# 2014 AAR Presidential Address: Interrupting Your Life: An Ethics for the Coming Storm

**Laurie Zoloth***



> The UN Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) issued a report today that says the effects of climate change are already occurring on all continents and across the oceans. The world, in many cases, is ill-prepared for risks from a changing climate. The report also concludes that there are opportunities to respond to such risks, though the risks will be difficult to manage with high levels of warming.
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> The UNIPCC issued a final report, saying human influence on the climate system is clear and growing, with impacts observed on all continents. If left unchecked, climate change will increase the likelihood of severe, pervasive and irreversible impacts for people and ecosystems. The gathering risks of climate change are so profound that they could stall or even reverse generations of progress against poverty and hunger if greenhouse gas emissions continue at a runaway pace. Failure to reduce emission, the groups of scientists and other experts found, could threaten everyone. Society faces food shortages, refugee crises, the flooding of major cities and entire island nations, the mass extinction of plants and animals and a climate so drastically altered it might become dangerous for people to work or play outside.
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> —*New York Times*, International Edition, November 3, 2014

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## THE LAST PLACE

WE ARE LIVING in the Last Place. There is no other world for us, no second chance. This one world is so beautiful, with the sweet green willows shushing in the August breeze, and the halting, diamond turns of water from small plastic sprinklers, the ordinary grace of a swerve of bright white birds and the spun net of high, floating clouds. The blue–green weed called miner's lettuce, abundant in the sidewalks of the city, the first snow on the black iron railings, the wet tear and tear of it, and the shocking shimmer: the yellow of oak in October. The trailing guitar from a block away, the way that wood rubs dark gold and soft from use, the crack of a hammer, clear and high, the sway of each of us on the train, in wet wool coats, the bodies of others in the soft black coats, elbows, the downward glancing grin, the way the old man down the alley whistles a song he learned as a boy. *Seedtime and harvest time, cold and heat, summer and winter, day and night, always and again* (Genesis 8:22).

We have covered the earth, so we can drive the buses and the cars, made the last place we have a good place for driving around, for working. We need to work, and so much of the work is good. We have made the Last Place with wide white streets. And here are all the usual things we know: this is a world so clean and easy for people with wealth, so hard and dirty for the poor; that the seas are polluted with the nitrogen we use to fertilize the fields; the forests are chopped for paper; species are blinkering out; we know this. We sound the depths, we dig up what is left of life crushed to carbon beneath us, and we burn it: to make important things, really—hospital intensive care units, high school libraries, synthetically derived insulin, ambulances and steel beams for the new clinic. But we burn it for nothing, too, really, for vanity and emptiness, and the tracing of that smoke lies over us now, invisible, warming the oceans, then the air, then all of the Last Place. Nothing about the usual things we know, the essential, terrible, injustice of it all, has stopped the burning. In fact, in 2014, we loaded up the air with more carbon than ever. We have been told clearly that this burning is deadly, and it has not made us change a thing. Our lives continue, seamlessly, lucky.

But we have gotten that IPCC warning letter, and for scholars of religion, we hear this as a prophecy: A storm is coming, it is already on our own horizon; it has been coming for years. The first mention of the fact that human beings might be changing the "nature of the air," the term for "weather" in Hebrew, came in 1957, written exactly at the place in which the American Academy of Religion had gathered for our 2014 annual meeting, during which I delivered this address. There in San Diego,

Professor Roger Revelle, founder of the University of California San Diego and of the Scripps Institute of Oceanography, first published his data. Now it is clear, he was prescient. Let me first say it in the words of the large and serious consensus body of the scientists who have been researching the issue for the last thirty years, the IPCC, whose chairman came to speak to our AAR gathering in 2014: "Human influence on the climate system is unequivocal. Greenhouse gases are at the highest level in human history. The changes are unprecedented and will cause long-lasting changes in all components of the climate system, increasing severe, pervasive, and irreversible impacts for people and ecosystems" (IPCC 2013).

Let me say it plainly in this address: Everything we study takes place in a world in which the climate has been essentially stable and predictable for ten thousand years. Every text written, every idea about faith, every song sung or harvest planted has been created in this Last Place. Because of the amount of greenhouse gases burned and extracted, humans have already changed the world for the next thousand years. Now at stake is only how very bad it will be. This means that the global temperature has already risen 0.8 degrees Celsius, and the already extracted energy (oil and gas), if burned, as is likely, may raise the global temperature to close to three degrees (Alley 2015). After the 2014 AAR, no one hearing or reading my address can say: *I did not know.* And that was my goal in undertaking this research, and my goal as a president of the world's largest organization of scholars of religion, and one of America's largest scholarly organizations. As an American bioethicist, I wanted us to face the most important issue in bioethics and the central moral imperative of our time. Climate change, and the way that it threatens the lives of the most vulnerable, ought to be a critical focus of scholarship, thought, speech, and action in our field. I want us, the scholars of the AAR, to mark this time, this day, this moment and say: Here we stopped, and here we started.

But—what would make you halt? What would stop your busy life? What would interrupt you?

## BEING INTERRUPTED

What do I mean by "interruption?" I begin in an ordinary definitional way. The concept of interruption signifies both "betweenness" (inter) and brokenness (rupture). To interrupt is, according to the *New American Dictionary,* "to stop the continuous progress of action; to stop (someone speaking) by saying or doing something or, to break the continuity of a line, or to obstruct (something, especially block a view)."

To be a being is to be a being living in the illusion of a life that is a continuous, busy process. We are committed to continuity, to historicity, to plans and prospects, to the order of things, their repetitions, patterns, and sequences. We expect, rather touchingly, that we live in a consistent, progressive narrative, and the interruption of being is a break in the story that we want to resume—we have made promises, we have bought tickets, we have a book contract, we are on the way to salvation, we need quiet for our mindfulness and not that noisy kid, or that cry in the dark.

