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Tar Sands Protest: 'When Ordinary People do Extraordinary Things'

by Eric Hansen

Crisis clarifies our deepest beliefs and affections, our spirituality. In turn, these moments of great clarity prompt ordinary people to do extraordinary things -- and historic changes happen.

Fifty-some years ago the Freedom Riders defied Klu Klux Klan church bombings and bus burnings to end racial segregation in the Jim Crow South.

Today, the crisis is catastrophic climate change -- carbon pollution that threatens all life on our planet -and a new generation of Freedom Riders is returning home from peaceful protests, and mass arrests, at the White House.

The sheer dignity and poise of the demonstrators is stunning as you view the photographs -- wave after wave -- day after day for two weeks -- more than twelve hundred people stepped forward, peacefully sat down in front of the White House fence and were arrested. This was the largest act of civil disobedience on this continent during this century.

They are asking President Obama to deny a permit for one of the oil industry's pet projects -- the Keystone XL Pipeline -- a project that noted NASA climate scientist James Hansen says is literally the fuse on North America's largest carbon bomb: the

massive Tar Sands oil extraction project in Alberta, Canada. The decision is Obama's alone, not Congress'.

The oil industry wants a pipeline from the Tar Sands to a deepwater port, enabling them to pump oil to the global market. Opposition from Canadian citizens has discouraged them from proposing a pipeline west from Alberta to the Pacific coast. Now, the oil developers want to run a pipeline through the Plains States to the Gulf Coast in Texas.

Local resistance is ferocious. Nebraska's governor and both U.S. Senators that represent that state have come out against the project. Bloomberg News put it like this: "The bottom line: A \$7 billion pipeline from Canada has angered Nebraska farmers and ranchers who value the state's precious water over oil."

Nebraska rancher Randy Thompson thanked the White House protesters. Part of his message said this: "It is time that the American people send a message to the big oil companies and their political allies, and that message is this: We are fed up with having our livelihoods and natural resources put at risk just for the sake of corporate profit . . ."

Thompson's message arrived at a protest that had its share of notables. Many well-

known figures were among those arrested at the White House -- scientist James Hansen, authors Bill McKibben and Naomi Klein, actor Danny Glover and actress Darryl Hannah.

Someone I know was among the demonstrators. Through her I know of the process she and her twelve hundred colleagues went through as they prepared for their day of mindfulness -- and their subsequent arrest -- at the White House.

Their processional began with travel to Washington D.C. There, reflective, meditative thought on their motives centered them. Training in the principles of nonviolent direct action prepared them for the challenges to come.

Milwaukee's Terry Wiggins lives in the Harambee neighborhood and aptly she was arrested on the designated Interfaith Day of the Tar Sands Protest, August 29.

She is a familiar figure in local efforts to build resilient communities, and transition from an oil-dependent economy to a liveable, just and sustainable future for all.

I know Wiggins as a hard-working member of the Interfaith Earth Network, a vibrant network of congregational environmental teams representing a diverse range of metropolitan area faith communities.

Last October we worked together to organize a "Celebration of the Power of Interfaith Earth Networking" event at the Urban Ecology

Center. Live music, a parade of giant eco-puppets and prayers for the Earth from different faith communities led into a high energy day of visiting. Show-and-tell displays illustrated projects congregations were working on for a more sustainable, more green future. The enthusiasm among the several hundred faith activists attending was contagious.

I came away from that day with a vivid sense of place of the Greater Milwaukee area -- a sense that this is a landscape not just of polluting power plants -- but where a broad spectrum of folks were working away at reducing our dependence on fossil fuel by solar energy projects and energy conservation -- and greening the land with urban vegetable gardens and other sustainability projects.

I believe the American people are a can-do people, and are ready to roll up their sleeves and get to work on climate change and sustainable energy. They just aren't getting much help from Washington.

Climate change can seem overwhelming -- but stopping the Keystone XL Pipeline is one concrete step we can do now, this fall. President Obama has until late November to make his decision.

Now is the time to speak up for common sense, conservation -- and no permit for the Keystone XL Pipeline.

Crisis prompts ordinary people to do extraordinary things.

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