

CLIMATE CHANGE CHRONICLE 13

A Walk in the Anthropocene

The term Anthropocene (meaning “man-made”) is the new term scientists are using to describe a new era. It is replacing the former Cenozoic Era that has existed since the death of the dinosaurs, sixty-five million years ago. The dominant characteristic of the Anthropocene is climate change.

When I first heard the term “Anthropocene” I said to myself, “That’s nice. Something we humans can be proud of.” But my attitude changed when I saw the impact of climate change: the increased number of hurricanes, forest fires, monsoons, rising oceans and flooding, long lines of refugees grasping their children’s hands and leaving behind their dried up farms, carrying little more than the clothing on their backs.

I began to understand. The full meaning of the term Anthropocene came to me when I recalled a walk I took in the early 80s.

I was in Cape Dorset, an Island community in the south-western corner of the Baffin region. I was the superintendent of social services for the region. My boss from Yellowknife and I were staying in a small hotel and waiting for a plane to take us back to Frobisher Bay, but the plane was delayed because of an emergency medivac. One of the other guests in the hotel suggested we go for a walk. He was an elderly man and a professional hiker. We’ll call him Joe. He told us he had hiked on all continents except Antarctica.

We set out in the early afternoon. It was a beautiful sunny day in late May but still quite cold so we had winter coats on. After lunch he led us to the edge of town, down an embankment to a little trail that ran for a hundred yards or so until it came to another embankment. We climbed up to a wide open area along the sea edge. My boss and I walked around all afternoon solving the problems of the world. In the late afternoon Joe led us back to the trail. He was well ahead of us. Then we got the shock.

The trail was covered with water and in the middle of it was Joe. His back to us, he was up to his waist in water. We started yelling. He didn’t respond. I jumped down the embankment into the water and reached up and pulled my boss down with me. We headed for Joe, yelling out to him. It was then that I felt myself getting pushed off the trail. My boss grabbed me and for the first time I realized that we were being pushed by the incoming tide. Ice chips were everywhere.

We eventually made it to Joe. The water was still rising. He was in state of shock. I grabbed him and pried his staff out of his hands. I tried to use it to probe the water level in front of us but the staff was bent and useless. We had only one option. We couldn’t

go back, we could only keep going forward. Eventually, holding on to each other, we made it to the embankment and pulled ourselves up out of the water. For a while we lay exhausted on the ground hit by the realization of what had just happened. Then we stripped off all our clothes and started to ring them out. Then someone threw some wet underwear at someone else and we were all doing it, laughing and yelling with tears in our eyes. We were still alive.

Today I think of the Anthropocene with its climate change as a huge tide moving over the Earth and affecting all areas and communities, some before others. We can't fight against it. We have to learn to deal with it.

We must understand what is happening. Earth has always had its bad moments but evolution is no longer "natural". In the Anthropocene we humans have taken over the evolution process. We are destroying Earth and its ecosystems because we think it has unlimited resources—and they belong to us. Earth is something "out there" something designed for our use and pleasure. The major problem is our neoliberal economic systems and the political and legal systems that too often are designed to do its bidding.

Reflecting on my near death experience walking in the Anthropocene I learned three things.

First, we must realize that our current systems are like the staff that is bent out of shape and useless. We need new systems.

Second, the good news is that we are all in this together and we can depend upon one another. The only way we survived in the tidal waters was by supporting one another. None of us could have made it alone. There is joy and inspiration in working together.

Third, we need a new way of thinking. We have to learn that we are Earthlings, part of a living and conscious Earth, and the living conscious Earth is part of us. What we are doing to Earth we are doing to ourselves. We have to notice the Anthropocene tide.

Many years ago the psychiatrist R.D. Laing said it so well:

"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"

This Chronicle first appeared in the Watershed Sentinel. We are taking a Christmas break. The next Chronicle will be in early January 2019.

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