

Ancestors of the Future - Our Role in a Climate-Changed World

by

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Yes, we are a part of the interdependent web of all existence.

Yes. We are destroying it.

That shocking juxtaposition of blessing and dishonour, gratitude and anger is probably the closest I can come to describing where I was left when the state of our planet truly hit me 9 years ago.

And I say ‘hit me’ rather than ‘became clear to me’ because it was like a blow. Of course because I – like all of us? – seem not to take blows well, I wanted to deny it, forget it, turn away, run from the guilt and cross to the other side of the road. And so I got very very busy or became dull with lack of hope or overwhelmed to the point of incapacity. [An example – madly reading and cutting out every ‘green’ article I saw, I ended up with binders and boxes – a hodge-podge of clippings - and thus overwhelmed, gave up on the environmental bulletin board in my church hall, then censured myself for that neglect, then ended up losing both the impetus to complete the church’s energy audit and all hold on being the environmental steward...] Still I tried to dodge the bullet – the bullet of this knowledge of where we have brought creation – which only meant that it had to get at me through the not-wanting-to-know, and in doing so, it caused in me what felt like craters and sinkholes, hairline fractures of fear, despair and grief.

This was not a fun place to live. Nor, sadly, will the earth be if we refuse to change. Not fun, not healthy, quite possibly not even viable for man or beast. From the cliff edge of this thought, where does one go?

Backing away from the edge, 2007, I start to understand the imperative of taking some kind of action, of weaving my concern into both my life and my careers. ‘But I teach Italian. How the heck is that going to work?’ Well, it’s incremental but soon all my courses are Green Italian, with students surprised to receive eco-points for their bus passes or reusable mugs, with field trips to the UBC Farm linking up to food security, eventually with essays pulling in Italy’s SlowFood movement, and group presentations on “Wall-E” or “The Road” (or certainly the most innovative, a “Pocahantas” puppet show in Italian!).

The other career... In 2008, I start working on a YA novel set in 2022 in a climate-ravaged BC. Post-carbon, dystopian, apocalyptic? I’m going with Ursula LeGuin’s term, future history.

So, the personal life-change part? (We’re still back in 2007.) I’ve seen all the lists: CFL light bulbs, reusable water bottle, Energy Star appliances, use the car less, unplug the electronics, buy local. But something about the ‘10 Green Choices’ thing isn’t working for me. Where’s the buy-in?

And then I’m realizing that climate change = climate chaos = climate refugees, and suddenly it’s just a bigger picture of another of my concerns, homelessness. Sustainability, I’m thinking, is considering the impacts of our every choice upon our *earthly home*, it is asking ourselves whether we will leave it in a livable state, whether there will *be* a home, for our children and grandchildren here and our brothers and sisters elsewhere, **everywhere.**

We all know that more than one type of response to homelessness is essential:
the political response of addressing the **issue**,
the personal response of letting ourselves be affected by the people affected,

and the principled response of acting from our compassion, acting with love.

How, I wondered, does this apply to the environment? Fast forward to today. Slowly, at our behest, governments have started to address the issue. Well, or not. We will see what translates to action.

But the jury is definitely out on our personal actions too. We've all made a few changes— still, it's often as if we make them almost mechanically, reluctantly, *without* in fact having let ourselves be affected by the people affected, modifying our lives according to an 'It's Easy to be Green' ad rather than transforming things from the heart outward, by placing as our cornerstones justice and equity. "Failing to care about climate change is a failure to love," says climate scientist & Christian Katherine Hayhoe. Maybe the opposite is true as well: Failing to love and factor into our daily choices those whose desert or island lives are being destroyed by our status quo is a failure to make any changes that will actually ensure anyone's survival.

This neglect is stranger still when one realizes that the people affected this time are not only figuratively but literally our very selves: the poor on our streets or the streets of New Orleans **and** our children as they move into their teens or twenties; the 'others' (who are **not** other) in drought-stricken Somalia or fire-ravaged Greece or California, or on a low-lying Pacific Island or in a no-Man's-land of climate change exodus **as well as** our grandchildren (our Vancouver and our Calgary grandchildren, our Somalian and our Ugandan and our Syrian grandchildren), who, if we continue to live as we have been living, may be skipping and hopscotching toward a tragically insurmountable brick wall, one undeniably of our making.

