Climate change: beyond denial and grief

John Launer

When I went to primary school in the 1950s, the head teacher was a man called FR Perrett. He had a florid face, a quick temper, and a liking for administering corporal punishment. But in one way he was ahead of his time. He introduced science teaching into the classroom when this was still unusual for young children. One of the things he taught us about was the greenhouse effect: how our planet was kept warm by a blanket of gases that reflected back its surface heat and allowed life to thrive. He also explained how human activities including the burning of fossil fuels would increase this effect over time, causing the average temperature on the planet to rise, which could affect the future of all life on earth. It may seem surprising that he was teaching us about the subject so long ago, yet what he described was already established science. The greenhouse effect had first been postulated in the early nineteenth century, and the first prediction of global warming made in 1896. He was quite clear about what was happening, and he hoped our generation would do enough to prevent it.

Now it is clear that prevention has failed. Indeed, the process has accelerated. Global energy consumption has increased around six-fold since 1950, nearly all of it in the form of fossil fuels: coal, oil and gas. The term global warming has largely been replaced by the more encompassing one of climate change, and recently by stronger words like climate breakdown, crisis, emergency or catastrophe. The earth is now warming at a rate of around 0.2 degrees Celsius per decade.

Because the chemical, physical and meteorological systems involved are so complex, predictions vary about how rapidly the climate is likely to change further during this century, what the precise effects of this will be on each region of the planet, and whether we have already passed a tipping point in relation to some of these effects. Overall, however, there seems no reason to challenge the conclusions of the recent report of the United Nations Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) that there are now only around a dozen years for global warming to be kept to a maximum of 1.5 degrees Celsius. Beyond that level, even half a degree will significantly worsen the risk of drought, floods, extreme heat, and poverty for hundreds of millions, especially in coastal areas and on islands. These in turn will have a huge impact on population health and the viability of national health systems. Reversal of this process in sufficient time would require an unprecedented shift in energy use, transport, agriculture, forestry and almost every other aspect of human industry, all on an unimaginably rapid scale.

CHANGING MINDSET

Some significant effects of global warming are already on us. Current signs of climate change include mass emigration from regions in Africa and the Middle East that were formerly fertile and are now turning into semi-deserts, an increase in the frequency and size of fires in places like California, the death of a fifth of all the world’s coral reefs, and the massive loss of ice from Antarctica. As we struggle to absorb such facts and the warnings they represent, many people are changing their mindset towards a more pessimistic one. This is perhaps best summed up by the title of a book of essays by the American writer Roy Scranton: “We’re Doomed: Now What?” In his book, Scranton argues that the task for us as individuals is not simply to rant against the follies that have brought us to this point, nor to do what we still can make a difference – although both of these are surely necessary – but to look reality in the face, accept that we are now living through exactly what was foretold, and prepare ourselves for worse to come.

Scranton’s views are by no means marginal. A report from the American Psychological Association (APA) on the impact and implications of climate change on mental health argues for a broadly similar approach. Among its recommendations, it advocates for climate activism as both politically necessary and personally therapeutic, but also argues in favour of preparing for future adversity and adaptation as the physical effects of climate change kick in. As the report also points out, such preparation will need to involve an awareness of the very strong emotions that surround the whole issue of climate change. These include guilt and anger, as older people reproach themselves for having led lives of comfort at the expense of the earth’s resources and their children’s futures, while the young rage against the poisoned legacy they have inherited.

Probably the most important emotional reaction to climate change is of course denial. It operates both at an individual level, because the enormity of our predicament is too much for many people to comprehend, and also at the collective level. This leads governments to downplay or evade the problem, while powerful industrialists and the media they support spend huge sums of money on spreading disinformation or sabotaging attempts to address the problem. For everyone, overcoming the impulse towards denial is painful. It means having to acknowledge one’s so-called ‘climate grief’: the anxiety, panic and despair we may feel at what is happening to our world.

MAKING A DIFFERENCE

Facing up to climate grief may be an essential step for each of us in order to free up action. As the APA report indicates, our failure to prevent climate change does not necessarily mean there is nothing we can or should do. We may still have the power to make some degree of difference, either at the level of local community or by supporting measures that will help others who live in more vulnerable areas. It is certainly not too late to make personal resolutions that will reduce carbon emissions, or to support climate activist movements such as 350.org or Extinction Rebellion.

We can also help ourselves and our children by being frank about the era we are now living in, and by thinking realistically about the kind of future we are likely to face. In an interview with Roy Scranton about “We’re Doomed. Now What?”, a journalist put the question to him: “You have a daughter. Are you hopeful for her future?” He answered as follows:

Our way of life is going to be very different in the future than the way it is now, though I don’t know exactly what that means. One of the complicated things about living through the end of the world as we know it is that the end doesn’t come about because of a single event. It’s actually just a day-to-day occurrence that’s going to take a long time. We’ll see transformation and degradation, an increase in violence and insanity, the breakdown of social order in neighbourhood by neigh-
On reflection

bourhood, then city by city. We’re watch-
ing it happen now... Well, we do have to live through that, but there will be opportunities for joy and for living a meaningful life. It’s just that we won’t find those things by acting in ways we always thought we could. We have to learn to be more flexible, much more adaptable, and much more grounded in the present. That last part... means facing unpleasant facts, recognising our fear and sitting with it, and accepting our sorrow and griefs and dealing with them. These aren’t things that we can just push aside in order to get to the next thing on our list. They are who we are. I’m hopeful that I can help my daughter to learn to do those things and live a full life in whatever world we wind up living in.12

This may not be as uplifting a message as we wanted to hear, but it may still be the most hopeful assessment for our times, giving us the courage to move beyond denial and grief, and to do whatever we still can.

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REFERENCES


