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Tuesday, 2 October 2018

Leadership Beyond Denial of Our Climate Tragedy

Transcript of a talk given at the Poetics of Leadership conference, University of Cumbria, Ambleside Campus, 7th September 2018, by Professor Jem Bendell, co-chair of the conference. Based on the conference paper "From Denial to Deep Adaptation: Seeking Leadership Amidst Climate Tragedy."

"The topic that we will explore in this session is in the ether of our conference. Which may reflect how the topic is increasingly in the minds of some people in recent years, particularly in the environmental movement. It doesn't feel right to me given the serious nature of the topic to just present a summary of my paper. We can't avoid the emotional impact of this topic. And shouldn't try to. Although my attempt to develop a "deep adaptation" concept was partly to take some of the sting out of things by inviting reflection within a framework, perhaps a life-raft for despair, I don't see there is any way to just jump into this as a technical or philosophical discussion.

Because it is such an important topic, connected to the most important questions of existence, and an emotional journey for me, I want to be more precise than I am usually. Therefore, I will abandon a habit of a few years, and actually read my talk.

What I want to do in this session is to invite you to consider simply: "What If?"

"What if it is too late to avert a catastrophe in our own societies within our lifetimes, due to the impacts of climate change, particularly on agriculture. What might that mean for my life and work?"



Only if we consider that it could be too late could we explore implications for life and work - and deepen our dialogue on adaptation. I am no expert in that field. Instead, my role here is to invite more people to engage in that dialogue. Most people don't engage, as they raise many arguments against the view that we now face a probable or inevitable collapse in our societies within ten years. So, to encourage more of us to move into that "what if" space to consider this and let it generate new insights, I will summarise some of my own story in arriving at this point of view.

I was an environmentalist since the early nineteen nineties. After University my first job was with the World Wide Fund for Nature – that's the large WWF charity with the famous Panda logo. I've known about climate change for decades. News of extreme weather used to be stories I would share as a call for action. But they started to come so thick and fast, that I began to wonder. Images like the one here have been appearing on our devices with increasing frequency (animated gif of temperature anomalies). I had assumed the authority on climate was the IPCC – the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change. According to them, an ice-free Arctic was a possibility by 2100. That sounds far enough away to calm the nerves. But real-time measurements are documenting such rapid loss of ice that some of the world's top climate scientists are saying it could be ice free in the next few years. So, I couldn't take for granted the official position of the IPCC anymore. For the first time in 23 years, I decided to look at the science myself. It was the start of a major shift in my worldview, self-image and priorities.

Sea-level rise is a good indicator of what's happening, as a lot has to happen to change it. In 2001, the IPCC estimated a global sea level rise of 2 millimetres (mm) per year. By 2007, satellite data was revealing a sea level rise of 3.3 mm per year. Yet that year the IPCC offered 1.94mm a year as the lowest mark of its estimate for sea-level rise. Yes, you're right: that's lower than what was already happening. It's as if the river had already flooded your living room but the forecaster on the radio says she is not sure if the river will burst its banks. Analysts have since revealed how the IPCC got it so badly wrong. When scientists could not agree on how much the melting polar ice sheets would be adding to sea-level rise, they left out the data altogether (1). Yeah, that's so poor, it's almost funny.

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Once I realised that the IPCC couldn't be taken as climate gospel, I looked more closely at some key issues. The Arctic looms large. It acts as the planet's refrigerator, by reflecting sunlight back into space and by absorbing energy when the ice melts from solid to liquid. Some of the most eminent polar scientists predict the sea ice will disappear in the next few years. I suppose that is one way of interpreting "by 2100". Once the Arctic Ice has gone, the additional global warming would amount to as much as half of all warming caused by our pollutants. That blows the global 2 degree target out the window. The implications are immense for our agriculture, water and ecosystems. Even just one warmer summer in the northern hemisphere in 2018 reduced yields of wheat and staples like potatoes by about a quarter in the UK. Unlike other years, the unusual weather was across the northern hemisphere. Globally we only have grain reserves for about 4 months, so a few consecutive summers like 2018 and the predicted return of El Nino droughts in Asia could cause food shortages on a global scale. (2)

Untethered from the IPCC, I discovered worse. I learned about the increasing concentrations of methane gas in our atmosphere, released from the melting permafrost. Methane is 80 times more powerful at trapping the sun's energy than carbon dioxide. The huge amounts of methane stored in the relatively shallow waters off Siberia are now at risk of release as the water warms. Any release would mean a jump of global temperatures not seen since the Permian mass extinction 250 million years ago, which wiped out 95 percent of life on Earth. I think you know what that means. Even for Elon Musk.

Is it happening? Worried, I looked at the latest methane readings from satellite and land measurements. Mid-altitude measurements showed methane levels increasing about 1.8 percent over the previous year, with surface measurements about half of that. Both figures were consistent with a non-linear increase - potentially exponential. The difference between concentrations at ground level and mid altitudes is consistent with this added methane coming from our oceans, which could be from methane hydrates.

Then I discovered that scientists at the Virginia Institute of Marine Science were reporting data on actual sea levels that was consistent with sea-rise being non-linear. That is a proxy for non-linear changes in our climate. It means that escalating feedback loops are now warming the planet further. It was harrowing research, and I summarise it in the [Occasional Paper that we issued in July](#).

As I considered whether to issue that paper immediately, rather than look for a new journal and wait a year for publication, I saw all the bad news on my screens. It was 30 degrees Celsius inside the Arctic circle during July 2018, which is 10 degrees warmer than it should be. The dark future was flooding in on the present. I couldn't delay being more public about this situation and beginning to change my priorities.

