

COMOX VALLEY CLIMATE CHANGE CHRONICLES 15a

The Milkman's Horse

My brothers and I grew up in the mid-1940s in a wonderful neighbourhood in East Toronto. Across the street was Withrow Park, a large (at least for us small kids) wonderland and we explored every inch of it.

In the winter there was a skating rink directly across the street. At night we could see reflections of the flood lights on the ceiling of our bedroom and hear the music. At the bottom of the park we would watch grown men in short pants speaking a strange language and running around kicking a white soccer ball. We thought it was a silly game that couldn't hold a candle to hockey.

But our great fascination in the neighbourhood was the milkman's horse.

In those days our milkman drove a horse-drawn cart. He would stop the cart down the street, take out a heavy iron anchor attached to the horse and put it on the sidewalk to keep the horse from running away while he was delivering the milk.

We always waited to see the horse come down the street to our house. We hoped he would rear up on his hind legs and whinny, like Silver, the Lone Ranger's horse in the movies. Or, at the very least, perhaps he would poop on the street in front of our house.

One summer morning after our dad left for work we were having breakfast with our mom. Suddenly we heard a terrible shrieking coming from the front of the house. We rushed out to the veranda and were shocked.

The milkman's horse was lying on his side on our lawn screaming, thrashing feverishly, hooves flying in the air. He was trying to rid himself of the fence wire that had gotten tangled up in his legs. There was milk all over the street and the milk man was standing on the sidewalk looking at his horse in a state of dumb shock.

Our mother was a small woman, barely five feet tall. She shot down the stairs, ran up to the horse, knelt down to dodge the flying hooves, and patiently untangled the wire. We thought she was going to get killed. Then she helped the horse to get up and spent some time patting him and calming him down. Later we remembered the stories she told about how she grew up on a farm in Manitoba and loved horses.

I thought about this incident while writing this chronicle. If it is so difficult for us humans to control a single animal, what made us think that we can control the living Earth without serious consequences?

We have been trying to manipulate and train Earth to respond to our ever increasing demands. Climate change is just the visible effect. The real problem is that we are affecting Earth at the genetic and systems level. But the living Earth is resisting our efforts. Just look at the television.

Every evening in the waning days of summer 2017 there have been countless pictures of people struggling to save themselves. Hurricanes have been rising up out of the Caribbean, destroying island communities in their path and ripping into the southern states. We see people in Mexico sorting through the rubble for bodies caused by two massive earthquakes just two weeks apart. Then there are the thousands of now homeless people in India and Southeast Asia waste deep in monsoon flood waters.

Despite fifty years of evidence and warnings from scientists about climate change we, and especially many of our politicians, have failed to recognize what is happening. They tell us these incidents are “natural” and they are correct. But they are the result of imbalances that we have created in the natural order. And Earth is reacting.

Despite the worst predictions it is not the end of the world or the end of our human species. We can turn things around. We have created this damaged world over some generations and we can “un-create” it. But it will take some generations to repair the damage.

So what to do?

Many of our governments have facilitated this abnormal situation. They have responded to the demands of many large corporations, sometimes by accepting financial incentives but more often by passing inadequate and even harmful legislation.

So we must work at the local level. We must create community cultures committed to restoring the real natural world. And, we must recognize that the core problems exist at the systems level. It is the entangled systems with their supportive laws that are creating the problems.

This will be a difficult struggle. We must support one another to jump in and un-entangle the damaging interlocking systems that are destroying our Earth. It is like what our mom did for the milkman’s horse—but on a vastly grander scale.

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