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Why keep trying?

June 16, 2011

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The other day, I was looking back over the photos I took at the [Fill The Hill climate change event](#) in Ottawa, back in October of 2009. At the time, the event made me optimistic. Here were all these young people concerned about climate change and ready to take personal action in response to it.

When I look at the photos now, the Hill seems a bit thinly populated. Contrast how many people turned out to express their concern about climate change with how many people get excited about a meaningless hockey game or concert and it seems like humanity has cause to worry.

The most important reason to deal with climate change is the ethical obligation we owe to future generations – the obligation to leave them a planet that can support their welfare. When it comes to how people decide on their priorities, however, it seems like such ethical obligations are very low on the list, way below [personal financial welfare](#) or convenience.

When I think about how the Amazon rainforest may be doomed because of human greenhouse gas pollution, along with the Great Barrier Reef and countless species, I feel overwhelmed with revulsion about how casually destructive our species is, and how little regard we show for the world which we inhabit and ultimately depend upon completely. We do not have the technical means to build a self-sustaining spacecraft and so the continued life of every human being on the planet depends on the continued operation of all the physical and biological processes that make the Earth habitable. Now – largely because we are fond of cheap energy – we are willfully assaulting those processes [as though they are indestructible](#).

In the face of that, I wonder whether any personal efforts of mine are meaningful. If humanity as a whole is determined to commit suicide, why should I spend my life trying to stop it? The forces pressing for a sane and sustainable strategy seem to be far weaker than the forces that promise instant gratification today, with little consideration for whatever consequences follow.

Normally, this is where I would try to write an uplifting closing about how doing the right thing is appropriate, even when the odds are hopeless and when other people will actually resent you for making the effort. The noble course [combines self-sacrifice \(reducing your personal impact\) with determined political action](#) to try to produce a better outcome. While I still think that is true, and know my conviction will eventually return, it is feeling thoroughly sapped at the moment, partly by the way voters everywhere continue to make their political choices [largely on the basis of their own short-term economic self-interest](#).

Humanity is very clever in a micro sense – when it comes to solving small problems in ways that benefit the solvers quickly and materially. When it comes to macro issues, it seems to be dumb luck and the sheer durability of nature that explain why we haven't wiped ourselves out already. That isn't much comfort though. There are limits to how much abuse nature can tolerate, and we have been [beating it pretty harshly with a wrench](#) lately (with still-worse abuse promised for the future). [Perhaps humanity has no future](#), and perhaps the thing to do as individuals is choose whatever life seems most tolerable with that possibility acknowledged.

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mek [June 16, 2011 at 6:54 pm](#)

Unfortunately for my own sanity, I feel morally compelled to resist. However, I think resistance on the global macro-policy level is, again unfortunately, agreed to be futile. As William Rees correctly notes, humans as a species are not behaving rationally. To their great credit, many people are working on initiatives such as the Transition Network to increase food security and community resilience. Even if you accept climate change as inevitable, there is no shortage of work to be done. Resistance can be as simple as gardening, canning, homebrewing, building a personal skillset and teaching others. Permaculture, De-Growth, Downshifting, etcetera... there are so many post-peak movements it's hard to remember half of them.

If political change is impossible within the system, all the more reason to work outside it.

[Ryan June 16, 2011 at 8:39 pm](#)

I strongly relate to your lack of optimism. I agree with mek that working outside the system is the most effective way to bring about change. I also believe that it is good idea for most of us humans to stop reproducing.

[Gail June 17, 2011 at 12:06 am](#)

Plus ça change...from ushistory.org:

“These are the times that try men's souls.” This simple quotation from Founding Father Thomas Paine's *The Crisis* not only describes the beginnings of the American Revolution, but also the life

of Paine himself. Throughout most of his life, his writings inspired passion, but also brought him great criticism. He communicated the ideas of the Revolution to common farmers as easily as to intellectuals, creating prose that stirred the hearts of the fledgling United States. He had a grand vision for society: he was staunchly anti-slavery, and he was one of the first to advocate a world peace organization and social security for the poor and elderly. But his radical views on religion would destroy his success, and by the end of his life, only a handful of people attended his funeral...Paine discovered that his contributions to the American Revolution had been all but eradicated due to his religious views.”

Don't get discouraged Milan! The journey is the point of it all – not what you accomplish at the end, which can never be predicted anyway. I just found out I can watch Hulu movies online for free. I kind of think you can't get it in Canada but, I saw the Snow Walker – it's not a great movie but I liked it, it's about surviving in the far north of Canada with no modern luxuries at all, but a big beautiful sky.

Anon [June 17, 2011 at 8:17 am](#)

Mormon missionaries face the same quandary – almost nobody wants what they are selling.

What keeps them going? Largely the conviction that they are right and doing good, while others are wrong and probably immoral to boot.

Milan [June 17, 2011 at 9:06 am](#)

The factual claims made by missionaries do not have a sound basis in evidence. By contrast, there is a robust and interconnected body of evidence that supports the view that we should be concerned about what humanity is doing to the climate.

