

United Nations Day and More
By the Rev. Ann Schranz
Monte Vista Unitarian Universalist Congregation
October 24, 2010

David and Barbara Mikkelson may be the most influential people you have never heard of. They even live and work in the Los Angeles area. They started a website called Snopes.com 15 years ago. According to David Pogue of the New York Times, “There's only one place to go for debunking or confirming the latest bit of rumor that just came into your e-mail box: Snopes.com, where 300,000 people a day drop in to find out if indeed Bill Gates is sending out free laptops, if President Obama is a Muslim or if Mikey from the Life commercials really died.”¹ The Mikkelsons help people separate fact from fiction.

Where does the name Snopes come from? “Snopes come from a family of characters who recur in the works of William Faulkner,” said David. “He typically had different families that represented a different strata of Southern society. And the Snopes were on the bottom rung of the social ladder. But none of that has anything to do with the site. It just -- I knew the name Snopes from having read William Faulkner.”

The Mikkelson's constantly update the hottest 25 urban legends currently circulating.² As of this week, the hottest 25 urban legends includes the one about cattle guards. Cattle guards are horizontal steel rails placed at fence openings to prevent cattle from crossing over that area. The cattle will generally not step on the “guards,” probably because they do not want to get their legs caught between the rails.

So, did you hear? “A few months ago, President Obama received and was reading a report that there were over 100,000 cattle guards in Colorado. The Colorado ranchers had protested his proposed changes in grazing policies, so he ordered the Secretary of the Interior to fire half of the cattle guards immediately! Before the Secretary of the Interior could respond and presumably try to straighten President Obama out on the matter, Vice President Joe Biden intervened with a

¹ See <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/07/15/technology/personaltech/15pogue-email.html> .

² See <http://snopes.com/info/top25uls.asp>.

request that before any cattle guards were fired, they be given six months of training to become Arizona border guards. ‘Times are hard,’ said Joe Biden. ‘It’s only fair to the cattle guards and their families.’”³ ;)

The firing of the cattle guards is actually a joke that has been around since the 1950’s. While some rumors are false and other rumors are true, the vast majority of rumors evaluated at Snopes.com turn out to be *mixtures* of fact and fiction. A kernel of truth is wrapped in a coat of fiction.

That mixture of truth and fiction is the case regarding the rumor that baby carrots are made from deformed full-sized carrots which have been permeated with chlorine. Look up “baby carrots; you may be surprised.) That mixture of truth and fiction is also the case regarding the rumor that actor Lee Marvin and Bob 'Captain Kangaroo' Keeshan fought together at Iwo Jima. Once again, look it up; you may be surprised.

It says something about the general level of fear and anxiety in our society when 300,000 people per day visit the snopes.com website to see if they should laugh or be alarmed at rumors such as these. Sadly, some of the rumors pertain to the United Nations. For example, last spring, this email was circulating: “While you were watching the oil spill, the New York failed terrorist bombing, and other critical crises, Hillary Clinton signed the small arms treaty with the United Nations. On Wednesday the Obama took its first major step in a plan to ban all firearms in the United States. The Obama administration intends to force gun control and a complete ban on all weapons for U.S. citizens through the signing of international treaties with foreign nations . . . This is not a joke or a false warning. As sure as government health care will be forced on us by the Obama administration by any means necessary, so will gun control.”⁴

In this polarized political climate, it is more important than ever that we defend and promote the United Nations. To start with, we should sing “Happy Birthday” to the United Nations. It was born 55years ago today, on October 24, 1945. There is a special connection between Unitarian Universalists and the United Nation because the Unitarian Universalist United Nations Office is

³ See www.snopes.com/politics/humor/cattleguards.asp

⁴ See <http://www.snopes.com/politics/guns/untreaty.asp>.

a force to be reckoned with among the thousands of non-governmental organizations working with the United Nations.

UN-UNO executive director Bruce Knotts reviewed recent history regarding this special connection: “In 2008, the Unitarian Universalist United Nations Office (UU-UNO) made history by focusing the attention of the United Nations on the need to eliminate laws that criminalize and discriminate based on sexual orientation and gender identity. The 4,000 other non-profits working at the United Nations took notice of this historic accomplishment.”⁵

“In 2009, the UU-UNO formed a working group dedicated to the elimination of gender-based violence in Sudan. Again, the UN community took notice of the UU-UNO, which has become one of the most influential non-profit organizations at the United Nations. So it came as no surprise that a UN delegation came to the UU-UNO to seek help in revitalizing the UN’s NGO Committee on Sustainable Development.” UU-UNO Board Member Dr. Jan Dash was elected to serve on the governing board of the UN Committee on Sustainable Development. It is terrific that such a distinguished Unitarian Universalist is in this position.