To some extent, we resent interruption because of this narrative ideal. We have an important product to produce, we tell ourselves, and even if the product is some unit of reflection or some ephemeral conference paper, to be interrupted is to be taken, snatched from our work to some other call, some other's need. To be interrupted is to be broken-in-to. It is to have one's view blocked by something one does not want to see—say the beggar, say the warming air, the acidifying ocean—to have one's talk stopped, the speech act, the professing, a declaration in your own voice, your own needs, your own story, stopped: a disagreement, perhaps, or someone calling out for help, a question, a story orthogonal to your own.

But if we are to understand the character of our being as temporal and located, and if we are to create a theory that can ground a decent response to the question of how we ought to live, how we ought to live in a world that is burning, it cannot be based on this idea of the pristine journey, or the next new thing. The arc of the universe bends toward justice, we learn from Martin Luther King, but it is not a smooth resolve: it is an unbroken line, and our pulling makes cracks and fissures—we live in the spaces between the rupture, and if we are to do anything as scholars, it is that we work to repair that arc.

The world as we know it is not flat, yet it is altogether flattened into a series of ceaseless falsities that present as actual challenges, and, in their quotidian necessity, make us despair. It is a world of totality (to take a term from the title of Emmanuel Levinas's *Totality and Infinity*), and we are told and we tell ourselves a story of seamless desire, each little event, each little trial, each little flattery presenting as if we were the only one in the room with our particular victory just ahead. Here is what it means to be modern: we believe that everything can be under control, ordered in advance, the costs and the benefits weighed up. But into our lives, and utterly out of our control or our will, comes the complete otherness of interruption. Is it a surprise that we understand interruption as a problem, the distraction of being within a world of necessity, and not, for example, as we would if we were medieval scholars—as the voice of God? Is it surprising we do not see the necessary order or disorder? The chaos of the utter otherness of being—all that is not-self coming knocking at

the door; all that is not-work come calling, just when you are writing your big idea.

For what are we interrupted? There are the thousand small serious interruptions; there are the questions of students, and their needs; there is the constant interruption of cleaning and clearing, which goes by the name of "administration" in institutions; there are the petty calls of email, the cascade of media noise, the sense of news constantly on a crawl beneath the actual work of our lives. There are bodies that need ordinal tending: children, the old, everyone who needs us to look at the drawing, to attend to the wound, to lift them up in our arms, just *now*.

For what are we interrupted? For the grandest dramas and greatest joys of human life. For the befallenness of illness, the birth of children, for true love, for desperate need, and, of course, for death itself. This is the deep praxis of interruption, and if you are a moral being, you will have done well to be a being who has broken off, who has stopped. This is so vividly true about our lives that is obvious, but unseen, "something that we know when no one asks us, but no longer know when we are supposed to give an account of it is something we need to *remind* ourselves of," as Ludwig Wittgenstein (1973: 89) noted in describing the task of philosophy.

## INTERRUPTION AS THEOLOGY

Here is what a theologian might say: We are interrupted by the insistent call of God, and when we respond rightly, it is prayer, it is action for the widow and the orphan, it is standing and saying—*hineni,* I am here. Yet, it is hard to respond rightly, and from this we flee in terror, not, as moderns, to be sure, into fish, or Tarshish, or deserts, but into work, meetings, parking applications, email, Netflix, grant applications. In my field, bioethicists seek out ever more unlikely cases or misguided desires. We consider obscure fears, cool movies, read the *New Yorker* about improbable technologies—all the places we go when we are in flight. We are in flight and the world is tiny, distant, far away. Here is the image I mean: it is George Bush, staring at Katrina, that first great climate disaster, from his airplane window, and we know it, because it is our own gaze. We are in flight, even people who know better, people who actually read the Prophets; we are off to the metaphorical caves. Who wants this interruption, this reminder, this challenge, this *politics*?

A theology of interruption demands that we attend to the interruption in a different way, which is of course to say, to act as if the interruption were the Real, and the other stuff of our lives the Distraction. How to live such a theological ethics—attention to the call of the other, and alert,

always, to the call of God, without seeming like a madwoman or a religious fanatic? What would such a life look like?

For a Jew, of course, there is Shabbat, made ever more absolute a stop in time because of the constancy of the machines that we admire and pet and constantly speak into. In that interruption, we turn only to one another, to Torah, to the grammar of prayer. We turn to actual faces, speak to actual friends, see their eyes and hands. This is perhaps too romanticized a version, for we also eat and complain, but it is not a trivial act, in modernity, to make a Shabbat, as a sign, to honor by the gesture and the interruption. And for any reader of Hebrew Scripture, there is the commanded interruption of the *Shmita* year—the sabbatical year, the year of release, when every six years all agricultural work stops, the fields are left fallow, and every living creature, animal, and person can eat from the field and the vineyard and the wide open world, when the boundaries of ownership and possession are broken so that the poor can take what they need, when all debts are released. It is a practice that is not metaphysical, but describes an actual theo-political economy—in force the year of the meeting when this address was written, 5775 in the Jewish calendar, a Sabbatical year, practiced and observed in Israel and throughout the Jewish community.

These acts of praxis, the acts of attention within lived communities of faith, these interruptions, are signifiers that the human person, each of us, a person within a people, living in actual places and standing next to actual others, is willing to act—even partially, even briefly. You can act if you hear something, someone, as if something that is not sold, not portrayed quantitatively, measured, displayed, or advertised, actually matters to being. This something heard is a part of one's self. It is not the only possibility for how to hear, but religions structure the practice of interruption, which is a moment of justice, or beauty, or compassion, or grace, in such an unjust world. And thus, to interrupt your life is a theological claim.

