

HIGH PROFILES

Bill McKibben

The US environmentalist
and founder of 350.org
interviewed by *Huw Spanner*
over the internet

22 June 2016

Time We Started Counting!

Bill McKibben

made his name as an environmentalist in 1989 with his groundbreaking 'righteous jeremiad' *The End of Nature*. Nineteen years later, an 'unlikely activist', he founded the global pressure group 350.org with seven of his students.

Huw Spanner spoke to him over the internet.



PHOTOGRAPHY: WOLFGANG SCHMIDT/RIGHT LIVELIHOOD AWARD

When did you first become interested in environmentalism?

I certainly knew about environmental issues growing up, though they weren't my main concern – I was more interested in things like homelessness.

When I was a young man I was on the staff of the *New Yorker* and I wrote a long piece for the magazine – I must have been 24 or something – about where everything in my apartment in New York City came from. They sent me off for a year, all over the world, to follow everything back to its ultimate source. So, I was in the Brazilian jungle looking at oil wells and I was up in the Arctic looking at the huge hydro dams at the tip of Hudson Bay and I was out on the barges that carry the city's sewage out to sea and so on.

And this had for me the interesting intellectual effect of making me realise how *physical*

the world actually was. I'd grown up in a good American suburb and a suburb is kind of a device for hiding out of sight all the physical workings of the planet. You don't see the rivers and you have no idea where the garbage goes – you know, any of that kind of thing. And having done this reporting I had a much stronger sense of what a physical place, and hence in a way, I think, what a vulnerable place, the planet was.

Even a city as mighty as New York, which can more or less conjure up money out of nothing – I mean, that's kind of what Wall Street does – and which trades in ideas and images – that's what Madison Avenue does – even a city like that is exquisitely dependent on the proper functioning of a wide array of natural systems.

I have a feeling that that was one of the things that set me up for reading the early climate science that was starting to come out in the latter part of the 1980s. I think it may have hit me harder than it would have otherwise, and perhaps than it hit other people.

I was also, in the same period, starting to read a lot of writers that I hadn't read before – maybe most importantly, Wendell Berry, the great Kentucky farmer and essayist and remarkable thinker about the natural and the human worlds.

Can we talk a little about your childhood?

I'm resistant to talking about myself too much, but...

Would people who knew you as a boy have been surprised to learn what you would be today?

I suppose I was contentious as a boy, in that when I was in high school I enjoyed debate and that kind of thing. It was pretty clear from a very early age that I was going to be a journalist. My father was a business journalist, and a remarkably good one, and that's what I began doing in seventh or eighth grade. At first I was just covering junior high school sports for the local newspaper for 25 cents a column inch, but soon that was where I was working [over] my summers.

The other work that I did on my summers was as a tour guide on the Battle Green in Lexington, Massachusetts. Lexington is what we call 'the birthplace of American liberty' – it was the first battleground of anti-imperial action in the modern world – and I suppose there's a certain respect for rebels born into anyone who grew up in a place like Lexington.

When you were 10 years old, your father was arrested at a protest in support of Vietnam Veterans Against the War. What effect did that have on you?

It was very out of character for him, but I remember being proud of him for standing up for what he believed in.

Who were the principal influences on you growing up?

Well, my parents above all, of course. My mother was, and is, a very serious Christian, of a mainline liberal denomination. My father as well. Reading together was important in our household, and the most important books of my childhood by far, I think, would be

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C S Lewis's Narnia books, which probably have as much to do with my sense of the world as – or more than – any other piece of literature.

Your sense of the world as a creation, as something sacred or...?

Yeah, maybe, but more as a guide to, you know, how people are supposed to behave and what it means to act responsibly and so on.

You are often identified as a Methodist, and you have described yourself as 'more a Methodist than a socialist'...

I wasn't actually raised a Methodist – I was baptised in the Presbyterian Church and grew up in the Congregational Church; but they're all versions of the same thing.

Is your commitment to Christianity personal or is it more cultural? You mention God sometimes in your writing, but Jesus doesn't seem to feature much at all.

Well, I guess it depends on what writing I'm doing. I wrote a book once that was mostly about the Book of Job,¹ and I talk on occasion – more than occasionally – about the gospel injunction to 'love one's neighbour', which I think is the core of the New Testament message. I think it's a message we are failing to heed in a world where we're increasingly drowning and sickening and whatever our neighbours.

I've read that as a young man you meditated on the Gospel of Matthew. What was it in particular in that Gospel that appealed to you?

