

January 31, 2013

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Why Climate Change Requires A Consciousness Change

Posted: 06/20/11 09:31 AM ET

Einstein famously said that we cannot solve problems with the same level of perception that created them. We have to step up to a higher and more inclusive level of seeing what is going on in order to understand and solve great challenges. Certainly climate disruption represents one of the greatest tests humanity has ever faced because it is a much higher level problem than the actions which have created it: countless local actions (driving cars, running factories, etc.) have produced global consequences that respect no national boundaries and that imperil our collective future.

Here is how James Speth, former head of the Council on Environmental Quality and a top Washington policy maker, describes the up-leveling of perception required: "I used to think the top environmental problems facing the world were global warming, environmental degradation, and eco-system collapse.. but I was wrong. The real problem is not those three items, but greed, selfishness and apathy. And for that we need a spiritual and cultural transformation." The transformation that Speth speaks about is a shift to a higher level of attention and seeing the world from a more objective vantage point with a witnessing or reflective consciousness.

Simply stated, what is required is a shift from an "embedded consciousness" that is locked inside the habits of our thinking mind to a more spacious "reflective consciousness" that enables us to become a fair witness or objective observer of our lives. This does not mean we stop thinking; instead, we stand back and, without judgment, simply watch what we are thinking and how we are relating to both the world and ourselves.

An up-leveling of our attention to a more reflective or witnessing consciousness makes an important difference in the flow of our lives. We are less bound by habitual and pre-programmed ways of perceiving and responding when we are consciously watchful of ourselves in the process of living. As we witness ourselves moving through daily life, we begin to cut through confining self-images, social pretenses and psychological barriers and begin to live more voluntarily and choicefully. The ability to witness the unfolding of our lives is so ordinary that it is easy to overlook. An old adage states, "It's a rare fish that knows it swims in water." In a similar way, we humans seldom recognize the power and importance of a witnessing or reflective consciousness. To clarify, let me to ask: Have you been conscious of sitting here reading this blog? Did you unintentionally allow your thoughts to wander to other concerns? Did you just experience a slight shock of self-recognized when I inquired? What does it feel like to notice yourself reading while you read? To observe yourself eating while you eat? To notice yourself talking while you talk?

As our familiarity with this mode of attention increases, we get lost in thought and worldly activities less frequently. This is not a mechanical watchfulness; rather it involves making friends with ourselves and accepting the totality of who we are with all of our faults, foibles, and unique gifts. In living more consciously, we are able to notice our habitual patterns of thought and behavior, both personally and socially. We are more able to penetrate through the political posturing, glib advertisements, and cultural myths that sustain the status quo. We are also able to respond more quickly to subtle feedback that something is amiss. We do not have to be shocked or bludgeoned into remedial action by, for example, massive famines or catastrophic climate disruption; instead, more subtle signals suffice to indicate that corrective actions are warranted.

A reflective or witnessing or consciousness also promotes a feeling of connection with the rest of life. We begin to see and sense our intimate relationship with all of life and this, in turn, naturally fosters feelings of compassion and caring. As we expand our interior learning to match our technological advances, we develop an inner maturation that is more equal to the enormous technological development that has occurred over the last several centuries.

Returning to Einstein's insight, climate disruption and other crises are moving the capacity for a reflective or witnessing consciousness from the status of a spiritual luxury for the few to a social necessity for the many. This simple though profound transformation in consciousness is not confined to our personal lives. The human family is acquiring a witnessing or reflective consciousness at lightning speed as the growth of television and the Internet enable us to become a collective witness to our own journey. By joining the deep but fragmented communication of the Internet with the broad but shallow communication of television, we are transforming our global capacity to witness our collective behavior and future. Working together, these tools are creating a broad and deep capacity for attention and collective conversation as a species. With the combined power of our communications technologies, we are fostering a new level of collective consciousness that can overcome our apathy, selfishness, and greed and enable us to discover a common future of sustainable prosperity. We are a witnessing species.

Assisted by the communications revolution, we are becoming more fully awake and able to respond with to the supreme test of climate change from a higher level of perception and understanding.

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