This year on United Nations Sunday, the UN-UNO encouraged congregations to focus on ethical aspects of climate change. Four hundred miles north of here on this very morning, Dr. Jan Dash is speaking at the Unitarian Universalist congregation in San Francisco. We are here, not there, so we cannot hear him speak. However, we can appreciate his talents by going to the Internet web portal regarding climate change that he designed. It can be accessed on the UU-UNO website (www.uu-uno.org) by clicking on the climate change link.

Dr. Jan Dash is asking Unitarian Universalists to do something *FAB*ulous – that is FAB, as in fair, ambitious, and binding. The goal of the existing “Copenhagen Accord” on climate change is to limit the global average temperature increase to 2 degrees Celsius.⁶ Most countries have now put forward voluntary goals for reduction of greenhouse gas emissions by 2020. There are

⁵ See <http://uu-uno.org/wp-content/uploads/2010/03/UN-Sunday-2010-Final.pdf>, page 3.

⁶ See http://unfccc.int/files/meetings/cop_15/application/pdf/cop15_cph_auv.pdf.

two problems with these voluntary goals. First, they are voluntary, not binding. Second, they are not sufficient to achieve the goal.

According to Dr. Dash, “An agreement incorporating more substantial reductions in a fair, ambitious, and binding (FAB) climate treaty is needed to protect future generations from massive impacts of global warming / climate change . . . UN Sunday can help UUs act to assist the process to help implement a fair, ambitious, and binding climate treaty . . . UUs around the world can lobby climate negotiators for a fair, ambitious, and binding treaty at the UNFCCC Climate Conference in Mexico in December 2010. UUs, therefore, can make a difference!”⁷

Remember what I said about most of the rumors investigated by David and Barbara Mikkelson of Snopes.com? Most of them are not completely true or completely false. Most rumors contain a mixture of fact and fiction. So it is regarding climate change. Contrarians take a kernel of truth and coat it with distortions. My parting gift to you this morning is coaching on how to counter the distortions you may hear about climate change.

I will share some contrarian claims and a one-sentence response by our very own Dr. Jan Dash, as recorded on the Skeptical Science website (www.skepticalscience.com) of John Cook.

By the way, John Cook began by writing complex responses to the arguments of climate change contrarians, but the responses were difficult for non-scientists to remember and use. John writes, “In May this year, I received an email from Dr. Jan Dash, ex-theoretical physicist and Director of the [Climate Initiative of the Unitarian Universalist United Nations Office](#). He had just co-lead a series of "Counter the Contrarians" classes at the [Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Monmouth County, NJ](#) . . . [and found that] my paragraph answers were too complicated to use . . .”

“I emailed back, suggesting if Jan wanted to have a go at writing some one-liners, he was welcome to. After not getting a response, I assumed Jan found it as difficult as I did. Then around a week later, I got a reply. Jan had gone through *every* skeptic argument and written a

⁷ This is from page 9 of the UU-UNO’s “UN Sunday 2010” document.

one-line answer! I started reading through them, thinking "okay, this'll be interesting". After the first page, it was obvious - by George, he'd done it! As I kept reading, I found myself thinking, "hmm, wish I'd said it like that!" He'd created a fantastic resource - short, non-technical, user-friendly answers to every skeptic argument."

Here we go. When you hear the following comment, respond with what the science says. When I put on this hat, I am channeling Dr. Jan Dash. [Note: I selected half a dozen or so skeptic arguments from the list below. Then I put on my outdoorsy explorer hat and responded with what the science says. I took the hat on and off as I alternated between the skeptic argument and what the science says.]

Skeptic Arguments and What the Science Says⁸

	Skeptic Argument	vs	What the Science Says
1	"It's the sun"		The sun's output has barely changed since 1970 and is irrelevant to recent global warming.
2	"Climate's changed before"		Climate reacts to whatever forces it to change at the time; humans are now the dominant forcing.
3	"There is no consensus"		97% of climate experts agree humans are causing global warming.
4	"It's cooling"		The last decade 2000-2009 was the hottest on record.
5	"Models are unreliable"		Models successfully reproduce temperatures since 1900 globally, by land, in the air and the ocean.
7	"It hasn't warmed since 1998"		2005 was the hottest year globally, and 2009 the second hottest.
8	"Ice age predicted in the 70s"		The vast majority of climate papers in the 1970s predicted warming.
9	"We're heading into an ice age"		Worry about global warming impacts in the next 100 years, not an ice age in over 10,000 years.
10	"Antarctica is gaining ice"		Satellites measure Antarctica losing land ice at an accelerating rate.
22	"Sea level rise is exaggerated"		A variety of different measurements find steadily rising sea levels over the past century.
23	"It's a 1500 year cycle"		Ancient natural cycles are irrelevant for attributing recent global warming to humans.
24	"'Climategate' CRU emails suggest conspiracy"		Several investigations have cleared scientists of any wrongdoing in the media-hyped email incident.
25	"Water vapor is the most powerful greenhouse gas"		Rising CO2 increases atmospheric water vapor, which makes global warming much worse.
27	"Oceans are cooling"		The most recent ocean measurements show consistent warming.
29	"Human CO2 is a tiny % of CO2 emissions"		The natural cycle adds and removes CO2 to keep a balance; humans add extra CO2 without removing any.

