

Thinkers' Lodge Climate Crisis Retreat
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Thinker's Essays

Some Thoughts on Our Uncertain Human Future
By Christine Heming

Introduction

What is put forward here is influenced by: my over 45 years of practice and study in the Buddhist tradition; my experience leading groups seeking to improve their lives through meditation; my experience working with families and teachers to build support systems around students with language and learning difficulties and/or special needs; and my love of the outdoors - of hiking, of all things near water, of trees and bird song. My reading and thinking about the social and environmental collapse we are facing has been influenced by many thinkers, in particular, Jem Bendell, Margaret Wheatley, Paul Hawken, David Orr, Miriam Greenspan, Wendell Berry and Rebecca Solnit, and by many spiritual leaders - Sakyong Mipham, Joanna Macy, Roshi Joan Halifax, Llewellyn Vaughan-Lee, Susan Murphy Roshi, The Karmapa Ogyen Tinley Dorje, The Holy Father Pope Francis, as well as by the indigenous view of how to live on this earth and CLP thinkers, Elders Albert Marshall and Ron Tremblay. I am forever indebted to my root teacher, the Vidyadhara Chogyam Trungpa Rinpoche, who, after witnessing the killing and torture of his fellow monks, nuns and friends at the hands of the Chinese, and being forced to leave his homeland of Tibet and venture into an unknown world, proclaimed the basic goodness inherent in all beings and the potential to create a good human society – a network of bravery, kindness and wisdom.

As I write this, it is clear to me that most people have not begun to reflect deeply on the reality of societal collapse, and in fact, have just begun to recognize the effects of climate change, sometimes only one aspect, like sea-level rise. They fail to see the interconnectedness among all the various effects of a warming climate. I am also aware that we have been conditioned by Western culture to think in ways that perpetuate the status quo, for example, seeing ourselves as separate from one another and from the natural world. This conditioning, often hidden from us, not only make it difficult to even entertain another way of seeing, but also orient us to isolated solutions that are minimally helpful if at all (e.g., individual efforts like switching light bulbs, eating organic food or giving up plastic bags).

My teacher, Sakyong Mipham, says this is a dark age when the minds of human beings are thick, less sensitive, numb to what is occurring in their environment. We can no longer read the signs. My friend Kathy told me the story of a young man who arrived in the far north intending to fish. The local, indigenous fishers would congregate along the shore before heading out to fish. They just stood around, doing and saying little. Then they went off to fish and almost always came back with a catch. The young man caught very little or nothing at all. This went on for some time. So the young man stood with the fishers, and over time he learned to read the signs and find the fish.

Our disconnection from the natural world and our human-centric views have left us blind to the many signs of climate disruption over the past decades. But now the signs are becoming very obvious, and there is an awakening around the globe. We see and hear the words kindness and

compassion appearing as solutions to this crisis. There are strong voices suggesting that creating local, caring and compassionate communities is our best solution as we face an uncertain future.

The Wisdom of Our Emotions

Awakening to the disastrous impacts of global warming is devastating, it's a crushing blow. These feelings of helplessness, fear, rage, despair, anger, sadness, numbness are completely natural. They are not to be shunned or viewed as negative. These feelings connect us to reality, and they arise from a sense of what is good and what is right. It's important to listen to the wisdom they offer. Miriam Greenspan asks: What if you honoured these feelings and listened to their message? What actions would they lead to?

Connecting with the energy of our emotions enables us to channel it in constructive ways. And doing that work together, in community, is healing and empowering. When asked how he works with his despair, Dahr Jamail, author of *The End of Ice*, says he meditates, spends time in nature, and gathers with others not only for support, but also for joy and nourishment.

Miriam Greenspan writes: "Living in an endangered world ecology affects and alters human psychology." Emotions are shared in the human family. Emotional energy is not inside nor outside, it flows through us. These painful emotions grow in the soil of a painful world. We are living in a world of global distress and we experience this viscerally. Our bodies, our hearts and our spirits know and feel this.

It is important to know that feelings, left unacknowledged and cared for, can turn into dangerous behavior – giving up, ignoring, acting out and blaming, shame and guilt, even suicide. We are in need of communities in which to face these dark times, to speak and listen to our pain, and to be heard. Greenspan: "We need to learn together how to use the energy of our fear and sorrow to mobilize ourselves to protect the earth."

