

Rethinking Choices

We help people survive climate change

The stages of climate grief

A little while back Richard and I were at an investment symposium. The topics were focused on sustainability and how to invest for a better future. We threw a spanner into the works with a message that none of that would work.

When we invest in medicines with the idea that medicines help people and do good, we are ignoring a quarter of the world's rivers are already toxic with pharmaceuticals we use every day.

What we actually need is to do less. We cannot solve a problem created by too much activities by pretending that the answer is by doing only the good activities. It is like saying no harm will come about if we only smoke the good stuff.

Later that evening, one of the participants made an analogy of what we said. He phrased it in terms of grief – “You and Richard,” he said, “are already way past the acceptance stage; we are still in denial and anger.”.

What he said made me think because he is right.

Climate change is not about the climate but it is about loss. We read about it being polar bears and glaciers, but it is much more than that. It is the loss of our promised way of life.

So, when I got home, I asked my cat, Crumble. Crumble is two years old. He is a covid-lockdown cat. He likes playing tag and hide-and-seek, and he is not very cuddly. However, the other day, he was cuddly and so I asked him, “What do you think of climate change?”

After two years, I speak pretty good Crumble. He looked at me, “Why do you even ask? Look, I’ve already found a new perch.”

And so, he had. The old perch was by the window and gave him a lovely view of everything. However, it got too hot and he gave it up. He moved on.

If you were a cat, you would understand what losing a perch means. Crumble lost his perch. Unlike us, he accepted climate change because he was able to move on.

Why can't we move on?

More than polar bears and glaciers, climate change means losing our way of life. Our modern world is so interconnected that when India has a heat wave, because the country makes medicines for the world, health services suffer everywhere. When Africa has too much or too little rain and cotton harvests are lost, our clothes from fast fashion T-shirts to designer items all become more expensive.

Climate change harms the way our planet can heal itself. This is big because our modern economy relies on the planet healing itself no matter what we throw at it.

When we recover from a disaster, we can do so only because the planet recovers.

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The climate, however, is getting weaker. We know this because diseases are spreading – monkey pox, Marburg virus, coronaviruses, dengue fever, and so on.

However, as the young man said, we do not see these problems as climate change. We see them as failures of our health services, or as consequences of globalisation. We do not see them as climate change because most of all we need to hold on to the idea that by working hard, innovating, we can solve any problem that comes along.

So, at the conference, our comment that we cannot solve a problem caused by doing too much by doing more, no matter whether we think what we do is good or not, was met with denial.

We cannot give up the ideas of win-win solutions. We have been taught that if we work hard, rewards will be ours. If we want to progress at work, we need to think outside-the-box. We are encouraged not to be limited by the boundaries of what we see. In society, we respect asking for forgiveness more than we respect asking for permission. Rules are there to be broken. We can be whoever we want. We can have whatever we want.

These are the things we lose with climate change. It is inevitable. They are all things that are made possible by using the planet as the ultimate provider.

Climate change is happening because we have breached the boundaries of our planet, and they cannot be breached further. It means we will not be able to have all the things we want. It means there is no more win-win, no more outside-the-box, no more forgiveness. Most of all, working hard will not make any difference.

So, when the heatwave hits India and the health of people everywhere suffers, even if we try to work harder, our economies will suffer. When our economy suffers, our governments will run out of money. When our governments run out of money, we lose our security.

The denial is a valuable defence against admitting to these changes which are happening too fast for us. It protects us from shocks that paralyse us. But if we allow it to continue for too long, it becomes an enabler for us to think that by some magic we can avoid the loss.

We want to believe a superhero who will come to rescue us, like Iron Man with his amazing technology or Dr Strange with his ability to turn back time.

I spoke with a friend from Italy and he asked about carbon capture. Wouldn't that be the solution?

I pointed out the New Scientist had an article a few weeks ago about the UK's largest carbon capture project. When it comes online it will capture 40 thousand tonnes of carbon dioxide each year.

The problem is the world currently emits 40 billion tonnes of carbon dioxide a year. This is it a drop in the ocean. The plant also uses the captured carbon dioxide to make into baking soda. Baking soda works by creating tiny bubbles of carbon dioxide in our cakes to make them light and fluffy, so the whole process simply emits the carbon dioxide from ovens instead.

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This is the essence of another stage of climate grief - bargaining. We bargain when we struggle with the loss and tries to do something about it. But bargaining is not acceptance. Bargaining tries to limit the loss. By being able to capture some carbon dioxide, we no longer feel as helpless. We make deal with ourselves. If we set a climate target, we can make it alright again. If we do something towards the climate target, we can say we are moving forward.

We bargain at every level. For the UK government, the carbon capture plant is a real win. The carbon dioxide is captured on its shores and will go towards meeting the country's targets. The captured carbon creates credit that can be sold for profit. That helps the company and the government through taxes. The credits will be used by another person somewhere else in the world to do something they need, like offsetting a business flight or a personal holiday. Overall, everyone wins – except for the planet.

As we explained in *The Unsustainable Truth* our economy takes good intentions and corrupts them. The persons offsetting their flights with the credit we produced no longer ask if their flights are necessary and will fly more. The other baking soda manufacturers are not going to give up their revenues, and more baking soda will be made and more cakes baked. More oil, gas, and coal will be burnt because even if the airplanes use biofuel and the ovens use renewable energy, oil, gas, and coal will still be needed to plant the crops that make the biofuel and extract the cooper that transmits the renewable energy. In our world today, doing any activity inevitably means someone somewhere will use oil, gas, and coal to support it or because of it.