Why does this not galvanize us? Where, how, why are we so disconnected from the state of emergency we have wrought within creation? We are blessed with reason, memory and skill.

How do we come to the decision not to drop everything and use these gifts to save what is in fact in our safekeeping?

Perhaps because we are back to that place of crossing to the other side of the road. ‘I don’t want to feel guilty!’ Nor do *I* want to inspire feelings of guilt. In fact, let me say right here that I feel compassion for *you*, for us in this place of needful and perhaps unwelcome change. It’s true—to a great extent, we *didn’t* know what we were doing to the earth by paving over and gearing up; by upsizing meals and manufacturing, houses and electronics and cars and vacations by air; by wanting and wasting; by seeking comfort in the external. Now we do know. In any case, there is no guilt, no benefit to blame, no use to shame, no time for them. Skip it. We start from here.

Wait. This whole conversation, of course, is underlain with FEAR. What of that? Just as unuseful, clearly, as blame and all the rest. The fear, though, in its connection with anger, in its transmutation through Love, can become righteous indignation, and that in turn can serve us well. Here in Canada, with the election of Prime Minister Trudeau, we saw the proof of that. And yes, we have the right to ask this new government for some big changes; that is, if we are fulfilling our own personal responsibility to also make those big changes in our own lives. Let’s think of it as Principled Action. Let’s hear how loudly the times are calling for it.

It really is a matter of rethinking and revising our lives. The active step-by-step process of deeply earnestly caring for our earth and for each and every other, when we start to feel its momentum, is hugely exciting: one change links to another and then another, which connects gracefully now with a larger action, which others, we find, are doing too!, and suddenly it is like vinegar spreading through oil, like puzzle pieces becoming a picture. Fascinating, satisfying, and in this case life-saving.

Back just for a moment to the not-really-wanting-to-know. Human. Under-standable. And here in the First World, we sure don't like the concept of sacrifice. But is it? Each of us chooses whether to perceive something, fearfully perhaps, be it our work, raising a child or changing any habits that are harming us or the world, as a sacrifice when we could instead choose to embrace it as a commitment or indeed a sacred trust.

Katherine Hayhoe again: "Those nations most vulnerable to climate change are the very nations whose inhabitants already suffer from malnutrition, food shortages, water scarcity, and disease. Climate change is deepening the chasm between the "haves" and "have-nots" across the globe." So, relating the state of the earth back to our responses to homelessness... Of course the connection becomes more clear with every boatload, every planeload of refugees. Violence, politics, yes—but underlying this, in most cases, are lands destabilized by climate change. So, here we are back at that third response to homelessness—principled action. As opposed to, really, an Entitlement To Which We Do Not Actually Hold Title.

We are Eleventh Hour. If the lifestyles and behaviours that this entitlement has fostered in everyone from toddlers to 90-year-olds are not reined in immediately, there will be nothing left for our children and grandchildren, be it food or water or a livable planet. Yes, reined in. Right, we are called to step up to something we would rather – to be honest – sidestep. If this makes it easier, just call it simplifying your lifestyle, though it is much more—it is pure social justice; it decides the future.

This all sounds like a heck of a lot of bad news. As I was writing my climate change lecture 1 year, a 5-year-old neighbour wandered over with a tiny plant pot saying, "Look! There's a little thing!", and sure enough, the unknown seed she had planted days before was sprouting. Ah, there's the hope.

Also... what about *my* personal changes over the last 9 years—did I end up doing anything? Well, I should hope so—first it was compost bin and tiny garden, then beef was off the menu, then rain barrel and selling the car and (well, thankfully Italy is all through me, mind, heart and soul) because as soon as I read about air travel being the fastest-growing source of carbon emissions, I stopped flying for good. (A word about closed and opening doors—of necessity, I discovered the Coast Starlight and California Zephyr, and have never before found such tranquility and inspiration in my travels.) Still, I need to do much more—downsizing from a 2-bedroom townhouse into a tiny home is going to be the *big* one.

