

COMOX VALLEY CLIMATE CHANGE CHRONICLES (18)

Sally, the Cultural Climatologist.

A while back, on a fine spring day, my wife was working on the front lawn. Passing on the street in front of her was a mother with a baby in a stroller and a small child about three years old walking alongside. At that moment a row of swans was flying overhead, honking loudly. The child, we'll call her Sally, looked up and yelled, "Hello trumpeter swans."

Let us now imagine that we are in the year 2050. Sally is now a mother with a child of her own but she is also a cultural climatologist. These are the folks who study the relationship between climate and how cultures deal with it. Sally is particularly interested in the first two decades of the 20th Century. She uses a methodology called hermeneutics.

The word "hermeneutics" means "interpretation". It is named after the Greek god Hermes, who carried and interpreted the messages from the gods to humans. The term and the methodology were developed by biblical scholars early in the last century to interpret the meaning of texts in the New Testament. It migrated to other disciplines—archeology, paleontology, anthropology and many others where the focus was not on texts but on historical happenings. Since climate change was the dominant characteristic of the New Anthropocene (man-made) Age, there was an increased interest in cultural climatology.

Put simply, hermeneutics involves three questions. First, what happened?. What were the effects of climate change? Second, since it was a man-made age, what were the cultural forces that enabled it to happen? And third, how did people interpret and deal with what was happening? Sally's research explored all three questions.

First, in terms of climatology, the question of "what happened" was obvious. The Earth temperature was increasing each year, ocean acidification was increasing; whole species were disappearing, topsoil was being destroyed, the ice caps in the Arctic and Antarctic were disappearing, droughts and flooding had become common in many parts of the world. Ninety- seven percent of scientists were telling the world that human-induced climate change was real. But their words were often ignored. So what was the source of the problem?

She could see it when she put on her cultural hat. She identified two major cultural influences, corporations and governments.

The latter part of the 20th Century saw the increased development of a GDP based economy. The key driver was corporations, particularly global corporations. Their survival depended upon a steady, annual increase in profits. This driving force created corporate cultures built upon self-sustaining patterns of behaving, feeling, thinking and believing. They dominated corporate existence. As the management guru Peter Drucker said, “Culture eats strategies for breakfast.” Part of the culture was the belief that Earth had unlimited natural resources that were at the complete disposal of corporations. Interfering with this right, especially by governments, was a violation of a corporation’s rights.

During this period governments had their own developing cultures. But traditional political parties were facing culture wars between the left and right, progressives and conservatives, the wealthy and the poor. So to survive and get money for their campaigns governments often formed close relationships with corporations to help their local economies and create jobs, even though many of them were disappearing due to technology. At the same time governments removed environmental legislation and passed laws giving other countries’ corporations access to their resources.

Finally, Sally looked at the interpreters. At first, because of the massive scope of climate change, people were satisfied to leave the interpreting to the politicians. With the 2015 Paris COP 21 meeting where most of the world’s countries worked out a climate change agreement this seems to be a successful strategy. But it came to a crashing end when, in 2017, the then President Donald Trump withdrew the U.S., the world’s greatest polluter. For a while there was great confusion but, in time, communities around the world realized they had to do their own interpreting. They began to create community cultures to deal with the harsh realities of climate change—and that continued to happen for the next several decades. In 2050 the struggle with climate change were continuing but there was some progress.

Sally spent some of her time giving talks in local high schools, in part to interest more students in becoming cultural climatologists. She likes to end her talks with a story.

On one occasion, some days after one of her school talks, she received a package from the students. She opened it and found a poster with a picture of planet Earth. Below it were these words:

“We are in a war against nature. This is a war we must lose. We can choose to live in different political, economic and religious cultures but not on different planets.”

Mike Bell
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