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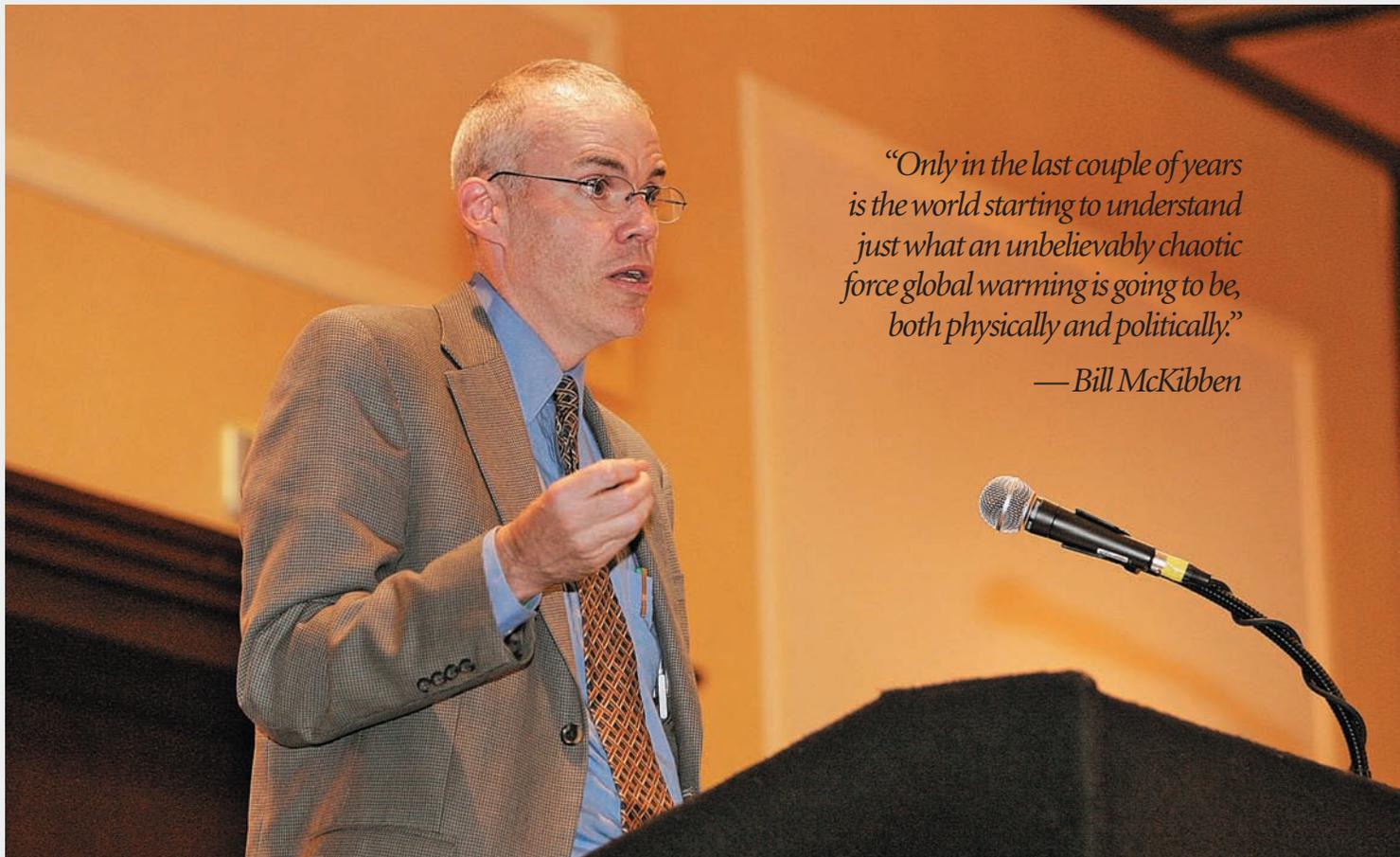
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Law School Report

BALDY CENTER FOR LAW AND SOCIAL POLICY

Seeking economic justice

Author McKibben sees climate change as an opportunity for transformation



“Only in the last couple of years is the world starting to understand just what an unbelievably chaotic force global warming is going to be, both physically and politically.”

