

Essay #5 – Exploring the possibilities for reducing our climate footprint

We are each capable of great deeds. But if we stay stuck in the little ruts our current social system, our lives will fade into oblivion.

We are facing a time unlike the world has ever seen. Human-caused climate change shambles along, dragging us toward a ruin that may ultimately threaten our existence as a species. We know our collective culture needs stop the warming, or it will surely tear itself apart. That should be simple – each of us just stops our emission of greenhouse gases, the human caused agents of our crisis. But those emissions are integrally tied to our lifestyles, which are embedded in our culture – tied to the point where it seems impossible for us to change. How can we shift an entire culture if we can't even change ourselves? And if we've waited too long?

Our politicians aren't helping. At best, or worst, they give us words – promises or threats depending on who you follow. They all talk about solutions, while actually they simply work to stay in power. And sadly none have demonstrated they will truly lead us to salvation from climate chaos.

Industry isn't helping either. Some companies make green promises while others give us reams of climate misinformation. With great fanfare they promote coming technological miracles. But when will these arrive will they actually save us or just dig us into a deeper hole. Sadly, while companies might gesture and tinker, they block significant changes because those would drastically lower our consumption and hurt their profitability. Ultimately, industry wants us to continue worshiping the power of the global market – the very same power leading us to climate destruction.

What about our spiritual leaders? Despite the teachings on honesty and service they pretend to champion, some flatly deny the scientific truth of climate change and the human tragedies that follow in its wake. These realities should make greenhouse gas emissions a grave sin. Yet some leaders commit yet another sin – false witness – when they advocate against the truth of climate science.

Other faith leaders are social justice advocates who include climate change in their portfolios, but they face so many needs with so little time. Nevertheless, climate change impacts are growing into the overarching social injustice of our time. Shouldn't this issue be their highest priority? And wouldn't solving this problem also address other injustices as well?

And finally, sadly, many church leaders have simply been silent on climate change. Maybe they are waiting for an Epiphany, but in the meantime disasters spread across the world.

Climate change has evolved from a problem on the horizon, to a coming storm, to now an active crisis. We already see its impacts in floods, droughts, famines and conflagration wildfires. Our continued emissions of greenhouse gases has led us to the cusp of a cascade of climate tipping points that will likely warm the planet 4 to 6 degrees Celsius or more, regardless how we respond. The climate catastrophe we could have prevented has arrived.

So for now anyway, we individuals (and our close communities) must respond to climate chaos on our own. But what should we do? Incrementalism – making small changes intended to lead us in the right direction – hasn't worked. Last year global greenhouse gas emissions grew 2.7% and US emissions grew 3.4%. Society is on the track of the worst climate scenarios the scientists can imagine.

We might have tried to sweep across the globe with an ethical movement that rejected consumerism and replaced it with economic and social institutions focused on human sustainability. We didn't; so what now?

We could pull out our personal bucket-list – all the indulgences we've ever imagined – and live petal-to-the-metal until climate chaos strikes us. But if all society takes that course, we will go down in

a gory blaze of consumptive excess, dooming most of humanity to destruction and the survivors to enduring misery. Our binge might give us fleeting pleasure, would fail to fulfill our deeper needs, and the hangover would be monstrous.

Or we could keep ignoring the problem, hoping politicians will solve it, or some undiscovered technological miracle will make it go away. These paths take us to the same world of pain without either transient pleasure or abiding fulfillment.

But we can search for a new hope – one that reflects to our inner sense of morality and self-worth; one that works to keep our personal dignity and help us find deep fulfillment as we move into a time of climate chaos. This requires that we examine how we live, and how that affects the world, and decide what we want our relationship with that world to be. If we do all that in light of our moral responsibilities, we will conclude that we need to reset our way of living to one that's consistent with saving what we truly value.

All this goes beyond trivial gestures and promises. Most of us will need to make radical changes in our lives, and these will go far beyond simply shifting from buying one product rather than another; changing from this technology to that one. We need to make deep and enduring changes in our personal lives and our entire social structure.

The previous four essays in this series presented a summary of current climate science, including climate change impacts. They also offered a moral perspective on the problem, and focused on two key questions: How do we as individuals stop the damage our greenhouse gas emissions are causing? And how do we make amends for the damage caused by our past emissions? There was lengthy discussion on these questions in the companion seminar to these essays. Participants reflected a deep consensus that we have a moral responsibility to both reduce our emissions and make amends.

But the discussion seemed to stall with the twin follow-on questions: How much should we reduce personal emissions? And how do we reconfigure our lives so we can truly make amends.

I've given much thought as to why participants had difficulty answering these latter two questions. I conclude that we held back because we can't conceive how we might cut our emissions in half, let alone to zero. We view life within the framework we see around us. And so we judge the possibility of change through the lens of that view.