Let me argue that the text of many Scriptures, surely Hebrew Scripture, the New Testament, and the Qur'an, is written as a sort of an argument, with in-between narratives and a chance to answer back. There are breaks, discontinuations, lacunae, ruptures of people speaking back, leaving room for centuries of *responsa,* commentary, rupture, public reception and fierce public fights, and of course academic scholarship. As scriptural readers, we have the texts, in which in narrative after narrative the given, stable, hierarchies of power, the truth claim, the natural order of the empirical world, the dark and steady pull of cultural customs, even the sequence of narrative, is interrupted by God. Let me turn to some examples of the story, interrupted. There are many in the Torah which I

ask you to consider: first the Great Flood texts, then the pivotal story of Abraham—who interrupts, according to the medieval commentator Rashi, a conversation with God to attend to the three strangers who show up, hungry, at his tent—and of course, the story of the Daughters of Zelephophad, women who interrupt the biblical narrative of the allocation of property to insist on their inheritance.

## TEXTS OF INTERRUPTION

For the Rabbis of the Talmud, the question of interruption is one of fascinated concern: in repeated, different, and prolonged discussions, the rabbis debate when interruption is permitted: on the Sabbath, on public reading of Torah, on a Nazirite vow, or in study, work, or prayer. Interruption is, of course, the very method of teaching and learning and ethical decision-making in Jewish thought, and one interrupts with story on story on story, each disagreement challenging the half-finished sentence of the previous argument. Perhaps a life lived in the midst of interruption is exactly the point of such a theological discourse.

Consider the scene of the great interruption in rabbinic literature: One day, the house of study was suddenly opened to all. To everyone: the poor, the ugly, the uncertain, a great interruption of the hierarchy of learning that was the very center of rabbinic Jewish life after the Roman destruction of the Second Temple:

> Brachot 28a
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> A Tanna taught: On that day the doorkeeper was removed and permission was given to the disciples to enter. For Rabban Gamaliel had issued a proclamation [saying]. No disciple whose character does not correspond to his exterior may enter the Beth ha-Midrash. On that day many stools were added. R. Johanan said: There is a difference of opinion on this matter between Abba Joseph b. Dosethai and the Rabbis: one [authority] says that four hundred stools were added, and the other says seven hundred. Rabban Gamaliel became alarmed and said: Perhaps, God forbid, I withheld Torah from Israel! . . .
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> A Tanna taught: Eduyyoth was formulated on that day—and wherever the expression "on that day" is used, it refers to *that* day—and there was no halacha about which any doubt existed in the Beth ha-Midrash which was not fully elucidated. . . . On that day Judah, an Ammonite proselyte, came before them in the Beth ha-Midrash. He said to them: Am I permitted to enter the assembly?

> R. Joshua said to him: You are permitted to enter the congregation. Said Rabban Gamaliel to him: Is it not already laid down: "Ammonite or Moabite shall not enter into the assembly of the Lord?" R. Joshua replied to him: Do Ammon and Moab still reside in their original homes? Sennacherib, King of Assyria long ago went up and mixed up all the nations, as it says, "I have removed the bounds of the peoples and have robbed their treasures and have brought down as one mighty their inhabitants." . . . Said Rabban Gamaliel to him: But has it not been said: "But afterward I will bring back the captivity of the children of Ammon, says the Lord," so that they have already returned? To which R. Joshua replied: And has it not been said, "And I will turn the captivity of My people Israel," and they have not yet returned? Forthwith they permitted him to enter the congregation. Rabban Gamaliel thereupon said: This being the case, I will go and apologize to R. Joshua. When he reached his house he saw that the walls were black. He said to him: From the walls of your house it is apparent that you are a charcoal-burner. He replied: Alas for the generation of which you are the leader, seeing that you know nothing of the troubles of the scholars, their struggles to support and sustain themselves! He said to him: I apologize. Forgive me.

What is this text teaching us teachers?

Here is a lesson about the enormous interruption. On one day, the rules of the language game and the admission standards of the rabbinic study hall were upended. "On that day," the halls of the academy were opened to everyone—so many came—was it four hundred or seven hundred? Despite the shocked response of Rabbi Gamaliel, the wealthy putative leader, an entire tractate of the Talmud is created that day, and every question of the law was answered with certainty—the closest thing to a miraculous event for Jews. Even the terms of "race" are undone—an Ammonite can enter the hall of study, for colonialization has interrupted fixed biological lineage, insists this text. Gamaliel goes to ask for forgiveness, for he has not fully understood the depths of these changes and sees the terrible poverty of his colleague, Rabbi Joshua, who works at that most desperate of jobs—burning wood into carbon, making charcoal—and the story ends with the critical claim about study itself, that teachers must understand the lives of the poor, and interrupt their professing with these facts: look at the blackened walls of the houses of the poor, learn from the poorest.

The passion for interruption on behalf of the poor continues in later medieval texts, in which prayer can be interrupted for a claim of injustice. In this ninth-century text of interruption, the leadership of the Ashkenazi community, deep within the long exile in Western Europe, hears a case, and decides the matter. But the man, or the woman, who is the subject of

the decision is unhappy, and she is determined, even when no one in power will listen to her. So she can take her claim to the synagogue and interrupt the prayer to demand: *listen to me*.

