

Bringing Climate Forward in Conversation

By Alice Loyd

President Obama didn't mention climate change during his run for re-election last fall, but he's not the only one staying silent on the most important problem in human and non-human affairs. A small group has made the subject contentious in order to preserve its own financial interests. Politicians walk on tiptoe around it, and even people who care deeply about it have difficulty bringing nature's needs into daily conversation.

It's easy to talk about the weather, but difficult to have comfortable exchanges about climate ("climate"¹ as contrasted with the "weather," which is always easy to discuss). When I raise the issue with someone I don't know well, I'm likely to enter a gauntlet marked by skepticism, ignorance, or fear. I want to communicate concern, and perhaps information from my vast stores gained by years of attending to what scientists say. But most days I'm not up to argument, or the nursing of someone's frail equilibrium. I understand why people revert to doubt and denial when confronted with this planetary emergency. These are normal human responses to threat of pain. If we don't talk about global warming, though, we can't expect the public to welcome climate change-related policies.

I think the climate discussion is ripe for dissension partly due to the schism between nature and humans that Herman, quoting Swimme and Berry, mentions in the above article: "The phenomenal world . . . has been viewed as oppressive to the more exalted aspects of existence. The spiritual world and the natural world have been viewed as two different orders of being." We don't like to face the limitations of our animal existence. Our minds can escape through a number of mechanisms, particularly in advanced industrial societies when we live insulated from wind, rain, cold and heat. The facts of human-caused climatic upheaval threaten physical comfort and emotional composure. It has been easy for oil companies to cast doubt on the human role and on the whole discipline of biogeochemistry.

Perhaps I find it awkward to introduce climate change when I speak with neighbors for the same reason I find it hard to explain CES's mission. "What does CES do?" is a question I'm asked when I name it as one of my affiliations. Try replying, "We work toward a coming era when human beings live in a mutually enhancing relationship with the larger community of life systems." During transition periods when paradigm shifts are in the process of being developed, language has to be stretched. There's no commonly understood street chat to use when discussing what's going on.

¹**cli·mate** (kli'mīt) *noun*

1. The meteorological conditions, including temperature, precipitation, and wind, that characteristically prevail in a particular region.
2. A region of the earth having particular meteorological conditions: *lives in a cold climate*.

Attempts to bring up new concepts are bound to be ungraceful. The fact that our well-being is interwoven with that of the non-human world, or that our current, costly industrial lifestyle must give way to one yet to be defined—to convey either idea requires true dialogue if it is to succeed. True dialogue is sure to happen between neighbors during a hurricane, of course, when quickly we cut through philosophical difference. Beforehand or weeks later, the same neighbor and I may be on more reserved footing. Our plight is that the most urgent threat humans have ever faced is upon us, and yet remains almost unmentionable.

If we start talking, though, we may find allies. According to scientist Anthony Leiserowitz, Director of the Yale Project on Climate Change Communication, 16% of Americans say they are “alarmed” about climate change and 29% classify themselves as “disturbed.” Those who are disturbed feel less than alarmed because they see climate change as more distant in time or space than those in the “alarmed” group do. The number of entrenched skeptics found by the survey regarding climate science was only 8%.

In his interview on the January 4, 2013 Bill Moyers program, Leiserowitz added that two-thirds of those surveyed said protecting the environment either has no impact on the economy or improves it. He concluded that 40,000,000 Americans are ripe to become an “issue public,” an organized movement that demands change.

I’m writing to encourage that kind of movement building by the ecozoic community. Global warming is a unifying opportunity as well as the greatest threat to our vision of Earth harmony. By offering feelers to our fellow citizens when we find ourselves in line with them at the store, beside them on a bench or in a café, or meeting them as we dawdle in the park on a warm day, we soften the sense of isolation these 16-and-29% tend to feel as the loud 8% dominate the airwaves.

On January 21, 2013, President Obama broke the silence on climate change in his inaugural address. If the rest of us proceed in our conversations from the weather to the climate, or from the price of gas to its true cost, we help to make way for the changes we so deeply desire.