

The Climate, R.D. Laing, and the Sierra Club

I was thinking about the British psychologist R.D. Laing, who was a 60s guru of sorts after reading a [column](#) in the New York Times by Maureen Dowd about just how crazy and just plain frightening the climate situation has become. Laing wrote that psychosis was a natural reaction to the insane global society that has brought us multiple wars and now massive environmental destruction. And while it is natural to feel depressed or angry or even hopeless about just how bad the world's climate has become, we are constantly being told by "the experts" and by environmental organizations like the Sierra Club that it can all be managed with some simple fixes and yes, if you give us money or buy my new book.

I don't advocate feeling hopeless in the face of the climate calamity as we really do have to get our act together and take forceful action. But it is important to understand the gravity of the situation and to not underestimate the problems we are up against. I was talking with Jim Young, who has long led the lemonade sales for the Eastern Missouri Group, and he said, "Nobody is talking about runaway global warming." He's right. Very few people are talking about the risk and how, at some point, the climate situation could pass the point when it begins to spiral out of any sort of control.

Even if we just look at where we are now, the future looks grim. Even if the world ceased all CO2 emissions tomorrow, the global average temperature would continue to rise. This is because of simple physics in that, because of the extra CO2 in the atmosphere now, more heat that used to radiate back out into space is now trapped and the extra heat is heating up the planet. This won't change until the atmosphere warms enough so that the outgoing radiation, which is a function of the temperature of the atmosphere, is again equal to the energy the earth is getting from the sun. The famous climate scientist James Hansen, in his blog "[Climate Change in a Nutshell](#)," estimates the atmosphere could warm as much as 2.5 degrees Celsius over where we are right now. Think about just what is happening now with only about a 1.1 degree Celsius increase and another 2.5 degrees is hard to imagine.

The Sierra Club has a long history of environmental activism and we should be proud of the club's many accomplishments. However, I believe that the Sierra Club has been very remiss in not actively promoting the idea of placing a price on carbon emissions. If you go to the Sierra Club website, you can find a [policy position on carbon pricing](#) that doesn't really deny that some form of a carbon tax could help but I still have yet to see the club actively promote the idea.

As a former environmental engineer, I am familiar with the usual regulatory approaches for controlling pollution. The usual approach is to require a permit to emit the regulated pollutants and these permits restrict what can be emitted into the environment. This approach doesn't really work with carbon dioxide as we are all emitters and we all contribute to carbon emissions just by driving our cars or heating or cooling our homes or other activities. We can point our collective fingers at the fossil fuel companies, and they do deserve criticism as they have all actively worked to deceive the public about the problem as documented in the file "[Merchants of Doubt](#)," but we are all in this game together and so we have to have a different approach.

The approach that most economists recommend is to place a price on carbon emissions at the source by enacting a carbon tax or fee. Even the conservative Wall Street Journal published an "[Economists Statement on Carbon Dividends](#)" to this effect that was signed by over 3500 economists, including 28 Nobel Laureate economists.

Since politicians are normally reluctant to pass new taxes, the Citizen Climate Lobby (or CCL) and others have recommended a “fee-and-dividend” approach. The idea is to pass a carbon fee that is paid by producers of oil, coal, and natural gas and this fee would gradually rise every year. The money that is collected by the government would then be given back to everyone in the form of an annual dividend. The dividend would be the same for everyone. The effect would be that those who have a high carbon footprint, who are often higher income people, would get back less money than they paid because of the fee while most of the rest of us would get back more than they paid. So from the standpoint of equity and environmental justice, this approach works well.

A carbon tax is not a silver bullet and by itself it will not solve the climate crises. But it would be a major step forward and there is no good reason to not impose some form of a carbon tax or fee. The US government has in fact estimated the “[social cost of carbon](#)” to be a minimum of \$50 per ton. This is the estimated future cost to mitigate against the impacts of climate change. So, if we don’t impose a carbon fee now, we are in effect saying that future generations will have to pay these costs – not us.

There are other things that need to be done and should be done. We all need to do what each of us can to reduce our own carbon footprint and I feel I could do more myself than I currently do. I think that a major cultural shift is needed if emissions are to be reduced. Being an energy hog should become the equivalent of being a smoker or an alcoholic in terms of social acceptability while those who are mindful of their energy use should become heroes like Greta Thunberg. While it doesn’t mean that we all must freeze in the wintertime or stop taking vacations, it does mean that each of us really needs to think hard about our lifestyle, consumption patterns, and what we really need to live a meaningful life.

While, I am a member of the Ethical Society of Saint Louis and so I’m not Catholic, I’ve read the encyclical by Pope Francis, [Laudato Si’](#). In this remarkable document, he makes an eloquent plea for people to really think about how we live and about how we all spend our money. I’m not an anti-capitalist (well, maybe a little) but there seems to be no doubt that US capitalism has in many ways been encouraging all of us to spend more and live higher on the proverbial hog than we really need to be doing. Volunteer simplicity is not something ones hears a lot about of these days but there I believe there is a lot of philosophical and psychological justification for doing this.

So, what do I advise? First, we all need to be doing more to reduce our own carbon footprint. More specifically, we need to think about our meat consumption, our vacation decisions, and what we all buy and consume including where we live and the types of dwellings we choose to live in. Condos are good, detached houses in distant suburbs – not so good. Next, we all need to urge our politicians to support some sort of a carbon tax or fee. The Citizens Climate Lobby has been remarkably successful in at least getting bipartisan support for the [Energy Innovation and Carbon Dividend Act](#) that being considered in Congress, so I support that organization more than I do the Sierra Club.

And finally – for Sierra Club leaders - please think about this. Your children and future generations all really depend on what environmental leaders do, say, and promote. Leadership sometimes requires sometimes means taking a bold stance on important issues. The club has a well-deserved record of environmental accomplishment, and I will continue to support the club. But it can and needs to do more on the critical issue of climate.

Getting back to R.D. Laing, I think he was correct in that the world can indeed seem like a crazy place and we humans often make major mistakes. But now, even more than ever, we need to be thinking

critically and clearly about the choices facing humanity. I'm reminded of the words of Stewart Brand, creator of the Whole Earth Catalog, when he said, "We are as Gods and might as well get good at it." The future is up to we who are alive now and we all need to be making responsible choices for the sake of the planet and future generations.