

CLIMATE CHANGE CHRONICLE 4

Learning Our Stories from Traditional Knowledge

In my early years working in the Arctic the federal government established a scientific research center. I facilitated two workshops with scientists to help them develop policies and research plans.

At the same time the Inuit and Dene groups were negotiating their land claims. They wanted to make sure that the research plans incorporated their traditional knowledge of places and practices that were built into their culture.

It would seem that there was a common ground between the scientists and the indigenous leaders. Both groups were concerned about the well-being of the Arctic and its future. But establishing the common ground was illusive. There was a clash of methodologies and cultures.

Though the scientists may have respected the wishes of the indigenous groups, they found it impossible to incorporate traditional knowledge into modern scientific methodologies and cultures. They sometimes tried to chop it up into little pieces so it would fit within their methodologies but it was a lost cause. Scientists were committed to a culture that focused on facts, figures and statistics. The emphasis was upon "objectivity" and the only real basis for objectivity was experimental evidence.

Traditional knowledge, on the other hand, is based upon stories, legends, myths and culture. Many of the stories focused on the relationships between humans and animals. These relationships were fundamental to indigenous cultures.

I remember an incident that outlines the importance of story in traditional knowledge. On one occasion government officials came from Ottawa to meet with native leaders to begin discussing their land claim. In the course of the discussion one of the government officials told the indigenous leaders that the land in question actually belonged to the federal government. The indigenous leaders, whose ancestors had lived on this land for centuries, were shocked. One of them stood up, looked across the table at the civil servant and said, *"If this is your land, where are your stories?"*

But though many scientists thought of traditional knowledge as a collection of unscientific myths and fables, there were some efforts to find a common ground. I remember one attempt by two anthropologists doing a study of Inuit hunters. They encapsulated the traditional culture into a simple but significant title for their study. *"I Am I And My Environment."*

So what does this clash of cultures and methodologies have to do with climate change?

Everything!

I'm not suggesting that we should try to adopt traditional knowledge as the foundation of our approach to climate change. I am suggesting that we need a more inclusive approach. I believe that some understanding of traditional knowledge can be extremely helpful.

For fifty years scientists have been telling us about the potential climate change disasters ahead of us. But for the most part their warnings have fallen on deaf ears. Though increasing numbers are coming to recognize the reality of climate change and what it means to our future, the real problem we all have is what to do about it.

Some place their hope in our new technologies and, yes, these technologies are important. But they will not save us. The real problem is with our dualistic thinking. We tend to think that we are "in here in our bodies" and the environment is "something else out there"—two separate things.

We have not grasped the fundamental message of traditional knowledge—that we are earthlings. We live within a living and conscious Earth and universe—and the living and conscious Earth and universe lives within us. What we are doing to our Earth and universe, we are doing to ourselves.

It is inevitable that when we think of climate change we think of our children, grandchildren and future generations. How will they see the damaged Earth they have inherited from us? Will they see themselves as earthlings and tell appreciative stories about us? Or, will they look back at the damaged Earth they have inherited from us with profound disappointment?

I don't know what kind of story they will have but I doubt it will be about facts, figures and statistics. I think it will be about us and how we failed to respond to something that was so obvious. I'm hoping that many of them will tell the story of how they came to realize that they are earthlings with a responsibility to help Earth heal itself.

And I'm sure many of them will have been inspired by the Earth storytellers and become storytellers themselves --telling stories that will help change their world.

As the American poet Muriel Rukeyser put it so well, "*The world is made up of stories, not of atoms.*"

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