

2021 CLIMATE CHANGE CHRONICLE 2

Making Room for a New World

As the title implies we are facing quite a challenge. This chronicle begins by describing three worlds we are now living in. It then moves on to suggest how we might begin to create a new world. We must redefine our relationship with Earth, develop a new vision for the future, and create new systems. My focus here is on the first two parts: the relationship and the vision.

The Three Worlds

I picture us living within three concentric circles from the smallest to the largest.

The smallest circle is our current culture. Built on a neoliberal economy, it benefits only some humans and those animals, plants and other elements of the planet that we prosperous humans consider valuable.

Moving outward, the second circle surrounding us is the Covid-19 pandemic circle. It has significant impacts upon our culture. No large public gatherings, hand washing and masks, cashiers hidden behind plastic barriers, small businesses closing down and so forth. The most serious impact of course is the number of people dying in Canada, the U.S. and all over the world. There is some hope with the vaccines but we will be struggling with this problem for many months, if not years.

For the largest circle, Climate Change, there is no vaccine. It will be haunting us and the rest of the world for some generations to come. Scientists tell us it originated with the industrial revolution at the end of the 1700s. Down through the years we humans took over from Earth the process of evolution. In our neoliberal economic world we now decide which species and elements are valuable and which ones we could do without. The situation is becoming more desperate every day, impacting even the humans who were benefitting.....and creating even more suffering for the poorest.

I'm reading a lot of articles recently which say that a Sixth Great Extinction is on the way. I'm not sure this is true, but it seems to be a possibility.

In times like this we usually turn to our historical experience for some kind of guidance. The last Great Extinction occurred with the disappearance of the dinosaurs' sixty-nine million years ago. Unfortunately there were no humans around to take notes.

Given that we seem to be starting from scratch on our own I'd like to suggest that we do three things: re-ignite our fundamental relationship with Earth, develop a realistic vision to guide us, and then focus on the systems problem. We start by understanding our true relationship with Earth.

Our relationship with Earth

In March 2012 John Seabrook wrote an article in the New Yorker entitled “The Tree of Me.” It was about the increasing use of DNA analysis to determine our ancestry. He noted:

DNA is a history of genetic heritage which includes not only our human ancestors but also our chimpanzee ancestors, our fish ancestors, and our protozoan ancestors, going all the way back to LUCA (an acronym for “last universal common ancestor”)—a thermophilic bacterium that lived some four billion years ago, whose DNA all species share.

In other words, Earth is our ancestor. We have come from Earth. So how do we respond to this fact? Some cultures have always understood their relationship to Earth, especially Indigenous cultures in our part of the world. This understanding shows when they speak of other creatures and plants as “*all my relations*”. Their behavior toward Earth also reflects the way they see the relationship. And this brings us to the way we “modern folk” treat Earth and its creatures.

When I first started working in the Arctic I wanted to get to know the various Indigenous cultures in order to better understand the people and communities I would be working with. In my mind land was real estate. But I quickly learned that they thought of land as a relationship. At first I had difficulty understanding this different perspective.

I remember reading a study of Inuit hunters on Baffin Island. It was entitled, “*I Am I and My Environment*”. That was a beginning.

Several years later I was working with an Indigenous community on the shores of the Mackenzie River in the western Arctic. They were being forced to organize their land claim because major corporations were trying to invade the land and steal its natural resources. The first morning of discussion was strange. We were getting nowhere. During the lunch break one of the elders came to me and said, “*Mike, the discussion about us organizing the land was very difficult for us. In our culture, we don’t organize the land. The land organizes us.*”

I finally understood this concept of land and Earth as a relationship in the early ‘90s when I travelled down from the Arctic to visit Fr. Thomas Berry in North Carolina. I had first met him when we lived together as monks in the Passionist monastery. On one of my visits he drove me out to the airport. Fortunately the plane was delayed for a couple of hours and we were able to have a long conversation.

I said to him, “Tom, a lot of people in the North use the beauty of the land as a focus for meditation. Have you ever written something on the land as an object of

contemplation? He said, “No, I haven’t”. I was surprised. Then he said to me, “But I have written something that you might find interesting. It’s on an Earth Spirituality within us.”

At last I got the point. Earth was not something outside of us. We and all the other creatures on this planet are Earthlings. Earth is part of us, a driving spirit within us. We have to discover it and respond to the responsibilities that come with our awareness. I was back to what the Indigenous people in the Arctic had been telling me.

Dealing with Systems

Some of the key causes of Climate Change are our current systems, particularly the Neoliberal Economic System which in one way or another affects all other systems. After what I said above about our relationship to Earth as Earthlings I thought it would be helpful to use the story of the caterpillar and the butterfly as an analogy to describe our struggle with systems. We all know the story so I’ll keep it brief.

The caterpillar weaves a cocoon to protect itself over the winter. Things are going along smoothly until one day some strange cells begin to appear. These are imaginal cells. They carry the image of the Monarch Butterfly. At first the caterpillar cells fight and destroy these invaders but they keep coming and eventually defeat the caterpillar cells. The caterpillar dissolves into a gooey mass. The imaginal cells get stronger. Finally the butterfly is fully formed. It breaks out of the cocoon, flies to the closest milkweed plant for nourishment and gets ready for the long flight to Mexico.

Here is how the story strikes me in terms of our economic, political and legal systems.

The caterpillar is like all those who benefit from our neoliberal capitalistic systems. The cocoon they have woven and controlled for many years is their way of protecting and ensuring their wealth. They will do whatever is needed to guard what they have. A [recent article](#) indicates that 2153 people control more wealth than the poorest 4.6 billion people. They will fight against anyone who tries to change things.

The imaginal cells, as their name suggests, can see and imagine a different way of living in the world. That is why they fight so hard to make their vision a reality. The question is, in our climate changing world will humans take on the role of imaginal cells? To do so they will need a vision—a different way of seeing the world and giving it meaning. So is there a vision that will help us see and develop a different kind of world to carry us forward? I think there is.

A Different Vision

To create a new world we need a new vision. In recent years various visions have begun to emerge. My favorite is one that has come out of what is called the New

Cosmology. It is the vision of Fr. Thomas Berry, a cultural historian and “geologian” and Brian Thomas Swimme, an evolutionary cosmologist. Both were influenced by the ideas of Teilhard de Chardin, a Jesuit paleontologist. Their vision: “***A mutually enhancing relationship between our species and Earth.***” With this as our guide, I think we have a chance to change course and develop new systems in which Earth and all Earthlings can thrive.

Conclusion

In this article we have come a long way, from living in three different worlds:

- to an awareness of our role as Earthlings,
- to a new vision for a new world.
- to a need to develop new systems for this new world

As a conclusion I offer these words from Teilhard de Chardin that seems to sum up much of this discussion.

“We are not human beings on a spiritual journey. We are spiritual beings on a human journey.”

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. <https://www.nationalobserver.com/2021/02/11/opinion/will-2021-mark-climate-turning-point-or-will-slide-continue>

