

COMOX VALLEY CLIMATE CHANGE CHRONICLES (17)

A Topdown Climate Change Consciousness

Years ago when I first moved to New York City I went to see the Empire State Building. As I stood outside on 5th Avenue I was aware of the crowds on the sidewalk, the din of the cars and trucks hustling by on the street and of one humongous building in front of me. I went in, rode the elevator up 102 floors to the viewing platform, and looked out. From there I had a very different perspective of the city: skyscraper, streets, businesses, neighbourhoods, parks, people that looked like busy ants moving around and the larger world beyond. I could see the diversity of the parts but they somehow seemed to link together in a bigger picture.

In dealing with climate change we must start with the big picture. But most of us concerned with climate change are not accustomed to think that way. Though we grew up with a mantra, “Think globally but act locally” Our problem was always with the “think globally” bit.

We often perceived thinking and talking about environmental as an intellectual exercise, perhaps even a waste of time. So we focused on the action. It is something we could control, something that would produce real results. We convinced ourselves that if we acted locally the global picture would take care of itself. Our approach was based on a very simple principle. The whole is nothing more than the sum of the parts.

Today with the influence of systems thinking and chaos theory we now realize that the whole is greater and more than the sum of the parts. (If you mix hydrogen and oxygen you get water. So which one contains the wetness?). In effect it is the whole that determines the relevance of the parts. To use our analogy, we can make some traffic improvements on 5th Avenue in New York but we must ensure that they improve the transportation system as a whole for it affects many aspects of life and business.

Because everything is linked together it is a matter of looking down from the whole, not up from the parts. So how do we develop a climate change consciousness?

In the early 1960’s the environmentalist Aldo Leopold started us down the right road. He said, if you want to understand the environment you have to “Think like a mountain.” It is clear from his writings that thinking like a mountain leads to action. If we change our way of thinking, the things we are thinking about will change. It will motivate us. It will inspire us to care for the mountain, its flora and fauna. Today, in what physicists tell us is a conscious universe, we might think of Leopold’s challenge in terms of a new consciousness.

The Oxford Dictionary tells us consciousness is “the state of being aware of, and responding to, one’s surroundings”. In a word it is both an intellectual and emotional reality. So we must concentrate on the whole and the parts together.

How do we do this?

First, we must adopt a holistic approach. We don't abandon the positive things we are doing in environmental or social programs, or our economy or legislation or governance. But we ask a basic Big Picture question that we discussed in an early chronicle about vision. **To what extent does what we are doing create a mutually enhancing relationship between our species and Earth?**

Second, we must be realistic. There is no way we can suddenly reverse the changes we are making to our planet—at least not in our lifetime. But, with a Big Picture perspective we can become system triage workers: removing the systems creating the most damage to Earth, salvaging and modifying the systems that we are still helpful.

Third, we can develop a more viable economic system, replace fossil fuels with natural energy, alternatives, develop more human and Earth friendly technologies, develop educational systems to deal with a changing world, stop poisoning our waters and soils, and so forth. As we are developing these alternatives we must also develop ways to phase them in.

Fourth, we must start with ourselves. We need to learn how to blend the top down with the bottom up. We need to find a realistic approach to “acting locally but thinking globally.” It is the thinking, the awareness of the damage we are doing to Earth and its ecosystems that must guide our “acting.”

One of my favorite songs is Billy Joel's “A New York State of Mind.” If we wish to deal with climate change in our community or any other community we need to put on a Climate Change State of Mind.

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