



## The First Step Toward Addressing Climate Change Is Facing Its Reality

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In a past column I have written about a narrow window of opportunity, a period of perhaps as few as ten years within which humanity must make dramatic reductions in worldwide CO<sub>2</sub> emissions or run the risk of unleashing dangerous cascades of “runaway” warming. In this scenario, warming would begin to feed upon itself and outgrow the human power to slow it, leading to shifts in temperature, sea level, ocean currents, rainfall patterns, and ecology with the potential to disrupt coastal cities, agriculture, and ecosystems.

Minimizing this risk calls for massive improvements in energy efficiency, decreases in consumption, and a rapid shift to clean energy. There’s plenty of evidence to suggest that all of this is possible if we were to get serious about public investment and incentives for a life-serving energy system, but ten years is a short window for going about such large scale change, especially in a nation that has not yet gathered itself to rise to the challenge.

A few hours and a little research will provide all of the information you need to come to your own conclusion about the above assessment. But then what? If you find yourself agreeing that we have ten years to address a problem of human survival and that addressing it will require very deep changes in much that we take for granted, how do you find the response that is right for you, whoever you are? What’s a fifth grade teacher to do? Or a grandmother? An artist? A carpenter? A student?

The answer to this question doesn’t strike most people instantly or with total clarity. Grave threat though it is, climate change isn’t at all like a burning building or a raging flood. It’s not the sort of crisis that automatically pulls our best selves forward. All our highest capacities are there to draw upon – our creativity, our intellect, our perseverance, our selflessness and courage – but most of us seem to need to hold the reality of global warming in our awareness for some time before our hearts and souls cipher out a response.

But here is a dangerous irony. While we may need to sit with the reality of climate change for a while before we can see what it is that we are able to offer in response, most minds don’t react to our global crisis with calm and deliberate introspection.

Some minds know for certain that calls for immediate and dramatic action are flat out wrong and typical alarmist environmentalism.

Some minds leap with fear for beloved people and places and can’t see or think very well beyond that fear.

Some minds quickly find distraction, in daily obligations or more solvable problems.

And some minds decide that’s it is too late anyway because people will never change and one person can’t make a difference.

Climate change presents us with all sorts of challenges, but the very first one, the one that must be met before any of the others can even be

engaged, is the challenge of opening ourselves to the reality of climate change's existence, scale, and immediacy.

There's no one right way to open oneself to something this big, of course. We each have to find our own way, on our own terms. But we can experiment, and we can share our discoveries with one another.

In that spirit I offer a few ideas:

Talking with others helps. Climate change is everyone's problem so there's no point in trying to face it alone.

Believing in your own sense of reality helps too. As you begin to learn about climate change, the fact that the newspaper headline says *150 New Coal Plants on The Drawing Board*, rather than *Congress Declares State of Emergency*, makes it easy to doubt yourself and your perspective.

Don't do this. Instead seek out others who have examined the data, talk it over with them, and consider the possibility that you're the sane one and it is the society that is lost in illusion.

Envisioning what you really want pulls your mind forward, and helps you see the other side of climate change, the push towards what you long for anyway. There is a lot to look forward to in a post-fossil fuel world. I'm more than ready for a super-efficient train system and a flowering of my local economy. I'm ready for less junk-mail and no more planned obsolescence of everything from toasters to telephones. I'm ready for more

quality and less quantity and more time with my family. I'm ready for the last day of the last war over oil.

Whatever you see when you envision your world once it's moved beyond fossil fuels, treasure that vision, allow it to reveal itself to you more and more clearly. One reward for realizing how much you dislike the current drift towards disaster is discovering just how much you want something else. Whatever this something else is, you can learn to describe it with passion and vividness, and in doing so, you can chip away at the unconscious belief in our culture that we are already living in the best possible way, and that any accommodation to climate change would therefore be sacrifice.

This is not a matter of imagination only, of course. Once you really take in the reality of a ten-year window to address climate change, without question, you will begin to try new things. Who knows what: biking to work, running for Congress, organizing your community, planting your first vegetable garden.

Whatever it is, in choosing it, you will be opening yourself to the messages of an astonishingly beautiful planet and trying to figure out how to live according to its elegant and non-negotiable terms.

And the human spirit can bear a lot of fear and worry and grief when it is held up by a purpose as large and life-affirming as that one.

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