Creating Opportunities for Community Engagement

The success of the Transition movement attests to how people will rally around community projects that fill some need, and food-related projects are popular. A few people on our road are looking to create some kind of community farm with the potential to grow food year round. It is interesting to see that the reasons individuals want to participate differ; not all persons see this as a resilience strategy. Some just want good, fresh local veggies. But acting together for mutual benefit creates natural wealth and capacity that may be our most valuable commodity for living in our uncertain future.

A stellar example of community engagement is the Alberta Climate Dialogue, a partnership between the City of Edmonton and the University of Alberta. Sixty Edmontonians representing a "demographic and attitudinal cross-section of the city" were guided through six days of deliberation in 2012. They learned about climate change, intervention strategies, what kind of action was under city control, and a variety of energy consumption scenarios ranging from "business as usual" to a low-carbon strategy. In the end, the group proposed recommendations aimed at establishing Edmonton as "the nation's leader in setting and achieving the highest standards of environmental preservation and sustainability," and it was unanimously approved by the city council.

I asked David Kahane, the project lead researcher, how this diverse group could come to such a strong consensus. Interestingly, the dialogue began, not with trying to convince anyone of anything, but with questions about what people valued about their city and what they envisioned for the future. When it came to values, the climate deniers and the climate activists found common ground.

Kahane commented: "The eagerness of people to really do the hard work of understanding issues, when they know their voices will make a difference, is very moving." He also admitted that consulting citizens directly about policy was not an easy process. The last thing you want to do is host a conversation where unpredictable things are going to happen. "But unless you're willing to do that, you're going to miss the wisdom that the public holds and the information you need to align policy with where the public is and could be."

Drawing Out the Wisdom of the Group

Deliberative Democracy, The Way of Council, Art of Hosting, Open Space Technology, International Café, and Talking Circles are excellent ways to draw out collective wisdom. They highlight hearing every voice, listening deeply with respect and speaking from the heart, i.e., one's own experience. Other key elements of the group process include: creating a safe and inclusive space, making and taking time, having a purpose or project, focusing on shared values and visions for the future, feeling empowered to effect change, and celebrating the joy of gathering together to share food, stories, music and dance.

Asking the Questions That Matter

One afternoon while surfing the net and feeling personally lost, I happened upon the web site of The Council on an Uncertain Human Future. It opened with one question at a time slowly descending across my computer screen:

How do you understand the political and social context in which we gather?

What is taking place on the planet and why is it happening?

What are the implications of these changes for the Earth and all living things?

How do we choose to conduct ourselves in the face of these grave dangers?

Given what we know, how do we live now?

These were the questions that I was seeking. Questions like these give focus to our contemplation about the future and throw us back on ourselves. It takes bravery to take an honest look at our world and our participation in it, seeing how our choices, words and actions in each moment are either leading us closer to helping this world, or creating more pain and suffering.

Jem Bendell, the creator of Deep Adaptation, offers four questions to direct our actions at this time. They centre around four R's – resilience, relinquishment, restoration and reconciliation.

What do we most value that we want to keep and how?

What do we need to let go of so as to not make matters worse?

What could we bring back to help us with these difficult times?

With what and whom shall we make peace as we awaken to our mutual species mortality?

Barbara Lepani explains: Resilience is the process of adapting well in the face of adversity, trauma and tragedy, and involves the creative reinterpretation of identity and priorities. Relinquishment

is letting go of certain assets, behaviours and beliefs where retaining them makes matters worse. This applies both to individuals and to communities. Restoration is rediscovering attitudes and approaches to life that have been eroded by our hydrocarbon-fuelled consumer driven civilization. This might include re-wilding landscapes, changing diets, increasing the capacity of communities to be more self-reliant, and transforming our culture into one based on caring, cooperation and compassion.

Jem Bendell explains that reconciliation is first, with one's own death, including any regrets or anger we feel towards anything or anyone. It invites reconciliation between peoples, genders, classes, generations, countries, religions and political persuasions. It is time to make peace, he says, so that during this time of deep adaptation we don't tear each other apart.

Beliefs Matter

Human beings have an innate instinct to help one another. We see this inherent goodness in how we fund-raise to help cover someone's medical expenses, how we organize search and rescue for a lost hiker or a lost and bewildered senior, and in all the heroic actions ordinary people take to save a life of another human being as well as of animals. These stories are a way of defining who we are. Every community holds stories like these.

