

2019-2020- Climate Change Chronicle 11

Harbinger Thinking

I'm writing this chronicle in the midst of the Covid-19 pandemic. With the number of deaths, plummeting economy, loss of businesses and of jobs, overflowing hospitals this is the most serious and dangerous event in most of our lives.

As saddened as we all are about what is happening, this chronicle is not about the pandemic as such. It concerns what the pandemic may teach us about an even greater challenge: Climate change.

I know you've never heard of harbinger thinking. Neither have I but it seemed to fit. So let's start with the term.

What is Harbinger Thinking?

The word "harbinger" is an old English military term from the 16th century. When the members of the Royal Family wanted to travel somewhere, an officer called "The Harbinger" was charged with the responsibility to go out in advance and arrange for lodgings or shelters. Later on the word meant signs of future events, things like prophecies, heralds, predictions, and so forth.

I think the word "harbinger" could apply to our current pandemic as well as even bigger challenges ahead. In recent years scientists have been predicting a radical change in our lives and in our civilization due to climate change. They indicate that we must take critical steps in reducing our carbon output (some suggest by 2030) or we will face dire consequences.

I also like the older meaning of "harbinger" because it suggests finding or creating safe and secure havens on our journey— places of protection for ourselves and for all species. In other words, building a living and thriving Earth.

So harbinger thinking is a way to prepare a future that benefits our species and all species on a living Earth.

So is this Covid-19 a harbinger? Can we learn from this experience how to better prepare for the radical change that is ahead of us? We can if we change our thinking.

Changing our Thinking—the Challenge

Harbinger thinking begins with a change in our current way of thinking.

I spent most of my working life as a management consultant with community groups. My job was to help organizations redefine their role in a changing world. I used to tell my clients to reframe, "*We don't see the world the way it is. We see the world the way we are.*" Today I would add, "*We must see the world the way it is becoming.*"

But it is a real challenge to learn to think differently about the world as it is becoming. Changing thinking about the future runs contrary to everything we have been taught and to what we may be telling our own children and grandchildren.

We try to prepare them for the future but we can't predict the future. So we conclude that we have to go with what we know, not with what we don't know. We try to make sure our children are *grounded*. The belief, of course, is that "the ground" is and always will be something solid they can stand on.

Today we are discovering that our world and their future world can and will change and change radically. And nothing in our lifetime is demonstrating these changes more than the Covid-19 pandemic.

Thinking about our Economic systems

I have noted frequently in these chronicles that we are moving into a new kind of world. Within the last hundred years or so we have taken over from Earth the role of driving evolution. We are determining what shall continue to exist and what shall not exist, what is valuable and what is not valuable and so forth. And the lens we look through to make these evaluations is the lens of human systems.... particularly that of our economic system and the culture that has formed around it.

Today, when we turn on our televisions, there is a flood of stories about the pandemic—including the impacts of Covid-19 on our economy. We hear about the deaths, the overcrowded hospitals, the threats to healthcare workers. But we also hear about restaurant closures, layoffs, disruptions to the supply chain (especially the lack of ventilators, masks, anti-viral cleaners). We see a frantic struggle to shore up the economic systems that have been affected. There is a belief that they will save us. And there is no doubt that they might give us some temporary relief. But it is these very systems that are the major cause of climate change.

Thinking about political systems

It is difficult these days not to think about our political systems, particularly the American system which is, in most respects, the dominant system in the world. People are focused on how the American political system will deal with the pandemic.

What we see is discouraging. Most of the news is about inaction or delays on the part of governments and about political conflicts: between the President, his followers in the opposition; between the federal government and the state governments; between the citizens and the non-citizens; between the wealthy and the less fortunate and poorer members of society. It seems like a profoundly unjust society. As Elizabeth Warren noted about injustices in American society, *"If you are not invited to the table you are probably on the menu."*

In Canada if the pandemic gets totally out of control we could be facing similar issues. What our two countries seem to have in common is a desire by politicians to maintain and expand economic systems that are faltering. The inability of governments to deal with the "pandemic that will last for a number of months, or perhaps even a year or two" is not reassuring. Will these systems be able to deliver when faced with the generations-long challenges we can expect with climate change?

