



Climate Change Conversations

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Why conversations about climate change?

One side of empowering people to respond to climate change is to offer insights and understanding about how the climate system works. This is necessary, even critical, as much an art as a science, and a definite focus of our work in Our Climate Ourselves.

But, when it comes to helping people find their strength and power for responding to climate change, facts and figures can only carry you so far. Climate change is not just an intellectual challenge it is also an emotional and personal one. It requires each of us to grapple with the emotions triggered by a threat to the system that supports our very existence. And it challenges each of us to expand our identities beyond our narrow selves and beyond the current moment. There are many ways to approach these dimensions of emotion and identity: vision, meditation, direct experience of nature, song, story, and conversation, especially open ended conversation, the kind with no right or wrong answers and plenty of space for listening and for silence.

There are probably as many productive questions to ask about climate change as there are people to ask them. The four that follow below are some that I've found particularly useful. I tend to use these queries with small groups in workshop settings, but they work as well around the kitchen table or as a focus for individual reflection or writing. They seem to need only time, space, and a reminder that no one knows the answers and that no individual or group can see clearly and broadly enough to find the answers alone.

1. Climate change leaves me feeling.....

This is a question that is easy to gloss over, especially if you are a facilitator or leader and find yourself feeling compelled to lead a group away from the bad news about the climate situation and straight to all the wonderful possibilities for addressing it.

But to rush past acknowledging the reality of how climate change make us feel is to loose valuable information. These feelings may be difficult, or strong, or uncomfortable, but they also serve us, inform us, and strengthen us, as long as we don't deny them.

When the facts about climate change sink in with the groups I've lead, fear is a common reaction. People fear for the people they love who are going to have live through the coming decades, and also for the delicate natural places they love, and often for the world's poor and powerless who will have the fewest resources for coping with climate change. Will there be more terrible storms? Droughts? Extinctions? Your impulse, whether you are a leader of a group or talking to your children, may not be to acknowledge these fears, but they do have a purpose. Fear reminds us to us pay attention. Just as fear helped our ancestors pay closer attention to their surroundings after a glimpse of a predator crouched behind a tree, our fear of what might happen if we don't address climate change can keep us focused and energized.

Where some feel fear, others fear anger. Anger tells us that there is something that needs our protection. The integrity of the atmosphere and the future prospects of our children are at risk, and our leaders can't – or won't – respond to that risk. Under the circumstances anger is a healthy, survival-promoting response.

Sadness allows us to recognize what is. Already there are losses as a result of climate change. We've seen the images of New Orleans, we know the coral reefs are dying. We know that priceless, unique, irreplaceable elements Earth's life have already been lost forever. And we know that there will be more losses, as the decades of carbon dioxide pollution we have already released continue to impact ecosystems and weather patterns. Our sadness allows us to recognize these changes, and our own contributions to them.

Our culture doesn't approve of the emotions most likely to be triggered by an understanding of climate change: anger, sadness, and fear. We are raised to be hopeful, optimistic go-getters. But our life support system is crumbling and we don't have a clear plan for restoring it, or even easing off some of the pressure on it. Under the circumstances, anger, sadness, and fear are normal, healthy emotions. Suppressing them requires energy that could be better spent on bringing ourselves into balance with the Earth.

Expect to hear about fear, sadness, and anger, when you ask people how they are feeling about climate change, but make room for happiness and excitement, too. In my living room talks, excitement and a sense of hopeful expectation aren't as rare as you might think. In the words of one woman, in one audience, "This is the chance we finally have to find out what kind of people we can be. If it weren't for this I might have gone through my whole life as an ordinary person, but now, in figuring out how to respond to this challenge, I must expand what I am capable of."

It takes some bravery to ask another person, or a roomful of them, how climate change makes them feel. But if you are willing to bring forward the topic, you offer people the chance to discover that they are not alone in the intensity of their feeling, but are in fact normal people in a dangerous situation, passionate about the future of their world.

2. When I imagine the world beyond climate change I see (and hear, smell, taste and touch)...

Our emotions help us pay attention and take action, and they give us energy for making change, but they don't tell us what that change should be. It's not enough to want global warming end, to want greenhouse gas pollution to stop and everything to be OK. Everything isn't OK, and it won't be until we create ways of meeting our needs that don't dump carbon dioxide into the atmosphere. How do we want to get to work in the morning? What kind of work do we want to do, for that matter? Until we can imagine and create more sustainable ways of living and making a living, we can't have the safety and peace that we crave.

What do we want our world to look like once we have left fossil fuels behind and entered the age of renewable energy? How will people be living? Where will they live? What will they be doing? Whenever I've created time and space in a workshop to allow people to really explore this question for themselves, the images and ideas they describe make one point very clearly: a society that has addressed climate change has the potential to be much more beautiful, much more fair, and much more life-affirming than the society we have today.

