1 Making climate change our job

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4%

I want to begin with a number. As of March 2015, only 4% of Americans hear a friend or relative talk about climate change at least once a week (Leiserowitz 10). Four percent.

Imagine yourself in a grocery store with another hundred shoppers. This week, ninety-six of them won't hear about this topic from anybody they know. In an average group of twenty-five students, only one talks about it once a week. Only four do so once a month.

Why is this? Our brains aren't wired for this topic: it's abstract, seemingly distant, too big. We worry we can't answer important questions or deal with misinformation. We avoid touchy issues of politics, ideology, religion, and cultural and personal identity. Above all, we find it deeply unsettling.

Climate change, therapist Rosemary Randall writes, is "a disturbing subject that casts a shadow across ordinary life." Like other social taboos, it can cause conflict and embarrassment; it "can raise fears and anxieties that people feel have no place in polite conversation." It provokes many defense mechanisms. In the words of another therapist, Renee Lertzman, these include "denial (it's not going to affect me or my kids; the science is not settled), projection (it's their fault, not mine), paralysis, apathy and disavowal (I know this is happening, but I am going to continue doing what I do anyway). When we trigger anxieties we almost always inadvertently trigger defenses—and when it comes to climate change these defenses act on everyone from greenie urban liberals to climate science naysayers." Note Lertzman's "everyone."

No wonder we don't like to talk about it. And yet it is certainly our greatest global problem.

We must help break this silence.

Learn a lot and take it personally

Once I heard Susan Joy Hassol talk about climate change communication, a field in which she is a leader. When she finished, someone asked a version of the most common question after climate change talks: "What do you say to people who ask

you what they can do to help?" She answered, "I tell them to learn a lot and take it personally."

Perhaps this answer resonated for me because it describes my own path. Elizabeth Kolbert's 2005 *New Yorker* series and subsequent book, *Field Notes from a Catastrophe* (2006) shocked me into serious attention. By the time the 4th assessment of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change appeared, my husband and English-department colleague John Calderazzo shared my concern, and one day that spring of 2007 we found ourselves sitting at our kitchen table trying to think how we could help. Within days we'd started planning what turned into an education and outreach program we called Changing Climates @ CSU.

Right away, we decided to work around the institutional edges. We gathered friends, acquaintances, and folks we'd only heard about for a pair of brainstorming sessions—and collected way too many ideas. Then we planned a semester-long lecture series, faculty speaking to faculty, sixteen speakers covering topics like how the climate system works, diseases that will spread with warmer temperatures, and potential impacts on farmers in the US and East Africa. We scheduled these talks for late Tuesday afternoons, advertised them only on campus, and averaged eighty listeners per talk—some of whom, to our surprise, were key climate researchers from different departments who were just then meeting each other. The next year we ran a revised series, advertised widely as Thursday-evening public lectures, "Climate Change: What We All Need to Know," eight speakers on climate science, biological and ecological effects, economics, the literary imagination, effects on people, politics and policy making, and energy solutions. This time our audiences averaged 250.

Late that first fall we started getting forwarded emails about a national climate change teach-in to be held in late January. After some resistance, we organized two days of talks that year and the next, adding other topics: visual art, national security, impacts in the Rocky Mountains, how to talk to skeptics, and so on. A few events since have brought our total to nearly 120 talks given by over 110 different speakers—speakers from twenty-eight academic departments and every college on campus, plus other entities at CSU, in town, in the region, and farther away. We've counted well over six thousand heads in our audiences.

How could two English professors pull this off? It just took time, energy, and commitment. You can read the details in our essay "Changing Climates @ Colorado State: A 'How To' Guide." Short version: it helped that we knew our way around campus; that several of John's former students worked in administration and PR; that he is comfortable on the phone while I can organize topics into logical sequences and create complicated schedules. It helped, we heard, that we had no scientific turf to protect; one scientist friend told us he was embarrassed that it took English teachers to make these conversations happen.

We kept things simple, did a lot by ourselves, and manna fell from heaven: people like our dean, the vice president for research, and the university president's assistant gave us money or helped us get funds we didn't know existed. More important, many people helped us without charge. Almost all our speakers donated their work. We paid to print posters, but a friend designed them. Modest

refreshments and a few rooms cost us, but most rooms on campus didn't. The student center and the campus teaching and learning center donated videotaping. We relied heavily on the university's PR apparatus—and on word-of-mouth advertising. Our total expenses were so low that virtually any university or college could afford them.

We also found the leaders of a climate research center (CMMAP, the Center for Multiscale Modeling of Atmospheric Processes) that happened to be headquartered on our campus. They wanted to expand their education and outreach activities, and their excellent long-term funding from the National Science Foundation allowed them to adopt us after our first year. By buying us course release time, they helped us find the time and energy to keep going after those first two exhausting, rewarding years.

