

COMOX VALLEY CLIMATE CHANGE CHRONICLES (10)

Learning from Monkeys and Chickpeas

How do we learn to deal with and prepare for climate change at the local level? Thinking about this we were inspired by the advice of Albert Einstein. He said, "*The significant problems we have cannot be solved at the same level of thinking with which we created them.*" So we local folks have to begin thinking differently. And, in advising about solutions he noted, "*Everything should be made as simple as possible but not simpler.*" His words reminded us of a story about a problem in India.

In some parts of India monkeys have over-populated. They are destroying farmland and the crops that people depend upon for their livelihood. The farmers have come up with simple but ingenious solutions to deal with this monkey business. .

They take bottles with rather narrow openings and tie them to trees. In the bottom of the bottles they sprinkle some chickpeas. The monkeys spot the chickpeas, put their fingers and hands into the narrow opening on the top of the bottles and grab the chickpeas with their fists. But they can't remove them from the bottles, they are too wide. Because of their greed the monkeys won't let go of the chickpeas. They are stuck there and are easy pickings for the farmers.

So what can we learn?

First, the monkeys and the chickpeas is a survival story. The farmers needed to find a way to stop the monkeys from destroying their crops that they and their families needed to survive.

We know that the scope of climate change is much more advanced in other parts of the world than it is here in Canada. Many communities are experiencing droughts, deforestation, the poisoning of the oceans, the destruction of fish stocks, the polluting of their air and so forth. But with global warming we have a sense that we are only biding our time. We have to prepare. Our survival depends upon it.

The second thing we learn from the story is the need for simplicity and practicality. Like the farmers we have to work with what we've got and turn it to the challenge at hand. Climate change will affect our education system, our political systems, our financial systems, our health care and social systems, our legal systems, our communication and technology systems—all systems.

Though we must start with what we have we must also be aware that sustainability may not always be an option. Some of our systems such as our economic systems demand unlimited growth and continued exploitation of resources. They are a major cause of the problem. They must be replaced or radically transformed.

The third thing we can learn from the story is the need for systems thinking. The monkeys are linked to the crops, to the farmers and their families, to the environments, to costs of land rentals and seeds and markets, to government systems, to cultural practices and so forth.

In our local communities we must learn to think both in terms of individual systems and how they relate to other systems. All systems deal with input and outputs. The water system comes in from the lakes, rivers and acquifers and goes out as sewage. A change in one part of the system affects the whole system and its relationship to other systems.

So a new sewage line affects costs and taxes, environment, treatment plant impacts on water sources such as the ocean and other water sources, the pros and cons of the system as it relates to neighbourhoods and house prices and so forth. Thus it is not enough to depend exclusively on engineers. And, for local politicians it is often a no win situations. Some people will be in favour of the pipeline and others may be opposed to it. We need to build consensus.

Fourth, there is the issue of transparency. The farmers can see the monkey's fingers grasping the chickpeas in the bottle and its inability to withdraw its hands. They can see how their system works.

In our climate change struggle we need to see how political decisions are being made. In particular we need to be able to see the influence of big money on politicians and political parties. As the people at the top become wealthier and the people at the bottom become poorer we have to fight to ensure transparency in our democratic institutions.

Fifth, and this is the most obvious, we need a community approach. A single farmer with a bottle and chickpeas cannot protect the fields. As they say, "It takes a community"

Farmers, monkeys and chickpeas can teach us lessons about survival, the use of simple but effective approaches, the need for systems thinking and transparency, the need for a community approach. We need them all in our community to deal with climate change.