

CLIMATE CHANGE CHRONICLE 30

The Power of Personal Witness

How can we change people's minds and get them involved in the climate change struggle? I'm convinced that there is nothing more effective than personal witness—individuals and groups that “walk the talk.” I became convinced of this in a single moment, on a single evening, at an event in the early 1970s.

I was working as a community organizer on Milwaukee's East Side drug community. The whole country was involved in the war in Vietnam. In our community we were very much aware of the war because of the number of Vietnam vets we were trying to care for who returned to our community with heroin addiction problems.

One evening the students at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee invited the leaders of the various churches to attend a meeting to explain their churches' position on the war in Vietnam. I knew it would be interesting because, to my knowledge, none of the churches had a position. There were a couple of hundred students in the audience. The church leaders were sitting at a long table on the stage facing the students. I was sitting close to the front, on the left side, at the far end of the table. The church leader on the stage directly across from me, who would be the last to speak, was twiddling his thumbs with a very worried look on his face.

The discussion started at the other end of the table with a monsignor representing the Roman Catholic Church. He had the toughest job because Cardinal Spellman of New York, head of the military chaplain service, would periodically bless the troops and send them on their way “to defeat the atheistic communists”. The monsignor didn't really make it through his comments before the yelling broke out. It continued as each church leader began his talk and was shouted down. Finally they came to my friend the thumb twiddler.

Just before he spoke a student stood up, held up his draft card, looked out at him and said. “My family used to go to your church. I'm going to burn my draft card when I'm called in at the end of this month. I'll go to jail. I want to hear your church's position on the war.” The audience cheered and clapped. The minister looked up and said, “I think I can understand what you are going through.” I thought, “Wrong thing to say. They will chop you up into little pieces.” The audience went berserk.

Then, after a couple of minutes of yelling “Shame!” came the moment. The minister raised his hands and asked to say just one more thing. He said, “I think I

can understand what you are going through because I did what you are going to do and spent four years in jail.”

There was an audible gasp in the room followed by dead silence. I looked down my row and saw people with astonished looks on their faces, some with tears in their eyes. In another few seconds of quiet two hundred people got up and silently walked out of the room.

So what does this have to do with witnessing to climate change? Everything! We are in a war with planet Earth and this is a war we must lose.

We must begin by realizing that we have moved into a new era, the Anthropocene, the first “man-made” era. We have very little experience living in this new world, and we are destroying it.

Next we must recognize the “order of magnitude” that comes with this new world. It affects everything- all species, programs, services, institutions, systems, human culture—all life as we have known it.

Third we can’t try and deal with it the way we often do—by creating a new specialized service or program. Climate change is not about creating a program. It is about creating a new context for understanding and responding. Here an example might help.

Puerto Rico has always had a broad range of services, government and private. As in all societies these agencies sometimes have difficulty working with each other. They tend to operate in their own “silos”. But then came Hurricane Maria. It affected everything. It created a new context for understanding regardless of what agency or service was trying to respond to the crisis. If the community was to survive, all groups and organizations had to work together. This became the “new normal”.

So where are the potential climate change witnesses in our community? They are dedicated people providing services and volunteering in activities that help the community. The challenge is to help them link their issues or areas of concern to the growing, new context of climate change.

(This will not be easy. I’ve had the experience of meeting with large, diverse community groups, mentioning climate change and getting a negative reaction. I was perceived as getting “off topic” and told I should be talking specifically about the environment. It is difficult to tell people you are talking about “everything.”)

Finally, there is our work on the personal level. Living in a privileged world of rampant consumerism we must each determine what for us is “enough”.

And, to witness in the community, we must develop a spiritual resilience. Often the work is like Waiting for Godot with very few tangible results. It can also cause harsh blowback from those that want to leave things the way they are.

In conclusion...a reminder. The word “witness” comes from the Greek word “martyr” and is linked to the persecution and deaths of the early Christians in the Roman Empire.

Mike Bell, Comox Valley Climate Change Network