Well, I think love of neighbour is for me the key, and the notion that we're called to feed the hungry and clothe the naked and care for the orphan and the widow, and all those things from Matthew 25. There also are very deep meditations on money and its value, and on what it means to be a stranger or an immigrant.

Many Greens are motivated primarily by a concern for human welfare, but some seem inspired more by a love for the other, the non-human –

It doesn't seem to me that they're exclusive categories.

No, no...

When I was living in New York, I attended Riverside Church (whose pastor, William Sloane Coffin, was probably the great white Protestant pastor of the late 20th century) and I helped start a homeless shelter in the basement of the church. I spent a great many nights doing that. And then I moved up into the mountains of the Adirondacks, which is the great wilderness of the American East, and there I found that I resonated with and loved the wild places and the wild creatures of that part of the world. So, I guess that for me there is less dichotomy than you describe for some other people.

You went to Harvard in 1978. What was your degree in?

Theoretically, I studied government, which I guess is what they'd call 'political science' elsewhere; but I devoted my energies almost exclusively to the student newspaper, the *Harvard Crimson*. It was the only daily newspaper in [Cambridge, Massachusetts,] a city of a hundred thousand people, and so it was a good opportunity to get outside the bubble of [university life] and cover local politics. In my senior year, I was editor of the newspaper – we called it 'President'.

I've read that you were galvanised by the election of Ronald Reagan in 1981. Is that right?

Reagan was elected when I was in college and I actually spent a couple of months in New Hampshire covering that election for the *Crimson* – in fact, I interviewed Reagan – and so I'd thought about it a lot. I think that it really *was* an important election – really, the most important of my lifetime. I think it represented a moment when we made a very fatefully wrong choice.

Jimmy Carter² had, for the first time in American history, begun to recognise the idea of limits in our world – it was the era of the oil embargoes and he had responded with a strong message about conservation. And Reagan said, famously, that 'it's morning again in America,' that there were no limits to be observed. And my sense at the time (and I think what I wrote for the *Crimson* holds up pretty well) was that that approach to the world was going to be very successful – for a little while. That there was one more economic boom to be wrung out of America, if we ignored the environmental and human costs, but that it would probably take us so far to the precipice that we wouldn't be able to recover.

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I've thought about it since and I think that a different way of putting it is that Carter stood for a long American tradition that we're all in this together and Reagan stood for a new kind of hyperindividualism, which I think has served America extraordinarily badly in the time since.

You were very young when you formed that judgement, and when you wrote *The End of Nature*³ (which the *Boston Globe* called a 'righteous jeremiad') you were still only 29 –

I think I was actually 28, as I recall.

Looking back, does that book seem to you the work of a young man or do you think it stands up strongly?

There are probably parts that are a little jejune, but I confess I think it... The science, which was half the book, sadly holds up very well. Our only mistake was in underestimating how quickly and how hard climate change was going to affect us. The other half was what I guess you'd call 'lay theology' or 'amateur philosophy' and was built around this notion that we were at a new [stage] in human history when all of a sudden our imprint could be read on everything around us. Ten years or so later, people began calling the world we've built 'the Anthropocene', and that was what I was getting at.

The main emotion that dominated *The End of Nature* was not so much fear as sadness. That was partly because global warming remained abstract at that point to a large degree and partly because I was thinking about it from where I was writing, which was up in the wilderness, and I was thinking about the sadness of a world without wilderness.

In the time since, as global warming has become much more real for (now) billions of people, I've spent most of my time concentrating on the other aspect: the correct fear, and now anguish, that arises as we see endless human casualties.

The book has an apocalyptic title. What exactly did you mean by ‘nature’? It’s quite an elastic word.

Yeah, yeah. My definition of it, for the purposes of that book anyway, was ‘that which is not under the control of people’: the more-than-human world, the world outside of us – which for almost all of history had been most things, and all of a sudden wasn’t.

One of the ironies of this debate is that the more completely we ‘conquer’ nature, the more vulnerable we are making ourselves to nature –

Yes, exactly right. Exactly right. There is a big difference between influence and control over the world around us. We seem to be perfectly capable of damaging everything all at once.

People often talk about ‘saving the planet’ or ‘the fragile earth’, but really we are talking about saving ourselves, aren’t we? The planet itself is not fragile. It’s only the bits that we depend on that are.

I think that may be a little glib. It’s true that the planet itself will survive – you know, the ball of rock third out from the Sun will still be here; but we are quite capable of taking with us a very large fraction of the planet’s DNA in the course of this century.

