

CLIMATE CHANGE CHRONICLE 26

Reframing for Climate Change

In the mid-90s in the run up to the creation of Nunavut, I was running a reframing workshop in Resolute, a small community in the high arctic. The participants were newly hired civil servants, all of them non-Inuit, preparing to enter their jobs in the new Nunavut government.

We were staying in a lodge owned by the highly respected Basil Jesu-Dawson. An East Indian, he was fluent in Inuktitut, the Inuit Language. He was also an outfitter. He outfitted for various adventurers from around the world who wanted to trek to the North Pole—by walking, skiing, dog team, skidoo, flying in ultralights or whatever.

One night after supper Basil asked me about the workshop. I told him it was about reframing. He asked me to explain. I gave him my quickie course.

We all live in frames. They are the intellectual and psychic contexts within which we send and receive messages, establish and maintain relationships, see the world and give it meaning. In a word we don't see the world the way it is; we see the world the way we are. When we work with people in different cultures we have to reframe. If we want to communicate effectively with them we have to understand their cultures and perspectives.

When I finished Basil smiled and said, "I'll tell you a reframing story."

A while back I met two Australian men who wanted to travel in the arid Australian outback but they didn't know where the water holes were. So they went to the Indigenous chief in town and asked for his help in locating the water holes. They asked the chief to mark the water holes on their map, which he did. The next day they took off in a small plane. They reached their destination and told the pilot to pick them up in ten days at the rendezvous point. When the pilot returned he found them on the ground, nearly dead. They had not found water where it was supposed to be.

The pilot helped them into the plane and took them to the hospital back in town. After they recovered they got into their jeep and went roaring back to see the chief. They charged into his house and started screaming at him saying he had deliberately tried to kill them. They pulled out the map, held it up and said, "There was no water where you put the arrows!" The chief was puzzled. "What arrows?", he asked. They jabbed at the map and said, "Those arrows". The chief looked at the map and said "Those are not arrows. They are the footprints of an emu, a flightless bird." The three-pronged tracks were moving in the opposite direction, away from the water holes.

When Basil finished the story he looked at me, smiled, and said, "That's what happens when you don't learn to reframe."

So what does all this have to do with reframing? Everything. It is about both thinking and acting.

If we realize that coal burning is a major cause of climate change we can reframe by switching to wind power and solar energy.

If we realize that plastic is causing significant damage to our waters and oceans we can reframe by switching to cloth or paper sacks to carry out groceries.

If we realize that gas-powered vehicles are damaging the environment, we can reframe and switch to electric vehicles or public transportation.

If we realize that the traditional form of religious spirituality we grew up with no longer meets our needs in a climate changing world we can reframe by beginning to develop an Earth Spirituality and work for change in our local communities.

Reframing is especially needed in the area of politics. But, as recent events show, it can generate a great deal of hostile opposition.

A few weeks ago two American politicians, Representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez and Senator Ed Markey put out a new bill to be considered by congress. It was called The Green New Deal and was based upon a concept put forward in 2007 by Thomas Friedman, a New York Times columnist.

The proposed Green New Deal used climate change as a frame. It stressed the need for clean energy by 2030 and within that context it indicated the need for a range of interlocking services: improved health care for all; better infrastructure; better transportation; better protection for ecosystems; wage increases for unions and other workers, and so forth.

A few of their Democratic colleagues supported it, though somewhat hesitantly. The Republicans rejected it outright. They ridiculed the bill and pointed to “the arrows”, if you will. There was not enough money for all the services. Also it would require a takeover of most of the services by government which would lead to rampant socialism (for many Americans, just a slight step below communism).

If we look at the arguments of those opposed to the Green New Deal they are probably valid—but only if the current American world is still valid and its damaging systems remain the way they are now. But the Green New Deal is asking them to reframe and move in a different direction to deal with the climate changing world that is closing in on their future.

So they have come to a fork in the road. They can follow the scratchy arrows back into the past or they can follow the living emu tracks into the future.

In our human situations we often have to reframe—whether it is due to illness or disease, moving beyond a relationship, caring for others in our community, experiencing the death of loved ones, and on and on. But we all come to a time when we need to reframe.

If our scientists are correct, and I think they are, this is that time. We must adopt a different life-giving frame to deal with the hazardous and somewhat uncertain road ahead. These days I find the reframing words of Leonard Cohen encouraging:

Ring the bells that still can ring
Forget your perfect offering
There is a crack in everything
That's how the light gets in

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