This is a remarkable moment in Jewish law, a method by which a judgment can be challenged by an interruption in a holy place, of a holy act. What is suggested is an astonishing moral gesture, especially given the elaborate rabbinic limits on interruption of the communal speech act of prayer. But clearly, there is tension between prayer and the needs of others. In the medieval text, it is suggested that the act of justice, the interruption of justice is also a part of the service. It is a radical claim—but it is a clear echo of the day of the great interruption: attend to the situation of the poor, see her.

## ACTS OF INTERRUPTION

What do narratives and practices tell us about how to be good, about the worth of our lives in a burning time? Why do the rabbis worry about interruption and its protection? Why do I say: *you must interrupt your life?*

To be interrupted is to acknowledge the power of the other over your being, to see the interrupting, messy, needy other as entitled to your full attention. But because we do not have a clear account of how one ought to live, to live as a good person at a time of climate chaos, and because full attention is so hard, we struggle to defend what looks like a series of affections or hobbies—we recycle, we bike. Is there a way to articulate a foundational theory behind actions of this sort?

To argue for the need for interruption is to advocate for a moral chronology. We are beings who not only live in particular locations; we live within a time that we order and sort, another sort of accountancy. How we order time, how we understand ourselves as having a past that leads to a present that promises a future, is always an interpretive moral choice, albeit one that seems to us utterly invisible, given. The clearest advocate for this recognition is Walter Benjamin, who alerts us to how we see time, how we experience it as "empty space" along which we endlessly travel, which aligns us with a sort of secular passivity.

Progress, economic growth, more units of things, the storm catches up our desires and our stuff. Benjamin sees that empty time exists "as an homogeneous continuum of moments which have no goal and finally no subject. . . . This sort of time has to be arrested; the thinking that it enables, indeed, necessitates, has to be interrupted."

How unlike the radical breaks of religious texts—the sun that stops in the center of the sky, the Prophets who unmake history and its narrative

of subjugation. How unlike the Jewish view of time, Benjamin argues, where "every second was the strait gate through which the Messiah entered." Empty time colludes with institutions that say "it has always been like this; this is impossible to change." It creates people who only yearn for things to stay precisely like they have always been. Yet we know that sustaining a world of endless, repeated injustice, an always unthinking movement ahead, is problematic. Argues Benjamin, uninterrupted time "expels any substantive expectation and thus engenders that fatalism that eats at the souls of modern women and men."

That fatalism, and the acceptance. But time can be interrupted at any point by redemption—an exodus can begin, slavery end, a bush can burn, a Messiah can be revealed at the gates of the city, hanging about with the lepers. This is not only a Jewish assertion. Our late AAR President, Otto Maduro, argued it from the very podium where I delivered this address. Scripture calls us to live as if at any moment, we could be surprised, awed, ready to rise to action and to grace, ready to welcome the Messiah, ready to appear to one another, in public, because our interruption could alter what we have come to think of as "the course" of history. Moral chronicity is an account of interruption as cessation, and redirection, and of ourselves as creatures with pasts, presents, futures, and as moral agents with the capacity to be ready.

The premise then, is larger than acting well as an individual, for I am responsible for my neighbors' pledge, reminds Levinas in "The Pact"—responsible for her responsibility. We act in this manner not out of fear of the future, although any rational person should at this point be quite sobered by the scientific accounts. The premise is that interruption of time, in the sense that Benjamin meant, leads to the creation of a sort of person with the virtues to which we aspire, but also to an argument that might convince others. And it is that sort of person that is capable of being a moral citizen.

The storm is coming and we are not a discipline of engineers. All we have is words, and the capacity to think, as Hannah Arendt insists. We must think quite clearly now, about our situation. To "do," to perform "ethics," is to think about how to be good. All of the complex work we do, all the research, is to know the story of how people struggled, spoke, wrote, and heard of the question, how are we, how am I, to live a good life? Now, how ought I to live when the world is burning?

How to reclaim this sort of thinking from stupid trivialities, or caricature? One way might be to avoid the easy tropes: both the rainbow promises and the apocalyptic threats. And another might be to consider the problem of evil, and how we have so thin a modern theory of evil, and this leaves us uncertain.

But the one direction, I want to suggest is to think about interruption as an ethical choice: based in the actualities of our human lives, lives in this time, when, always, there is the knock at the door, and despite all our fears, to be good is to open that door and welcome the stranger. Thinking about interruption, the stopping, the hearing, leads to thinking about hospitality, the act of speech and welcome. Because climate change transforms the world, there will be exile, and there will be strangers on the move. This is vividly true now, when thousands crowd the roads. We must think about welcome, and we must stop, get up, and make the move to answer, for we are the only ones left, and this our home is the Last Place for the traveler. So: a theology of interruption as an ethics for the coming storm; this is the theological basis for the structure of response—but now what do I do?

## THREE WAYS WE INTERRUPT: AS MORAL INDIVIDUALS, AS CITIZENS, AND AS SCHOLARS

First, we must think and then act as individuals. It will not be enough, and when we act as individuals, with our little ordinal choices, it will feel futile against the scale of icebergs and thousand-year floods. It is true that the scale of our individual action, even if every one of us refuses meat, abandons our car, insulates and light bulbs and recycles, will not be enough. But how are we to live unless we stop, one by one, and stand like objects of resistance, like interruptions, in the flow of the river of history, breaking the rushing lines, and disrupt? If I do not, who do I imagine will?

There are many reasons to act beyond the calculation of benefit or payoff, of course. We are shaped by our acts, our bodies, our homes, our organizations, and one reason we act is to create a life worth living, a life of meaning and courage. This act of stopping will shape me, and the act of unthinking consumption—that will shape me too. I am a Californian, and I grew up in a curl of the Pacific coast, a cove called La Costa, which means "the home," where the sea has risen and the storms are newly terrible, and the rocks are now bleached acid white. Each time I act, I act for my home and this is true for each one of us.

