

2019-20 Climate Change Chronicle 2

The Climate Strike March

There is a prediction in the Bible about the end of times. It says that, at the end of time your men and women will prophesy. Your old men will dream dreams and your young men and women will see visions.

I thought of these words last week when I was on a youth-led march for climate change. We are at the end of time—at least the end of the Cenozoic Era. We recently entered the Anthropocene Era—the man-made Era.

It is time for some different ways of thinking. Here are some thoughts that came to me during and after the march.

1. The March

Our community march was on Friday September 27, 2019. It was a march not a walk. The word “walk” suggests a leisurely affair, like a stroll in the park. A “march” has a military tone to it. It suggests that we are entering into a battle—and that is precisely what we are doing.

Many thousands of people in Canada participated in such a march. And a week earlier millions of people in the United States held similar marches.

I found it inspiring and encouraging that this world-wide action was initiated by a sixteen year old student, Greta Thunberg.

2. Politics and Political Parties.

The purpose of the marches in both Canada and the U.S. was to convince politicians that they need to do something about climate change. But what do they need to do? And how and when will they need to do it?

Right now would be a good time. We have our Canadian Federal Election on October 19. In the U.S. the federal election will be held on November 3 of next year. But judging from the number of hopefuls vying to become the Democratic candidate for president there is no doubt that the election season is in full swing there as well.

Before he dropped out of the Democratic debates, Jay Inslee, the governor of Washington State, ran a unique campaign. He had a single issue—climate change. An interviewer said to him, “This is crazy. How can you run for president on a single issue?” Inslee responded, “Yes, climate change is my only issue. If we can’t deal with it, the rest won’t matter.”

But is it possible for the present political parties to deal with the climate change issue? I think it is—but only if they all work to find some common ground. There are a number of other problems.

3. The Timing Problem.

One of the things we know about climate change is that it will continue not just for years but for generations. But our governments are elected for four year terms.

Parties don't think in terms of generations. They look for issues that can be dealt with now. This makes it very difficult to develop plans for what is becoming. Their followers want them to respond to their immediate needs...and do so because they want to get re-elected.

There is also the competitive issue. Candidates often run on a platform to do away with the policies and legislative priorities of the previous government. They introduce their own new policies. We Canadians saw this happen when the Conservative Harper Government did away with many of the environmental regulations and legislation put in by the previous Liberal government. President Trump is doing the same thing today. He is destroying the environmental regulations developed by the Obama government.

I'm not suggesting that we have to do away with competition. I am suggesting that the parties must share the same common ground. More about that shortly.

4. The Systems Problem

My family and I have benefited from the economic systems that are in place. But science is telling us that our systems are the cause of the climate crisis.

Our neoliberal economic systems have demanded continual profits and almost unlimited access to the limited resources of Earth. Many of these systems are designed to promote and prolong the use of fossil fuels, a major cause of global warming.

Our political systems are dependent upon contributions from major donors like corporations to stay in power. They need money for publicity in mainstream media and on-line. To keep those donations coming they often give special access to lobbyists from corporations.

Our legal systems support the economic systems in place. They pretend to pass laws that will protect the environment. In practice these laws only limit the amount of damage we can do to the Earth. And, as Canadians saw in the former Harper government and Americans can see in the Trump administration, politicians can remove existing environmental laws in the blink of a political eye.

What we need are living systems that can live within a living Earth. By "living systems" we mean systems that will benefit both us and the living Earth—systems that foster a mutually enhancing and beneficial relationship between our species and Earth. Fortunately these new systems are beginning to emerge. One immediately thinks of the Green New Deal, the Doughnut Economy, development of solar panels and windmills, electric vehicles and so forth.

5. The Power Brokers

Many current governments are headed by leaders who appeal to the fears of their supporters and to the greed of their corporate backers. Here is a recent example of how this is happening close to home.

The Alberta Tar Sands are by far the major cause of pollution in Canada. Recently the United Conservative Party won the Alberta election. Jason Kenny became the new premier and held his first formal meeting with the heads of oil and gas companies.

[In his talk](#) Kenny indicated he was creating a War Room with an annual budget of twenty million dollars. The purpose of the war room was to target and investigate environmental groups opposing fossil fuel development.

He suggested that his followers could learn a lesson or two from Putin who put dissident environmentalists in prisons in Siberia where they would never be heard from again. In the same talk he focused attention on a woman, Tzeporah Berman, a prominent environmentalist. She then faced a barrage of death threats.

There are many similar situations emerging from the Trump government in the United States that are familiar to people who watch the evening news.

