

Grab This Dangerous Moment

Responding to Earth's "Code Red"

By Shae Hadden

We respond to fire drills as if they are the real thing. Will we take the IPCC's planetary-wide CODE RED seriously?

On August 9th 2021, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) handed us all a “code red” reality check. The entire planet's climate system is changing in ways that are “unprecedented in thousands, if not hundreds of thousands of years”.¹ The IPCC anticipates that, within a scant two decades, we will reach 1.5°C of global warming—and that will trigger a vicious rampage of extreme weather events, the effects of which may impact the Earth for hundreds, if not thousands, of generations. I can hardly imagine what that means, other than we can expect a lot more of what we don't want in the immediate future: extreme heat waves, deep droughts, wildfires, tropical cyclones, intense rainfalls, ice melts, rising sea levels, acidic oceans, severely flooding coasts, atmospheric methane gas. This “sky is falling” list drones on and on, recapitulating those annoying public service announcements that warned us all our computer systems would fail at the turn of the century, those pronouncements that left me feeling frustrated and powerless back in 1999.

But this one...well, it does more than that. Today's breakdowns are environmental, not technological. The implications of that have me scared stiff, not just because the warning was issued by a respected United Nations body. But also because I see it happening myself. I have sweated through this summer's heat dome and felt wildfire smoke burn my lungs for weeks on end. I have walked among charred redwoods and blackened desert mountains. I have seen algae blooms clog waterways and watched fish gasp for oxygen in rivers running brown with silt. Things are *not* supposed to be this way. Yet, they are.

What will happen with our planet's biosphere in the future?

No one can be certain. Things could prove to be a lot less severe than the IPCC predicts—or a lot worse. We may face deadly heat waves like the one that kills millions in the opening chapters of Kim Stanley Robinson's climate fiction novel *Ministry for the Future*. We may generate breakthroughs in carbon capture that stop global warming. Or both.

Certainty is not the point. We must learn to live with the uncertainty thrust upon us in this dangerous “now” and start listening to what the firefighters are saying about our beautiful blue planet as if our lives depend on it.

A global climate emergency poses a threat to *all* life, not just the homes of one or two human tribes. When habitats change, species either adapt or perish. Survival this time depends on adapting fast enough to the

widespread and rapid changes occurring in our biosphere. Any species that adapts too slowly will become, at best, threatened or endangered. At worst, extinct.

When I think about the scope and potential impact of the climate emergency, I feel as if I am one of 7 billion victims. Deflecting my attention to the daily challenges of pandemic living has only deepened my despair. My way of life has been turned upside down; my work has taken a hit; the vitality of my health and my relationships have diminished. My angst burns even hotter, while my inability to affect events freezes my sense of empowerment.

Still the little voice inside my head chatters incessantly: “There must be *something* I can **do**....?”.

Over the last twenty years, I have learned practices and embodied distinctions that have helped me be serene and ambitious in the midst of most uncertainty. I can distinguish between a conversation in which everyone talks *about* change and a conversation that actually *changes* something. And yet, today, even with these tools, I am so upset, so off kilter in the face of what’s happening at a global scale, that the conversations I have initiated to resist the forces tearing our world apart show up as pointless re-actions. They make a lot of noise locally, but they don’t make a lot of difference globally.

To be honest, conversations that have the potential to actually change things at a grand scale in our world are very few and very far between. I don’t have access to them. And even if I did, it seems that too many of the ones being held these days pander to the demons of polarization and leave humanity with watered down solutions to our most pressing climate-related problems.

Climate change could lead to the collapse of civilization (again) or the extinction of our species. This threat warrants a global call to action. But what action?

All of the many worthwhile things we as individuals have been doing for the last forty years—recycling, switching to electric vehicles, installing solar panels, advocating for policy changes—feel like exercises in futility. As American futurist Alex Steffen admits, “I just don’t trust that any specific recommendations I offer can work in the ways we thought they did in previous decades. And, if we’re being honest, no one else should have that confidence either. That’s because we’re in the middle of an all-encompassing discontinuity, and no one knows anything for sure about what’s coming. **Predictability is extinct.**”¹

I cannot be clear about what the future will be.