What I do, how I live, is a moral act: every single gesture. And while the gestures seem innocent, they are cumulative and they set in motion a change of action that, given the structures of exchange, is part of the systemic order of the world. And the world is so shaped, in the production and exchange and consumption of the goods, that the wealthiest have garnered the vast majority of wealth, burning the vast majority of carbon at the expense of the lives and the health of the poor. And we are the sort of

creatures with a plight into which we are each born, which is that we cannot not act. There is no "doing nothing," for the doing of nothing is a something, a moral act, one in which you support the existing constructs of carbon use and the policies of the energy companies, and it looks for all the world like you are then acting as if you have a duty to them, one that you enact every time you get into the car.

Second, we must think and then we must speak as citizens. For Hannah Arendt, the public speech—the speech to one another that disturbs and breaks into the power of totality, the unthinking acceptance of the loss of agency—is both political and ontological. It is the act of civil disobedience that creates the institutions of a larger democracy. Consent, freedom, all of this, is contingent on the fact that we *could* protest, we could enter the event of the polis, and we could speak to stop it. The reverse is of course also the case. If we do not speak, if we do not stop, then we partake of what is being Said, we sustain the givenness of this order, an order so convenient for us, so terrible for too many, terrible one by one in too many places, child by child. Can you not hear them at your door?

We must act. It will not be enough. But let me expand this idea of civil interruption, for we must act as citizens in addition to acting as individuals. I now turn to a distinction made by Arendt in her consideration of civil disobedience. Individual acts, she argues—Socrates' refusals and Thoreau's protest—while infinitely appealing, are ultimately subjective. Thoreau himself is happy with his conscience being clear and his one day in jail, when he refuses to pay taxes to a state that allows slavery and war. This is noble, but personal (and his buddies bail him out and quietly pay the tax). Thoreau writes that "we come into this world, not chiefly to make it a good place to live in, but to live in it be it good or bad." And Arendt understands the limits of his personal choice theory this way: "Indeed, this is how we all come into the world, lucky if the world and the part of it we arrive in is a good place at the time of our arrival, or at least."

But what if it is a place where the wrongs committed are of such a nature that it requires you to be an agent of injustice to one another, she asks. "For if this is the case, then I say, break the law."

This idea, this tension between being a good person and being a good citizen, between morality and politics, is as old as the idea of the state, Arendt notes; as old as the city in which, as Socrates teaches, one must avoid evil "because you would then have to live together with the wrongdoer." The thinking person—the philosopher, the critical, alive-to-others person—must think not only of the judgment of others but also of the interior integrity of the self. But there is a problem with this strategy, and it is why if we only each recycle our cups and bike to work, we are not

finished with our duties in this burning time. Ultimately, she argues, individual acts remain subjective and self-interested, for they have as a justification only individual and private directions, which can look strangely like opinions or choices in the marketplace, hard to know which is more justified. And such personal acts are evoked only in times of emergency, such times when, as in her time, the "good person" emerged from anywhere, (a few) to oppose fascism with their conscience, lives, bodies.

Arendt wants more that even this: she wants more than the individual interruption, she wants public action. She wants civil disobedience, meaning organization. It is when "minorities band together, make a decision and take a stand" that the state can be changed. And here, in her beloved America, in the decades of the 1770s, the 1860s, and the 1960s about which she was writing, when "the defiance of established authority . . . can be the outstanding event," when persons act as citizens in the "name of and for a group . . . on the ground of basic dissent, not as individuals."

To be a citizen, to actually change things in a democracy, is to seize the deadly serious duty of continuing participation in "all matters of public interest." This participation, this voice, this interruption of the business taking place in the public square: this is all that free people have. But we must act as if participation matters, beyond a noble loneliness, and that requires a great deal from us, especially if we are the sort of citizens that are not used to thinking in this way, the sort of scholars who are worried about being political, who are willing to forego some comforts, to be sure, but not entirely sure we want to risk what is so dear to us, our work, our profession, our professing, to do well, *politics*?

Third we must think and then teach as scholars of religion. For does not the question of the other, the one has not arrived in a lucky place, emerge from our own scholarship? Is not that the point of knowing that the stranger, widow, and orphan are at the door, that the mendicant needs alms, that the land needs a year of release? We must live as if ready, say the texts we teach, we must live as if we were chosen to uphold the Law, to be the persons who come in love, who ask even about the city of Sodom. Who will do this, if not the teachers that we are? Letting the danger, the power, and the endless mercy of religion be excellently told is the task of the scholar of religion. To teach religion excellently is to engage in "the public examination of things," the task of the scholar since Socrates spoke truth to his Academy, notes Arendt, "which doubtless spread uncertainty about established customs and beliefs." And our teaching, if it is actually *parrhesia*, should raise the questions that will doubtless interrupt the usual way of things, which in our Academy would mean disruption of the institutions that govern us in the absence of a

vivid, democratic, civil participation: the *ratio* and the *episteme* of the marketplace, a marketplace devoted to continuous expansion, whatever the cost.

Finally, we have a duty as scholars that emerges from the blunt fact that in scriptural texts we think important, the point is made over and over again: your moral activities can affect the rain, the harvest, and the health of everything you love. The link between moral choices and material outcomes is made continually, and it is received and studied toward normative action. The texts suggest the interruption of desire, of consumption, and of acquisition. They link that interruption to the order of the natural world, of harvest time and planting. Our scholarly behavior is a part of this, for unless we see the world of the charcoal burner, our work will be lacking.