Climate change is regarded as a ‘wicked’ problem,⁴ which ironically *doesn’t* involve obvious wickedness; but when one sees photographs of the Alberta tar sands, for example,⁵ it’s hard *not* to reach for words such as ‘evil’, and even ‘demonic’. Do you feel it is ever appropriate to use that kind of vocabulary about climate change?

I would try to avoid using ‘evil’ and ‘demonic’. This is a great crisis, maybe the greatest crisis that humans have ever faced, but it’s not like the Holocaust in terms of moral accountability. Much of the carbon [dioxide] that’s in the atmosphere was put there before people understood what the problem was, and even now there are many situations in which people have no choice but to continue burning [fossil fuels], you know? And so I don’t think of it as *evil*.

I *do* think we’re now beginning to see evidence of things that people have done that were pretty rotten. It’s come out over the last year that Exxon knew everything there was to know about climate change 30, 40 years ago.⁶ All Exxon needed to do was, you know, when [the climate scientist] Jim Hansen⁷ testified before Congress in 1988, say: ‘Our scientists are finding the same thing.’ Which they were. No one would have accused *them* of ‘climate alarmism’. Everyone would have said: ‘Well, if Exxon says it’s happening, I guess it must be happening. Let’s get down to work!’ We wouldn’t have at this point *solved* climate change but we’d be well on the way.

And instead Exxon did just the opposite: they actively spread the opposite message. Well, you know, that was a rotten thing to do.

I’m surprised that you settle for the word ‘rotten’ where other people *would* use the word ‘wicked’. Are you just being politic?

I’m not politic with regard to any of this. I just think ‘evil’ is a potent word best reserved for... I mean, it depends how loosely you mean it.

One of the tragedies of climate change, I think, is that for the most part we’ve walked somewhat blindly off this cliff – most of us – and to a large degree that’s a great failure of journalism. The fact that Exxon were able to keep a fake debate alive for a critical

quarter century is as much a testament to the failure of journalists to grapple effectively with this issue. I mean, I've lived through 25 years of watching journalists play along with the idea that there was a debate about whether climate change was real or not.

What do you feel you've learnt about human nature from observing developments over the decades?

That's a good and large question.

I think, that human nature is not particularly well equipped to picture scale – that is, to understand that in this case things are happening on a very, very large scale very quickly. Something in us resists the idea.

And so a lot of my work has been endlessly looking for new images, metaphors, facts, ideas that help get that message across in ways that people can understand it. That's one of the reasons why we started what we've called, somewhat oddly, '350.org'⁸ – in that case we were trying to use numbers to get across where we stood. That's why we've done these huge global art projects,⁹ images [that involved] so many people across so much space that they had to be photographed by satellite to [make sense] to the human eye.

We've tried every [technique] we can think of. Environmentalists are better at reaching those parts of us that respond to bar graphs and pie charts than other parts of us, equally important, that respond viscerally, so we've tried to make good use of things like art and music.

The patriarch of the Orthodox Church said in a sermon: 'Global warming is a sin, and 350.org is an act of redemption.' That has helped us a lot

Before the 1992 Earth Summit, George Bush Sr declared: 'The American way of life is not up for negotiation.' Isn't that the root of the problem – that most of us simply don't want to know what is happening to the planet, because our way of life is 'not up for negotiation'?

I don't think that that's... I think there are many people who are willing to make the changes that we need to make if they understand where we are – especially because the changes are not necessarily all that hard. One of the things that's happened over the last quarter century is that engineers have done a marvellous job of helping us understand how we can make some of these changes much more easily than we would have thought. The price of a solar panel is a hundredth of what it was when I wrote *The End of Nature*. That's a good thing.

OK, let's take a practical example. Barack Obama's first Energy Secretary, Steven Chu, said that one simple way to begin to address global warming is to paint roofs, and even roads, white to increase the planet's albedo, to reflect more sunlight into space. That's something eminently doable, isn't it, that hasn't even begun to be done.

Yeah, I guess. I mean, truthfully it may not have been as utterly simple as that, and once people ran the numbers [they realised that it wouldn't achieve] that much of a change in albedo anyway. But, yes, I take your point. There's lots of things that people can be doing.

At 350, and in my work, in recent years especially, we've tended not to spend a lot of time thinking about lifestyle changes for people, because I think in some ways they tend

to be a distraction from the real work at hand. If we had 50 or 100 years to deal with climate change, they'd probably be the most sensible thing to be focusing on, because we'd get the fairly slow, evolutionary change that humans and their civilisations are best at dealing with. But that's not the situation we're in. We have a very short period of time to deal with this and so that means accepting the fact that it's essentially a structural and systemic problem – and that means looking for structural and systemic answers.

