

CLIMATE CHANGE CHRONICLE 35

Reframing for the Anthropocene

In the run-up to the creation of Nunavut in 1999 I was giving a workshop on reframing in Resolute, the small Inuit community closest to the North Pole. The participants were kadluna (white) civil servants. The subject was reframing—how our cultures teach us to see the world and give it meaning.

After supper I had a conversation with Basil Jesu-Dawson, an East Indian Canadian, fluent in inuktitut (the Inuit language), and a highly respected member of the community. He built the lodge where we were holding the workshop and was also an outfitter for folks who came to Resolute from around the world and wanted to trek to the Pole. He asked me about reframing. After I explained it to him he told me a story.

"Several years ago I was outfitting a couple of Australians for a trip to the Pole. They told me what happened to them on one occasion back in Australia when they were going into the outback--but they didn't know the country. Since they would be travelling in a desert area, they were particularly concerned about finding the water holes. To make sure they wouldn't get into trouble, they went into the closest aboriginal village, talked to the local chief and asked him to mark the water locations on their map--which he did.

The next day they took off in a small plane, had the pilot drop them off at their destination, promising to return to pick them up at an agreed upon location in ten days. When the pilot returned he discovered the two men lying on the ground almost dead. They had found no water holes and they were furious with the treacherous chief of the village who, as they saw it, deliberately tried to kill them by giving them false information about the location of the water.

A week later, after they had recovered from their ordeal, the two adventurers drove their land rover back into the village, charged into the chief's house and began screaming at him, accusing him of deliberately lying to them. "The water wasn't where the arrows said it would be," they yelled. "What arrows?" the chief asked. "These arrows." They pulled out the map and jabbed their fingers down at the place where the chief had clearly marked the arrows on the map that pointed to the water. The chief looked down at the map, then up at the two men. "Those are not arrows," he said. "Those are emu tracks,"-- the tracks of a flightless Australian bird. And the tracks showed that the bird was moving in exactly the opposite direction to where the two men thought the "arrows" were pointing".

Basil sat back, looked at me with a twinkle in his eyes and said, "Now that's what can happen when people don't learn to reframe."

From time to time I would get a telephone call from a company asking me if I gave workshops in cross cultural communications. I asked them if they were looking for someone who could tell them about the Inuit or Dene cultures. They would say "yes" and I would say "I don't do that. If you want to know about their culture you have to ask one of their elders."

Sometimes they would ask me what I did do and I would say, “I help folks understand what our culture is doing to their culture”—at which point they would usually hang up.

Knowing what our culture is doing to other people’s cultures may be a starting point for future generations trying to build a culture for the Anthropocene.

Because a totally different world is being created by climate change, there is no way we can provide details on building a viable Anthropocene culture. But we can help them reframe—learn to see the world differently than we have seen it.

There are a lot of old geezers like myself who know how our generation’s culture has damaged their world. We can tell them about destructive economic and political systems, over-reliance on technology, rampant consumerism, the conflicts between the rich and poor, the over population, the failure to recognize Earth laws to guide human laws. In a word we can tell them how to avoid the mistakes we have made.

We can’t draw arrows on a map that will show them the way but we can sketch out some emu tracks away from a desolate Earth to resources that will help them develop a healthier, livable Earth.

More about “how to” in upcoming chronicles.

Mike Bell, Comox Valley Climate Change Network.