But what if we change the lens. What if we let ourselves imagine other ways of living that aren't constrained by the walls of the competitive society our current industrial economy has sold us. What if we step away and envision other ways of living that are sustainable; that reject the ongoing injustice of climate change; that give us comfort and sustenance and fulfillment and moral peace. What if we take that image of a new life, and shift into it – not with timid, tiny steps, but in a full-throated adventure. I believe if we do that, we might find our way to better lives for ourselves, and a better world for everyone. Just maybe.

I am proposing a paradigm shift in our lifestyle – pulling away from the destructive aspects of the current American dream, and reconstructing our lives in ways that support global justice and sustainability. This could be a thoroughly daunting and confusing effort. So in order to make this easier and more orderly, I propose it be done in five steps. Those who have attended the first seminar session, or read the first four essays in this series, may have already moved through step one as described below – Believe. I would caution, though, that each of these steps is crucial, and each subsequent step builds on the ones before. None of the steps are casual, and those of us working through this need to retain the beliefs we gain from step one as we move into step two – Imagine – and then retain both the belief and the image as we move into step three. And on through the process.

This path will take contemplation, discussion, and ultimately community support. This path takes us completely beyond small incremental steps, and into one giant leap. But after over thirty years of studying climate change and how to stop it, I think this is the only path that takes us to the deep changes we and the world needs.

The five steps in this adventure are as follows:

Step One: Believe – believe the truth about climate change, that we need to respond, and that we can.

I think most folks do not yet understand, let alone fully believe, the scope of climate science and the extent of the changes that are coming at us. Before we can adequately respond as individuals and as a society, we need to believe that climate change threatens our civilization to its core and that it is the overriding social justice issue of our time. And we must believe that we are causing this problem through our ongoing demand for goods and services. And finally, we need to believe that we have a moral obligation to change our lives in response, and that we can change. If we don't truly and fully believe all this, any changes will be inadequate. But with a genuine moral commitment, it will.

Step 2: Imagine – build a new dream to replace the consumer-based American dream.

I would argue that our greenhouse gas emissions are the result of current consumption frenzy, which in turn is driven by our mindset. Most Americans have a mindset that is largely focused on achieving some form of "The American Dream" -- a beautiful house, sleek cars, elegant clothing, gourmet food, exotic vacations, and on and on. As long as we're stuck on that dream, we won't change our consumption habits in any significant way. And we've been so deep into that dream we haven't let our minds imagine there are other ways to live. But I'm hoping the beliefs we come to in stage one of this process will allow us, encourage us individually and together, to find a new dream -- the kind of dream that would meet our moral obligation to cut our climate footprint to net zero while still giving us comfortable and satisfying lives. We need to start imagining, and keep at it until we settle on a dream that fills the bill.

Step Three: Examine – look at every aspect of our current lives in relation to our beliefs and our new dream.

Once we've formed our new dream, it's time to examine every facet of our current lives to determine which would support the new dream and which would be in conflict. I think it best to first look at our activities -- work, social life, entertainment, and how we manage our lives as a whole -- because the stuff we buy is usually dictated by what we do. The point here is not to shift our activities yet, only identify which are in conflict with our new dream and which would support. Making the dream a reality will come in step five.

Step Four: Plan

Shifting from the current American Dream to our new dream will be exhilarating, life-changing, ultimately deeply satisfying. But it won't be simple or easy. Having a well-considered plan will help make the shift smoother and more complete, and may be the only way the effort will succeed.

Step Five: Do – Make it all happen

In the last stage we can make this significant shift in our lives with the confidence that it is supported by the best current knowledge; will bring us to a lifestyle that is morally fulfilling while

satisfying our human needs (likely doing a better job at that the current American Dream); and can be successfully done.

In the December 7th seminar, I am proposing that we focus on Step two – imagining a new dream (in later seminars, with the support of more essays, we will look at steps 3 – 5 as well as other climate chaos questions). I ask that anyone expecting to attend (and anyone who wants to move through this process outside the seminars) prepare by thinking about new lifestyle dreams from their personal point of view. In doing that, I ask that those dreams contain key attributes that satisfy the beliefs we have come to in stage one. Those attributes are as follows:

- A lifestyle that has a deep foundation in justice – that is fundamentally non-predatory and non-exploitative;
- A lifestyle that is achievable – that recognizes our physical, social, and financial limitations;
- And a lifestyle that morally and spiritually fulfilling, and gives our lives purpose.

I expect us to consider these desired attributes as we search for the components of our lifestyle dreams: place, shelter, sustenance, health, protection, and finance and employment. In the seminar, we may construct a matrix of sorts that helps us structure our thoughts. I encourage each of you to do the same on your own.

Many people, particularly climate detractors, focus on the sacrifices that we would need to make in any true effort to halt the progress of human-caused climate change. They fear that effort would take away their cars, their vacations, their houses and their hamburgers and force them to live like cave-men. But they are only looking at the negative.

I focus on the positive – on the prospect of a new way of living that sweeps away the baggage of the old American Dream. I look on the path to getting this new life and living as a Grand Adventure – likely the grandest one I've ever lived.

Respectfully,

Allen Edwards