



Reflections on Fasting for Climate Justice

23 January 2014

The Tree and the Empty Stomach

By Martin Kopp

My story begins millions of years ago. At the time, there was a beautiful tree living in a luxurious forest. Some of its leaves fell on a river instead of the ground, and the river carried them into the ocean, where they eventually sunk slowly, just like I did when I was five. Fortunately, the comparison stops here. For whilst the leaves did reach the bottom of the ocean, my dad's strong arms saved me the trip.

Those leaves were joined by thousands of other companions of all kinds, vegetal and animal. As years went by, they were covered by sediments, and sunk once again, but in a much hotter, darker, pressured place: the ground itself. There, they began a slow transformation, much like that of a butterfly, capable of great effects. They turned into oil.

One day, they were taken out of their long power nap by a strange new species: the human being. They were extracted out of their nest and refined; they travelled thousands of miles, were sold and, eventually, burned. Second transformation. They turned into greenhouse gases.

Who thought that leaves that lived millions of years ago would impact my stomach once a month today? And yet, they do. Those leaves made me fast for the first time of my life, as I #fastfortheclimate. It was, and is, a changing experience.

Fasting changed the way I look at the world. As an inhabitant of the so-called "developed" countries, I had never gone to bed hungry. Now I do so once a month. And I realize that this is the daily experience of hundreds of millions, some of them because of extreme weather events or, increasingly, because of the decade-to-decade shift in climate patterns. During COP19, I did not feel hunger too much, because of the adrenaline caused by the event. But now that I am back in my everyday life, I feel hunger more sharply. In that sense, fasting made climate change real for me, opened my eyes and brought me closer to my neighbors. This is one of the reasons why fasting once a

month is interesting: it raises one's awareness on a regular basis and not only when extreme weather events happen.

But fasting in France also is a challenge, because of the social status of meals. Eating is (very) important in my country, which is famous for its *cuisine*. A meal is a moment of conviviality, of quality time with family and/or friends. If everyone happened to fast, there would be no problem, but the reality is that often not all of a family or all of a group of friends does. And some might feel bad about eating while you don't. Some might say you're being a little extreme here... come on, why don't you eat with us? You can fast tomorrow!

That happened for me on the 1st of January. It must be said though that this is a special day of the year, it is not just like any first of the month: it is a public holiday and people celebrate together the New Year. I decided to "cut the pear in half", as we say in French: I did not eat for breakfast and lunch, sharing just a cup of tea while they ate, but had dinner with them, making an exception. At first I felt guilty – up to know I've always fasted 24 hours in a row. But I remembered Jesus' saying that the Sabbath was made for humans and not humans for the Sabbath (Mk 2:23-27 and pars.), and I considered that it was the same with the fast in this particular case.

This fast should not make anyone feel guilty. You know you can do it the way that suits you and the people around you. As Simone Sinn underlines in the LWF resource "[Fasting for Climate Justice - A Lutheran Perspective](#)," Martin Luther, in his time, said: "Here everyone has to take a look at himself and judge his own feelings. We are not all alike, and so no one can set up a general rule". There is always a way. As long as you do fast and share your commitment around you, you help raising awareness about climate change. And that is, after all, what makes your fast matter.

Martin Kopp is from the Union of Protestant Churches of Alsace and Lorraine in France and is PhD candidate in Christian Faith and Economics at the University of Strasbourg. He was a member of LWF delegation to COP19.