Thinking About Our Legal Systems

Long before there were legal systems in writing there was only one legal system: the laws of nature or what has become known in today's world as Earth Jurisprudence. Our ancestors learned the laws of nature in order to survive. These laws continue to this day in some aspects of Indigenous cultures. I am not suggesting that we return to or adopt Indigenous cultures. I am suggesting that we take steps to incorporate our cultures into the laws of nature.

Unlike a large number of United Nation countries, our Canadian and American constitutions do not make any reference to nature. There is not even a mention of the human right to clean air, clean water and fertile soil. Further, the environmental laws that exist are not really designed to protect nature. They are designed to limit the amount of damage we humans can do to the environment. Both of our countries have seen that environmental laws can be removed in the blink of a political eye.

Finally, our legal systems give rights to corporations as persons. This enables some corporations to own and control vast natural resources.

In 1972 in a famous Supreme Court case *Sierra Club v Morton*, the Sierra Club put forward the position of Christopher Stone in his book, *Should Trees Have Standing*. The court refused to agree but William O Douglas dissented, indicating that other things had rights, particularly corporations. It seems like time to revisit this issue.

Thinking About Our Communities.

As I noted in previous chronicles I've spent most of my life working as a community organizer in a variety of cultures. Never did I image that I would work with community members who were isolated from one another because of a pandemic's requirement for social distancing. Most people have been told to stay at home in a form of social isolation. But our traditional approach to community development requires that community members work together in small and medium-sized groups.

Fortunately we can communicate on line. But this is a mixed blessing. It is difficult to build solid working relationships without regular person to person contact. There is one thing that might be of significant benefit. Mass online media have increased our knowledge of the pandemic and also about the various ways communities are handling it. We are now gaining more firsthand experience with tools that may be useful in meeting the climate change challenge.

Harbinger thinking requires a vision that communities can work with. The vision is critical to building consensus. It must be a vision that creates a mutually enhancing relationship with our species and the living Earth. It must also help us deal with the systems that are causing climate change as well as help us create new systems. And, it must develop transition mechanisms from the old systems to the new ones.

A Summary

To summarize, I've talked about *harbinger thinking*, a new way of thinking to deal with the Covid-19 pandemic and the climate change challenge. Harbinger thinking has two important benefits: first, it helps us envision a future that includes all living beings; second, it helps us build a mutually enhancing relationship between all humans, other species and Earth itself.

Then I discussed how this new way of thinking can help us see the need for changes in our economic, political and legal systems and in our work at the community level.

Finally, here is a practice you might find helpful to build your resilience and renew your spirit for the long haul:

The requirement that we self-isolate in place can be a depressing situation. But it might be a good time for taking up practices that can encourage us, help us build resilience and renew our psyche and spirit. Here is a practice someone sent me that you might find helpful to build your resilience and renew your spirit for the long haul.

WHEN ANXIETY ARISES—A MEDITATION

Sitting comfortably, preferably outside, or near a window, contemplate each set of phrases as you gently breathe in and out three times.

Breathing in, I follow my breath all the way in.

Breathing out, I follow my breath all the way out. (3x)

**Aware of the life-sustaining oxygen filling my lungs,
breathing out I send loving gratitude for Earth's precious Atmosphere. (3x)**

**Aware of the fluids circulating in my body, keeping me alive,
breathing out I send loving gratitude for the mighty Waters of the Earth. (3x)**

**Aware of the healing sunlight touching and penetrating my body,
breathing out, I send loving gratitude for the Fire of Creation. (3x)**

**Aware of the firm but changing ground supporting me,
breathing out, I send loving gratitude for Mother Earth, the living body of our planet (3x)**

Breathing in, I feel calm and free from anxiety.

Breathing out, may all living beings be well. (3x)