

CLIMATE CHANGE CHRONICLE 6

Reframing for a Climate Change Culture

As the title indicates this chronicle is about three things: reframing, climate change, and culture. It is also about an emu, a very large flightless bird in the Australian outback. But I don't want to get ahead of myself so I'll start with a story.

In the mid-90s in the run up to the creation of Nunavut, the homeland of the Inuit in the High Arctic, I was running a reframing workshop. It was held on Cornwallis Island in the hamlet of Resolute. (The original Inuit name means "place with no dawn".) The participants were newly hired civil servants, most of them brought in from other governments. They were all Qallunaat (white people) preparing to start their jobs in the new Nunavut government.

We were staying in a lodge owned by the highly respected Basil Jesu-Dawson. He was an East Indian and fluent in Inuktitut, the Inuit Language. He was also an outfitter. Resolute is the closest community to the North Pole. In the spring, when the community emerged out of the winter darkness, he outfitted various adventurers from around the world who wanted to travel to the North Pole—by walking, skiing, dog team, skidoo, ultralight or whatever.

One night after supper I was talking to Basil. He asked me what the workshop was about. I told him it was about reframing. He asked me to explain. I gave him my quickie course.

We all live in frames. They are the intellectual, psychic and emotional contexts within which we send and receive messages, establish and maintain relationships, see the world and give it meaning. In a word we don't see the world the way it is; we see the world the way we are. And, we live in our stories about our world. When we work with people in different cultures and want to communicate with them we have to reframe. We have to try and understand their cultures and perspectives.

Basil listened, then smiled and said, "I'll tell you a reframing story."

"A while back I met two men who wanted to travel in the arid Australian outback but they didn't know where the water holes were. So, they went to the Indigenous Maori chief in town and asked for his help. They asked him to mark the water holes on their map, which he did. The next day they took off in a small plane. They reached their destination and told the pilot to pick them up in ten days at the rendezvous point. When the pilot returned he found them on the ground, nearly dead. They did not find the water where it was supposed to be.

The pilot helped them into the plane and took them to the hospital back in town. After they recovered, they got into their Land Rover and went roaring back to see the chief. They charged into his house and started screaming at him saying he had deliberately tried to kill them. They pulled out the map, held it up to his face and said, "There was no water where you put the arrows on our map!" The chief was puzzled. "What arrows?"

he asked. They jabbed at the map and said, “Those arrows”. The chief looked at the map and said, “Those are not arrows. They are the footprints of an emu,” The three-pronged tracks were moving in the opposite direction to the ‘arrows’.

When Basil finished the story he looked at me, smiled, and said, “That’s what happens when you don’t learn to reframe in a culture.”

So what does this story have to do with reframing for climate change? Everything.

As I’ve noted before, the students who are out on climate change marches will be facing a climate changing world for their whole lifetime, as will their children and their children’s children. We need to help them and future generations to prepare for this reality by helping to create a culture—specifically a climate change culture.

But with the possible exception of the consumer pseudo-culture that we have fallen into, none of us has ever had to create a real culture. We have no practical experience to help us. We were born into a culture that took many years, perhaps centuries, to develop.

But we don’t have centuries. Scientists are talking to us in terms of decades. So we are going to have to do a great deal of reframing—learning to see the world in a different way and doing it very quickly.

As we turn our attention to creating this new culture, we see that it must occur on two inter-related levels: the universal level and the community level.

At the universal level we see that climate change is affecting all life on Earth but in different ways. We are experiencing a different world that requires what we might call a “meta culture.” (“meta” meaning “after” or “beyond”) a totally new culture that takes in all others.

In Greenland, in the Arctic and Antarctic, and in the snow-capped mountainous regions in South America, the major problems are melting ice caps, methane, and rising sea levels in coastal communities. While in India and neighboring countries periods of sustained drought are followed by devastating monsoons. In North America and Amazonia we have wildfires and the destruction of forests for farming. In coastal waters around the world it is the impact of rising ocean waters on cities and towns. In the Caribbean and lower U.S. warming oceans are causing devastating hurricanes and tornadoes. And in much of the world, especially in large cities it is simply the rapidly rising temperatures.

As we turn our attention to the community level we see a different problem. Our economic, political and legal systems are damaging Earth. They are integrated: if we change one system it will affect many other systems. We seem locked into the world we have created without an apparent escape route. We seem unaware that we have taken over the evolutionary process. We don’t recognize that what we are doing to Earth is harmful and lasting. Its species, including ourselves, are struggling for survival. As Walt

Whitman put it in his “Leaves of Grass...” *The Earth is not an echo*. The damage we are seeing is real.

Fortunately things are changing. A new reframing and consciousness is emerging. I started these chronicles two and a half years ago. Back then there was hardly a mention of climate change as a major concern. If people thought about it at all, climate change was just another environmental issue. That is not the case today. Every day, in our newspapers, on TV and in social media there are constant references to climate change.

If we are to deal with it we must begin at the local level. We need to continually challenge the power brokers—the corporate leaders and the politicians controlling the universal level. And we need a better communication process. If we are going to succeed, we must convert the science to stories—personal stories, community-building stories in our communities.

How do we do this? I mentioned above that we live in our stories about the world. So here is a final story about using our personal stories to reframe.

A few weeks ago I went to an evening discussion in our community about climate change. It was very well attended. It began with a local speaker in front of a screen. He put a number of simple but comprehensive statistical slides up on a screen about the suddenly emerging climate change reality. It was very well presented.

But then, towards the end of his presentation, he put up a picture of two very small children. They were on the living-room floor playing with what looked like posters for one of their father’s climate change events.

At first the slide seemed out of place for this kind of presentation...rather personal. But when the speaker turned and looked at the picture, his mood suddenly changed. He paused, took a deep breath and seemed to be struggling for control. Then he looked out at all of us and said, “These are pictures of my children a number of years ago. Recently my daughter, now in her early teens said to me, “Dad, I’m not going to have any children. It wouldn’t be fair to bring them into this world.”

So to summarize, let us do what this man did--help one another reframe. We turn the science into our stories, our stories into a community culture, and the culture into a movement.

Let’s leave behind us our own emu tracks that young people coming after us will be able to follow.

Mike Bell, Comox Valley Climate Change Network