I find it, I guess, there are a couple of places. One, of course, is in my family and my home. I have the privilege of living in a really beautiful part of the world, up in the mountains of the northeast. I just walk outside the door and am reminded hourly of the beauty of the world, at which point I become pissed off again that we're not paying attention to it and protecting it and so forth.

The other thing that gives me lots of strength is working with people all over the world. I think at [350.org](http://350.org) we've organized about 20,000 demonstrations now in every country on earth except North Korea. We have pictures of most of them. Flickr is our killer app. I have met—I've been to every continent now and worked with people everywhere and most of these people have done nothing to cause this problem. If they're willing to go work on it and fight it with us, then that seems to confer a powerful obligation on the rest of us.

So you know my friends in the Pacific Islands are next week launching traditional canoes from 12 island nations that'll be underwater soon. They're taking them to Australia and using those canoes to blockade the biggest coal port in the world. When I think of the bravery it takes to be out in a canoe against some of the biggest ships on earth, that makes me willing to keep fighting.

Michael: Yeah, yeah, amen. Well, since you started sharing a story along those lines, please share what—sort of give us a little history of [350.org](http://350.org) and some of the most inspiring things that have happened within that context because I've heard you on other interviews or some of your presentations and some of this stuff just brings me to tears, and I'd like you to share some of that here with our audience.

Bill: Well, 350 has been fun. We started almost seven years ago now with myself and seven college students. We had no money. We had no mailing lists or anything, but for whatever reason, we were undeterred by all of that. Somewhat ludicrously we set out to organize the world. There were seven students. There are seven continents. Each one took one and we went to work. The guy at the Antarctic also had to do the Internet.

We started finding people like ourselves all over the world. People who were working on hunger and public health in the poorest parts of the world who knew that they couldn't do the work they were doing on a degrading planet. We organized our first big global day of action about a year

later. With beginner's luck, we managed to have about 5,200 simultaneous demonstrations in 181 countries. CNN called it the "most widespread day of political action in the planet's history."

We've gone on to do many big educational kind of days like that around the world. As I say, working pretty much everywhere. I wish we had time for that to be all that we had to do, that we could just educate people and over a generation or two make the shifts we need to make. Since physics isn't allowing us that, we've also had to move pretty quickly from education to confrontation.

We helped organize the fight against the Keystone Pipeline, which has become one of the first big kind of tripwire battles of the fossil fuel era. I helped organize the largest civil disobedience action about anything in 30 years in this country. A lot of people went to jail as a result. They've so far not built that pipeline and kept 900,000 barrels of oil a day in the ground, dirtiest oil on earth.

Now we're organizing this divestment campaign. We've just had this help with many others this huge People's Climate March in New York that was by far the largest climate rally ever in this world and really the largest political gathering about anything in the United States in quite a while. All of that good, but not good enough. We're still losing, but we're getting closer to whatever tipping point we're going to get to.

Michael: Yeah, what do you see ahead when you look out the next year or two for [350.org](http://350.org)? Is it just continuing to do what you do and get better at doing it?

Bill: Just cause as much trouble as we can.

Michael: Amen!

Bill: That's our role in the world. There are lots of great environmental organizations that are good at lobbying and so on and doing all the detail work and all that. Their jobs are made much easier if there are people out pushing from the outside. Then they can work from the inside more easily.

Our job is to push from the outside and we'll keep pushing as hard as we can.

Michael: Yeah, that's great.

Bill: One of things that's really been good is the rapidly increasing involvement of the faith community in this work. When I started doing this 25 years ago, there really was no religious environmental movement to speak of. In liberal churches, it was considered a kind of luxury to be gotten to once you dealt with poverty and war and things. In conservative churches, it was seen as—environmentalism as a kind of weigh station on the road to paganism.

I think those attitudes are shifting quickly as people understand this is, if we faithfully read the signs of the times, there's nothing written in larger bolder letters than the need to take on creation here, and it's really good to see that happening.

Michael: Yeah, I was deeply inspired when I interviewed Katharine Hayhoe as part of this series. She just rocks!

Bill: Great hero.

Michael: Bill, I wanted to ask you about three books that I've read recently that I find really inspiring, challenging, igniting a righteous fire. One of them, of course, was *Moral Ground*. I already mentioned that. But I'm listening. Connie and I, this week, because it only came out last week. Naomi Klein's new book *This Changes Everything* and we're listening to it on audio about halfway through and just absolutely loving it. Have you read that yet?

Bill: Of course. Naomi is an old friend and I think it's one of the most important books about climate in a very long time. You know it speaks uncomfortable and powerful truths about a lot of things, including the fact that unregulated, unchecked market systems are not producing any answers around climate, and so it's very clear that we need to regulate them.

You've already talked about the single most important way, which is not letting them use for free that which belongs to all of us or to God, the atmosphere around us. At the very least, if they're going to be filling it with carbon, they should be paying rent to the rest of us, which is why this fee and dividend system is such a good idea and one that might help bring things quickly under control.

Michael: Yeah, I promote to CCL, Citizens' Climate Lobby everywhere I go as well.

Bill: Yeah.

Michael: The other one that I'm just now reading and it's exposing me to a sort of more radical edge, and yet I think it's so vital just in the same way that the earth first movement sort of redefined the middle back a couple decades ago, this Deep Green Resistance movement. I'm reading that book and really finding it, by and large, profoundly inspiring and challenging. Is there any way that you're working with or collaborating with or just sort of parallel paths? I mean what do you think about the Deep Green Resistance movement?

