It's about the carbon: What's worse than the gulf oil leak?

by Bill McKibben in the June 1, 2010 issue

The sudden, hideous explosion of oil in the Gulf of Mexico is the latest reminder of who we really are. By we, I mean:

British Petroleum: For a while it engaged in an expensive public relations campaign to restyle itself as Beyond Petroleum, but clearly the initials stand for Broken Pipe. Or maybe Bigtime Pollution. Or maybe just Bad People. You want to know what it means to be a hugely profitable company? It means taking huge risks, almost always with other people's money and future. BP has left a trail of fines, safety violations and hubris on its way to its enormous sums of money, and its liability for damages in the gulf is carefully capped by federal law at $75 million, roughly one-fiftieth of what the company made in the fourth quarter of last year. (You think BP might have played a role in writing that federal law?) Right now it's busy building a device technically known as a Big Honking Dome that it's planning to lower over the hole. Maybe this will work, in which case the obvious question will be: Why didn't you have a Big Honking Dome standing by before you started?

Our government: This one you can't just pin on the Bush administration. Its legacy of constant deregulation is a clear contributing factor, and somehow it's not surprising to learn that Dick Cheney's former employer Halliburton is at least peripherally involved. But Barack Obama has been completely "balanced" about energy, careful at every turn not to offend the big oil and coal companies. Just a month ago he announced that he was suspending a longstanding moratorium on offshore drilling. "The answer is not drilling everywhere all the time," Obama said at Andrews Air Force Base. "But the answer is not, also, for us to ignore the fact that we are going to need vital energy sources to maintain our economic growth and our security." The balance part? He simultaneously allowed as how the federal government would add 5,000 hybrid vehicles to its auto fleet and that the military would experiment with biofuels. Well gee, thanks.

And, *well*, *we as in—us*: You don't think every politician in America, Obama included, hasn't noticed that Americans scream every time the price of oil begins to rise? You think maybe, just maybe, that the needle BP stuck into the bottom of the sea flows straight into our veins?

If you want to understand the stakes, here's what you need to do: Stop looking at the oil-soaked birds for a little while. Stop studying the newspaper pictures of the spread of the sheen. In this case, your eyes are fooling you.

Yes, the plume of black oil is nasty and dangerous and damaging. But it's merely the visible face of dirty energy, in many ways less damaging than the underlying daily damage. Let's assume for a moment that the oil had made its way up through the drilling pipe, onto the platform, off the gulf into some refinery and thence into the gas tank of a car. Or let's assume that that West Virginia mine hadn't collapsed on the miners and instead the coal had proceeded smoothly down some rail line to some coal-fired plant. What then?

What then is called carbon dioxide. Whenever you burn fossil fuel, the combustion process involves taking the carbon atom in the coal or gas or oil and combining it with a pair of oxygen atoms from the atmosphere to form CO2—a lot of CO2. (If you burn a gallon of gas, which weighs a little more than seven pounds, you get about 22 pounds of CO2. The average American car driven the average American distance releases its own weight in CO2 annually.)

What then? The molecular structure of CO2 traps heat near the atmosphere that would otherwise radiate back out to space. So far we're trapping about two watts per square meter of extra energy. That doesn't sound like much, but it's a lot. Here's what's happening:

• Everything frozen on the face of the planet is busily melting. Those famous Apollo pictures of the planet from outer space? They're about as useful as your high school yearbook picture. There is much less white up top, because there's a third less ice.

• Because warm air holds more water vapor than cold, there's a lot more moisture in the atmosphere—5 percent more than 40 years ago. That's an astonishing change in a basic physical feature of the planet, and it occurred in the blink of an eye. It means that we're seeing not only more drought in arid areas, but also outlandish increases in big storms, the kind that drop huge quantities of rain. In Tennessee recently Nashville got more rain by May 5 than it has ever gotten in an entire May. Buses are

floating down streets. The month before, tens of thousands of favela dwellers were left homeless in Rio (and unlike Tennesseans, they had done nothing to contribute to the problem).