## WHAT CAN I DO TO INTERRUPT YOUR LIFE?

What can I do to interrupt your life? To pull you over and make you attend to this crisis? Consider this scene: lunch with friendly fellow scholars, who happily eat all around me, and all agree that climate change is coming, that it will be terrible, and that is it foolish to deny this. Yet no one is ready to change their lives, to give up meat on their plate, or to abandon the car for a bike, to change habits of air travel to conferences that we zip in and out of on jet planes. Around us the world changes, but it can seem so far away from this lunch, this choice.

There is nothing I can say that anyone who reads the daily news does not already know, except this: *We must be interrupted; we must stop*. To make the future possible, we need to stop what we are doing, what we are making, what we are consuming, what we think we need, what makes us comfortable. We need to interrupt our work—even our good work—to attend to the urgency of this question. For it is, as yet, only a question, one that needs a coherent answer, an answer we have not yet seen. Is our society unable to stop careening toward the deep trouble of the coming storm because we have not fully attended, because we cannot stop?

We are quite sobered by the scientific accounts. Listen to the language of the latest IPCC (2013) report: "The mass die-offs of forests, including those in the American West, the melting of land ice around the world, an accelerating rise of the seas that is leading to increased coastal flooding, and heat waves that have devastated crops and killed tens of thousands of people: all happening already, not a generation from now, but now."

The scenes of flooding are familiar if you live in the wake of Hurricane Sandy or the hurricane that wiped out thousands in the Philippine Islands. But they are familiar and resonate to scholars of

religions as well. We know the language of flood. So let me turn to the texts of flood.

## Genesis 6:5

The text begins as if in the middle of the story, in despair, the thoughts "of the heart" of a watching God:

> And·he saw that all the very imaginations-of the heart of humans are nothing but evil, every single day. So much evil by the humans, the·earth and·by every shape of being. . . . And·He regretted that he-made the·human in·the·earthhumans and·He-grieved to the very heart-of·Him. And·He-said I-shall-obliterate the·human whom I-created from·off the faces-of the·ground. From·human to beasts to every moving-animal and·to the flyer-of the·heavens that flies. I regret that I made them.

The very earth, His Last Place, "she is ruined," says He-who-regrets, in the text. "She is ruined by men." It is done in front of His face, *m' panim*, violently.

> And, look, I, even I, will bring a flood of waters upon the earth, to destroy every living, breathing being from under heaven. Every thing in the earth shall die.

Let me continue in the Qur'an. In the Qur'an, the account of the flood is different—there is a chance, a warning, an invitation to truth:

> Surah 71: 1–3: We sent Noah to his people, and said to him, "Warn thou thy people 'ere there come on them an afflictive punishment." He said, "O my people, indeed I am to you a clear warner, worship Allah, fear Him and obey me."

It is not only Abrahamic texts that tell a story of a vast flood that destroys some great wickedness or chaos, but in Gilgamesh; in Plato, in the Theology of Bibliotea; in the Irish story of the Cessair; in the Finnish Kavevala; in the Kwaya, Mbuti, Maasai, and Yoruba narratives. In India, the flood is told; in China, it is called Gun Yo; in Malaysia, the Celav; for the Tai, Khun Borom. There is a great flood told by the Hopi, the Mayan, the Incas; in Chile, it is Trentren Vilu, in Peru, a flood and a rainbow and the waters running out in the huge waterfalls of Bogota.

Let me be frank: in the tradition of the Hebrew Bible, it is not a happy or redemptive tale. And after the catastrophe, the narrative ends exactly

as it began: God watching, the words *b'Levo* in his heart. "I will not kill the living beings as I did."

We are left with the faintest of hope, a rainbow that vanishes, that barely lasts until we turn, a few lines later, to the prophet Noah naked, drunk, and silent, and a world which will continue endlessly, ceaselessly, and without interruption, wrapped in its own spiral.

> Until all-of days-of the·earth, seed and·harvest and·cold and·warmth and·summer and·winter and·day and·night no, they-shall not-cease, *lo shabbato.*

And this world, full of tempted, broken people, where not even childhood is innocent, is the one in which we live. It is not Eden, we are told, and we who believe in science believe in this, that carbon thrown into the cycle of summer and winter will cause a spiral in predictable unceasing physical realities of this place.

The word "will not cease" in Hebrew is "*lo shabbato*," "Shabbat," meaning to actively stop, as opposed to resting. *Shabbas* actively ceases the marketplace exchanges and all the frenetic, mechanical action of the world, all the digital zinging, all the traveling, all the writing, all the finishing of things into other things. One interrupts the natural order, the cease-less cycle—to cease, to make an in-between—*rupting* or breaking the totalizing cycle of events. Break the six-day week, and make a Shabbat, an event that is exactly not in the natural order, the people are commanded from Sinai. And every six years, break the bonds to the field and the seed time and harvest time and make a stop for justice, make a Sabbatical Year.

This is a task of humans, and it is a moral choice, this active *shabbato.* And we humans, we need to stop; we can make an argument to stop and start, to understand the link from behavior to the turning world. But it will take the sort of argument that is made in the many, many flood stories: there is a moment, just before the flood, when it could be otherwise. Listen to the prophets' warning, say the texts, allow even a corner of goodness to survive and the world could be otherwise than destroyed. We could stop here, attentive, thinking.

## WHAT TIME IS IT?

Let me say a word about why what I am asking is so hard. To be present in your place: *hineni,* to God's asking "Where are you?" is not only the event of attendance. We understand—how could we not, with our Google maps and our PDAs—where we are, we feel like we can own

and possess place and territory, but we are uncertain *where we are* in time, "when" it is that we exist. We do not have the time, sorry. We do not have time, we cannot grasp it. And so we think we have, if not forever, later.