⁸ See <http://www.skepticalscience.com/about.shtml>.

32	"It cooled mid-century"	Mid-century cooling involved aerosols and is irrelevant for recent global warming.
33	"Glaciers are growing"	Most glaciers are retreating, posing a serious problem for millions who rely on glaciers for water.
34	"Extreme weather isn't caused by global warming"	Extreme weather events are being made more frequent and worse by global warming.
35	"There's no empirical evidence"	There are multiple lines of direct observations that humans are causing global warming.
36	"We're coming out of the Little Ice Age"	The sun was warming up then, but the sun hasn't been warming since 1970.
45	"CO2 was higher in the past"	When CO2 was higher in the past, the sun was cooler.
46	"Scientists can't even predict weather"	Weather and climate are different; climate predictions do not need weather detail.
47	"Animals and plants can adapt to global warming"	Global warming will cause mass extinctions of species that cannot adapt on short time scales.
59	"Volcanoes emit more CO2 than humans"	Humans emit 100 times more CO2 than volcanoes.
60	"It's El Niño"	El Niño has no trend and so is not responsible for the trend of global warming.
61		
62	"It's the ocean"	The oceans are warming and moreover are becoming more acidic, threatening the food chain.
63	"CO2 measurements are suspect"	CO2 levels are measured by hundreds of stations across the globe, all reporting the same trend.
64	"It's aerosols"	Aerosols have been masking global warming, which would be worse otherwise.
65	"500 scientists refute the consensus"	Around 97% of climate experts agree that humans are causing global warming.
66	"Solar Cycle Length proves it's the sun"	The sun has not warmed since 1970 and so cannot be driving global warming.
71	"Sea level rise predictions are exaggerated"	Sea level rise is now increasing faster than predicted due to unexpectedly rapid ice melting.
75	"Greenhouse effect has been falsified"	The greenhouse effect is standard physics and confirmed by observations.
76	"It's land use"	Land use plays a minor role in climate change, although carbon sequestration may help to mitigate.
77	"Humans are too insignificant to affect global climate"	Humans are small but powerful, and human CO2 emissions are causing global warming.
80	"It's methane"	Methane plays a minor role in global warming but could get much worse if permafrost starts to melt.
88	"Ice isn't melting"	Ice is melting at an accelerating rate at both poles and in glaciers all over the world.
89	"CO2 is not increasing"	CO2 is increasing rapidly, and is reaching levels not seen on the earth for millions of years.
91	"Record snowfall disproves global warming"	Warming leads to increased evaporation and precipitation, which falls as increased snow in winter.
93	"Springs aren't advancing"	Hundreds of flowers across the UK are flowering earlier now than any time in 250 years.

96	"Solar cycles cause global warming"	Over recent decades, the sun has been slightly cooling & is irrelevant to recent global warming.
97	"A drop in volcanic activity caused warming"	Volcanoes have had no warming effect in recent global warming - if anything, a cooling effect.
102	"CO2 is not the only driver of climate"	CO2 is the main driver of climate change.
103	"Climate is chaotic and cannot be predicted"	Weather is chaotic but climate is driven by Earth's energy imbalance, which is more predictable.
105	"Breathing contributes to CO2 buildup"	By breathing out, we are simply returning to the air the same CO2 that was there to begin with.
115	"Global temperatures dropped sharply in 2007"	But global temperatures rose sharply in 2009, to the second hottest level.
116	"It's CFCs"	CFCs contribute at a small level.
125	"We didn't have global warming during the Industrial Revolution"	CO2 emissions were much smaller 100 years ago.

May we take seriously the free and responsible search for truth and meaning. May we speak up to counter misperceptions and distortions in climate change and everything else. May we be **FAB**ulous and lobby climate change negotiators for FAB treaty (a fair, ambitious, and binding treaty) at the Climate Conference in Mexico in December. May it be so!