

COMOX VALLEY CLIMATE CHANGE CHRONICLES (11a)

A Disturbance in the Force

As I sat down to start writing the next climate change chronicle I experienced a “disturbance in the force.” Well, actually, it was more like an internal explosion.

The disturbance occurred on June 1, 2017 at 3:00 p.m. Eastern Time. I turned on the T.V. and saw President Trump withdraw the United States from COP 21—the international climate change agreement that all but two of the world’s nations signed. Now the United States, the world’s largest polluter, was abandoning its promise and leaving.

Whenever there is a disturbance in the force I notice that it comes with a bad side and a good side. The bad side is anger, frustration and depression. The good side is optimism, hope and looking for a potential way forward.

As I watched the news conference I got angry. I immediately thought of something Edgar Mitchell, the pilot of Apollo 13 and the 6th person to walk on the moon, said:

“You develop an instant global consciousness, a people orientation, an intense dissatisfaction with the state of the world, and a compulsion to do something about it. From out there on the moon, international politics look so petty. You want to grab a politician by the scruff of the neck and drag him a quarter of a million miles out and say, “Look at that, you son of a bitch.”

I shared his anger and felt depressed. We are destroying the living Earth that we and other species depend upon for our continued existence. So where is the hope?

I discovered it in a recent NYTimes article that discusses depression. (“We Aren’t Built to Live in the Moment” May 2, 2017).

For a century depression and mental health problems have been attributed to the past and/or the present: childhood trauma or the inability to deal with present difficulties. Recent studies indicate that depression has much more to do with “prospection”—the struggle and often the inability to look into the future and consider our options.

As the researchers put it, “Recalling an event in a new future-oriented context changes the way we think about the struggles we are facing.” It seems that Donald Trump is providing us with a new context. He is helping us think about our future and the way forward. So what are the challenges?

First, one of our current difficulties is the lack of a “clear and present danger.” There is no world war, or nuclear explosion that will inspire us to take action. As we look forward we now have a clear and present danger. The world’s largest polluter is abandoning any effort to deal with climate change.

Second, up to the present much of the climate change work has been top down. COP 21 is a good example. People expect their federal governments to do the heavy lifting.

But Trump's rejection of COP 21 has encouraged an immediate bottom up approach. More than 80+ mayors have stepped up to the plate. They have been joined by some state governors, some corporations and many universities—all committed to following through on the U.S. commitments. This is very encouraging.

Third, the struggle with climate change can be, at times, lonely and discouraging. As a Canadian who lived and worked many years in the U.S., I feel much closer to American individuals and groups who have taken on the climate change challenge. This is Mitchell's "people orientation." Climate change transcends borders. We are all in this together. I have no doubts that Trump's decision will spur on the continued development of a global movement.

Fourth, it takes four years for nations to opt out of their COP 21 commitments. But a new election for president will take place within that time frame. If things in the White House continue to go the way they are going there may be a new president before then.

So, as we look to the future, we see that the disturbance in the force has two sides, a bad side and a good side, a side of anger and despair and a side of optimism and of hope. We have to choose the side we wish to stand on.

As we look to the future most of us inevitably will choose the good side for what it will mean for our children, grandchildren and future generations.

In the climate change challenge I'm reminded of what an old man with a funny name once said to encourage a young warrior. "Go with the force, Luke."

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