It is this essential miscalculation that is the point. As Ban Ki-moon noted on November 2, 2014: "Science has spoken. There is no ambiguity about the message. Leaders must act. Time is not our side."

We think that the great interruption of climate chaos is an event of the far future and look, we are busy, we are worried about ISIS and Ebola and tenure committees and the poor in our own cities and actually, tenure committees. We think that, while we need to play the long game—after all, what is religion if not the long game?—we can think about the issue some other time. And here is a fundamental problem. For the climate has already changed, as the UNIPCC has told us. This information interrupted: Time is not on own side.

> The report contained the group's most explicit warning yet about the food supply, saying that climate change has already become a small drag on overall global production . . . the world's food supply had shown signs of instability . . . factors like high food prices and intensified weather conditions would most likely leave poor people worse off. In fact, the report said, that has already happened to a degree. (Gillis 2014)

Why can this occur in our faces, this hunger, and yet we do not stop, we who worry about missing lunch for this talk? Why, knowing everything, having proof-texts and data, do I still act without real urgency?

There is something more. There is something else that makes it easy to flee from our duty as we confront climate chaos. We find it impossible, as moderns who live in the always-present, to imagine our own death. Our version of climate denial is about the great flight from our denial of our death; that is the real denial. Only a distortion this central to the event of our being can *possibly* explain why rational scholars, rational political leaders, even rational capitalists can act as we act, as if the good American life will be stable. As if we did not have to stop in our tracks. Why is our denial of death a particular problem in this catastrophe?

A few months ago, speaking to my son about the terrible paradox of evil people flourishing, the rewards for mendacity, for greed, for simple carelessness, he reminded me that the essential premise of one rabbinic argument is that evil people have no share in *olam haba*, the afterlife, or "the world that will come," and I told him that I this argument was entirely unconvincing, overly pious. But in fact my doubts about *olam haba,* my modern's lack of simple faith in a cosmic system of reward and

punishment, is a symptom of a far larger issue. The modern inability to imagine an afterlife, in the comforting way of earlier periods, is linked to our inability to imagine a life after us—any sort of world to come. If we cannot confront the facticity of our own death, and we cannot then imagine a time in which we will not be here, in our present, with our stuff and our loves, our temperature control, our airline travel, our oceans nicely in their place, then we cannot possibly imagine the world that our grandchildren will face. But we must imagine it, for if not, they will face it alone, stunned by the thought that we, if we had acted as if we were mortal moral agents, could have made it better.

The world, the coming one, is a place we can already see if we look, but only if we look at the lives of the most marginalized, the border dwellers, the women on the ridges of the sand in Bangladesh, the Chinese herders in the great dust storm, the men who burn charcoal to sell. But, we cannot see them if the world is full of, well, me, and my immortal, continuing happiness. So we flee, we are fleeing, we are trying to outrun the coming storm.

But, colleagues, we do not have to run. We can stand, in our place, in this place, and in our research, our teaching, and our academic citizenship, we can claim our power. Let me explain. Religions, we who excellently study them, have many liabilities and in too many ways have made some things worse, but we might agree that religions have at least four powerful capacities.

First, religions confront the enormous terror of each as we face death, with narratives that allow us to imagine our good life as a part of a larger story, in which we are mortal, broken, old, and yet beloved.

Second, religions allow ordinary people to believe in their own power to change unjust situations, despite all odds and everything arrayed against them. This idea, of the beauty and crystalline brilliance of action, of the value of compassion and repentance and of the power of humility, is so unlike the tropes of our American culture, and of our academic culture as well, that is hard to even teach. But it is a vivid truth of our texts and our traditions. There is power here, dangerous and vivid. It is the power to see the most ordinary, the smallest, the most degraded one, the remnant, the lost, the desperate hungry stranger, as your sister who is next to you at Sinai, as the center of the teeming world. Religious language fights for values beyond the marketplace exchange; it holds the last, lost tongue of justice.

Third, religious traditions allow for prophecy. To imagine the future, to call for repentance, to see a day coming that can be imagined, changed, redeemed, all of this is possible: the road to the impossible is open. Calling and wild, or rational with charts and power points, come now the

activists and the scientists, comes the guy in the lab coat, comes the farmer: if you teach religious studies, you will know them as prophets, and within the traditions that attend to dreamers, they can be heard.

What time is it?

Let that question interrupt you. They are saying: now, the time is right now.

Fourth, religious are without borders. Just as medicine can be *sans frontières*, religions allow us to consider ourselves to be global members of covenants far deeper and far broader than national boundaries. Religious are often strongest in the places where the climate is worst—the global south, where the land lies close to the sea, and where clean water is a day's walk away. Understanding the borderless nature of the problem is the first step toward solidarity.

As scholars of religion, we understand that we may see the words of desperate warning burned or discarded by the powerful who deny a link between moral behavior and the actual word. We know what it is to walk in Nineveh and despair of change, or to be the smartest outsider in the King's Court, the ones who are taught to speak Chaldean, or science, or politics, to be the interpreter of the terrifying visions of the future. We know what it is to speak against the marketplace and the soldier's order. As scholars who read the texts that show how a human life might be lived in view of God, we are used to disbelief and used to the idea that religion is trivial or naïve, or simply unrealistic.

All we have is words—we have no armies, only students and colleagues. All we can do is teach—to act as moral agents, to live out our work. We make a living by struggling to understand the truth of the world, speaking *parrhesia*. And here it is important to note that we like hard inquiry, and we believe in skepticism—but we do not believe in ignorance and we do not support the denial of data. We are teachers.