I am not clear about what actions to take.

But I am clear about one thing.

Being a victim of these circumstances doesn't work for me anymore.

The best hope might be to become a different person, not engaging with the world around me in usual ways. For instance, I accept that, to grab the opportunity this dangerous moment presents, I will need to relate to the future like an explorer, with curiosity, not fear and anxiety. I will need to embrace the unknown and the uncertain in a mood of optimistic resolve. I will need to commit to the possibility we *can* overcome this existential threat before any evidence exists that it is even possible. As my coach Jim Selman says, I will need to become “existentially confident”.

In this spirit of confidence, I commit to an experiment. I will change who I am being (a victim) by changing how I relate to everything—to myself and others, our climate emergency and time—and then see what one middle-aged Canadian woman can do to improve life on this planet.

Relating to Self

My experiment starts with observing myself and my thoughts throughout the day. The objective with this exercise in awareness is to learn how to unhook myself from the persistent pestering of my little voice and its attachment to choosing the “right” thing to do.

Many of my waking hours, I discover, are spent listening to the unending stream of thoughts flowing through the echo chamber of my mind. Only in rare moments am I present enough to be aware of who I am being and how I am showing up in a particular situation. I have little to no control over these moments of mindfulness: I cannot will them to start or to stay.

Similarly, I cannot will the chatter that floats through my mind to stop. Friends, hearing of my experiment in self-awareness, suggest I check out the dozen or so “tools you can implement on your own” in psychologist Ethan Kross’s bestseller *Chatter*. Many of his distancing techniques provide small comfort to one who already experiences the climate emergency as a challenge, if not *the* challenge of all time. Remembering that the anxiety in the pit of my stomach is “an adaptive evolutionary reaction that improves

performance under high-stress conditions”³ does nothing to quell my fear of a worst case scenario. Spending more time in green spaces only sharpens my sadness about the 23 species in America that were recently pronounced extinct. Changing my perspective by going neutral, third party and then zooming out to consider humanity’s existential crisis as one event in our 4.5 billion-year-old planet’s history only amplifies my concern that we may have already doomed life on Earth. Meditations, rituals, stream-of-consciousness writing, talking to myself like a friend. Nothing gets me off this hook. Until, by coincidence, I flip to the epigraph.

“The voice in my head is an asshole.”

Dan Harris³

It’s as simple as that.

My ego initially balks at the idea of being called a blatant idiot, then surrenders. The world “should” be other than what it is. I “should” be able to do something significant and impactful about the climate. I “should” choose the right thing to do. These “shoulds”, these ideas of control and illusions of heroic grandeur, are stinking thinking, my ego’s covert way of keeping me trapped in a spiralling doom-and-gloom story.

No more.

The world is what it is.

I am responsible for it (that is, I am able to respond). I can choose to do one thing, many things, or nothing at all, even though I may never know the full consequences and impacts of my actions. Rather than be a victim, I can become a “trim tab”, as visionary systems theorist and futurist Buckminster Fuller so aptly put it in his 1972 interview with *Playboy*.

“Think of the *Queen Elizabeth*—the whole ship goes by and then comes the rudder. And there’s a tiny thing at the edge of the rudder called a trim tab. It’s a miniature rudder. Just moving the little trim tab builds a low pressure that pulls the rudder around. Takes almost no effort at all. So I said that the little individual can be a **trim tab**.... To be a real trim tab, you’ve got to start with yourself, and soon you’ll feel that low pressure, and suddenly things begin to work in a beautiful way.”⁴

Essentially, a trim tab assumes responsibility for using the resistance of the ocean to power a change in the ship’s direction. I, too, can be personally responsible for climate in my community, my country or my continent. I, too,

can have a positive relationship with resistance. Being a trim tab gives me freedom of action: every conversation with another human being, every interaction with another institution becomes an opportunity to express my commitments, values and ideas.