Catching up on that novel of mine too— when I began “Distant Dream”, though I knew my aim was a compelling cautionary tale, I had never heard of climate fiction—now, as I finish the 2nd book in the series, cli-fi is front and centre. “New York Times”, “LA Review of Books”, Doubleday—they’re all talking cli-fi, and rightly so, for, as Heidi Bostic says in “The Chronicle of Higher Education”, “The world needs new narratives capable of situating and conveying to a global audience the challenges we share.”

This is another puzzle piece, another place for action: story, art. Speaking at the 2008 conference Faith and the Environment, then-Premier Campbell said that to be able to say, “We saved and preserved and put to brilliant use every bit of this extraordinary [UBC] Farm of ours” would be a story worth billions. For sure, there were Green Italian students marching in the Farm Trek that indeed saved it the next year. “Evviva la Fattoria!” And the thriving Farm *is* indeed a wonderful story and reality.

Back in the classroom? By that time, I had my students writing a no-holds-barred wish list for their future (all the *stuff* they have learned to want, state of the world be damned) everything from career to home furnishings to vehicle to number of kids. Then we talked about

climate change, and the butterfly effect and basically ‘justice, equity & compassion’. And then that wish list, revised as **reality check**, led to their Azioni Verdi, 3 Green Actions taken asap and written about in Italian. I overheard some interesting conversations:

“Wow, I was going to have 4 or 5 kids like in our family. Now I’m thinking 1, but then...”

“Hey, *I’m* an only child. Nothing wrong with that.” or

“I always just figured 2 cars when I get married, but I mean really... My wife’s just going to have to share mine!”

Their final essay was ‘Il Mio Piano Verde’, ‘My Greenprint for the Future’.

“Se non abbiamo un pianeta, abbiamo niente!” “If we don’t have a planet, we have nothing.”

“I *finally* got my parents to turn off all the electronics!”

“After 25 years at home, I can’t wait to move out! Thinking about the environment in my lifestyle will be good for the earth plus it’ll also save me money.”

‘I’m going to’: “...ride my bike to work...”

“...take much shorter showers...”

“...make my own lunch...”

“...be a responsible consumer...”

“...create a relaxing Earth Hour without electricity every week for myself...”

Anyone starting to wonder where this is going? Yes, of *course* there’s homework. 3 green actions, just not in Italian, unless you like. Same parameters: no low-hanging fruit like turn the lights out or remember to turn the computer off. *New-to-you* actions. One to do with food. Push your boundaries.

Pointers: think first to all those who are impacted by your actions—make them a part of you. Then go into yourself—what small things do you love, what do you do best, who are you really? and from there, build your actions:

gardening in community?

a family project – making our diet earth-friendly

teaching someone to knit or sew or preserve

bringing your wisdom to Suzuki Elders

creating climate art

doing guerrilla gardening & seed bombing!

no more straws and disposable cups!

checking out the Soaring Eagle Nature School or greentechexchange.ca or [slowmoney](http://slowmoney.org) or

becoming a citizen scientist or the thought of Exquisite Sufficiency ~

calculating that footprint & majorly reducing it

meeting with each other to talk through the despair and the hope

staying here on this Blessed Coast to explore and safeguard the beauty of where we live...

The possibilities are as varied as we are. The constant is that it is incumbent upon us all to embrace them now. Joy in your changes! Write them up and paper your walls here with them.

Ramp it up. Stick with them. Add more.

Let yourself be guided. A former speaker here, Guy Dauncey, author of *Stormy Weather: 101 Solutions to Global Climate Change* and the just-published novel *Journey to the Future*, proposes that instead of the law of attraction, which is about getting, we practice the law of guidance. How perfect, for guidance is unlimited and always there, waiting only for our welcome.

The more we accept the reality of climate crisis and strive for Coherence of principles and Impeccability in our actions, the more of a chance our next generation has for a livable future. As Rhea Wolf says, our responsibility is not to be taken lightly, for we are, simply and critically, "...the future's ancestors."

Postscript: My little neighbour again. "Did you know caterpillars can walk a long way? All the way to Safeway!"

Your 3 Green Actions – that's how you ensure you are doing something today and every day to keep the seeds sprouting and the caterpillars walking, the future happening for us all.
