

"I am convinced we can change...."

The challenges of climate change are overwhelming but before we can save the planet we must first save ourselves, says philosopher Charles Taylor.

Mr. Taylor, you have been living on this planet for 86 years. How's our earth doing today compared to how it was the past?

Much worse of course. Today we are witnessing very big events, the sea is rising, hurricanes are getting more frequent, desertification is taking place, air pollution is a dangerous reality in China, India and elsewhere. Of course, many of these things started developing in the past, but in my younger days people were yet to see the systematic nature of things. We were worried about overpopulation, about hunger and the great political struggles: We asked ourselves how democracy could be expanded, how leftist modes of thinking could be spread. But all of these questions were much less existential than what we have to talk about today.

Many of the problems you discuss are man made. Does our species simply not care enough about our home planet?

I am not sure if it's that we don't care. It is probably more that the implications of the decline of our environment and of climate change are too worrying to be taken seriously. The potential effects of climate change are so catastrophic that they tempt us to turn a channel, as if we were watching a hockey game on TV. There is a sense of having an inability to counteract an issue of such enormous scale - and that produces a switch off. You start to think: "Well, what can I really do about that?" So we have developed a tendency not to face up to the issue. In some sense, we feel like a doctor has told us that we only have a couple of weeks to live and we decide to live it up rather than worry about it. The other reason is of course related to the geographical and psychological distance of the consequences of climate change.

So will the consequences of climate change have to hit us closer to home to spur us into action?

It's a terrible thing to think of course, but yes, I believe so. Compare the issue of climate change with the financial crisis of 2008. Back then the immediacy of the threat was imminent. From one day to the next people got a slip from their employer and were out of a job. And as a result governments immediately took action. With climate change it is different. Maybe a really big catastrophe has to happen before people wake up. In a sense, these catastrophes are already happening and will happen soon: The cyclones in the Bay of Bengal are getting bigger and bigger. Lots of Bangladeshis will suffer. Desertification in Sudan is real and there is hunger and displacement.

So in particular the West is yet to feel the consequences of climate change?

In a sense, yes. But that is now changing. Look at the storm Harvey, look at what is happening in the Gulf of Mexico. As catastrophic as these events are, one can hope that a smaller and smaller number of people and people in charge will be able to "switch off". Fewer and fewer people will be able to deny what is happening. At the same time that

gives us a course of action. We can say for example: Donald Trump's policies will make the next storm even bigger. This is the realization that we have to ram home.

Or maybe we just have to accept that we are an intrinsically unsustainable species. Our obsession with growth, how we run our economies, all works in direct opposition to the well being of the planet ...

Surely as a species we are the first with the ability to destroy the very basis of life. One might say that earlier versions of ourselves, maybe even the earliest hominids, had a more sustainable connection to the planet, but I am not even sure if that is true. Even our ancestors killed entire species, hunted mammoths and changed the face of the earth considerably via agriculture and forestry. Now we are just doing it on a grander scale, a massive scale that endangers the planet. But unsustainability has been part of our DNA for longer. That doesn't mean we can change our ways, however.

How could that look?

We will have to fundamentally redefine our relationship between us and the planet. We have to create a whole new way of thinking about our place in the world. In the 21st century, we don't have autonomy from the planet, but the planet doesn't have autonomy from us either. We are living in the anthropocene, an age where the two concepts of humanity and nature have begun to merge. We as humans are in this day and age in fact an integral part of nature. So we have to start thinking about ourselves in that very way. The planet would be a very different place without us. Think of it on a scale that is easier to understand: You as an individual and as a group with your peers make up and define the nation state. There is no nation state without individuals. In the same sense, there is no nature as we know it without humanity. The two concepts are intrinsically interconnected because we have altered the planet on such massive scale already. We always lived with the idea that there are humans and there's nature and if we damage bits of it, it can repair itself. But now there isn't any way for us to take ourselves out of the equation.

What does that mean with regards to climate change?

It means that our discussions of nature and our discussions about society cannot be separated from each other anymore. That is a radical shift in our thinking of course. It means that creating a healthy, just and functioning society means creating a better planet, because we are a part of that very planet – and we also create better preconditions for sustainability to begin with. It is important to make this shift in thinking, because it can inspire the way we try to change our societies and economies in practice. For example, when we think about green economies and more sustainable industries, we also have to think about what is sustainable for our societies. Under that precondition a global shift to renewable energy has to be thought through very carefully.

Could you explain that?

Well, certainly a shift to a greener economy would be utterly necessary. And certainly producing more steel, more coal and so on is utterly unsustainable. But, on the other hand, the stability of our western industrial societies depends on everyone getting a job and along with globalised trade, automation and artificial intelligence, a green economy

might undercut a huge number of jobs. Now environmentally that might be a much needed change, but simply introducing such change might make our societies less “healthy” in a way – and if you think human society and environment as part of the same concept, then neither of the spheres can get better without the other one being good in the first place. In France and the USA there are enormous rust belts. Of course we could impose a more sustainable economy and close down the factories there, but we have to first think about a follow up plan. Will we just accept that people will be out of a job and accept instability? Or will we come up with new concepts of engaging them? Because it will not be enough to simply say: “Well, for the sake of the climate you lost your job and now we will give you social security, money, to make up for it.” That’s not going to satisfy people, they want to be given the sense that are making a contribution.

So, if we want to save the planet, we need to save ourselves first?

The fact is, that we cannot leave a whole number of people behind. Especially not in a quest as big as tackling climate change. Inequality and abandonment will create societies that are unable to work together anymore. And we need cohesion to take meaningful action. We have to avoid getting into a relationship with large parts of society similar to how the US-Democrats were with working class in 2016. They gave them the feeling that they weren’t being listened to. The only discourse they could offer was condemnatory. You are backward, you are illiberal, you are deplorable. If we go about the issue of climate change and creating ecological change in the same way, then we lose a large part of the people and cannot make a coalition with them. One of the most important cancers working away at democracy is impotence. People do stupid things when they feel impotent, like voting for Trump. You can get them out of that faster if you have some avenue, some means by which they can take control of the situation.

How does that translate into a pro-climate action plan?

One of the ways towards successful change is when local communities decide that conditions are terrible and have to be changed. Climate change seems to be an issue that can be only be worked on an international, global level. But in reality the changes have to happen in local communities. People need to get a sense that they can change things for themselves. We have to get to them and get them interested in the issues that matter. There needs to be an immediate sense that, yes, we have a plan.

Empowering people and integrating them on the local level sounds like a great idea. But how can we foster local action?

For example by new modes of participation. My niece works in the United States, in the rust belt, where she works with any community which wants to come together and make a plan for the future. She talks about possibilities, sounds out people about future options. That kind of facilitation will be integral. This sort of work should be valued and not treated as a form of voluntary work. We also need to think of new models of involving people. The political scientists Patrizia Nanz and Claus Leggewie refer to a new advisory political branch called “Die Konsultative”. It would be a sort of fourth estate, in which people from all generations and backgrounds act as a kind of consultation board to politicians. This could be one of many routes towards sustainable change.