We live in a time, we teach at a time, when religions are in center stage of history, have marched into the center stage and, in the center of the stage, enact and speak. Of course, because all real moral agency is based on the idea that real, deep evil is a possible choice, enacted there is both peace and violent war; both attention to the climate and the display of wealth and power that destroys the climate. The moral gesture of teaching and of working at a university is not an innocent gesture, for we still live as Americans, using three times the resources of most, we still get to fly to San Diego and take it over, living in hotels far above the beggars, eating and drinking, and swimming in what we call work, but is laughably more than the dreams of most people of the world (just ask the women who cleans the toilets in your department, or the man who sweeps the sidewalk of your pretty campus). And we will fly home, leaving the white

trail of our carbon streaking and crossing the sky, filling it up this much more.

We must stop, and we must start—to support the peacemakers and the climate protectors, the life sustainers. If you care about the lives of the poor, now, you need to care about the climate. If you care about women, now, you need to care about the climate. If you care about children, this is what you need to think about: the world to come. Do not think for a minute that we are powerless. We teach in one of the central institutions of American life, the university. Our scientist colleagues are already in motion, our engineering colleagues are already working—we need to join them, to produce the research that describes this moment, to reflect on the texts of crisis and collective action, to evoke resources for cultural and political change, and to be sure that the one great foe of even the most apolitical scholar—ignorance—is defeated. What time is it? Let that question interrupt you. Here is what they are saying: the time is right now.

## CONCLUSION

I am not the kind of ethicist who merely describes the issues, or throws up her hands to say "Oh gee whiz, that is awful." As Karen LeBacqz warned me in graduate school at GTU, we must make real decisions in this actual world: to whom do you listen? For whom do you work?

Who stands with you?

So, finally, we must think and work as scholars of the AAR. Here are some pragmatic signs and acts at the AAR scale, small things that are beyond the personal—here are acts in public, that may make a public space, two ways we can stop and then start: tithing and the sabbatical year.

First, let science interrupt you, and tithe enough time to respond. In every speech and every paper, and every class, make room for the question of this problem. Not the whole semester—you can still do exegesis or describe the lived religious practices of the Brooklyn Catholics, or translate the last rare copy of the fifteenth-century Viennese manuscript, but make corners in your field, in our field of scholarship: a time tithe, ten minutes of attention about the very real need to think about our climate. Tithe one week a semester, or tithe four hours from weekly email to read one IPCC report, one book about the issue. Study the science, teach the consequences. Tithing could be on ongoing part of our annual meeting, making the AAR a transformative community. We could each take two hours off of our meeting and leave a project in our wake, one garden,

even new trees. We can and we must do far better; we could plant trees every place we have been.

Second, we need to think of and for the group of us, for we are ten thousand people, the size of a small city, and we have the power of speech. This is a problem of collective action, the biggest problem we as teachers have faced as a species, and it can seem utterly overwhelming, but we can make decisions at the AAR scale. Here is one idea, from my Jewish tradition; I hope a good one among the many that will emerge in our Annual Meeting. We could create an AAR Sabbatical Year. What would this mean? It means that once in every six years, we would pause. Following the biblical cycle, we could chose to not meet at a huge annual meeting in which we take over a city. Every year, each participant going the meeting uses a quantum of carbon that is more than considerable. Air travel, staying in hotels, all of this creates a way of living on the earth that is carbon intensive. It could be otherwise. What if instead of coming together, we spread out over the land, as it were, and read out papers to one another at our own universities and institutions? What if we could meet, each of us in our own city and turn to the faces and the needs of our fellow citizens? What if, *on that day*, we taught the poor, volunteered in local high schools or community colleges, or the prison, the hospital, the military base, the church, mosque, synagogue, or temple, at a place that is not your own, worked at planting an orchard or a garden, served food to the poor, offered our teaching, offered to learn? What if we turned to our neighbor—the woman who cleans the toilets, the man who sweeps the sidewalks—and included them in the university to which we are responsible? We would then be actively making an interruption in our lives, saying by this act: I will sacrifice to save my planet. I am not suggesting—far from it—that we do more than try this, in seven years, when the sabbatical year comes again—2021. We can go happily back the other years. But, remember: time is not on our side, and there will come a time, in seven, or fourteen, or twenty-one, or twenty-eight years, when we will not be able to fly to this coast of California unless we radically change the course of history. If the AAR began a sabbatical year, others might follow. Perhaps other organizations, institutions, and individuals would also say "No more flying for business," and that would be one very clear act—Shabbat, stopping. Of course, it will be hard, and you might be thinking now how hard, how costly, how—as they say—*inconvenient*. But we have seven years to figure out the details and you are a very, very clever group of scholars. Do you want more government action? Think big business has not done enough? Then let us start with a dramatic and definitive action.

I do not know what other thoughtful answers might spring from religious scholars devoting their full, serious research attention to the problem of climate change. In 2014, fully one-third of the sessions at the AAR Annual Meeting addressed the crisis with a variety of methods, texts, and interrogations. This is a good beginning, but there must be far more. We must work harder. We must do all we can. To live an interrupted life, to live a life of moral attention, is the first duty of the scholar.

I wanted to be a president who took seriously the prophetic duty of my field, bioethics, to warn, to speak of the possibility of our power and our responsibility, and who interrupted you and told you to let the call of the stranger stop you in your tracks and the brokenness of the earth call you to action. I wanted to be the one who said to you, stop. Stop and start. And now all of this, this world, this organization, this, the greatest moral question of our time, it is completely in your hands. I know your power and what we can do. Stand with me; let us begin.

Thank you for the opportunity to both deliver this talk, and to publish it as an address.

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