

# Engaging with Climate Change Means Engaging with Our Human Nature

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One positive outcome of the Copenhagen summit in 2009 is that world leaders did all come together to acknowledge that climate change is real and manmade. However, most of us living in developed consumer societies are still in denial about it, still tending to turn a blind eye, even when we accept the facts and causes of climate change. I suggest one important reason for our denial is our tendency to avoid discomfiting facts about human nature.

The human sciences, including psychoanalysis, branches of psychology, sociology, and also current evolutionary biology, are currently converging in a remarkable way toward a common view of abiding aspects of human nature. The science shows us that as a species we struggle in an ongoing way with inherently conflicting strands in our nature, being far less moral and more rapaciously greedy than we would like to think we are and also far more moral and capable of selflessness and restraint than we realize. Our morality stems from our natural empathy, concern, protective feelings, and love for those we experience as close to us, whereas our immorality stems from our capacity to cut off empathy and concern in indifference or hate.

We are most likely to cut off concern and empathy when we convince ourselves that we are superior to those we consign to out-groups that we experience as far away from us; it tends to make it far easier to exploit our out-groups, both human and animal, when we see them as inferior to us and therefore not worthy of our concern. Feeling superior, we also feel entitled to ideal-sized portions, to ride roughshod over restraint and limitation, and to be spared knowing about the real cost all this entails. This kind of arrogant superiority is an ordinary part of human nature and it is as old as the hills. When arrogant we are capable of great destructiveness, cruelty, and stupidity.

So, when we look in the mirror and engage with what we see in a realistic way, without the rose-tinted glasses of our wishful fantasies

and without the distortions introduced by underlying political agendas, we face a sobering view, not to be taken lightly—one that enriches us even while it saddens us. We are both loving and destructive by nature, and which side of us predominates determines the prevailing human climate.

An arrogant frame of mind is the opposite of being mindful because arrogance, feeling entitled to be spared human difficulty, tends to apply quick fixes to problems it faces and also causes. This is particularly the case when the problems are with guilt, shame, and anxiety about the damage a rapacious greed can cause. If we know that our actions cause damage we feel guilt and shame. These are useful emotions because they can act as restraining brakes on further destructiveness. However, in the mindless world of the quick fix, magical ways are found to deny guilt and shame and also to deflect us from knowing about the underlying causes of our mounting anxiety.

Shame and guilt are regularly airbrushed out in our current society. Being shameless is fast becoming a virtue and quick fixes for our guilt are now widely socially acceptable. An everyday mindset is, “I know it is wrong to buy this fresh food flown in from abroad and wrapped in nonrecyclable plastic, and that battery chicken; but not to buy them would make for difficulty in my life and difficulty is not something I should have to tolerate.” Here, a sense of special entitlement insulates us from exposure to our guilty feelings and we can also apply another quick fix at this point, which is to blame someone else. “Look, it’s not my fault. I didn’t cause this mess and make it so difficult to live ethically. It’s our leaders. It’s overpopulation. And, what a shambles Copenhagen was.”

An arrogant state of mind can make a partial truth the whole truth and in this way personal responsibility can be evaded in a tricky and slippery way. These partial truths are often more difficult to spot and refute than outright lies and can cause much confusion. Of course it is not all our fault that the struggle to find sustainable ways to live has become so hard. Corporate greed allowed to flourish in an insufficiently regulated climate has indeed made it very difficult daily to live in a mindful and ethical way and we could mobilize for change far

more easily if our governments imposed restraint. However, we are also intimately involved in what has come to pass. By allowing government to appeal to our wish to be superior and to feed the destructively greedy side of our nature we have been up for seduction.

Quick fix states of denial can also be self-perpetuating and acquire momentum, and thus arrogance can start to revel in how clever and special it feels in finding its cheap “no cost” solutions. The triumphant feeling involved can become an addictive high. We can be mindlessly excited when we say, “It was so cheap, I bought double!” or, “I just booked a flight for almost nothing! Hey!” But, really we know deep down that things are only cheap because the real costs are not being factored in.

The denial of reality through quick fixes inevitably leads to anxiety and the denied realities, kept on the margin of consciousness through turning a blind eye, are always threatening to break through. In the current situation this anxiety, because it relates to our deepest concerns, about survival, is increasing difficult to manage and this can lead to the quest for further quick fix unthinking solutions, often involving attempts to deflect anxiety by renaming its cause.

Avoiding guilt and shame through quick fixes leads to increasing stupidity and here the original meaning of the word “stupid” is revealing. It means stupefied; struck dumb with grief. Deep down we know one profound reason for our anxiety is our grief, guilt, and shame at the greed we have participated in and the effect of this on Mother Earth, on ourselves, and on the next generation, our own children. We are creating a world in which all will have to bear terrible suffering. Because Mother Earth only has so much to give, our closest in-groups, our families, and also ourselves are now being treated in reality with the indifference usually reserved for our furthest out-groups and this is an unprecedented and new situation

for humans. We are rightly anxious about the survival of Mother Earth, but also about our capacity to love and protect the relationships that mean the most to us. Will our capacity for love and reason survive?

One observable feature of the recent election in Britain was that many people voiced outrage toward the collective political leadership for not telling the truth. I think the most damaging lie that people in consumer societies are being encouraged to believe is that denying facts about external reality and also about human nature is a cheap solution with no cost.

Outrage can form part of our moral sense by rightly taking full measure of our hatred for what is wrong, but it can easily become yet another quick fix when it lifts us to a high ground of being squeaky clean and blameless ourselves.

Our leaders have not sufficiently appealed to us to grapple with difficult complexities and painful realities but rather have tended to try to seduce the part of us that tends to feel superior and arrogant with the quick fixes of denial. We wanted them to help us be a bit greedy but not this destructively greedy and we are fed up with the lie that it has no environmental, social, or personal cost.

To engage with the issue of man-made climate change, we need a profound engagement not only with science and the study of the political process but also with ourselves. We would do well to face our own natures as realistically as we can.

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