



Who Will Cry for the Ice?

by Carter Brooks

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An examination of conceptual understanding of climate change through metaphor

Carter Brooks

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Abstract

Examination of the conceptual metaphors we use in every day speech can provide insight into how we think about and understand the world. Conceptual understanding of climate change is shaped not only by scientific research, but also by everyday metaphors for such mundane topics as “warming” or “change.” Starting with an examination of how our most basic conceptual metaphors influence how we see climate change, this research then examines how competing worldviews dictates how global warming is understood and addressed, and finally how emerging terms create assumptions that influence how global warming is understood. This book suggests that our conceptual understanding is limited by our physical experience of the world, and that how we understand climate change is influenced by our life priorities and worldview, which is in turn shaped by our day to day activities. The conclusion ponders the question, “what is missing?” The answer implies that our conceptual understanding is likely flawed and incomplete, and suggests more complex understanding may be found using indirect methods such as art.

Preface

For the artistically minded, the best way to solve a problem is indirectly. How many great discoveries have been accidents? How often do we set out on one course and arrive at an unexpected destination? So, perhaps the best way to address the climate crisis is to address something else. This is why I often say that I'm not interested in solving our climate change crisis. The crisis that needs solving is the crisis of the human imagination.

John Jeavons, an activist biodynamic farmer used to give a talk about agriculture in which, after thoroughly convincing the audience of the importance of learning to grow crops, he would say, "But once you have learned to grow crops, I want you to stop growing crops. I don't want you to grow crops ever again. Instead I want you to grow soil." That is, grow soil that will grow good crops. He would then state the obvious—that to grow good soil not only makes it easier to grow good crops, but also requires knowing how to grow crops. Then he'd stop and do it again. "I want you to stop growing soil. I want you never to grow soil again. What I want you to grow are people. People who know the importance of growing soil."¹ The lesson is no different with climate change. We don't need to stop emitting greenhouse gasses. We need to grow people, cultures even, that know not to.

We currently have a crisis of the imagination. When our politics cannot imagine a way to harness clean energy without being in conflict with economic well being, then we have a crisis of imagination. When we have a populace fed awareness through a television, a populace wandering about muttering the talking points of the dominant party, we have a crisis of the imagination.

¹ John Jeavons, "Cultivating Our Garden," *In Context*. #42. Fall 1995. Context Institute 1995. p.32.

When climate change is reduced to an issue of fossil fuel emissions thickening a carbon blanket, we have a crisis of the imagination. But the question of the imagination goes beyond the collective human mind. There is more to imagination than just thinking. The landscape is an imagination. The thousands of insect species, bacteria, and other life forms playing out the game of life and death on any tree on any day is expression of imagination. The shape of mountains carved by rivers of ice is an expression of imagination.

Meanwhile, how many species a day are currently being driven to extinction? This is a crisis of imagination. Around the globe, the floor of the oceans to depths of 600 feet. has been bulldozed by dragging trawler nets.² This is a crisis of the imagination. The crops that feed humanity have been reduced to a few hundred from tens of thousands. This is a crisis of the imagination. The ethnosphere of language and culture is in a state of genocide.³ This is a crisis of the imagination. The white peaks that wear down the mountains are vanishing. This is a crisis of the imagination.

In the middle of this crisis of the imagination, I wonder what it means that the great ice rivers and ice sheets of the Earth are melting away. Before I am a grandfather, the ice of Kilimanjaro will be gone. When my daughter is a grandmother, Santa's ice cap will be a watery nothing in the summer months. In my lifetime, the CO₂ concentrations in the atmosphere have reached levels the earth has not seen in 55 million years.⁴

And today it requires imagination to notice the missing question: what does it mean?

The crisis is of imagination. It is the war. "The only war that

²Robert Ballard, Public Lecture at Marin Civic Center Auditorium. Marin Speaker Lecture Series 2004/2005.

³Diana Parsell, "Wade Davis on Vanishing Cultures," *National Geographic News*. June 28, 2002.

⁴Daniel Schrag, Presentation at Thought Leaders Forum, 2003. Credit Suisse/First Boston LLC 2003.

matters,” as the great poet Diane DiPrima repeats and repeats.⁵ :

There is no way out of the spiritual battle the war is
the war against the imagination you can't sign up as
a conscientious objector the war is the war for the
human imagination and no one can fight it but you/
& no one can fight it for you

⁵Diane DiPrima, “Rant,” *Pieces of a Song*. City Lights Books. 1990.