We bargain because we do not want to face up to the loss. We know we cannot wait for Tony Stark or Stephen Strange, so we invent our own win-win way out of the problem. However, the loss is real and no amount of bargaining will change it.

When we see others do this, we get angry. We get angry with the people who buy the carbon budget to offset their personal holidays; they should be having a staycation instead. We get angry with the governments that allow the company to get away with it. We get angry with journalists for not covering the real story, or for failing to present the real facts. We get angry if the facts are not there to support what we know must be true.

We now have a generation of young people focused on being angry. They strike every Friday to stay angry. Their loss is real. They point to those who have to pay. They call out everything as greenwashing. We must to stop oil. Governments must do more.

Anger diverts the focus to someone else, or something else. It helps us to feel we have some control. We can do something – petition politicians, go on protest marches, be with people who feel like us and have a sense of community and solidarity. It helps us to go through our grief for the loss not of the planet, but of the promise of our tomorrow.

If we give up on our anger, we fall into depression. Everything is then bleak. It is all pointless. A friend told me of a conversation he had with a young taxi driver in Budapest.

Yes he knows it's happening. No they never talk about it among friends. He said what's the point of thinking about it, since he can't do anything. What's the point; he's one guy among 8 billion.

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The thing about this is that this stage comes to us all. It does not matter if we are running the sustainability plan for a major company or the taxi driver in Budapest. This is the moment when it becomes personal.

A lot of climate change is intellectual. That is the problem why we are still increasing our oil, gas, and coal use even in a year when we should be cutting emissions by 2 to 3 billion tonnes of carbon dioxide and its equivalent a year. We understand it as an intellectual challenge, but fundamentally, we still believe in solving it like the problems we solved before – by finding win-win solutions.

I met with a friend yesterday who moved last year to Mexico. He was visiting back and we went for a walk. He was surprised how hot it was in London. He told me Mexico City is 2km above sea level so it is naturally cooled. In London, it was a particularly hot day.

We caught up about our families and our work, and eventually moved to talking about climate. I mentioned about the issues with denial, bargaining, and anger, and went on to talk about what we can do about it. Just before we left each other, he mentioned it is important to him because of his children. We paused for a little longer to talk about that. “What”, I asked, “would you leave as the lesson for your children?” We didn’t know.

That is why we are depressed.

COP26 was a defining moment for me. The US had re-joined the Paris Agreement. Boris Johnson was making particularly strong statements to commit the UK to rapid progress to net-zero. Yet, Boris Johnson flew out of COP26 on a private jet just to get dinner with a friend. For him, the loss is intellectual. They are trapped in the triangle of denial, bargaining, and anger because it has not yet become personal.

When it becomes personal, depression comes. We become sad and low. Everything feels bleak and hopeless. We do not have words.

At the end of COP26, I was depressed. I felt this was the day the climate died. We have people bargaining inside the meetings, angry outside the meetings, surrounded by media that are in denial asking questions about how to have win-win.

Depression is what it is. The stages of grief are not steps in a course we have to follow. They are the feelings and emotions we have when we face loss. We may find ourselves in one or another without warning, and we may bounce from one to another without reason. However, our emotions will help us to make sense of the loss and the implications of the loss as much as our reason. That is why we have to be aware of them.

How can we be more like Crumble? To accept it and move on? What does move on mean?

I had a conversation with a friend from Bangladesh. He told me the country is so flat it is facing real issues with rising sea level. It is not just the sea taking over the land, but the sea is already making the land too salty. Very few things will grow. He like many others in Bangladesh work in textiles, and exports of clothes make up three-quarters of the income for the country. He said, the people he works with, they have people who are in the parts that will become flooded.

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He feels it personally. We talked about what people may want to do for themselves there; if we can be part of the thinking that leads to the actions they want to take.

Crumble took an action. He found himself a new perch. He accepted climate change, accepted this meant the loss of his old perch.

For us, the loss too is clear. We are not as smart as we thought we were. This puts us into a new position of humility. We do not know what to do.

It is like driving to your child's final year school play. There will not be another and you are already late. You want to be there. However, the car's engine temperature warning light starts to flash and there is still a long way to go. The engine is getting too hot. You are caught in an impossible situation. If you go faster, the engine will overheat and cease up on you. If you do not go fast enough you will not get there.

So, you start by ignoring the flashing light, denying there is a problem. Surely, it's just a malfunction. You do not want to admit that you are going to be late, and your child will not see you there.

Then as you smell burning, you start to get angry. If only the car had been serviced properly; if only the meeting you were at before did not run-over. All this, though, makes no difference. You bargain with yourself. If you make it, you will do something good.

As you exhaust yourself through the cycles of denial, bargaining and anger, you give up. You accept the loss. There is no point, it is too late. You stop. Frustrated and depressed. There is nothing to do.

Only then when you have accepted the loss are you able to pick up the phone and leave a message. You are late, but you are coming. The car broke down, but you will be there. Good luck on the performance. You have remembered why you wanted to go, the thing that gives you joy.

So, COP27 will be worse than COP26. We are in a year when governments have even less authority and desire to make real changes. Businesses are suffering too. It is therefore even more important that we go into it and leave feeling we can take little actions to help each other and ourselves. When we do that, we will feel able to take care of the big picture too.

Today, I was at a small garden created by a Danish friend in the centre of London. He was poorly and was not there. I met a couple of other people, a Japanese friend of mine and another Japanese she brought along. In the garden, there was a note – take 30 minutes out each day, and if you are really busy, take an hour. So, the three of us took an hour and talked about our ambitions, fears, and things that give us joy. Climate featured centrally, and tomorrow her friend and I will meet again to see what things we can do to help each other and ourselves.