Rebecca Solnit, an environmental activist and journalist, researched the human response to disaster. She showed conclusively that in times of crisis when our very survival is challenged, the vast majority of people rise to the occasion to help one another, even risking their own lives in the process. Natural leaders emerge and people self-organize. Solnit's work is a confirmation of the inherent goodness in the heart of humanity. This goodness not only manifests kindness and compassion, but also is awake, intelligent and resourceful.

This view of the goodness of human nature extends to society. It is the naturally arising energy, communication and kindness of society itself. We see this in the way we create and support institutions that serve the common good – our hospitals, schools, fire departments, police departments, governments, parks and common space, food banks and other numerous community groups. Paul Hawken suggests we don't need to invent a new way of being together, we need only restore society to the grace, beauty and justice, the natural goodness, that is already there.

History has shown that the innate goodness of human beings can be thwarted, completely overshadowed by fear and desperation. Narratives of human greed and aggression, competitiveness and individualism, supremacy and dominance, can take root. When this occurs, human dignity is threatened, people lose heart, and negative forces take hold. We are living during a time in which these forces are increasingly in the forefront casting doubt on our own human nature as well as our innate resourcefulness and power. As Pope Francis writes: "The external deserts in the world are growing, because the internal deserts have become so vast."

Beliefs matter. How we think and feel about ourselves is directly related to how we think and feel about others and about society, and the view of human nature that we hold will directly inform our actions. If we respond with the view of inherent goodness, we can bring out the natural goodness of others and of society, and help society respond with care and compassion during this time of great challenge. But when we doubt this goodness and believe that human beings are

essentially flawed in some way, aggressive or greedy, our conduct will only serve to reinforce this view and our entire society will suffer. It will be difficult to trust one another and work together towards solutions to these great challenges.

It is up to us to remember and keep telling the stories of our goodness, to acknowledge the power of even a small gesture of kindness, and to open to uncertainty we face with courage and confidence in the human spirit.

“Hope in the Dark”

Rebecca Solnit entitled her book about activism “Hope in the Dark.” Dark here is not a sense of foreboding or evil, it is the notion of uncertainty or unknowing. Human beings have always faced an uncertain future. When we take the time to look at our experience, we can see the groundlessness that is always expressing itself: things fall apart, we loose things, the unexpected happens. Try as we may, we cannot create a completely predictable and secure world. But this openness creates possibilities of creativity, growth, freshness and change.

Rebecca Solnit puts it this way: “The world is always being made and never finished.” This gives rise to hope – not for a specific outcome – but for an opening, an opportunity to have an impact. Solnit writes that social, cultural or political change is unpredictable. Even a month before the Berlin Wall fell, almost no one anticipated the sudden disintegration of the Soviet Bloc.

There’s a quote in Solnit’s book that addresses the kind of hope that fuels activism and keeps us going. It comes from Vaclav Havel: “The kind of hope I often think about . . . [is] above all else a state of mind, not a state of the world. . . It is an orientation of the spirit, an orientation of the heart; it transcends the world that is immediately experienced, and is anchored somewhere beyond its horizons. . . . [It is] an ability to work for something because it is good, not just because it stands a chance to succeed.”

Awakening Our Heart

When we recognize and acknowledge that the future is always uncertain, that each of us has the power to shape that future, and that collectively we have the wisdom to do so, it is empowering. We see the wrongs and we set out to right them. We forget about success or failure and just wholeheartedly keep doing what is right. If we make a mistake, we learn from it, we stay open and keep working from the certainty that something is worth doing. We find a purpose even as we stay in the turmoil of painful and uncertain times. And we learn that there is tremendous joy in working with and for others.

My journey into the heart of our unimaginable future happened one afternoon while reading the latest scientific report, which at that time was advocating holding to under 1.5° C global warming. The facts were all there, but they passed right through me. Then I scrolled down to a section called “In Memoriam.” There I found four smiling, bright faces of indigenous people, three of whom were murdered for standing up for clean water and ancestral land. My heart breaks even now as I see these faces before me. Global warming, catastrophe, collapse has a human face. Time to decolonize our minds and hearts and co-create a new beginning based on justice, equality, kindness and compassion.