

JOHN FRANCIS: WALKING AWAY FROM OIL¹

Madeline Ostrander[©]

When the Gulf oil disaster first hit the headlines, John Francis got a series of calls and messages from friends across the country offering condolences and apologies. Francis isn't from the Gulf but he has spent years trying to answer the question that now looms large in public debate—what does it mean to end our addiction to oil? It took an oil spill and a tragedy to get Francis to radically change his life. Francis grew up in a working-class African-American family in Philadelphia and moved to California as an adult. He was in his early 20s in 1971, when he witnessed the aftermath of a collision between two oil tankers in San Francisco Bay. The resulting spill coated shores from Berkeley to Marin with oil and killed thousands of birds and fish. That event and the death of a friend a year later profoundly shook Francis. He gave up driving and riding in motorized vehicles for 22 years.

One day, as an experiment, he stopped speaking and realized that the experience opened up deeper modes of communication with others. "From this new place [of silence] lessons come," he writes in his memoir, *Planetwalker*. "The first is that most of my adult life I have not been listening fully." He spent the next 17 years in silence, began a pilgrimage on foot across the country, pursued a Ph.D. in environmental studies in Wisconsin at one of the nation's foremost graduate programs, and became an expert on oil regulations. He taught courses at the University of Wisconsin—Madison without speaking and took an oil regulations policy job with the U.S. Coast Guard without driving.

The journey has made Francis into a kind of moral, spiritual, and symbolic leader for the environmental movement. He considers himself to be living proof of the idea that a single person and simple actions can reach millions. He has since resumed driving, riding, and speaking, but continues to promote environmental education, walking, and personal empowerment, especially among children, youth, and college students, and through lectures across the country. I caught up with Francis at a green building conference in Seattle. I wanted to find out what his life might teach us about how to confront a disaster like the BP spill in the Gulf.

Madeline Ostrander: What was it about the spill in San Francisco Bay that affected you so powerfully that you decided to stop talking and riding in cars?

John Francis: A number of my students are always asking, "How do I know what is going to be my issue, my moment to make a decision?" For me, it started with the wildlife—I could see that birds were dying. In my childhood, I used to save young birds that had fallen out of their nests. Once I went to save a bird, but before I could, a car ran over it. I cried for weeks. The spill in San Francisco Bay made me cry. It made me cry in a painful way. There are tragedies you can move away from and you don't have to confront them. If you're reading about an oil spill in the newspaper, you can just turn the page. But you couldn't get away from the effects of the spill. I could see that birds were dying. And the olfactory impact—the smell—was just huge. I tell my students, "If you are moved to such a degree that you feel the pain, and that you can feel the tears running down your face, then you're looking at an opportunity to make a change, to make a difference in the world."

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Each of us has to have that moment when we know that we have to do something. I said, "What I want to do is not ride in cars." My girlfriend said, "Yeah, but we don't have any money." That's usually what happens—you start thinking about practical realities—money, job. Those thoughts can dissuade you from making that decision at that moment. It took a friend's death to convince me that we only have right now—this moment. He died in a boating accident. He was about the same age as I was. He was a deputy sheriff, was married, and had a beautiful family and a house. He was living this dream, and all of the sudden he was just gone. It was irrevocable. He doesn't get to come back and say, "Oh, there's something I wanted to do." What I wanted to do was get out of my car and walk. I went on a walk with my girlfriend to commemorate and celebrate his life—20 miles to hear some music. On my way back I realized that there's no guarantee that tomorrow is going to come or that we're going to get it together. I told my girlfriend, "I'm already walking. I'm just going to keep walking."

Madeline: In your book, you describe how that walk led you to give up driving altogether. You write, "I just didn't want to come back and fall into the same old way of living a life." In your case, you witnessed these events that shook you enough to change your life dramatically. What do you think it will take for people in this country to change their ways of living? We all have lifestyles that contribute to climate change, our oil economy, and environmental problems.

John: In 1969, there was another spill in California—the Santa Barbara blowout [when an undersea rig exploded]. It was 200,000 gallons of oil. That spill galvanized a lot of people to start the environmental movement in the United States. People made some really significant changes just to get a day recognized for the environment—Earth Day. It was a spill and someone's death that prompted me to change. And it was me just being stubborn, even when I thought, "God, I don't know if I can really make a difference." It's going to take something like that to happen for each of us: Each of us has to have that moment when we know that we have to do something. It might not happen to the whole country all at once—but enough people making those changes will make a difference.

As I walked across the country and studied environment and started speaking again, I realized that sustainability starts with the way we treat each other. And I believe that the way that we treat each other manifests in the physical environment around us. Our relationships are the first opportunity to treat the environment in a positive, sustainable way. We can't oppress one another; we can't kill each other for resources; we can't use each other for our own gain. We need to look at each other. We all use oil. We all have some responsibility. That's a good thing because if we have some responsibility, we all have some power. Each of us has to have that moment when we know that we have to do something. I have to say if somebody had told me years ago that I could make a difference by getting out of my car and walking, I would have thought maybe they were not right on the beam. At first, I thought I might have a peaceful life playing the banjo and living in a cabin. But after more than 20 years of walking, I walk to the other side of the country, and the next thing I know, I'm a Ph.D., helping to write the oil pollution regulations for the United States. And I could not have seen that!

Madeline: How has the spill in the Gulf affected you?

John: Well, right away, when there's any spill in the United States or anywhere in the country or in the world that gets into the media, people start writing me. Sending me emails and calling me to say, "John, we're so sorry." I am affected by this spill, even though I don't own any stock in BP, and I haven't lost any loved ones. People are going to hurt from this spill. People are going to feel pain. In that pain, however, there's an opportunity for us to change and look at what it is that's going on. In that clarity, or moment of obligation, we can understand who we are and

make that commitment to change. Some people have already started car-free, motor-free, engine-free lifestyles. And I hear from them. Even though we may not all give up driving and riding in cars, we can look for the hidden costs and redefine our energy policies. The hidden cost of our petrochemical economy is huge and devastating to the rest of the planet. People die so we can drive in our cars. That's a cost that we think we don't have to pay financially. But we do pay the price—because it manifests in the physical environment around us.

Madeline: Many of us—when we're looking at what's happening in the Gulf or thinking about the enormity of climate change—experience grief or despair. How have you learned to confront those feelings in yourself?

John: I talk to you. And I write articles and a blog. I talk to the media. And I talk to the people around me. I'm not the expert. I can tell you my life and my journey. I think we need to understand the connectivity that all of us have with each other. Each of us is not here doing this alone. It's all of us. We're part of each other's journeys as well.