

Being Awake to Present and Future Challenges

by Ralph C. Martin

White water canoeing is a wild ride of swiftly adapting to signals on the surface while also reading the river, to go the distance, on a tongue of deeper water.

This month we learned more about the impacts of climate change and how we might react. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) released a report on Impacts, Adaptation, and Vulnerability www.ipcc.ch/report/ar5/wg2/ and as I write, the next report on Mitigation is being finalized www.ipcc.ch/report/ar5/wg3/

The temptation is to stare at the surface of this fast flowing river of reports and give in to despair and stop paddling. Alternatively, some ignore the signals all together and keep paddling as though it isn't really happening. White water canoeing is about being wide awake.

Thomas Homer-Dixon wrote a recent article in the Globe and Mail www.theglobeandmail.com/globe-debate/whats-behind-these-fractures-stalled-economies/article17925027/ about stalled economies in Thailand, Turkey, Ukraine and Venezuela. He argues there is a trend toward decreasing peace with slower economic growth, along with relatively higher prices for oil and food. With insufficient growth to alleviate other grievances, political instability is more likely. In this regard, he expresses concern about prospects in China.

Joanna Macy is well known for being clear sighted about the limitations of Earth's carrying capacity, declining options for future generations, increasing rates of species' extinction and potential destruction of most life forms. Nevertheless, like Frodo in Lord of the Rings, she says, 'It looks bleak. Big deal, it looks bleak.'

<http://exopermaculture.com/2014/04/02/joanna-macy-on-how-to-prepare-internally-for-whatever-comes-next/>

Macy reminds us "that the very fact that we are seeing is enlivening... we are just one part of a vast interdependent whole—one cell in a larger body.... what it comes down to is that we are here now. So the choice is how to live now. With the little time left, we could wake up more and not stop at premature equanimity. We feel we ought to be in control ... we ought to be sociable. That cultural cast has tremendous power to keep us benumbed and becalmed."

Not knowing the definitive destiny of humans, other species or of Earth's ecosystem is not a reason to avoid or to ignore what we can understand. We have adapting to do.

In the first IPCC report noted above, “glaciers continue to shrink in many regions, the abundance, geographic distribution, migration patterns and timing of seasonal activities of species are shifting and hypoxic areas (“dead zones”) in coastal areas are increasing in number and size. There is a risk of food insecurity and breakdown of food systems linked to warming, drought, and precipitation variability, particularly in regions with poorer populations.”

The bubbles of entitlement directed education and jobs and comfortable lifestyles may not last. However, we tend to live our lives as though bubble maintenance, and even expansion, is a top priority. The risk to a focus on business as usual is that the usual will become unusual and the unexpected will become more common.

Political will, especially in Canada, appears to be missing in action. Perhaps too many citizens and politicians are ‘benumbed and becalmed.’ As Easter approaches this week, the Pope’s question to ask ourselves is, “Has my life fallen asleep?”

It can feel fruitless and frustrating to do what is necessary while so many others do not. Why bother to drive less and slower, avoid flying and keep home temperatures low in winter and ambient in summer? Don’t counteractions of others cancel impacts of individual actions? On the other hand, who will lead by example to inspire those on the cusp of action?

Much of human history, and indeed the history of Earth, has been a drama of survival, against high odds. In the last few decades, at least in Europe and North America, the game plan has shifted to productivity, creature comforts and, as conscience prods, to sustainability. Perhaps our polite efforts to sustain will elude us until we realize again, that the drama of survival is still with us.

Slower economic growth may be just what we need to get us realistically paddling. We could be awake to using less energy and reducing greenhouse gas emissions while preparing to adapt to fluctuations in weather. This might also include more time with families and neighbours.

As much as we might prefer to be somewhere else, we are here on Earth, in 2014. We are in the current of 21st century events. Stopping is not an option. Somehow we must paddle adroitly, seeing the swift and shallow, while discerning the distance and depth. This is our river to navigate, now, in full awareness.

If we capsize, floating may still be possible, albeit with limitations and discomfort. To prevent tipping, is still the smart choice.

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