— Bill McKibben

An acknowledged prophet of the environmental movement gave a stirring call to action in delivering the keynote address of a UB Law-sponsored economic justice forum on Sept. 28.

Bill McKibben, whose book *The End of Nature* first brought the threat of global climate change beyond the scientific community and into the public debate, spoke on the second day of the conference, called “The High Road Runs Through the City.” About 175 activists, academics, students

and concerned citizens heard his address at the Hyatt Regency Buffalo.

The conference, co-sponsored by the Law School’s Baldy Center for Law and Social Policy and the Industrial Labor Relations School of Cornell University, focused especially on the health of cities and featured speakers on the living wage, worker protection laws and accountable development.

McKibben’s most recent book, *Deep Economy*, addresses the shortcomings of the growth economy and envisions a tran-

sition to local-scale enterprise. But his remarks were couched in the urgency of the global climate change crisis as he explored how it might affect humanity’s social, political and economic life.

“Only in the last couple of years,” he said, “is the world starting to understand just what an unbelievably chaotic force global warming is going to be, both physically and politically. The main thing we have learned in the last 20 years is that it is happening way faster and on a way larger scale than we would ever have guessed. We

have set in motion enormous forces, and those forces, as they play out over the course of this century, will constitute the greatest single injury we will ever inflict on poor and marginalized people around this country and around the world. If we are not able to control this, the prospects for most of the world's and the country's cities, certainly those situated on the coast, are grim."

But, he said, not all is bleak. "There are both enormous pitfalls and enormous opportunities afforded by this physical fact," McKibben said.

"The energy transformation demanded by the fix we find ourselves in offers more possibility for change in a positive direction than we have seen in a long time. This transition to different forms of energy can be the next great driver for the economy." For example, he said, retrofitting existing homes with solar panels will be a big job, and there is money to be made.

The key issue, he said, is the increasing scarcity and cost of petroleum-based energy. "We are on the verge of losing our magic fuel," he said – the oil and natural gas that has been cheap, plentiful, and relatively easy to obtain and transport.

And as the world realizes that its oil supply is not infinite, economic and political change will surely follow. "There are reasons to think," McKibben said, "that what we are now undergoing will, in very profound ways, change the course of economic gravity and cause it to work differently than it has worked in the last few generations. The logic of a world that took global warming seriously is the logic of a world where fuel becomes more expensive."



Top: Professor Martha T. McCluskey, William J. Magavern Fellow and Professor. Above: Sara Faherty, Clinical Professor.

As one example of that transformation, he said, "It is quite possible to contemplate that the ascendance of the suburb in our society may be coming to an end. The suburbs were built on cheap fuel – 4,000-square-foot houses, and people driving 60 miles each way to work in semi-military vehicles. That is the world that cheap fuel built. Over time, the economic force of gravity will work in the direction of more localized economies with much more real work being done."

Besides the economic shift, he said, "we need a real philosophic shift in how we understand ourselves. Cheap fuel produced a certain kind of mass affluence, it filled the atmosphere with carbon, and it allowed us

to become the first people on earth who had no practical need of our neighbors.

There have never been human beings before like us.

"The transition has to be back toward a world that takes community at least as seriously as it takes individualism."

And so, for example, he said, it is good news that farmers' markets are proliferating – not only do they feature local produce, which takes less energy to bring to market than foodstuffs from across the country or across the world, but they also foster human community. One sociologist's study, he said, showed that shoppers at farmers' markets have 10 times as many conversations with each other as supermarket shoppers do.

McKibben concluded with a call to activism by people concerned about official inaction on climate change. "The scientists tell us that we have only a few years

to succeed in this effort," he said. "And I have to tell you, I am not completely certain we are going to make it. The name of the book I wrote 20 years ago was *The End of Nature*, so I am not the most incredibly optimistic person in the world. But I am heartened by the action I have seen on this."