Look, my house is covered with solar panels. I drove the first electric car in Vermont – the first electric Ford, anyway. I've fed my family for a long time only on local food. All these things are very good and very important, I'm glad that I do them – and I try not to fool myself into thinking that they're having any real effect on climate change. That's why if someone told me they had a limited amount of energy and time to spend on this problem, I would tell them that the first, second and third most important things they can do are to organise – to get together with other people.

Our instinctive analysis is that as individuals we're going to have not much effect on global warming, that against something of this scale we're very small; and that instinctive analysis is essentially correct, though it took me a long time to figure that out. And that's why we started 350.org and organised in the ways that we did: because we wanted to show people that there were a lot of other people like them, so that people would feel less daunted and hence a movement could emerge and that movement could help make the systemic and structural changes that might – I emphasise, *might* – give us some hope of slowing down climate change.

I was intending to ask you 'Do you see this as essentially a spiritual battle?', but I get the impression that you don't, really.

Well, it depends on your definition of 'spiritual', I guess. If your commitment is to love your neighbour in practice, then yes, very much so.

It's been one part of my work – not the main part, but an important part – to help in the process of nurturing and building a religious and spiritual environmentalism. It didn't exist a quarter century ago but now, as of (I'd say) last summer, when Pope Francis published his encyclical *Laudato Si*, it is deeply embedded in our spiritual consciousness.

Which faith communities have you found most responsive to your message?

You know, most. For instance, we've done a lot – a *lot* – of good organising across the Muslim world and in Hindu India; and certainly the Dalai Lama and institutionalised Buddhism were early an important part of this fight.

Maybe the very first community to really step up in a big way was the Orthodox Christian community. The most important person in that world was and is Bartholomew [I], the patriarch of the [Eastern] Orthodox Church, who comes out of the Greek tradition but resides, like all his predecessors, in Istanbul. He was already involved in a variety of environmental endeavours when we formed 350, and as we were getting ready for our first big global day of action he gave a sermon in which he said: 'Global warming is a sin, and 350 is an act of redemption.' Those were strong words and they have helped us a lot across that large swathe of the world where 400 million Eastern Christians reside.

What particular spiritual themes or theological ideas have proved potent for other faiths that have been responsive?

There is a strong Jewish environmental movement rooted powerfully in the Genesis message around stewardship. That influences the whole Christian tradition, but there's

also the strong gospel orientation around care for the needy. Islam is pretty interesting on the question of hyperindividualism versus thinking about society.

The particular Catholic innovation, I think, and the one that's powerful in *Laudato Si*, is the more thoroughgoing critique of modernity and the understanding that the problem we have goes deeper than climate change, that climate change is a manifestation of a world that's disordered in many ways.

Can you say more about the response from the Muslim world?

There are an extraordinary number of great environmental thinkers and doers across the Muslim world and they're operating in an environment that would be difficult because of the accidental overlap between the Arab world and the world of petroleum. I was very moved when we had our first big global days of action to see that people had organised demonstrations, some of them fairly sizeable, in places that I never would have imagined it would happen: in Saudi Arabia, in Qatar, even in Iraq amidst what was then – well, still is – complete military chaos. I take those as very hopeful signs.

You know, it's possible that it would be easier to deal with this crisis were we all subscribed to some nature-based faith or something; but that's not going to happen in the time that we have to deal with it. So, it's been very good that people have been able to rummage through the scriptures that we do have in all our faiths and recover them for the moment in which we live. That was the project that I undertook with the Book of Job, and I confess that's an analysis of which I'm still quite proud.

One thing that's been very remarkable in the last few years is to watch the dramatic emergence of indigenous political and spiritual resistance. I think it may be the most important part of the kind of activist coalition that's emerged around climate change and fossil-fuel extraction in the last five or six years. You know, those are the deepest and oldest spiritual traditions that we have and I'm very glad to see them coming to the forefront in this work.

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The person who really deserves great credit for bringing all these theological traditions to bear is Mary Evelyn Tucker, now at Yale, who organised, early on in the 1990s, a landmark series of conferences at Harvard with representatives of every faith tradition. It turned out that all of them had resources to offer. It was quite stunning.

Five years ago, you joined with Wendell Berry and Naomi Klein and others in calling on people in the US to resort to civil disobedience to stop the Keystone XL pipeline. You ended your letter: 'We know we're asking a lot. You should think long and hard on it, and pray if you're the praying type.'

You're a hugely effective activist, but it made me wonder: Are *you* the praying type?

Yes, I do pray.

And what do you think prayer achieves?

At the very least, it's an expression of solidarity. But it's not a substitute for action!