Fortunately, in response to these short-sighted power brokers, some political parties are beginning to show a concern for longer term solutions.

6. Partnerships.

The situation I have described above is indeed difficult and there are no simple answers. But there are some things we can do. The first thing might be to realize that we cannot change things by ourselves. We need to enter into many partnerships.

For many years the Canadian and American governments have had a close working relationship, especially in terms of our respective economies. Now we are facing similar problems and, as much as possible must work together. Despite the huge differences in the size of our economies both of our governments can develop and share a common ground—a similar relationship with Earth. Still this will be a challenge.

Some years ago our former Prime Minister, Pierre Eliot Trudeau, was asked to describe our relationship with the U.S. He said, "*When a mouse gets in bed with an elephant it often goes poorly for the mouse, even when the elephant's intentions are honourable.*" Fortunately the signs of positive change are appearing in both countries.

7. Developing a Common Ground.

Can we do something that will create more stability and hold all political parties accountable? I think there is.

The majority of [United Nation Countries](#) have written into their constitutions the human right to clean water, sanitation and a healthy environment. Canada and the United States have not done so.

What would happen if we take an insight from Indigenous peoples? Instead of incorporating clean water, sanitation and a healthy environment into our current constitutions, we create an Earth Constitution and incorporate our political constitutions into it.

We could establish a fundamental principle in our constitutions: Whatever actions we take must foster a mutually enhancing relationship between our species and Earth. Our political constitutions must fit into our Earth Constitution.

The benefit of doing something like this is stability. It will require political parties to operate within this new context, regardless of the length of their tenure. They will still have their different priorities but this new constitution will establish a new common ground framework within which they must operate.

But is there anything in either of our political or legal histories that might support this significant step? Is there something we might use as a starting point, something that may have been tried before that we can build upon? I think there is.

8. A Lesson from William O. Douglas.

It was the 1972 Court Case in the U.S. Supreme Court—“*Toward the Legal Right of Nature*”, Sierra Club vs. Morton.

The Sierra club was basing its case on the 1972 book by Christopher Stone, “*Should Trees Have Standing?*” The U. S. Supreme Court turned them down. But there was one dissenting member of the court, Justice William O. Douglas. In his closing statement he said, “*We have given legal rights to non-living things like corporations. Why can't we give them to living things in Nature?*”

In our climate changing world where our systems and approaches are destroying the living Earth we depend upon for our continued existence, it seems to be time to take the next step. We must give ‘standing’ or status to trees and the living Earth.

9. We are Terrestrials

The key to any viable relationship with Earth and with each other is to realize that we are “terrestrials”, a word that comes from Latin and means *of, on, or relating to the earth*. I borrowed the term from Bruno Latour. (I used to refer to us humans as “earthlings” but that sounded too much like something out of a 50’s horror movie). The term “terrestrials” indicates that we have come from Earth through the process of evolution. Our human communities are part of the greater Earth community and the conscious universe. This relationship is often expressed by Indigenous peoples in the phrase, “All my relations.” So how can this relationship be played out in practice?

10. Relationship

Our young leaders are now discovering their relationship with nature. I was wondering as I marched with them if there was something similar that happened to children of long ago.

I was wondering if there was an earlier time before the brick and mortar, glass windows, steel buildings, stoplights, crosswalks and traffic—a time way back when our Indigenous community was surrounded by a dense forest. Parents would take their young children for walks on the trails.

I was wondering if they were telling their children about how the trees and the animals they see are part of them—their relatives.

I was wondering if their parents were making it very clear to them that their family's relationship with Earth was the most important thing in their lives—something they must never forget because that relationship was the key to their own life and survival.

I was wondering if we could ensure that schools, starting in the earliest years, could teach children about their relationship with Earth.

I was wondering if the young people leading the march who may have just recently discovered this relationship will one day take their very young children aside and begin telling them about their critical relationship with Earth.

Closing: Total Commitment

It was a very windy day. We were halfway through the march. I looked over and saw our Unitarian group struggling in the wind to hold up their banners. They didn't want them to get blown off the road onto the sidewalks and into the storefronts beyond.

My 80-year old body wasn't doing too well either. I was thinking of throwing in the towel—sneaking out of line and taking a short cut back to our car.

Then, I looked up in front of me. I saw a tall, middle-aged man. Like all of us he was struggling to fight against the wind. But then I noticed his walk. He had an unusual gait that slowed him down.... likely the result of some accident or illness. I changed my mind about quitting early and kept marching.

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