

# Creating Climate Changing Community Cultures

## In a Chaotic World

As the title indicates, this is an article about creating Climate Change Community Cultures in a chaotic world. I'll begin with some definitions or descriptions.

**Climate Change** does not need much of a description. It is the result of global warming and is a civilization problem. By that I mean it affects all aspects of human existence on Earth. It manifests differently in the Arctic thaws, the floods in the mid-west, the forest fires on the west coast and so forth.

**Community** The word has different meanings. It can refer to a specific neighbourhood. It can also refer to a scientific community, a business community, a religious community and so forth. People can live in several communities. In this article I use the word "community" to refer to a group of people living in the same area, neighborhoods or regions that are trying to deal with climate change.

**Culture** The Columbia Encyclopedia describes culture as "*the integrated system of socially acquired values beliefs and rules of conduct that delimit the range of accepted behaviours in any given society.* (In a climate changing world that last part of "*delimiting the range of accepted behaviours*" is significant.) I am not trying to describe a new type of culture dedicated solely to dealing with climate change. It is my belief that, given the universal impacts of climate change on all cultures, these cultures will have to learn to address it. Why a culture? Because we need something we can pass on to future generations who will also have to struggle with it.

**Chaos** comes from a Greek word that means "a chasm" or "empty space" and this is where I will start this discussion.

### A Chaotic World.

We live in a chaotic world. Often we feel empty and uncertain. Forty year ago Thomas Berry, a cultural historian, described our current situation as being "between stories". The old stories guided us on a cultural level and helped us deal with and make sense of the world in which we existed. It wasn't perfect but it worked. But the old story no longer serves our need given the changes that are occurring in Earth. So we need a new story and it has not yet been developed. We are lost in a sort of emptiness between stories.

Modern science is telling us that we are living in a chaotic situation. We are dangling in the empty chasm between two very different ages—the Cenozoic Age which existed since the death of the dinosaurs sixty five million years ago, and the [Anthropocene Age](#) ("Man Made") which probably began in the industrial age in the mid to late 1800s.

Up until the industrial revolution Earth was driving the evolutionary bus. We were just along for the ride. But now we humans are driving the evolutionary bus and our systems are creating irreversible transformations in Earth, its resources and its species.

Our neo-Liberal economic systems demand continual profits and almost universal access to Earth's limited resources. Those systems, in turn, are supported by governments and political parties depending upon them for funding.

Our legal systems, which consider corporations as persons, do not develop laws to help protect the environment. They are designed to limit the amount of damage we humans can do to the environment. And, as we have seen in recent years, environmental laws and regulations can be removed in the blink of a political eye.

So where do we go from here? We can't move forward by **incrementally** improving the existing systems. As Einstein put it, "*The definition of insanity is to do the same thing over and over again while expecting different results*". But, we can use what is salvageable from existing systems, especially the technology, to develop new living systems that can live within a living Earth.

In what follows I will outline the three essential steps to develop Climate Change Community Cultures. They are: redefining our relationship with Earth, creating a shared community vision, and activating the vision.

### **.A Relationship with Earth**

One of the things we have to do is redefine our relationship with Earth. Many of us tend to see Earth as something "out there", something that is different from us and not part of us. Here an analogy might help.

Let us suppose that a small infant, a baby girl, is separated from her mother at birth. The child grows up, gets married and has children of her own. But all of her life she has been searching for her mother. Then, one day, she finds her. There is no doubt that the woman she found is her mother. The DNA can prove that. But once she finds her mother it creates the possibility of a new and more intimate relationship.

In like manner we must discover our relationship with Earth. It is not something "out there". It is something within us. Culturally we are earthlings. We come to realize that Earth is our greater self and what we are doing to Earth we are doing to ourselves. The discovery of this relationship creates possibilities for deeper interactions.

### **A Shared Vision**

The second key requirement is a shared vision at the community level. We must develop a vision that benefits ourselves and Earth. People are beginning to develop these visions. My favorite, as I have mentioned a number of times, is from Thomas Berry and Brian Swimme—*a mutually enhancing relationship between our species and Earth*. I believe that this kind of relationship is possible.

### **Activating the vision**

The vision will be activated in different ways in different communities, depending upon the climate change issues the community is facing. In some cases where communities

have adapted their cultures to deal with climate change we can work with the community members to help them expand their vision.

There are many people who volunteer on community projects, run businesses or work with agencies, teach in schools, are members of government departments or work in elected positions. These people are key to implementing community cultures. We need them and the help and knowledge they can provide.