When I ask people what they want out of a future that has responded to climate change, I don't hear only of rooftop solar panels and windmills – although there are plenty of both in the visions people share – but also of the rich world sharing with the less rich, of thriving farms in every community, of healthy, delicious local food, of cities full of gardens and bike paths and canals full of clean water, and of a human society so

wise, so clear in its purpose, that it has surrounded itself with wilderness, allowing the rest of the life of the planet to go on about its work in peace.

A person who knows what it is she wants for the future has taken the first step towards discovering where to act today, because a vision tells you what to feed and what to let wither. Only by knowing the future you want, with such clarity that you can see it, taste it, almost feel it, can you recognize all the parts of what you want that already exist, from the biodynamic farm in the neighboring town, to the car sharing collective down the block, to the courageous political champion of greenhouse gas controls. The seeds of the future are all around us, but they are only easy to spot once you've imagined the wonders that they could give rise to.

Such visions seem to be very individual and personal. You may see rivers full of salmon, I see parks in the middle of every city and people with time for playing games with children and walking along winding paths. Someone else will see a smooth-running, highly efficient transportation system, and a distributed network of energy generation. Together, we have a good chance of seeing enough complexity and possibility to describe something worth working very, very hard for.

And so, whenever you invite another person, or a roomful of them, to share what they would really like to see in the future of their wildest dreams, you help that future ease its way into existence.

3. As we face climate change together I feel compelled to ...

As the reality of the need for massive and immediate cuts in carbon emissions sinks in, for some people only one thing seems to feel right: starting tomorrow, they must change everything about their lives, and devote everything they have to this survival crisis.

But pretty quickly, other realities come back to mind. Mortgages, debts, college tuitions, health insurance. Nothing is as simple as it first sounds, and the next step in this thought progression seems often to be: if I can't devote all of myself to this crisis then there is nothing for me to do. It is hard to look at addressing the potential extinction of one's species as a part-time avocation.

Many other people have great ideas for tackling climate change, if only they were president of a massive environmental group, or a car manufacturer, or a Senator. Too bad they are 'only' a student, a mother, a preschool teacher, an editor.

That's why I tend to ask people to search for what they already are positioned to do, where they already live and work, with the friends and allies they already have.

We don't know how to live as a planet of over six billion people. We don't know how to cut our carbon dioxide emissions by more than half while providing a better life for all the people, all the children, who don't have a sufficient food, shelter, and security today. We don't know (or remember) how to share like that. We don't have all of the technology that we will need. We don't know (or remember) how to live happy purposeful, satisfied lives while being frugal with our use of energy and materials.

Not knowing how to do this, we must learn. And it won't be good enough if that learning is just embarked upon by people who get paid for it, or people who can afford to quit their jobs. And it won't be good enough for the only learners to be the "leaders" at the "top."

Who's going to figure out how to expand the local food network in your city? Who's going to get the bike paths built and the train routes re-established? Who's going to write the new songs that make meaning and

purpose and some kind of beauty out of the terror and change that we are living through? Who's going to talk to children about it, and who's going to insulate the water pipes for your frail, elderly neighbor?

There is a paradox here: this massive global problem is the result of small decisions by ordinary people, and it's eventual, miraculous solution, if it comes, will likewise be the result of small decisions, made with courage, by you and me, ordinary people alive in an extraordinary time.

So ask each other, push each other, admit that we can't, most of us, drop everything, that we aren't, most of us, leaders of national stature, and start from there. What needs doing that we know (or can learn) how to do?

4. What I am learning from climate change is

Climate change has a lot to teach us about how to live well and decently within the capacity of the Earth to support us. But we will only learn those lessons if we look for them, if we keep our sights not only on changing light-bulbs but also on changing ourselves and our communities.

What does climate change tell us about our economics, an economics where fossil fuel can still be cheap even when we know that greenhouse gas levels are close to the tipping point where climate change could begin to feed upon itself?

What does climate change tell us about nationalism, when there are no boundaries in the atmosphere and when the lives and livelihoods of people who've never owned a car are threatened by choices made by those who own several?

What does climate change tell us about happiness and security when our headlong pursuit of both have carried us beyond the climate's ability to support us?

What does climate change tell us about our democracy, when the resistance of special interest groups is able to keep an entire country from moving forward to address the problem?

And so on.



The only thing I can think of that will make the inevitable climate change losses bearable is the possibility that through facing these losses and acknowledging our role in causing them, we may come to understand our place on the planet and learn how to live in that place.

But if we don't stop to look for lessons in the climate crisis, if we just try to manage, accept, and adapt, we lose our chance to become wiser and stronger. We lose our chance to figure out how to fit into the rest of biosphere. Of all the important conversations to have about climate change I believe that this one - what can we learn - is the most important of all.