

COMOX VALLEY CLIMATE CHANGE CHRONICLES (11)

Albert Einstein—On How to Break Out of Our Prison

Some time ago I came across an interesting cartoon about two cave men inside their cave. One of them is at the door of the cave. The other one is writing something on the cave wall. The one at the door turns and says to the writer, “Knock off that crap. The bison are on the move. We gotta go.” Then we notice what his buddy has written on the wall, $E=mc^2$, Einstein’s world-changing formula: energy equals mass times the speed of light squared.

Many of us dealing with modern problems like climate change often consult the wisdom of the past, whether it is in religious texts, writings of elders or whatever. When I saw the cartoon I remembered these words from Albert Einstein.

A human being is a part of the whole called by us universe, a part limited in time and space. He experiences himself, his thoughts and feeling as something separated from the rest, a kind of optical delusion of his consciousness. This delusion is a kind of prison for us, restricting us to our personal desires and to affection for a few persons nearest to us. Our task must be to free ourselves from this prison by widening our circle of compassion to embrace all living creatures and the whole of nature in its beauty.”

Einstein noted that we humans have a consciousness problem. We fail to see ourselves, our thoughts and our feelings, as part of Earth. We see ourselves as something completely separate from Earth and the Universe. This is what he calls an optical delusion. But even worse it is a prison that restricts us to our personal desires. The focus is on what we humans want and need. And we only share these wants and needs with a few close friends.

Fortunately he also tells us what we should do about this. We must break out of our self-imposed prison. We do this by expanding our compassion (a term that means “to suffer with”) to embrace all living creatures and the whole of nature in its beauty.

To translate his words into a concept we have used frequently in these chronicles, Einstein is telling us that we must realize that we are “earthlings.” We have come from Earth, we will return to Earth. Earth is our Greater Self. What we are doing to Earth and its ecosystems we are doing to ourselves and those who will come after us.

But what about this prison bit? How do we get out of prison? Einstein is telling us what we need to do but not how to do it. The “how” is up to us.

First we might begin by examining our own lifestyles to determine how we are contributing to the climate change problem. To what extent have we bought into a lifestyle and community culture that is contributing to the problem?

Second, we need to learn systems thinking. As we have noted in previous chronicles, a major cause of the problem is the systems we have adopted, particularly the economic system. It is often controlled by multi-national resource corporations that see Earth as a source of unlimited resources at their beck and call. These are the jailors that are continually creating and refining the systems and building them into our culture.

Third, we need to change the systems. We need to explore alternatives, some of which are already being developed. We must save what can be saved, do away with what must be rejected, but above all we must provide transitions.

Fourth we have to learn to be patient. We are dealing with what scientists refer to as “wicked problems.” These are interlocking systems that can produce unintended consequences. There are no road maps. This is often a trial and error process. If it works we keep doing it. If it doesn’t work we try something.

Fifth and finally we can’t do all this alone. We don’t need a key to our personal cell door. We need a prison break: a whole community of earthlings who think globally but act locally, who know how to think in systems, who are committed to creating a community climate change culture, and who are not afraid of a trial and error process.

Finally, we must do two things at once. We must “follow the caribou” so we can feed, nourish and care for our families. And we must realize that we are living in Einstein’s new and different world, a climate changing world of irreversible transformations. Generations who went before us never experienced anything like this.

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