

## COMOX VALLEY CLIMATE CHANGE CHRONICLES (2)

### A Climate Change Context

We need a new context to deal with climate change.

The dictionary says: a context is the setting for an event, statement, or idea and in terms of which it can be fully understood. A bit too abstract. I prefer to define a context as *the way we see the world and give it meaning. More specifically it is the way we structure reality in our minds and in our actions.* Meaning gives rise to the action.

Different people see the world and construct it in different ways. When it comes to climate change some folks deny it exists. Other folks believe it is happening but don't know what to do about it. Still others believe that it is real, will affect them, their families, future generations and their communities. These folks may not know what to do about it but doing nothing is not an option. They decide to do some things that might be helpful.

So each group sees the world differently and each one perceives climate change according to their own structuring of reality. But the development of contexts always starts on an individual level. Then people often look for kindred souls that see reality the way they see it. This is how I discovered a more relevant context and decided to share it with others.

In 1980, our family moved to Baffin Island when I took a job as the Baffin Superintendent of Social Services. When I asked my superiors in Yellowknife what I was supposed to do out there they told me I was supposed to help the Inuit people develop. So development became the context and I was pretty comfortable with that.

I had a number of developmental management theories to try out: Management by Objectives, Zero-based Budgeting, Performance Management, etc. So I had my marching orders, my theories, and a context. I was excited and thought of myself as the professional developer the Inuit had been waiting for.

It didn't take me long to see my management theories were useless. After a while it dawned on me that Yellowknife's idea of development was a community that got its budgets in on time and had a number of staff that could speak English (for we weren't about to translate rules and regulations into Inuktitut, their language). So a developed community was one that looked like a well-run, well organized small town in, say, northern Ontario. But I really started thinking about another job when I realized that the Inuit had been developing themselves and survived for centuries in the most severe climate on Earth. Our governmental approach didn't make sense.

The reality really struck me as I started travelling up and down the Island, holding community meetings to get feedback on our services: child welfare, social assistance,

drugs and alcohol, our correctional center in Frobisher Bay. I'd be sitting in a community hall on the top of Baffin Island, in winter darkness at -40 to -50. Inevitably an elder would get up and say in Inuktitut, "Learn from the land". It was a sort of mantra that I heard in a number of communities. I respected it as an important part of their culture but I felt it was completely irrelevant to the serious services we were developing.

One day, when I was about to give up on this whole context thing I was reading a book by Thomas Berry, a cultural historian and geologist. A short sentence jumped off the page at me. It said, "The universe is the only text without a context." A little later Berry said, in relation to Earth, "We are not a collection of objects. We are a communion of subjects." In other words we are earthlings in an Earth community of living species. When I read these words I heard in my mind the echoes of the elders in those community halls telling me to "Learn from the land." I had found my new context.

I am not suggesting that we turn back the clock and try to transfer the traditional indigenous context to our modern world. We don't have to. A new context is already emerging. Modern evolution has established our relationship with Earth. We humans are earthlings and, in a sense, kin to other species. And quantum physics has taught us that as humans we and other species are in a constant relationship with Earth and the Universe. There is a bridge developing between the wisdom of indigenous elders and a new cosmology of which we humans are a part. This is the new context. .

In the difficult and dangerous world of climate change the words of the Inuit elders are more timely and relevant than ever. "Learn from the land."

Mike Bell

Comox Valley Climate Change Network.