

Business As Usual or Leading a New World? -- Your Role in Global Warming

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I.

Last week, Time Magazine issued a special edition on climate change in which it said, “Never mind what you've heard about global warming as a slow-motion emergency that would take decades to play out. Suddenly and unexpectedly, the crisis is upon us.”

United Nations reports show rapid melting of the polar ice sheets, Antarctica, Greenland, and glaciers throughout the world. The oceans are heating and rising. Coral reefs are bleaching and dying. Species are on exodus from their habitats towards the poles in search of cooler temperatures. As a result of global warming the world now faces crop losses, food shortages, flooding, coastal loss, wildfire, drought, pests, hurricanes, heat waves, disease and extinctions. An international climate team has warned countries to prepare for as many as 50 million human environmental refugees by 2010.

UN scientists fear that unchecked climate heating will turn large parts of Brazilian rain forest into savanna, cause collapse of marine food chains, disrupt the Atlantic ocean currents, leave as many as 600 million people in the world facing starvation, 3.2 billion people suffering water shortages, and trigger the kind of mass extinction that hasn't occurred on Earth for 55 million years.

So, should we care more about global warming or about our daily Business as Usual?

The lifestyle that delivers convenience to the millions of us by the minute is locking us all into a future where life itself will be a colossal struggle on a daily basis. The more carbon

we pump into our atmosphere, the hotter Earth gets. This country produces 25% of the world's carbon emissions. Carbon levels are now higher than at any time in the past 650,000 years, and carbon lingers in the atmosphere for centuries. We have already locked our world into at least a 2 degree F. temperature rise, and our carbon emissions are still increasing 2% each year. The scientific alarms could not be more loud and clear: our carbon pollution brings us closer each day to a tipping point where feedback loops and irreversible dynamics will trigger catastrophic heating of our planet.

II.

We Americans tend not to dwell on survival when we think about our future. We assume a paycheck will take care of our needs. But the UN reports underscore that our basic elements of survival --- food, water, shelter, and health --- are in jeopardy from global warming. When we see a picture of a polar bear clinging to a diminished iceberg in the middle of a vast sea with no other pack ice in sight, we must see ourselves in that picture.

Climate crisis leaves no one untouched. If the oceans swell enough to inundate New York, Boston, Washington D.C. and nearly all of Florida -- which is what the leading climate scientist for NASA warns will happen with just a 5 degree F. temperature rise -- that kind of heating will have pervasive impacts. It will not stop at high water marks. The killer heat wave that swept through Europe in 2003 left 35,000 people dead. Author Mark Lynas writes:

Let me put it simply: If we go on emitting greenhouse gases at anything like the current rate, most of the surface of the globe will be rendered inhabitable within the lifetimes of most readers of this article.

Humanity has never faced such urgency. Four months ago British Prime Minister Tony Blair said to the world: "This disaster is not set to happen in some science fiction future

many years ahead, but in our lifetime. Unless we act now, [the] consequences, disastrous as they are, will be irreversible.”

There is still a window of hope, but it is closing fast. Scientists have told us what we need to do. We have to arrest the growth of carbon emissions within the decade. We have to dial that carbon down before the tipping point has come and gone. And then, by 2050 at the latest, we have to cut carbon emissions by 80%. This isn't our environmental law. This is Nature's Mandate. If we fail, we essentially lock the door of a heating greenhouse and throw out the keys, leaving ourselves and future generations trapped inside. Once you understand this tipping point concept, you can understand why leading climate scientists have issued a call to action saying, “Business as usual cannot continue yet one more day.”

But, our Business as Usual does continue, day after day. And each day, the window of opportunity closes more. Our society is nowhere near decarbonizing. Many Americans have made small changes. They ride the bus more often, they recycle, they turn off lights. But this sort of progress gives us a false sense of security. Nature's Mandate entails carbon math. Our reductions must be sufficient. A rescue rope that is too short is no good at all.

III.

So what can each one of us do? Three things.

First, we must wake up our governmental officials to this emergency. We cannot curb global warming without leadership. Every elected official and every agency should be convening task forces to achieve carbon lockdown within the decade. But frankly, most officials seem oblivious to the tipping point facing our planet. Their agendas are still consumed with Business as Usual. It is time to put these officials on your speed dials and email lists and contact them frequently with strong messages.

And if you can, help a child take political action. Our children cannot vote. They are the powerless class that will face tragedies unimaginable to us if we don't arrest the growth of carbon within this decade. If we bring children to meet with legislators and county commissioners, we will have rapid political response, because elected officials cannot look children in the eye and continue to ignore climate crisis.

The second thing we, as individuals, can do is bring carbon thinking into every dollar that leaves our hands. We've heard about cars and light bulbs, but every product we buy encapsulates a carbon release, and some far more than others. The banana we ate for breakfast came from another country and was refrigerated along the way. The bottled water we drank entailed production of plastic. It was then transported and distributed. We can't call back those carbon releases even if we recycle that bottle. Let us use our purchase power to bring about carbon deflation of the American dollar.

The third thing we can do is become citizen entrepreneurs for the next Industrial Revolution. The business sector is not taking initiative fast enough. Standard throwaway practices are costing us our future. We need individuals who can jumpstart an efficiency revolution by catalyzing millions of changes. Not all of us can be inventors of the next hybrid car or portable solar panel, but each one of us can identify senseless carbon waste, design a sensible alternative, and convince a merchant to adopt it. As consumers of a dysfunctional economy, we have to engage the business sector as fervently as parents would engage a dysfunctional educational system.

IV.

To close, the question should not be *whether* we can transform society soon enough to thwart global catastrophe. The question is *how* we, as masses of individuals, will find the motivation and focus within ourselves to do so.

Our greatest enemy is distraction. Though every day of carbon pollution brings increased risk of disaster within our lifetimes, our attention is still focused on the next episode of Grey's Anatomy, the Dow Index, and the kids' soccer games. These distractions are, to us, what heroine is to an addict. We have been drugged by Business as Usual to climate reality.

If we are to secure any future we must, individually, look climate crisis in the face and keep a tenacious focus on it until we've pulled the carbon needle from the veins of society.

This effort takes collective action down to the last individual on earth. We need *everyone* -- from the smallest employer to the largest nation -- to take responsibility.

We have no certainty that others will join us. But true visionaries always take a leap of faith and shine their light on a new path. This leap of faith prompted California's leaders to enact the most stringent carbon laws in the country even when other state legislators still sit idle. This leap of faith caused mayors across the country, including Mayor Piercy, to endorse the Kyoto Protocol even though President Bush refused to do so. This leap of faith moved thousands of people to stage rallies last Saturday from mountain peaks, coral reefs, farms and cities across the country demanding climate legislation. This leap of faith inspired the climate initiative that President Frohnmayer will announce for our University today.

These acts, joined by countless other leaps of faith, will form a new social compact across the globe -- a compact lodged not in the eroding sands of waste and excess, but rather in the woven strands of life's own web. This compact will not stop at property lines or national borders, because its most sacred covenant holds each of us *individually* responsible for Humanity, for other species -- indeed, for all Life on Earth, now, and forever. Nature is calling forth every one of you as leaders of this new world. Thank you.