Rather than try to overpower the reality of climate change, I can acknowledge we are not going to “fix” the world in the time we have. And, rather than trying to forcefully change the direction of the planet away from a dystopian fossil-fueled future, I can create more space in conversations for the long-term viability of a future powered by renewable energy sources, a circular economy, industrial carbon capture, geoengineering, and plant-rich diets, among many other possibilities. By pushing ever so slightly against the momentum of our society, I can direct more energy to a vision of a sustainable world, a vision that includes the mistakes made by relating to the environment as a source of “resources” to be extracted and controlled.

Just because I make this shift does not mean anything will necessarily change. Our civilization is much larger and more complex than a ship. Survival is not a sure thing. However, the trim tab metaphor inspires me to move beyond the comfort of my well-worn victimhood and rugged individualism.

I am already connected to conversations with groups of human beings who are confronting this sense of being powerless in the midst of an emergency. I can humbly participate with these like-minded people in edifying dialogues that can help us navigate the uncharted waters of this massive change. In doing so, the trim tab of “I” becomes the trim tab of “we”. In dialogues about the possibilities of regenerative agriculture, cultures of kindness, and online transformational experiences, I sense that low pressure of resistance that Fuller mentioned starting to emerge.

We can literally use the world *as it is* as raw material to create the world that can be.

Relating to Others

This shift to “being the trim tab” has me listening more intently and objectively than ever before for those points of leverage that, with minimal input, can deftly change the course of a conversation, a person’s life, or an organization’s trajectory. Selman excels at this. So my experiment shifts to reflecting on the vital few things I have learned from observing how he listens, what I have already put into practice, and consciously applying what I have not yet.

Listening generously to everyone gives me access to relationship. When I'm with someone who, like me, believes climate change is a real threat, it's easy to be respectful and interested, open and generous in my listening of them. Generating a collaborative relationship can happen almost effortlessly. On the other hand, when I'm listening to someone who believes climate change is a hoax, "easy" looks much less generous. "Easy" includes discounting what the other person thinks and sticking with my own point of view. That defensive way of listening destroys the possibility of broadening each other's perspectives and, with it, the possibility of collaboration. And so, with colleagues whose worlds are different than mine, I practice a more generous (albeit challenging) listening that zooms out to include the other person's point of view and zooms in to catch the nuances of mood, mindset, and history that shape their beliefs.

Listening for learning, for possibility and for opportunity are very different from listening to justify decisions, to prove a point, to validate an opinion. For example, I hear more and more people looking at biological, physical and chemical methods for capturing and sequestering carbon that can be both environmentally sound and fiscally remunerative. To discern where real opportunities lie, I let my curiosity lead. I read and ask questions about the science behind each method. I seek out and explore anomalies, those ideas and practices at the fringe that challenge conventional wisdom and which may, like the iPhone, become mainstream one day. In this way, I combine learning about various possibilities to identify which are actually opportunities that warrant attention, energy and resources.

Here, quite often, my rational mind wants to take over. As a trusty prediction machine, it runs on taking logic that worked in the past and throwing it at an unknown future. As Kross says, "We are constantly, both consciously and subconsciously, making predictions about what we expect is going to happen next, and our brain prepares to respond accordingly."⁵ Knowing predictions are extinct, I borrow the hack of a placebo from *Chatter*: I stand in a vision of humanity surviving the climate emergency. I stay present to how I am being. And I choose to generate moods of curiosity, anticipation and wonder. Moods are contagious, and these three are especially conducive to learning, innovation and collaboration.

