COMOX VALLEY CLIMATE CHANGE CHRONICLES 15b

Climate Change and Our Communication Problem

Several years ago George Marshall wrote an excellent book called: ***Don't Even Think About It: Why Our Brains Are Wired to Reject Climate Change.*** It is about overcoming the difficult problems in communicating about climate change.

As Marshall talked about what not to do I thought of a favourite New Yorker cartoon. It shows the Grim Reaper knocking on the door of an apartment. A man opens the door, sees the Reaper and gets a terrified look on his face. The Reaper is handing him a note and says, "Now don't freak out. This is just a save the date notice."

The message: Don't be a "doomer". People don't want to hear about looming disasters. They want to know what they can do to prevent them or deal with them..

A second challenge is the sheer magnitude of the problem. As I read Marshall's book I remembered the story of the preacher who gets a new job in a rural area. He arrives in the community, advertises the time of his first service and prepares his sermon. But on Sunday only one person, an elderly man, shows up.

The preacher sees the man and says to himself, "Well the Lord has sent me here so I'm going to preach", at which point he launches into his forty-five minute sermon. Afterwards he asks the man what he thought about the service. And the man says, "Reverend I'm a farmer and every evening I feed my cows. But if only one cow showed up I wouldn't give it the whole load."

Because climate change will affect our whole civilization and all aspects of life on Earth scientists have been trying to give us the whole load. But most of them only communicate with other scientists in technical language about their own specific disciplines. They don't know how to translate their technical language into plain language for "the man in the street". They also risk criticism if they comment on an issue that is outside their particular area of expertise.

Also, they often have to deal with another communication problem that has nothing to do with their area of expertise. It has everything to do with politics.

Our former Prime Minister, Stephen Harper, had a hate-on for science and scientists. He withdrew Canada from the Kyoto Protocol, the international agreement to deal with climate change. He would not fund scientists to conduct environmental research and he forbade them to publish their research or even speak about it in public. And he closed numerous scientific libraries around the country.

As a Canadian with many American friends—and I hate to say this—but I've been wondering if President Trump has taken a page from Stephen Harper's anti-science playbook

President Trump has withdrawn the U.S. from the international COP 21 agreement on climate change. His cabinet members, staff, and many Republican politicians at both the federal and state level follow Trump's lead and call climate change "fake news." Everyone has to stay on message so they won't confuse Trump's support base.

So how can we communicate the realities of climate change without becoming "doomers" and intimidating people with the whole load?

First we must get beyond our own identity politics. We must work with everyone in the community. As I write this the evening news is full of pictures of the devastation caused by the September 25 Hurricane Maria in Puerto Rico. In their current survival struggle there are no more Republicans and Democrats, rich and poor, black brown and white, good guys and bad guys. Everyone has been affected. On the ground there are only ordinary community people working together to survive.

Second, we have a great advantage—the science. We can help translate technical language into plain language understandable to non-scientists. In part this means taking advantage of social media. But even more it means learning how to appeal to ordinary folks at the community level and talk about things they know and care about like their childrens' future. (As George Marshall noted, don't talk to people about polar bears. Most of them have never even seen a polar bear.)

Third, we need to be resilient. This is a long-term struggle in a trial and error process. There will be some wins but lots of failures. Because we are going to have to change systems that are causing the problems there are no quick fixes. Resilience means developing a spiritual inner landscape that will respond to the outer climate changing landscape.

Finally, we must work to create a community climate change culture. The impetus must be from the bottom up and it must be for the long haul. Only a community culture will prepare our children and future generations to deal with the climate change problems they have inherited from us.

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