

## The Sea Covered my Uncle's Birthplace, What Now???



An Uncle and his Niece walked on a picturesque beach on one of the many Atolls that make up the Islands of Kiribati in the South Pacific. One can only guess at the many thoughts that the uncle has but what is very clear from his own sharing of the story of his walk on the beach with his Niece was that the moment provided an opportunity to teach a lesson about the past and an emerging present.

It was a lesson about family history; his niece was to learn a little bit more about where her uncle was born. But this lesson was tinged rather heavily with the ugly pain of an emerging reality. A reality that raised questions about the future, about existence, cultural survival and what it meant to speak about who he understood himself to be, a Kiribati Islander and the future that faced his niece.

Uncle pauses in this walk and invites his young relative to look at the beauty and awesomeness of the ocean. The invitation seems strange given that the ocean is not far from their lives and existence; it is a source of food, a source of life and is always not far away. He then focuses her look on a submerged spot in the sea, close to shore. When she queries the reason, he says, "That is where I was born". In that moment there is a coming together of family history, family loss, the harsh reality of a threat to cultural survival and authenticity. A painful teachable moment came to

life because of the reality of sea level rise, global warming and its connection to our insatiable appetite to consume and devour the very planet that gives us life<sup>1</sup>.

That which is an equally ugly phenomenon or dynamic, call it what you will regarding this emerging reality for the people of Kiribati, Tuvalu, and the residents of the Bay of Bengal Delta is the arrogance and sheer stupidity of those who chose to deny for their own economic convenience<sup>2</sup> the lived reality of fellow human beings<sup>3</sup>. For this islander and his granddaughter, that which was a source of life, an essential part of their identity i.e. the sea, was now becoming the destroyer of all they knew. There only connection with the cause of this climate reality was their humanity. Its cause lies in the actions of humanity that has lost its balance and its bearings. Wealth acquisition, consumption and the rules of the logic of imperial hubris are the norm.

The evidence is indisputable; on every front we see the impact of human excess on the very environment within which we exist. A brief survey of the following articles makes the point:

- *“Scientists: Human activity has pushed Earth beyond four or five planetary boundaries.”<sup>4</sup>*
- *“We should not surrender to climate change.”<sup>5</sup>*
- *“Earth has lost half its wildlife in the past forty years, says WWF.”<sup>6</sup>*
- *“Sea levels rising faster than previously thought says new study.”<sup>7</sup>*

The above are a tiny sample of data and evidence that invites us to think again. What does it say about our activities as human beings? What is our obligation to the

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.theguardian.com/environment/2014/dec/04/in-30-years-maybe-kiribati-will-disappear-climate-change/>

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.ipcc.ch/report/ar5/wg2> - The weight of emerging scientific evidence from the IPCC reports over the years is undeniable. However for the deniers' the contributions of science to humanity seem only acceptable when it facilitates life for ones convenience. When the evidence pushes the need for a reordering of life this inconvenient truth then becomes unacceptable.

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2013/jan/29/sea-change-bay-bengal-vanishing-islands>.

<sup>4</sup> [http://www.washingtonpost.com/national/health-science/scientists-human-activity-has-pushed-earth-beyond-four-of-nine-planetary-boundaries/2015/01/15/f52b61b6-9b5e-11e4-a7ee-526210d665b4\\_story.html](http://www.washingtonpost.com/national/health-science/scientists-human-activity-has-pushed-earth-beyond-four-of-nine-planetary-boundaries/2015/01/15/f52b61b6-9b5e-11e4-a7ee-526210d665b4_story.html)

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.theguardian.com/environment/2015/jan/27/should-not-surrender-climate-change-sea-level-rise-maldives>

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.theguardian.com/environment/2014/sep/29/earth-lost-50-wildlife-in-40-years-wwf>

<sup>7</sup> <http://www.theguardian.com/environment/2015/jan/15/sea-levels-rising-faster-than-previously-thought-says-new-study>

future, the children and grand children? What of our obligation to all creation without which we cannot exist? For the Council for World Mission (CWM) what does this mean for ethical, sustainable activities? How do we reframe intentionally what mission is? Challenging anthropocentric privatized redemption and embracing a life affirming commitment for all creation. Is there the need for a reengagement of theological thought and a commitment to reframing how the church engages in community?

Lets get back to uncle, his niece and that moment in time on a beach, on an atoll in the South Pacific. It is necessary to connect the stories in the new articles above with those two Pacific Islanders. For now they will remain nameless, yet there names you do know, they are you and I. They are representatives of the total connection of humanity, representatives of what we do to each other in our self-absorbed existence.

The loss of culture and the norms of existence in ones own space, as a nation, an ethnic group is for me unimaginable. The possibility raises more questions that can be answered? The denial of existence through conquest, war, and primitive versions of biological warfare e.g. Native Americans has already taken place. Some would argue that those events took place at a time of lesser sophistication.

Yet in the midst of our scientific, sophistication the same threat to existence is to be the lot of the people of Kiribati, Tuvalu, the Maldives and Bangladesh. A slow and creeping death to all that is normal has become humanities gift to those who have had the least role to play in our consuming of the very place in which we live. It would seem that any response to what is now a harsh reality can only mitigate and at best only prepare communities for a new existence away from what was home.

Here is the painful reality, uncle has to prepare himself and prepare his niece for a future that says, "I am a Kiribati Islander even when Kiribati no longer exists". What that will look like, feel like, I have no idea. What now? What now?... is the unanswered question. I do know that there is a need to strengthen campaigns and processes that will build awareness. The Pacific Conference of Churches and other

organizations are already engaged. CWM will begin a process aimed at helping communities in Tuvalu and Kiribati to focus on how they prepare for the future. This process will look in-depth at issues of identity dislocation, migration and the reframing of processes of biblical understanding as communities prepare for the future. Additionally facilitating capacity building that is hopefully adequate enough to contend with the impending sociological, cultural and other challenges.

And yet all that has been said above only mitigates, the pain of loss regarding a sense of self because land, which is essential to my identity, will no longer exist is immeasurable. For uncle and niece that walk on the beach was sometime ago but the impact of the moment lives on. The reality that home will soon no longer be home still exists, the sea is rising. The sea took my uncle's home, what now? What now? is a call to action and greater awareness on behalf of Tuvalu, Kiribati, Bangladesh and others. It is more importantly a call to action about the future. The sea is rising and we by our actions have put creation at risk what now?

Randolph Turner

Program Secretary – Justice and Witness

Council for World Mission