Using moods as a navigational aide, I find, is an exercise in listening deeply to what's really going on moment to moment with people, including myself, and speaking respectfully. Even between people who are committed to a shared future, moods of frustration, anger and resentment crop up. Moods conceal or reveal what we care about, what possibilities we can see, what choices we can have. When we can observe them and not be caught up in their sticky virality, we can learn from them. My anger, for example, tells me a line has been crossed that I think shouldn't have. My frustration, that

something isn't moving in the direction I want or at the speed I expect. My resentment, that someone or something have not been treated fairly.

How I move in the world moves others.

Moving through our rapidly changing world as a trim tab involves acknowledging and working with these unfavorable moods as they arise in conversation, rather than burying them until they spread like the cancer of resignation or erupt with the uncontrollable force of fury. The point is not to make some moods “right” and others “wrong”: it is to validate what each person in the conversation is experiencing, to create openings to explore what has triggered those moods, and to work together to take care of our underlying concerns.

Relating to Climate

As John F. Kennedy said, “...time and the world do not stand still. Change is the law of life.”⁶ Looking at the Earth from the perspective of an alien species, I realize I am not counting on evolution's slow burn of continuous improvement to produce some superhero human beings whose more, better and different capabilities will ensure the survival of civilization. Neither am I counting on—or wanting—the dramatic and often irreversible disruption of a revolution to produce radical breakthroughs. Evolution takes time. Revolution is messy.

I am counting on transformation, a change in people's *relationship* to what is happening with our climate. Nothing *in the world* has to change—neither the climate, nor our civilization—for transformation to occur. Transformation, defined this way, can occur in an instant. It is a “no change” kind of change that gives humanity new openings for co-creation.

Admittedly, I and others are already relating to climate “change” in a new way by renaming it a climate “emergency”. That shift in language is, in itself, a transformational move because it inherently changes our relationship to what is happening.

Declaring an emergency means we accept and surrender to the fact that the climate is changing. Declaring an emergency reveals what is at stake and what we value and have taken for granted: a certain quality of life with a certain amount of mobility, access to education and career opportunities, freedom to love and to enjoy close relationships with family and friends, and a safe, relatively stable environment in which to raise our children and live out our days.

“Emergency” graces the climate “change” with a certain sense of **urgency** and reframes it as a finite challenge that must be handled, a challenge for which we can each choose to be personally responsible.

We are no longer victims. By viewing it as an emergency, we are starting to see new possibilities for sustaining our civilization while we regenerate our planet. If we had all remained focused on what’s not possible or if we were all still resisting the idea that humanity has any influence on the health of the biosphere, those possibilities would not exist.

This transformational interpretation gives me confidence. I don’t have to resist the climate change deniers or resist the proponents of climate change solutions that have no grounding in reality. I can be personally responsible, conscious and present to moods, focused on what is possible. I can be constantly observing what’s missing in a clear, centered and calm way, no longer run by moods. I can be fearless and engaged. Perhaps, I may even be able to mobilize others.

Relating to Time

The urgency of this emergency has me thinking about mobilization as if there is a deadline for humanity, even if we do not know exactly what it is.

No one can know the future. Time itself is a human construct that was once based on measuring the passage of the days, months and seasons in the production of food. That construct now measures the passage of the hours, minutes and milliseconds in the operation of machines. Regardless of what time measures, the speed at which our environment is being disrupted has me believing that time is of the essence—and it is perilously short.

We no longer trust the past to guide our decisions. We are not certain about what the future holds. We are literally living in “real time”, operating within instantaneous time frames, moving from one original moment to the next original moment. Charting our way through the unbelievable complexity of our perpetual present by assigning “cause” and “effect” to actions and reactions can be a highly dubious, if not risky, practice. Thinking in terms of actions and reactions can trap us in a vicious cycle, creating more of what we already have and perpetuating the status quo.

Everything is action. Many of our actions will, of necessity, need to be “**originals**”.

Take mobilizing people. That is not in my wheelhouse. Common sense would dictate learn how to lead others through crises first, make a commitment to lead some part of an organization through a crisis, then go ahead and do it. Today, that reliance on historical knowledge and experience won't necessarily work. Not only will it take a lot of time to go through all those experiences. But the “how” of mobilization would also be based on something that worked for events in the *past*, not necessarily the unprecedented planetary-wide crises happening in the impermanence of the *present* “now”.