An essential requirement is educating people about climate change and how it may affect their community. It is a matter of sharing the vision and explaining how we and our communities are part of the Earth community. A key element here is communications, especially through social media. The more people hear about the impacts of climate change on communities the more they will be inclined to get involved.

Real change comes from the bottom up not from the top down. It is essential that people work with one another, get politically involved and elect the right people to help them develop community visions.

There are many ways to activate the vision and build community climate change cultures. The challenge is to get folks to accept the challenge.

Though developing this kind of community culture may seem unique it is not. Many indigenous cultures have been guided by adopted this kind of vision for hundreds of years.

### **The Obstacles on the Road Ahead**

In trying to adapt our community cultures to the climate change challenge we must begin by thinking about the obstacles ahead. The first obstacle is a problem of awareness. We just take them for granted.

My vivid memory of this problem occurred in a Paris cafeteria in the in May of 1968. The student riots had just begun. I was in a lineup waiting for lunch on the campus of the Cite Universitaire International campus—forty national houses for students from around the world. It was May of 1968.

I was looking over the room watching two hundred students sitting at tables eating. The noise was terrible. The students were speaking in their own languages and yelling at one another to be heard over the noise of other languages and the din of the tin plates. It was like being on the ground floor of the Tower of Babel.

I was standing next to two American students in a line waiting to be served. They were looking out at all the students just as I was and I heard one of them say to the other, "Geez, I wish we had a culture don't you." It reminded me of Marshall McLuhan's observation: *"I don't know who it was that first discovered water but I'm sure it wasn't a fish"*

Then there is the problem of trying to think about the potential impacts of climate change on our communities. Like many other people who live on the West Coast we have an Earthquake Kit in our front hall. We are preparing for “The Big One.” What we really need is an earth quake kit in our minds. (It’s a terrible analogy but I’m sure you get the point.)

Some might object that it is impossible for us to think of communities in terms of relationships to Earth. Not so. The Inuit and Dene indigenous Arctic communities where I worked for many years didn’t think of their communities in terms of specific geographic locations. They had been nomadic peoples and only came off the land in the first half of the last century. I came across one of the traditional definitions of a community. “*A community is an intimate reality with all living things, both animate and inanimate*”

On a project level we are in a trial and error situation. Some of our efforts to create community climate change cultures will succeed. At other times they will fail. We will face a great deal of hostility from those who are opposed to our efforts. They will do everything they can to maintain their power over the existing systems

This time of chaos will have a profound psychic/spiritual effect upon us. Working to develop community climate change cultures is not a cake walk. We need to develop personal practices that will help us restore and maintain resilience. These restorative practices may be things like daily meditation, Tai Chi, walking in the woods, listening to music, reading poetry, volunteering on specific projects we find helpful, meeting on a regular basis with a small group of friends—whatever it take to maintain our spirit.

**To conclude:** This is my version of “*Creating Climate Changing Community Cultures In a Chaotic World.*”

To accept the challenge of adapting our community cultures to the challenges of climate change we need some basic skill development. I’ve attached an appendix. I’m suggesting that communities undertake a community education program based on courses and discussion groups.

## APPENDIX

### Skills Needed to Help Develop

#### Community Climate Change Cultures

To adapt our current cultures to deal with the climate change crisis a community education program might be helpful. . Here are some suggestions for courses and/or discussion groups.

- Climate Change—the major causes, why it is a crisis
- The nature of community cultures
- Organizing at the community level
- Identifying and building community resources
- Learning to reframe for climate change
- Making changes in our personal lifestyle
- Systems thinking: how our existing systems are contributing to the crisis.
- Clean energy alternatives
- Innovative system developments: Limits to Growth, The Green New Deal, The Doughnut Economy, etc.
- Basic communication skills: How to translate the science into stories the community can understand
- The use of social media to establish networks.
- Dealing with conflicts at the community level: the middle ground between the right and the left
- Developing courses on climate change for high schools
- The role of seniors in the climate change battle.
- Learning how to organize political campaigns
- How to do research on climate change. Identifying some of the best online resources
- How to fund raise
- Resources to build resilience.
- Etc. etc. I would welcome additional suggestions

Resource persons with the required skills to teach or facilitate discussion groups are available in most medium sized or large communities. Courses could be sponsored by community colleges.

I invite and welcome any comments or suggestions on this article and appendix.

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