CLIMATE CHANGE CHRONICLE 34

Counter Cultures Then and Now

My first real job was working as a community organizer in a counter-culture neighbourhood on Milwaukee's East Side. The war in Vietnam was sending us heroin-addicted Vietnam vets, the Gay Pride movement was just getting started, and the Jesus Freaks were big into the magic mushrooms. All of this happening in what used to be a working class community. I was hired by the Lutheran Church to help the street people set up needed programs.

Our guru was Saul Alinsky, the writer of *Rules for Radicals*. His approach was to find out what the community wants, identify the bad guys and attack. So that is what we did. We attended council meetings and created a lot of disruption. (I don't remember if we followed his advice about having our people sitting on all the toilets during the long meetings and having little kids walk across carpets on hot days with double-dip ice cream cones. But I do remember playing with a beach ball in the council chambers, banging it back and forth over the heads of the councilors during the meeting—until we were forcibly removed.)

The problem was that some of the other guys were doing the same thing to us. The Catholic Church set up a critically important drug crisis and treatment center in our local hospital. But they also hired Alinsky organizers to come into our community and try to clear out anyone with long hair, beards, head bands, tie-died shirts, and flowers in their hair. It was a crazy world.

Alinsky's tactics worked well in those days but they won't work well today. Why not? Because of globalization, identity politics and systemic cultures that have changed the nature of community challenges.

Globalization. With globalization the "bad guys" no longer live in our local communities. As we have seen fighting a harmful coal mine we had to struggle against corporate mining partners in Vancouver, Korea, and Japan, along with a supportive provincial government in Victoria enabling the project. There were not going to be any beach ball games in those board meetings.

Identity politics. To an increasing degree the residents in many communities no longer identify as community members. They identify with particular group issues. They become tribes. The classic examples are in the U.S. where a Tea Party group sees itself as pro-gun, anti-immigrant, anti-big government and, for good measure, anti-climate change. This is less the a phenomenon in Canada but it seems to be growing in Europe. In some cases in various places around the world democracies are becoming dictatorships.

Systemic Cultures. Corporations and Governments have very strong systemic cultures. Corporations are ruled by one fundamental cultural principle: *make a profit*. This principle affects all aspects of corporate life. If a company doesn't make a profit there is no reason for it to continue to exist.

Political parties also have a systemic culture. Undoubtedly there are many good and dedicated politicians who want to do the best for their constituents. But they too are guided by a fundamental cultural principle. *"Don't do anything that will alienate our base and/or jeopardize our ability remain in power."* Often campaign promises go out the window as soon as a party is elected.

So why create a counter-culture at the local level? Because it seems like the only road to getting a permanent community climate change culture. Things don't change unless we can show how the current systems are doing irreparable harm to Earth and to current and future generations.

In previous chronicles we have talked about the need to adopt a fundamental principle for a climate changing world, a principle that will do for our community what the concepts of profit and sustainability do for corporations and governments. The cultural principle is **To create a mutually enhancing relationship between our species and Earth.** To be honest this principle seems somewhat airy-fairy. Nice, but how do we put in into practice?

We put it into practice by demonstrating why the present systems are causing serious problems—how they are damaging Earth. That is where the counter-culture comes in. We use our principle to evaluate what the other systems are doing to Earth and why we need a change.

Some years ago I came across a quote from the management guru Peter Drucker. He said, referring to businesses, *"Culture eats strategies for breakfast."* The message was clear. A proposed corporate strategy or policy is good if it is consistent with the cultural values of the company. But it is rejected if it is not consistent with cultural values and objectives of the company.

Cultures evolve over time through a trial and error process. We can use our climate change cultural principle to evaluate the systems that are harmful to our community and Earth.

The counter culture precedes and leads to the community culture that can best sustain us and future generations. We need a community culture that will eat harmful strategies and policies for breakfast.

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