

CLIMATE CHANGE CHRONICLE 27

The Spiritual Side Of Our Response to Climate Change

As the title of this chronicle indicates, it is about the urgent need to reframe on a spiritual level in a world undergoing the increasingly severe effects of climate change. (First, In terms of Spirituality--Full Disclosure: I am a Christian and a former monk and Roman priest practicing my faith in a Unitarian Fellowship.) So what is a frame?

A frame is the psychic and emotional context within which we send, receive and interpret messages, establish relationships, see the world and give it meaning. We don't see the world the way it is, we see the world the way we are.

Reframing is the need to change our frame due to different situations or circumstances—like recent information about climate change.

We have known about climate change for a long time. But a change in our understanding of it comes from a United Nations [report on Climate Change](#) that came out in October, 2018. It was developed by scientists from around the world and it was alarming. It noted that, given the current rate of global warming, if we do not make significant changes by 2030 we will be facing a real disaster by 2040.

So how do reframing, and this recent news about climate change fit together with spirituality? Here are the connections.

Spirituality and Religion

For many people spirituality is an essential component of their particular religion. If we look at the history of religions we can see that there are three essential elements: spirituality, tradition and world view.

For the purposes of this paper, the word spirituality refers to the insights drawn from the life and teachings of an inspirational leader—Jesus of Nazareth, Abraham, Mohammed, the Buddha and others.

Tradition captures the insights of the leader. It writes these down in sacred texts (scriptures) and develops doctrines or moral and ethical teachings that are used to guide the faithful.

The world view is the understanding of the world as interpreted by the religious leaders. This is critical because the purpose of the religion is to help its adherents to live meaningful lives in whatever their circumstances: ("Render to Caesar...etc.)

Today most mainstream religions, at least those on this continent and in Europe are in decline. There are many reasons for this but they are beyond the limitations of this chronicle to discuss. But one aspect of the decline is significant: a decline in church membership, especially among young people and families. I believe this is related to context—the changing world. The churches seem unable to reframe—to relate their traditional spiritualities to the changing world.

An Earth Spirituality

Within most of the world's religions there are the seeds of what we would call an Earth Spirituality. These can be found in the Abrahamic religions – Christianity, Judaism and Islam. They are very evident in other world religions and in many Indigenous and shamanic cultures and beliefs around the world.

There are many people who have never been members of a religion but have developed their own spirituality. This is often an Earth Spirituality and manifests itself in a wide variety of ways: music, art, writings, poetry, gardening, private meditations on nature, walks in the woods, travels on the land and so forth. This spirituality often leads to action to help care for Earth.

Finally, in relatively recent years we have seen the blossoming of an Earth Spirituality among many Christians. This growth has been inspired by the creation of a New Cosmology based on scientific development linking the creation of Earth and the human to the traditional cosmology, dealing with the planets and galaxies.

What is characteristic of this movement is the scientific background of its leaders. Teilhard de Chardin was a paleontologist, Thomas Berry was cultural historian and Brian Thomas Swimme is a mathematical cosmologist. While respecting the Bible they see the Earth as the primary source of divine revelation.

For some time these leaders and their many followers have been speaking out about the “irreversible transformations” we humans are causing to Earth through our economic, legal and political systems. Berry and Swimme have also proposed the need to reframe—to develop a new vision for a climate changing world. They called their vision the Ecozoic Era-- (from the Greek, “the household of living things”). This term indicates that our future as a species depends upon development of a mutually enhancing relationship between our species and Earth.

To conclude, I believe we urgently need to develop or rediscover an Earth Spirituality to help us on a psychic and emotional level as we deal with our climate changing world.

Perhaps there is one reframing question that remains unanswered. Is it possible to have an Earth Spirituality without a religion or a belief in a personal god? Yes it is. Here is the insight of an elder who did not believe in a personal god but did believe in an Earth Spirituality.

“A human being is a part of the whole called by us ‘universe’, a part limited in time and space. He experiences himself, his thoughts and feelings as something separated from the rest, a kind of optical delusion of his consciousness. This delusion is a kind of prison for us, restricting us to our personal desires and to affection for a few persons nearest to us. Our task must be to free ourselves from this prison by widening our circle of compassion to embrace all living creatures and the whole of nature in its beauty.”

Albert Einstein

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