Milan [June 17, 2011 at 9:07 am](#)

That said, there may be some psychological similarities between the experiences of missionaries and those of climate change activists.

Gail [June 17, 2011 at 9:16 am](#)

“...there may be some psychological similarities...”

A gracious gesture but I would venture to say that statement is nonsense. Missionaries of faith are intrinsically operating from a completely different motivation than scientists, whose most fundamental tenet is that a theory can be tested, and proved or disproved. There is no reason to conflate the two unless the objective is to denigrate science because it goes against ideology.

Anon [June 17, 2011 at 10:25 am](#)

In both cases, there is a feeling of moral superiority. Also, a feeling that you are part of a small group that understands an important truth that most people are ignorant about.

Anon [June 17, 2011 at 10:27 am](#)

To some extent the conviction shown by both groups is suspicious to the general public. Lots of

people are out there with scams or crazy ideas, and most people just want to live their lives without worryin about such things.

LinneaSR [June 17, 2011 at 11:14 am](#)

Perhaps you are correct: climate changes will take their most drastic projections, humanity and much of the other lifeforms on Earth are doomed in the near future. You may not be, but let us assume that you are.

Don't the choices then become about living with integrity? Making the choices which make the most sense, each time? So far, none of us have made it out alive, so if we all die with less hope that "something will remain beyond ourselves" than people have for the last many thousands of years, is that anything more than a blow to our ego & sense of self-importance?

This may be a bit nihilistic, but it's where I am. Right now, anyway.

Tristan [June 17, 2011 at 11:38 am](#)

It's not good enough to simply propose that an important problem be dealt with. While you are certainly correct that climate change is the biggest problem facing humanity, simply proposing we do something about it without working within avenues that have a tactical chance at success is I think similar to proposing that "everyone live in peace".

Mek is right – if opportunities for chance do not exist within the system, then the appropriate place for advocacy is outside or parallel to the system.

It seems to me that dealing with climate change is, from a scientific, logical, and moral point of view, one of the most obvious and obviously important problems which humanity has ever faced. As such, I think it might be more useful to fight the ways in which inaction is reproduced as the norm rather than proposing action. What do you think of proposing the problem in this way: Acting on climate change is obvious and simple – it's the inaction which is currently normalized which is complicated and needs to be fought against.

alena [June 17, 2011 at 6:30 pm](#)

As the most critical issue of our times, action in regard to it is bound to be slow. That does not mean that what you have done and stood behind with such determination and zeal has no value. In fact, it is an inspiration to many. I don't believe that governments will devote enough funding or effort to climate change until it is too late, and perhaps the earth will not be a life sustaining place within the foreseeable future. If that is the case, each individual action will at least make the remainder of our life more humane and bearable. I salute you and all the other people who have devoted their life to making a difference in whatever field they choose. You are definitely an outstanding example of commitment and passion. I am sure that you will find a way to be heard or to make an impact on others.

oleh [June 19, 2011 at 9:30 pm](#)

In my lifetime, I have seen tremendous positive change of attitudes and actions on the environment. Raising awareness about climate change is extremely important. That concern was not even widely known 20 years ago. Now it is well-known. This website and Bury Coal has been

an effective way to raise that awareness.

With that awareness, comes action. Working both within and outside of “the system” is important. Being outside of the system can raise awareness. That has now generally occurred. However, it is working within “the system” that I believe the most widespread change is institutionalized. This occurred with the forms of pollution such as air pollution that we are addressing.

Peter [June 21, 2011 at 4:31 pm](#)

Milan, there’s an old saying: if you don’t have anything good to say, don’t say it.

The world is like a balloon, filled with positive action, hope and energy. Some people are trying to fill the balloon, while others are trying to pop it.

If you’re feeling burned out, fine! But don’t pop the balloon. Just move on to something else. Whatever gives you more meaning or satisfaction, whether it’s another cause or a long vacation. Do what you feel called to do — but if you’re burned out, give it a rest!

There are already too many burned-out old fools trying to spread their gloom around.

. [June 22, 2011 at 12:37 pm](#)

To make our elected leaders take action to solve the climate crisis, we must forcefully communicate the following message: “I care a lot about global warming; I am paying very careful attention to the way you vote and what you say about it; [if you are on the wrong side, I am not only going to vote against you, I will work hard to defeat you — regardless of party](#). If you are on the right side, I will work hard to elect you.”

oleh [June 23, 2011 at 2:22 am](#)

Peter, I believe that we are better off with a full discussion and attitudes. I do not believe that I should tell you what to say, write or think; I would encourage you not to tell others what to say, write or think.

There is definitely a need for people who identify what is wrong in the world. That seems to run contrary to your starting proposition that “if you don’t have anything good to say, don’t say it”. If someone does not identify what is wrong, then positive change is equally unlikely to happen.

I believe that there is definitely a reason to be pessimistic regarding whether the world in general is taking the problem of climate change adequately seriously; therefore, there is room for the pessimistic opinion.

. [July 22, 2011 at 3:27 pm](#)

[Climate change and conflicts between generations](#)

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