- 1 *The Comforting Whirlwind: God, Job, and the scale of creation* (Cowley Publications, 2005)
- 2 President of the United States from 1977 to 1981
- 3 Published by Anchor in 1989
- 4 'Wicked problems have these features: It is hard to say what the problem is, to define it clearly or to tell where it stops and starts. There is no "right" way to view the problem, no definitive formulation. There are many stakeholders, all with their own frames, which they tend to see as exclusively correct. Ask what the problem is and you will get a different answer from each. Someone can always say that the problem is just a symptom of another problem and that someone will not be wrong. The problem is interconnected to a lot of other problems; pulling them apart is almost impossible. ... But it gets worse. ... The problem keeps changing on us. ... It's not possible to understand the problem first, then solve it. Rather, attempts to solve it reveal further dimensions of the problem' – Jay Rosen, 'Covering Wicked Problems', keynote address to the UK Conference of Science Journalists at the Royal Society in 2012
- 5 See, for example, bit.ly/29zCe8J.
- 6 See bit.ly/29DtK27.
- 7 Then head of the Nasa Goddard Institute for Space Studies
- 8 The organisation takes its name from the contention by James Hansen that 'if humanity wishes to preserve a planet similar to that on which civilization developed and to which life on Earth is adapted, paleoclimate evidence and ongoing climate change suggest that CO₂ will need to be reduced from its current 385 [parts per million] to at most 350 ppm, but likely less than that.' It was recently measured as nearly 407 ppm.
- 9 See art.350.org/earth.

Biography

Bill McKibben was born in Palo Alto, California in 1960 and grew up in Toronto and Lexington, where he attended the local high school. He studied government at Harvard, and in 1981 became editor of the *Harvard Crimson*.

He graduated in 1982 and joined the staff of the *New Yorker*, for which for five years he wrote much of the celebrated column 'The Talk of the Town'. He quit in 1987 (after the magazine's editor was forced out of his job) and moved to the Adirondack Mountains, to write freelance.

His first book, *The End of Nature*, was published in 1989 after being serialised in the *New Yorker* and has since been printed in more than 20 languages. It was followed by, among others, *The Age of Missing Information* (1992), *Hope, Human and Wild* (1995), *Maybe One: A personal and environmental argument for single child families* (1998), *Enough: Staying human in an engineered age* (2003), *Wandering Home* and *The Comforting Whirlwind* (both 2005), the bestseller *Deep Economy: Economics as if the world mattered* and the handbook *Fight Global Warming Now* (both 2007), *The Bill McKibben Reader* (2008), the bestseller *Eaarth: Making a life on a tough new planet* (2010) and *Oil and Honey: The education of an unlikely activist* (2013).

In 2001, he began teaching environmental studies at Middlebury College in Vermont (where he was named the Schumann Distinguished Scholar in 2010).

In 2006, he was one of the leaders of a five-day walk across Vermont calling for action on global warming. The following year, he launched Step It Up, which organised simultaneous rallies in hundreds of US cities and towns urging Congress to act to reduce CO₂ emissions by 80% by 2050. Step It Up 2 then added a demand for a reduction of 10% in three years.

In 2009, with seven of his students he co-founded the 'anti-carbon' campaign group 350.org. Its first big initiative was to organise more than 5,000 simultaneous demonstrations in 181 countries. The following year, 350.org's 10/10/10 Global Work Party convened more than 7,000 events in 188 countries, and it later co-ordinated a 'planet-scale' art project. In 2011–12, as leader of the campaign against the proposed Keystone XL oil pipeline, he spent three days in prison in Washington. In 2014, he was one of the instigators of the People's Climate March, which brought more than 300,000 people onto the streets of New York, along with 'companion demonstrations' around the world.

He is a frequent contributor to publications including the *New York Times*, the *Atlantic*, *Harper's*, *Orion*, *Mother Jones*, the *American Prospect*, the *New York Review of Books*, *Granta*, *National Geographic*, *Adbusters*, *Outside* and *Grist*. In 2012, his *Rolling Stone* article 'Global Warming's Terrifying New Math' garnered over 125,000 likes on Facebook and 14,000 tweets.

He has been awarded both a Guggenheim and a Lyndhurst Fellowship. He won the Lannan Literary Award for Nonfiction in 2000. He was elected a member of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences in 2012. He was awarded the Sophie Prize in 2013, and in 2014 he and 350.org received the 'alternative Nobel Prize', the Right Livelihood Award.

He has been married since 1988 and has one adult daughter.

Up-to-date as at 1 July 2016