

Courage

“Sustainability is a global issue that we all have a responsibility to address. This means taking serious action today to assure the planet’s existence as we know it in the future. Mount Union is committed to leading the way.” Mt. Union President Richard Giese

Did you catch the articles that ran Wednesday? “Mount Union joins effort to fight global warming” ran across the page from “College seeks stories of courage from community.” In case you missed it, let me summarize by saying that President Giese has joined more than 450 other college and university leaders around the United States in an astounding commitment to achieve “climate neutrality” on their campuses. That is, he is committing Mt. Union College to “reducing, and eventually eliminating the college’s global warming emissions.” This is courage of the best sort.

In his weighty book “Collapse: How Societies Choose to Fail or Succeed,” Jared Diamond (highly honored UCLA professor of geography, and winner of the Pulitzer Prize for “Guns, Germs and Steel”) comes to the conclusion that societies’ success or failure depends on their courage to make two types of choices.

The first choice relies on “...*the courage* to practice long-term thinking, and to make bold, courageous, anticipatory decisions at a time when problems have become perceptible but before they have reached crisis proportions.”

The second choice “...involves *the courage* to make painful decisions about values. Which of the values that formerly served a society well can continue to be maintained under new changed circumstances?” Specifically, he is hopeful that his examples of past societies’ difficult decisions will “...inspire modern First World citizens with the courage to make the most fundamental reappraisal now facing us: how much of our traditional consumer values and First World living standard can we afford to retain?” He explains that the standard of living in the United States is 32 times as high as that in the Third World, where many are dying for lack of basic necessities. The world lacks the resources for all of its population to live at our standard of living – it would require multiple Earths. Even if this doesn’t bother the conscience of the First World now, as times get tougher this disparity will cause us grief as it fuels the emotions of those who suffer from the inequity. Diamond points out that terrorists are one product of desperate societies who feel this injustice. As the French aristocracy of the late 1700’s found, there are risks involved with conspicuous consumption in a world of want.

Do we have the courage to willingly decrease our waste and consumption here? Do we have the strength of character to be more concerned with others’ survival than with our own luxuries? Intimidating as change may seem, changes in our lifestyle might actually benefit us. Diamond notes that Western Europeans only consume about half of the oil we do, and “...yet Western Europeans’ standard of living is higher by any reasonable criterion, including life expectancy, health, infant mortality, access to medical care, financial security after retirement, vacation time, quality of public schools and support for the arts.”

So do we have the courage to make the tough decisions? Thankfully, we have a college president and a mayor who have demonstrated the courage to lead us in these choices. But who now will have the courage to follow their lead? Will we have the courage as individuals? ...as businesses? ...as institutions? ...as community groups and houses of faith? And do we have the courage to keep choosing? The tough thing about this sort of courage is that it often takes the form of perseverance. Like the successful New Year's resolution, it requires more than one brave act. The courage we need is that of the marathon runner, or the sort of spiritual perseverance that calls us to "...run the good race..." when we'd really like to take a break from doing the right thing. It calls for us to choose hope, and to do what we can even in the face of daunting odds.

This is courage.

Check it Out:

American College and University Presidents Climate Commitment:

<http://www.presidentsclimatecommitment.org/>

"Collapse: How Societies Choose to Fail or Succeed," Jared Diamond, 2005.

"The threat to our planet," article by Jared Diamond for the New York Times, Jan. 13, 2008.

January 29th, 10:30 am, Mt. Union Theater: community members are invited to join the Mt. Union Teach-In on the topic of "courage," to share their personal stories of courage

January 31st: "Focus the Nation," a national Teach-In on global warming solutions for America - creating a dialogue at over a 1000 colleges, universities, high schools, middle schools, places of worship, civic organizations and businesses. Be courageous enough to host a teach-in on this topic, or join the webcast on Jan. 30th! See <http://www.focusthenation.org/> for details