• Even the oceans are changing with astonishing speed. You think that black oil slick heading toward Alabama is bad news? As the oceans have tried to absorb the extra carbon we've put in the atmosphere, they've turned 30 percent more acidic in recent decades. That's enough so that on every ocean on the earth, creatures at the bottom of the marine food chain are having trouble forming shells and reproducing. That's enough to lead coral reef researchers to think that the entire ecosystem may be extinct by mid-century. Forget the slick in the gulf; think of the invisible acid slick now covering all seven seas.

This is a new Earth—I just wrote a book where I call it *Eaarth*. We still have the same number of continents. Gravity still works. But it's a fundamentally different place. We're rewriting the ground rules, and things are getting worse. So far humans have raised the temperature of the Earth about a degree. Before the century is out, if we don't get off fossil fuel, then the climatologists have made the prognosis clear: five or six more degrees. If not actually hell, then something pretty close.

Here's a profound theological way of thinking about all this. God spent six days making the earth, which God pronounced "good." On the seventh day God rested, and we took over and have spent the last few decades screwing it up.

What do we do? First, we don't waste an opportunity. What's going on in the gulf is a tragedy. We need to support every person who lives there in the same ways we as churches and denominations tried to after Katrina. But that's not all we need to do. This is the ultimate teachable moment, the place where we can insist that our leaders start to take serious action—not just, or even mainly, to make sure that we don't have oil well blowouts in the future, but to make sure that we get off dirty energy.

So far we've seen none of that action. For 20 years there's been a bipartisan effort to avoid taking any action on climate change. The Obama administration has been more involved than its predecessors (5,000 hybrid cars for the federal fleet! Tanks running on biofuels!), but compared to the scale of the problem, those actions are like tossing a roll of Charmin into the gulf to soak up the oil.

As the president has stood by watching, Senators John Kerry, Joe Lieberman and Lindsay Graham have devised a climate “plan” essentially dictated by oil companies and electric utilities. It is weak tea—it would reduce America’s carbon emissions 4 percent from 1990 levels and hand over a collection of nicely wrapped shower gifts to the oil, coal and nuclear lobbies in return for their cooperation. It’s easy to bash the senators for their tepid bill. But it isn’t really their fault. Without Obama pushing much harder, they had no real leverage, and Obama wouldn’t push harder because he didn’t see political gain involved—he already has the environmental vote. Why risk the controversy that would come with real change?

In a larger sense, it’s not Obama’s fault either. He’s not willing to go further because there’s no movement giving him the cover (or the push) to take the issue to the next level. It’s true that physics and chemistry demand far more of him—but political reality means he won’t give it unless we give him room to operate.

We push by becoming politically engaged. On the tenth of October (that would be 10/10/10), 350.org is coordinating a Global Work Party. It’s a follow-up to the Global Day of Action last October, which sparked 5,200 rallies in 181 countries—what CNN called “the most widespread day of political action in the planet’s history.” Around the world everyone (most of them poor, black, brown, Asian, young) was saying the same thing: listen to the scientists telling us that 350 parts per million CO2 is the most we can safely have in the atmosphere. If we want the world God left us, that’s the number.

That crusade half-worked. At the Copenhagen climate summit, 117 nations signed on to that 350 ppm concentration target. But they were the wrong 117 nations—the poor ones. The rich and addicted weren’t yet ready to face the truth. So we need to build this movement. On October 10, people around the world will be putting up solar panels and harvesting community gardens and laying out bike paths because they want to send a serious, pointed message to our leaders: If we can get to work, you can get to work. If we can climb up on the roof of the church and hammer in a solar panel, you can climb up on the floor of the Senate and hammer out a serious bill.

Churches are key to this work. Last year in Copenhagen, Desmond Tutu preached a service at the city’s great cathedral. When he was done, the cathedral bell range 350 times, and then 3,000 churches across Europe did the same thing. It sent a message: what we’re doing to the Earth is not only stupid, it’s evil. It’s blaspheming.

We need to speak that plainly. Here’s how Patriarch Bartholomeos, leader of 400 million Eastern Orthodox Christians, put it last fall: “Global warming is a sin, and 350 is an act of redemption.”

In the end, it’s not complicated. It’s black and blue, like the oil and the gulf. If you’re sickened by the images on your TV screen, then join the fight against dirty energy. And do it now.