

CLIMATE CHANGE CHRONICLE 27

About Culture

In these chronicles I've often used the term "Community Climate Change Culture." This chronicle explains what I mean by "culture".

My interest in culture began when I lived in Paris. In May of 1968 I was a student working on a degree. I was also working as a student chaplain. I was living in a residence across the street from the Cite Universitaire Internationale, a huge student campus with forty national houses for students from around the world.

On May 3rd the first student riots broke out and for the next few months the whole society rolled to a stop. Like many other people I spent many evenings on the Left Bank watching the students build barricades and then engage in pitched battles with the police.

One day I went over to lunch in the Cite cafeteria. There were several hundred students eating at tables with fellow students from their own countries. The din was incredible. The students were having to shout at one another because of all the languages being spoken, and everyone was eating out of tin plates. It was like walking into the ground floor of the Tower of Babel.

I was in a lineup waiting to get served. Immediately next to me were two American students looking out over the crowd at this wonderful sight. One of them turned and said to the other, "I wish we had a culture, don't you?" I was surprised. They didn't seem to realize that they had a culture and that their culture—with its films, economy, lifestyles, technologies and English language—was moving through every other culture on Earth with a two-edged sword. In those days the word culture referred to customs, practices and rituals. Except for the arts, the physical environment was not part of the culture. It was just something "out there."

A decade later our family moved north. I worked for almost three decades across the Canadian Arctic as a community organizer. What a difference in terms of an understanding of culture. Among indigenous people in the Arctic the environment was not part of the culture. It was the culture. The Land was living and they were part of it.

I remember reading an early anthropological study of Inuit hunters. It was entitled, *I am I and My Environment*. When I held community meetings to seek advice on programs and projects the Inuit elders would often get up and repeat their mantra, "*Learn from the land.*" Because they had been nomadic peoples (coming off the land to settlements in the 50s and 60s) community was not based upon a particular geographical location. One traditional definition of a community was "*An intimate relationship with all living things both animate and inanimate.*"

So how does all this relate to developing a viable community climate change culture? I think we must consider three things: the scope of the problem, the ultimate long-term goal, and the alternatives.

In terms of scope, climate change is affecting our whole civilization as we know it and it will be with us for generations to come.

In terms of our long term goal I think it was best described by Thomas Berry as *“developing a mutually enhancing relationship between our species and our living Earth.”*

In terms of alternative approaches at the community level there seem to be two possibilities. We can either...

1. Maintain our present practices and try to incorporate the present systems into our human cultures (better environmental laws, more resources, more education, etc.) or
2. Create a community Earth culture with its own laws and integrate our human cultures into it.

As you might suspect, I prefer the second option. But I'm not suggesting we adopt an Inuit culture or any other indigenous culture and superimpose them on our communities. I am suggesting we can learn from these cultures and work to create Earth cultures in our own communities. .

Whichever option we choose will entail a lot of hard slogging, struggles and the development of alternatives and transitions.

So where do we start?

I think we must begin by examining our present systems and determining the extent to which they are helping to create a mutually enhancing relationship with Earth or doing just the opposite—damaging the living Earth that we all depend upon for our continued existence. I think the psychiatrist R.D. Laing spelled out this first step quite clearly.

“The range of what we think and do is limited by what we fail to notice. And because we fail to notice what we fail to notice there is little we can do to change; until we notice how failing to notice shapes our thoughts and deeds.

In the next several chronicles I will explore an Earth culture in more detail with some insights from ancient leaders still functioning today—the shamans.

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