

CLIMATE CHANGE CHRONICLE 34

A Lesson from the Far Side

I've always been fascinated by cartoons. The role of the cartoonist is to take some aspect of ordinary life—something we all recognize—and create a scene that is a mirror of our own lives.

One of my favourite cartoons is from Gary Larson's *Far Side Collection*. It shows two men sitting in a rowboat fishing. They are looking at the other side of the lake. Far off in the distance they can see four mushroom clouds, an indication of nuclear bombs exploding. One of the men says to the other, *"I'll tell you what this means, Norm...no size restrictions and screw the limit."*

So what are the takeaways from this cartoon? Three things.

First, Norm and his buddy know exactly what is happening. It is the end of the world, or at least their world. Second, there is absolutely nothing they can do about it. And third, they might as well take advantage of their current situation and catch as many fish as they can. There will be no one around to charge them with breaking the laws because there are no longer any laws.

So when we glance up from our daily pursuits, how do we react to the threat of climate change? Three different reactions.

Some of us spend a lot of time and energy trying to convince climate deniers that climate change is humanly induced. That is a complete waste of time. The denier numbers are rapidly dwindling. We can leave it up to nature with the floods, hurricanes, forest fires, arid soils and ever rising temperatures to convince them, especially when these things affect them directly.

Others don't know what to do or how to do it. It seems to be the job of scientific experts. They feel helpless to make big changes.

Last, there is a significant group of individuals who may pretend to be deniers but they do that to maintain the power they have been able to achieve with the existing economic and political systems. So they are doing what Norm's buddy is suggesting—taking advantage of the present situation to exploit as many natural resources as they can. They remove the existing legislation or work around it.

If we are to turn things around we must begin by recognizing the massive scope of the problem. I have never seen it expressed more succinctly than by Naomi Klein's article, [Climate Change is a People's Shock](#)

"...any attempt to rise to the climate change challenge will be fruitless unless it is understood as part of a much broader battle of world views—a process of rebuilding and reinventing the very idea of the collective, the communal, the commons, the civil and civic after so many decades of attack and neglect. Because what is overwhelming about the climate challenge is that it requires breaking so many rules at once—rules written into national laws and trade

agreements, as well as powerful unwritten rules that tell us that no government can increase and stay in power by raising taxes, or saying no to major investments no matter how damaging, or gradually contract those parts of our economy that endanger us all...If that worldview is delegitimized, then all of the rules within it become much weaker and more vulnerable.”

The challenge we are facing is not quite as obvious as the nuclear explosions our two buddies were watching. But it is the most significant challenge we humans have faced as a species since the extinction of the dinosaurs sixty-five million years ago.

So how do we relate to all of this? For instance, will our efforts to reduce, reuse and recycle help us with this situation? Not directly but it is a very good start. It will help us develop a community climate change culture that will influence major changes. But the real change can only be accomplished by those who have control over the political, economic and legal systems.

Every significant change in human history has started at the grass roots level and worked its way up—whether we are talking about racial integration, or the development of the feminist movement or recognizing the existence and rights of the LGBTQ community. It will be the same bottom-up approach dealing with climate change.

And a final point. We have to get rid of the concept that climate change is on the same level as the environmental movement or health programs or social programs. It is not. It is a context—a whole civilization context—that contains all other integrated systems. The key here is integration.

As Naomi Klein notes in the article mentioned above, forming a grand coalition to demand a guaranteed minimum income might be a lot more effective than, for instance, a fight for a less popular cause like a minimum carbon tax. Why? Because the systems are all integrated. Organizing people in one system can build local power and influence to deal with all the other systems.

Ultimately, however, we need a vision—something like a mutually enhancing relationship between our species and the living Earth. This is the foundation of a climate change culture.

Then there is the motivating reminder that the American poet Robert Haas expressed so well. *“We are the only protectors, and we are the thing that needs to be protected, and we are what it needs to be protected from.”*

Finally, there is the timing issue. As Donella Meadows, the author of *Limits to Growth* noted, *“We have just enough time to change things—if we start right now”*. She said that in 1972.

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Note. I'll be taking the summer off. There may be the occasional Chronicle. But I'll send them out again on a regular basis beginning in September. .