We've stopped running lots of lectures now; others on campus have taken on this job. Instead, we've been helping scientists who want to speak more clearly to the general public. And, with targeted help from colleagues, we (mostly I) run a multidisciplinary climate change website, *100 Views of Climate Change*, intended primarily for college teachers, their students, and interested non-specialist adults. This collection of annotations and links crosses the curriculum, from climate science to art, ecology to activism, misinformation to wild weather. The sources are accessible and reasonably lively, with college-level content and primer-level clarity. This is one good place to learn a lot.

I also still recommend Kolbert's book, along with the comprehensive, user-friendly website for the 2014 U.S. National Climate Assessment; Robert Henson's excellent primer, *The Thinking Person's Guide to Climate Change* (2014); Tim Flannery's *The Weather Makers* (2005) for a southern hemisphere focus and lots about biology; and Mike Hulme's *Why We Disagree about Climate Change* (2009), a heady consideration of just how "wicked" the problem is. I point to the *Skeptical Science* website and to *The Psychology of Climate Change Communication*, a 2009 report from Columbia University's Center for Research on Environmental Decisions. Having learned that universities are full of people happy to answer questions, visit classes, and otherwise share their knowledge, I also consult colleagues across campus.

There is *so* much knowledge available to us, once we step through evasion into curiosity and determination.

One key thing to learn is how enormous the difference is between our possible futures. If, collectively, we do nothing different, if we stick with what is called BAU, or business as usual, then we face a global temperature rise during this century of perhaps 5°C. (As my climate scientist friend Scott Denning explains, for inland, temperate-zone, northern-hemisphere places like Colorado, this means roughly 14°F: hot summer days of 109°, not 95°.) Globally, the World Bank reports, "A 4°C world is likely to be one in which communities, cities and countries would experience severe disruptions, damage, and dislocation, with many of these risks spread unequally" (World Bank 19). More severe floods, droughts, heat waves, and hurricanes; biodiversity and crop losses; inundated coasts, acidified oceans, and dead coral reefs: such problems might be beyond our adaptive capacity.

If we act aggressively, though, we might see a rise of just 2°C (or about 6°F in Colorado), not good, but much, much better. Perhaps more to the point, a very large space divides these two scenarios. The choice of what we do, and thus the world we will be living in, this choice is ours—ours collectively, as a gathering of individuals.

And taking all this information personally? I suspect that this next step is inevitable. Climate change is, after all, everybody's business.

Still, there are so many versions of evasion. It is so easy to think, or feel, that it can't be real, then be blindsided by a piece of news. One day last year, for instance, I read (in a World Wildlife Fund report) that in just the last forty years, the number of mammals, birds, amphibians, and fish on Earth has dropped by over half. Habitat loss and human hunger are the first two culprits, but climate change is the third. Another day I was shown a map of the western states illustrating projected increases in area burned every year for each degree Celsius in global temperature rise (National Research Council 41). The space around my own home in Colorado—where in 2012 one huge wildfire stopped a half mile away—was split between the scarlet of 393%, for the grassy plains, and the brown of 658%, for the forested mountains. At such moments, my stomach clenches, my heart pounds, and I can't catch my breath. I try to sit still, let my feelings unfold, and remind myself that real caring encompasses fear and grief. I think about what courage and authentic hope might entail. Then I get back to work.

This is what taking climate change personally means to me.

That's not my job

A few years ago, my friend Nina Bjornsson went to a talk given by cultural theorist Slovaj Žižek at the University of Iceland. He spoke about the damaged climate and how simplistic thinking will eventually doom the human race. After he finished, she waited in line to ask, not surprisingly, "What can we do?" His answer? "That's not my job."

Like many others in the academic humanities, Žižek saw his job as illuminating the problem, not trying to solve it. In departments of English and in cultural studies, at least, this premise is central to our BAU. We so often focus on what is wrong. We analyze, critique, interrogate, problematize. We blame gigantic faceless forces: corporations, capitalism, neoliberalism. We talk about how everything is constructed—by faceless forces. As another cultural critic, Bruno Latour, points out, "entire PhD programs are still running to make sure that good American kids are learning the hard way that facts are made up, that there is no such thing as natural, unmediated, unbiased access to truth, that we are always prisoners of language, that we always speak from a particular standpoint, and so on, while dangerous extremists are using the very same argument of social construction to destroy hard-won evidence that could save our lives" (227). When we emphasize critical thinking, we may do so at the expense of thinking that is practical, compassionate, and creative.

Climate change is a problem for our BAU in other ways, too. My department's core subjects are language and texts, not greenhouse gases, international

negotiations, or carbon pricing. We typically focus on individuals and small groups of people, not populations, species, or social and political institutions. We tend to discuss rather than lecture, to emphasize interpretation over fact, personal responses over worldly effects. We may feel more comfortable teaching the "controversy" than teaching the facts, a bad idea when controversy is manufactured to obscure the facts. We aren't trained to help students understand climate change or prepare to cope with a disrupted planet—never mind how to transform economies, infrastructures, politics. This hasn't been our job.

If on a global scale BAU is a recipe for very big trouble, can we be complacent about ours? I think we need to admit that sticking to BAU is a kind of denial. We must imagine new job descriptions.