I have worked in a profession where people said it's not helpful to worry people. But without much evidence for that claim. I have worked in a profession that celebrated all the good things being done, such as reduction of carbon footprints and the development of renewable energies. All that is good and should be continue. But these steps forward are like walking up a landslide. They won't change the temperature increases that are locked-in and the damage that will be caused. I had to conclude we face the kind of disruptive climate change that will trigger social collapse. By that I mean an uneven ending of normal modes of sustenance, security, pleasure, identity, meaning, and hope. It is not clear when such a collapse will occur. Yet all of us want to know "how long we've got." So, on the basis of the impact on agriculture, I am guessing (yes, only guessing) that within 10 years a social collapse, in some form, will have occurred nearly everywhere on the planet.

As a profession and way of life, academia invites us to believe we must be experts in order to engage in dialogue. We want to be understood and accepted as experts. I realise this is restricting us from exploring what is happening in the world around us. I am not claiming to be an expert in climate science, or in the implications for agriculture, or on the way collapse might occur. I am not claiming to be an expert on how we respond to this realisation personally, professionally or politically. Part of my reason for publishing the result of my study and the call for "deep adaptation" may have been a need to grieve in public. Or perhaps it was to push myself away from more years of denial. I don't know, as this is a new situation for me to be in. It seems to be new to others too, and that is why I have started blogging on my unvarnished and non-researched reflections on my journey after accepting imminent collapse.

Some of you will, quite rightly, be questioning the credibility of what I have just said. You may want to corroborate with other info. I recommend you do. For that, I recommend the [full Deep Adaptation paper](#) and then look into the sources I cite.

Some people who I have discussed this topic with did not try and double check but appeared to diminish the impact of the message on themselves. I have written about some of the ways such denial works, and how it may be institutionalised in the sustainability sector, in my paper for this conference. In a more accessible format, I have listed [12 typical patterns of denial](#) on my blog at [jembendell.com](#)

That happens because we think, consciously or not, that we can't bear it. Our protection instincts kick in to stop us from crying or losing our way. But many of us are probably feeling a bit anxious about the situation I have described. So, before I say anymore, I want to take a moment to acknowledge that anxiety. If you feel like it, I'd like to invite you to notice where it sits in your body, take a deep breath, and let it out, knowing that we are not in danger ourselves right now. I wonder whether we could find a way to welcome that anxiety for how it can invite us to change our beliefs and behaviours.

Some of us will want to grieve. I did. And I still do. Grief about this situation and what is coming will now be a companion to the rest of my life. But grief isn't a feeling that exists alone. We grieve because we love life, including our own, those of others and the whole of life itself. Love is the basis of our grief. In recognising that basis for our grief, we can move beyond despair or numbness. We can start again, to explore what we might be and do now. Only after acceptance can new forms of meaning, new forms of hope, new kinds of vision be allowed to emerge. For most people that process of moving into and through

despair towards a renewed basis for being and acting is not a quick one. And certainly not immediate. But we have just a few minutes more together in this session. So, I invite you to open the door. To begin to reflect on “what if?”

Some of you will have been through this process for some time, maybe even years. If you have, then I ask you to refrain from aspiring to have lots of answers. We may want to have a plan and reassure ourselves and others. But we can't really prefabricate for collapse. I will therefore ask you now to turn to one person only and share with each other what you FEEL in response to this question. Just stick with feelings to start with. Let's do this not as conversation but hearing our neighbour speak without interruption. I know this is a big ask but I'm going to ring a bell after one minute and ask you to then switch speaker. The person with the longest hair in your pair can start.

“What if it is too late to avert a catastrophe in our own societies within our lifetimes, due to the impacts of climate change, particularly on agriculture?” How would you FEEL?

Now switch.

Thankyou. Now check in with yourself. Aside from what you shared and heard, what else do you feel?

Thankyou. Now, please turn to another person, and share what you THINK in response to the same question, with an additional part: “What if it is too late to avert a catastrophe in our own societies within our lifetimes, due to the impacts of climate change, particularly on agriculture? What might that mean for my life and work?”

Now switch.

Thankyou. To conclude, please formulate a key question you now have that you want to answer because of this talk. If you want to, take a moment to write it down. I'll give you a minute.

In my paper I provide more background on what has led me to this situation where I'm inviting conversations like the ones you have just had. I don't have many answers, as this is new territory for me, emotionally, psychologically, and spiritually, even before considering the implications for strategies and policies. Instead, I invite you to keep having these conversations, and see what emerges. I realise this is quite tough for many of us and it has been for me. On my website I discuss [the range of responses](#) I have experienced or witnessed, as well as information on [emotional support](#) on this topic.

Thankyou for your attention and taking the time for reflection.

References

The paper draws on the studies analysed in the conference paper, available [here](#). Other references include:

- 1) <https://www.sciencealert.com/international-climate-change-reports-tend-toward-caution-and-are-dangerously-misleading-says-new-report>
- 2) <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2018/sep/03/falling-yields-of-key-uk-crops-could-raise-food-prices-and-leave-farmers-struggling>

In the News

Professor Bendell's work on Deep Adaptation has received mainstream media coverage in [New York Magazine](#) and [Bloomberg](#).

Next talks on Deep Adaptation by Prof Jem Bendell

30th October 2018, Kendal, Cumbria. Natural England. 12pm midday, Natural England offices. Private event.

17th December 2018, Carlisle, Cumbria. COWC and IFLAS. 7pm at Gateway Building, Fusehill Street. Public event, info [here](#).

19th December 2018, Bristol, Avon. Labour Party and Momentum. 7pm. Public event, info [here](#).

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Posted by [Jem Bendell](#) at 06:24



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