Bill: I think there's a lot of merging complementarity going on. As I say, I work a lot in civil disobedience, and I was pleased to see the day after the big climate march many of the same people, many of my friends helped organize this flood Wall Street attacks, which I thought was good, powerful, classic civil disobedience. I think all that's good.

I don't think that it's going to be useful to do property destruction. I don't think we can actually stop the fossil fuel industry by wrecking a particular pipeline or something, and I think in the end that tends to strengthen their hand rather than weaken it. There are tactics that I think make more sense than others, but I'm very glad that people are engaging this in a far more systemic way all the time.

Michael: Yeah, yeah, that's exactly how I feel about it. I tend to think that the violent means are not likely to be useful, but then again, the frustration that some of us feel with the way that the corporate sort of deregulated capitalism and the fossil fuel industries have now, as you said, bought the sort of political realm and I think that non-violent means are going to be much more effective in the long run, but I suspect there's also going to be some that blow up a pipeline now and then or whatever.

Bill: I mean among other things, that are just for those of us who come from a Gandhian tradition and a Christian tradition, that kind of Sermon on the Mount tradition, that's not applicable anyway. But that doesn't mean any less resolve.

Michael: Yes, exactly. One of the other things that people are often surprised to hear is that there has been some really deep thinking happening among whole sectors of society for which there is no denial anymore, such as the insurance industry, the upper echelons of military planning, the forestry industry. I mean there is no—you don't find denial in those areas.

But I was inspired the second half of Paul Gilding's book *The Great Disruption*, and he talked about the one-degree Celsius war plan that Jorgen Randers and he and others have been working on. Are there other—anything that you want to say about that? Is there a place where we can—this idea that the dam of denial potentially breaking in the next two, three, four, five years and that the entire world is mobilized like we were at the beginning of World War II. I find that idea inspiring. In addition to anything you've already shared, is there anything that any of us can do to help further that?

Bill: I just think that the key thing is to keep reminding ourselves that we're not going to deal with this at this point one light bulb at a time, as important as those things are. Our biggest job as individuals is to figure out how not to be individuals in this fight, to come together in big movements, so that's powerful.

Michael: Yeah, amen. Well, Bill, if you had the opportunity to speak to someone in their senior years, somebody who's retired and wanting to find some way to stay inspired, to be in action rather than being overwhelmed with fear, what would you say to that person? Then on the other end, you have the opportunity to speak often to young people, but if some young person is just overwhelmed or paralyzed with fear, what would you say to these people on different ends of the age spectrum?

Bill: Well, when I wrote the letter asking people to come to Washington and get arrested in that big civil disobedience action, one of the things I said was that I thought that young people shouldn't have to be the cannon fodder here. If you're 22 in our economy, an arrest record may not be the best thing for your résumé.

One of the unmixed blessings of growing older is past a certain point what the hell are they going to do to you? We didn't ask people when they came how old they were, but we did, I think, cleverly say, "Who was president when you were born?" The two biggest cohorts that people are getting hauled off to jail were from the FDR and the Truman administrations.

Michael: Wow!

Bill: On the last day, there was a guy arrested with a sign around his neck that said, "World War II vet. Handle with care," who's old enough that he'd been born in the Warren Harding administration in that one, so willing to go enough that I'd really basically forgotten there was a Warren Harding.

The good thing about it all is, for me, that young people got to see their elders acting the way elders are supposed to act. That was healthy all around.

Michael: Yeah, amen. Well, Bill, this is a question that I've been asking everybody. It's sort of off-the-wall, but it's also resulted in some really amazing responses. If you had the opportunity to have a dinner or glass of beer or glass of wine or something with any three people in human history, either at a dinner party where all three of those people and yourself were at or just one-on-one. Who would those three people be and why would you choose them?

Bill: Well, I mean the honest answer is my wife and my daughter and my dog. That's who I most like to have and I spend a lot of time out on the road and a fair amount of the time having dinner with famous people and things. That's great and I enjoy it, but what I like is to be home with them.

Michael: How old is your daughter now?

Bill: My daughter is now a junior in college, so she's not home all the time. When she is, I like to be here.

Michael: Well, you know something? I will definitely go with that because yeah, you're one of the few of us in this movement that does have the opportunity to meet with people all over the world, famous people and all that. I can relate. Connie and I living in other people's homes for the last 12 years. The last four years we now have a number of places that we cycle back to where we are, instead of for three to seven days, we're three to seven weeks or sometimes two or

three months at a really gorgeous location. Just having dinner with Connie and taking a long walk is the most soul-nourishing thing that we can possibly do.

Bill:            You said it! You said it!

Michael:        Bill, thank you so much. For people that want to go more deeply into your work and these ideas, obviously, [350.org](http://350.org). You mentioned [gofossilfree.org](http://gofossilfree.org). Any other resources that you'd like to particularly recommend?

Bill:            Nope. If you want to read my books, most of them are at the library. But mostly we just need people out on the street. We need people engaged in movements.

Michael:        Great! Bill, thank you so much.

Bill:            Thank you. Thank you and your wife very much for your work.

Michael:        Cool, thanks.

Bill:            God bless.

Michael:        Same to you, brother.