We don't have to start from scratch, but we may want to return to some basics. We can think about and employ the power of words and stories. We don't expect people to always act rationally. We understand about personal identity, how hard it is to change, how much it directs what we do. We know how deeply enmeshed it is with such things as gender, sexuality, race, ethnicity, class, social and cultural structures, ideology, our physical environment. We have learned to talk about these things, even when doing so is scary. We feel comfortable with emotions, beliefs, and values, things numbers can't adequately capture. We pay attention to how people find or make meaning, and how meaning can change. We care about the lived experiences of individuals and communities. We nurture empathy for those who are different from us. We imagine other people's lives, in other places and other times, and other ways of living. We have distinctive ways of thinking that we can bring to the climate change conversation. Once we turn our minds to the task, we too have important things to offer.

We can do this work indirectly. I have asked students to observe how characters in wartime novels respond to crisis, how they adapt to the need to live differently. I have pointed to the way novels like Leslie Marmon Silko's *Ceremony* understand that impersonal disruptions such as prolonged drought also disrupt personal, familial, and cultural identity. In a course on the Dust Bowl, we tried to put ourselves in the place of the real and fictional people we read about. What was it like to watch a farm dry up and blow away, a child suffer with dust pneumonia? Would we have stayed home or taken off for some place the rain still fell? Would our hope have been realistic, our disappointments paralyzing? What would it be like to become a refugee in an unwelcoming place—or watch our own towns fill with strangers needing housing and jobs?

Hundreds of literary works, I now see, offer sites for contemplating what happens when the world changes around us, shaking our understandings of who we are and what we should do. Many suggest ways to find strength and resilience in ourselves and in others. Some show us how cultural changes actually occur, despite opposition and inertia; they can teach us what it means to be agents for change. We can easily add ideas relevant to climate change to a wide variety of literature courses.

In writing classes, both expository and creative, we can urge students to think creatively and rigorously about how to make a better future. One of my colleagues,

Tom Conway, gives his advanced composition classes a "spaceship Earth" assignment based on work by Buckminster Fuller and Paul Hawken. His students research, design, and write about life on a city-sized spaceship "with the overall goals of sustainability and flourishing in mind"—and then they consider how their best ideas might be enacted on *this* Earth.

In my environmental literature courses, I tackle the subject of climate change directly. Starting at midterm in my most recent such course, we worked our way in this order through the following. First, *Chasing Ice*, a powerful documentary film about photographer James Balog's project tracking receding glaciers. When the film ended, my students sat in stunned silence, and I promised I would help them move past that state of shock. Second, *Field Notes from a Catastrophe*, for solid information. Third, Doug Fine's *Farewell, My Subaru*, a short, funny account of going off the grid that lightens the mood and suggests how small personal actions can lead to larger, more effective ones. Fourth, biologist Carl Safina's account of a year spent mostly on the tip of Long Island, *The View from Lazy Point*. With its impressive mix of personality, science, philosophizing, polemic, and lyricism, with its balance of good news and bad, this book energizes students.

Finally, we read some essays I think of when I feel worst about climate change: two pieces that confront its emotional impact, Rosemary Randall's "The Id and the Eco" and Ray Scranton's "Learning to Die in the Anthropocene"; pieces about citizen activism by Terry Tempest Williams, Bill McKibben, and Audrey Shulman; essays about ethics by Dale Jamieson and Michael P. Nelson, who suggest we should act not with success in mind but in ways we feel are right; and Paul Hawken's heartening "To Remake the World," with which I showed (on his interactive website) photographer Chris Jordan's "E Pluribus Unum," an image of Hawken's index of grassroots groups working toward a better world. All these texts offer traditional literature-class topics. But they do much more that matters today.

In these ways and in others, thinking about what I and my students can do about climate change is now the center of my job.

Tell the truth

One day last year I was chatting with a young woman whose name I don't remember. She mentioned how rarely she hears solid information about climate change that isn't sugar-coated. I replied that the research about communicating this topic shows that too much bad news, however accurate, makes listeners shut down, and so, hoping to be heard, many people soften their messages. She cut in with words that I keep hearing: *Tell the truth!*

The truth has many parts. In this case, the setting is important. It was September 2014, and we were painting signs on a rooftop in Brooklyn, working with volunteers from all over the country to prepare for a climate change march. She had come from Utah, I from Colorado. She was a snowboarder and an activist; I an introverted English professor. She must have been less than half my age. We were two tiny points in a very large gathering.

The People's Climate March turned out to be enormous, a gathering of not the

thirty or forty thousand the New York City police expected, not the hundred thousand the organizers dreamed of, but something like four hundred thousand people. Those who carried the signs we had painted, bright orange life rings stenciled with the names of communities hit hard by Superstorm Sandy, led the march. So many people filled the streets of downtown Manhattan that it was hours before the end of the line could begin to walk.

The optimism, energy, and commitment in that gathering were stunning and contagious. And they remain critical parts of the unfolding story of climate change: the agency we can own, the power of creativity and community. So I keep learning this story. I keep taking it personally. I try to tell the truth. And I make it my job to talk about it.

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