

2021 CLIMATE CHANGE CHRONICLE 7

Toward a Climate Change Culture

About Cultures

The other day, as I was thinking about writing this chronicle, I was walking down the road in our neighbourhood. I heard a noise, looked up and saw a man nailing shingles onto a roof. As I was passing the house, he sneezed. I looked up and said, “God bless you.” He looked down and said, “Thank you”.

My expression, “God bless you”, was part of my family culture. It came from my parents, who got it from their grandparents, or maybe it came from our Irish Christian ancestors. I don’t know how they came upon this saying for sneezers. The man on the roof’s “Thank you” was probably part of his family culture. But when cultures become part of us we tend not to notice them. That can be a good thing, as in this case, or a bad thing.

Here is another example of cultural habits that we just take for granted.

Most evenings I watch a number of U.S. evening news programs on TV. They are filled with stories about the pandemic, conflicts among political parties, racial tensions, mass shootings, the impact of climate change around the world, and so forth.

Between the bad news segments comes what seems to be some good news—the commercials. Most of them show happy people who are buying expensive cars, mattresses that adjust to your body weight, food and exercise that help you lose weight, life insurance, cosmetics and drugs of all kinds, vacation trips to south sea islands or river cruises in Europe and so forth.

There are two interesting things about these commercials. First, they have nothing to do with the dangerous events going on in the real world. Second,

most of them are promoting things that cost money, often a lot of money. And, though we do not think of things this way, the commercials are also establishing and promoting a culture—more specifically a money culture that has exploded in the last 100 years. You have to have these things or be able to buy them if you want to live a happy life and be respected by your peers.

So how did this money culture get to be so dominant? Of course it has come about in part because of the development of our media, the expansion of the middle class and the growth of neo-liberal financial systems. Now more people have and want things that formerly only the rich could dream of. Meanwhile the impact of the money culture has done immense damage to our Earth and its creatures.

The Radical Change in Awareness

Today scientists are telling us that we have entered the beginnings of a new Earth age—the Anthropocene. It is replacing the Cenozoic Era that began at the time of the death of the dinosaurs sixty-six million years ago.

There are various opinions about the actual start of this new age. Some scientists see its beginnings in the late 1700s with the start of the Industrial Revolution, others place the date much later. Regardless of the exact date, it is clear that somewhere down the road we have taken over from Earth the process of evolution. In more recent years this process has been driven by the wealthy leaders of a relatively small group of corporations. The growth of their corporations hinges on making continual profits for their shareholders. In turn this demands almost unlimited access to Earth's resources. The Gross Domestic Product (GDP) has overtaken the limited Earth Domestic Product (EDP). This economic process has spread world-wide and the process itself is a culture maker.

All over the world individuals and organizations have recognized the problems created by our current culture and are trying to do something about it.

The Way Forward

So how do we turn things around? We don't sit down with a group of people and decide we are going to create a culture. Instead we take some specific steps and positive actions that will eventually lead to the emergence of a climate change culture.

First we have to redefine our relationship with Earth. It is not something "out there". It is something within us—a living relationship. As Thomas Berry and Brian Swimme have noted, we need to foster a mutually enhancing relationship between our species and Earth. The key word is "relationship" We are earthlings and we depend upon the living Earth for our continued existence. Here we might explore the relationships of Indigenous peoples who traditionally have always seen themselves as children of the living Earth.

When I first went to live and work in Inuit communities on Baffin Island in the High Arctic I couldn't see how the Inuit could have developed a culture enabling them to live and work for several thousand years in the harshest climate on Earth. But then I came to understand more about their culture. I remember reading a study by two scientists from the south about Inuit hunters. It seemed to explain it all. It was entitled "*I Am I and My Environment*".

Second, we can't do this alone. We have to engage with others in our communities and bioregions. Here I will borrow a page from Peter Senge in his book "*The Fifth Discipline*". The book was about learning organizations. I will adapt it to our situation.

Senge starts by using the term "metanoia". It is a Biblical term which means "a change of mind". He states that if we want to create learning organizations we have to change our minds—learn to think of things differently.

In our relatively new climate changing world we need to think differently about our world. The whole thing is a learning process. The scientists can give us a good idea about the causes of climate change. But they are often quite silent about what to do about it and especially how to do it. .

Our job is to read the simplified versions that appear in magazines, newspapers and social media. We then have to learn how to translate the information into action. It is a trial and error learning process. Our communities must become learning communities.

Third, we must also especially care for those in need who can't care for themselves. We must prepare our children and grandchildren to deal with the problems in the world we have handed over to them.

Recently I read an article by a doctor who teaches medical staff how to deal with emergency situations. She is very much in demand during this pandemic. She is also deeply concerned about the environmental impacts of the world in which we live.

One day she was lying down beside her sleeping nine-month old daughter. She looked at the baby and said to herself, "My daughter has climate change." I've never heard it put that way but it sure makes the point.

Fourth, Caring For Ourselves

There is nothing to focus our attention like a world-wide pandemic. Then there are the heat waves like the one we just experienced in western North America, the destruction of species, carbon emissions polluting our air, rising waters threatening our cities and towns, loss of farmlands due to drought, the increase in the number of severe weather events. So we only have two choices. One is to let the chips fall where they may. The other is to take action.

I think the sane approach is to take action. The climate changing Earth is sending us a very loud message. It is telling us that it will be a difficult road ahead with both successes and failures—perhaps many failures. But doing nothing makes no sense at all. We need to take decisive steps to help the living Earth that will eventually lead to a climate change culture.

To Summarize,

In this chronicle I've been talking about the impact of our current culture on a climate changing world.

We have to begin by redefining our relationship with Earth. Then we have to replace our neoliberal money cultures and work with others to help create learning communities to deal with the harsh realities of our climate changing world.

A critical dimension in the road ahead is to help others who are in need, those who, for one reason or another can't help themselves. We must especially help those who come after us, our children, grandchildren and their descendants. If we do our part to change the culture that got us here, our descendants will take actions that will further add to the development of a climate change culture.

Can we succeed? We must succeed. And our great supporter is Earth itself. It will motivate us by continually acting out and showing us what we are doing to ourselves.

Finally, most successful cultures have deep within them a spiritual dimension. By way of conclusion I share an Earth prayer from my Irish Christian culture.

“May the road rise up to meet you

May the wind be always at your back

May the sun shine warm upon you

And rains fall softly upon your fields

And, until we meet again

May God hold you in the palm of his hand.

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