I need to somehow learn in real time, even as extreme weather events wreak havoc, breakdowns multiply, and conditions continue to degrade everywhere. Most of my learning in life so far has happened in silent solitude with a big stack of books. Yet mobilizing people isn't something that can be learned this way. I need to learn in action in real time.

I stumble across the idea of appropriation. Appropriating offers me a way to learn from people directly just what I need to know, when I need to know it, and to leverage the intelligence of the collective. Instead of registering for a *general* program or course, I start quickly researching online who the key voices are in *specific* subjects of interest. I participate in virtual conversations in their communities, bringing my curiosity and wonder to what I don't know yet. I reach out to individuals who follow a diversity of these voices to find out whether my observations and assumptions are correct, and then apply more critical thinking to choose whose ideas and practices to study in further detail. This not only helps me avoid getting attached to a single point of view and then reacting to people's opinions. It also makes the best possible use of my time.

The end of my little experiment in changing who I am being marks the beginning of a journey of collective learning and continuous participation that will, hopefully, last to the end of my life. It started with a focus on climate change, but everything I am learning applies to my whole life. For everything I do affects the environment—and everything in my life is affected by climate.

In undertaking this lifelong commitment to learning, I am humbled by four realizations. First, how much I don't know is vast. Second, my old habit of needing to understand everything inhibits my ability to be with what is emerging. And third, it is possible to learn to live with epic amounts of ambiguity. By being a committed observer in edifying conversations with others who are taking this planetary-wide CODE RED seriously, I hope to

discover more of what's possible and to participate in realizing emergent moonshot opportunities.

It has been three months now since the IPCC released their announcement. The alarms of this CODE RED ring louder and louder every day. Considering what we are at risk of losing, climate change presents us with an existential emergency. Unending arguments over causes and effects distract us from what must be done. We are all operating in “real time”, moving from one original moment to the next. Everything is action. Everything is about shifting the heading of the course we are on toward sustainability and regeneration.

I still care. I am still committed to the possibility we can overcome this existential threat. But without access to conversations that actually change things in the world on a grand scale, I have chosen to respond to this global call to action in the only way I know how: by transforming how I relate to our shared circumstances, time, myself and others.

As a response-able trim tab, I put aside any and all egoic dreams of heroic grandeur and illusions of control, and am appropriating what I need to know, when I need to know it. In every conversation I am in, no matter who it is with, I listen generously and humbly for learning, possibility and opportunity. I embrace uncertainty and ambiguity. I accept the world as it is—with all its extreme weather and climate disasters—and use it as raw material to create a world that can be.

I wonder what might be possible if we all did the same...?



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NOTES

- ¹ Alex Steffen, “Discontinuity is the job”, *The Snap Forward*, August 8, 2021. Accessed August 30 at <https://alexsteffen.substack.com/p/discontinuity-is-the-job>.
- ² “Climate change widespread, rapid, and intensifying - IPCC”, IPCC press release, August 9, 2021. Accessed
- ³ Ethan Kross. *Chatter: The Voice in Our Head, Why It Matters, and How to Harness It*. (New York: Crown, 2021), p. 163.
- ⁴ “Buckminster Fuller: the Playboy Interview”. Accessed September 29, 2021 at <https://www.bfi.org/sites/default/files/attachments/pages/CandidConversation-Playboy.pdf>.
- ⁵ Kross. *Chatter*, p. 138.
- ⁶ John F. Kennedy. Address in the Assembly Hall at the Paulskirche in Frankfurt (266), " June 25, 1963, *Public Papers of the Presidents: John F. Kennedy, 1963*. Accessed October 4, 2021 at <https://www.jfklibrary.org/learn/about-jfk/life-of-john-f-kennedy/john-f-kennedy-quotations>.

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