

A New Story of Climate Change: New Frontiers (2018)

Transcript of Charles Eisenstein's Talk

<https://charleseisenstein.org/videos/a-new-story-of-climate-change-new-frontiers-2018/>

Humanity right now is entering into what I see as kind of an initiation, an ordeal that will bring us to another level of our collective evolution. And that it's not about being a bit more clever in doing what we've always been doing; perhaps to come up with better ways to manipulate the resources of this planet and better ways of disposing of the wastes that we create through manipulating the resources. What is being offered to us is a completely different relationship to the rest of life on earth. 'Completely new' I mean from the perspective of what we call civilization but definitely not new on Earth. In fact not new for most of the cultures that have been on Earth, which already were in a different relationship than what is familiar to us.

So I want to make a link here between two areas in which New Zealand is exercising some leadership in the world. One of them we've maybe been hearing about is the Zero Carbon legislation that's being prepared to make New Zealand a leader in meeting and exceeding the requirements of the Paris Agreement. The other seems kind of unrelated but I'm going to explain why it's actually essential, which is New Zealand's leadership in granting Nature -

That's not actually what I want to say. I was going to say, "granting Nature rights or legal personhood," but that's actually not ours to grant. It's really more about recognizing something that is already true. New Zealand is a leader in this. Not the first. That would probably have to go to Bolivia or Ecuador. But among so called developed nations, definitely a leader in moving this direction. Toward understanding really it comes down to, 'we're not alone here.' We're not the only beings worthy of reverence. We're not the only beings who are full beings. And therefore that the world is not just a bunch of instrumental stuff, a pile of resources devoid of the qualities of a Self. Devoid of the qualities of a Being. Devoid of intelligence, devoid of purpose, devoid of consciousness. But it *is* a being worthy of respect and so we can't just exploit it in ignorance. In ignorance of its Beingness. Otherwise - and again this would be the Old Thinking - to say 'otherwise bad things will happen to us.'

But what if, what if I said to you, "You know, I've got a five year old son. He's my fourth son. I'm getting kind of sick of this. What if I stop feeding him and push him out onto the street? Why not?"

And you say to me, "But Charles! If you did that then you would get prosecuted for child neglect and he wouldn't take care of you in your old age. And what would the neighbors think?"

I'd say, "Yeah, you're right. I better take care of him."

Can you see how that echoes a lot of the environmental narrative today? Especially the climate narrative which says the reason that we've got to take better care of this pile of resources is that if we don't, if we're not a little more clever, if we're not a little more foresightful, then bad things are going to happen to us.

Can you see that there's a problem here? And that even if I agree with you and say, "Yes, you're right, I better take better care of my son," I'm not going to take good care of him. He's not going to thrive. Because really what you need, what I need, is to be connected with my love of this being. Then I am going to know how to take care of him beyond what anything can be prescribed or enforced or regulated, because it's going to be coming from a relationship.

I think that the planetary crisis that we call climate change is almost, you could almost say, 'meant' to bring us to that realization; to bring us to that relationship of love. Because the losses we are seeing are connecting us with the reality of this living Being here.

So to recognize what might be called 'legal personhood' for beings of nature - for rivers, for mountains, for land - that is a step toward this new and ancient relationship to the rest of life. And it's not just a philosophy.

Because sometimes it seems like, "OK yes, we should do that and thereby demonstrate our respect for indigenous people and we get to be kind of politically correct by doing that along with learning Maori language and things like that. But then let's get to the nuts and bolts! I mean here is the carbon budget, here are the planetary boundaries. Let's formulate some policies to get those numbers down."

They seem to be in two separate realms. What I have learned in my research that I've been doing for the book that Matthew mentioned is that there are not two separate realms. That in fact the things that people do to protect and restore and heal land are exactly the same things that we need to do to maintain a healthy biosphere and healthy climate, more than science has realized.

Science is beginning to appreciate how, for example, regenerative agriculture can increase carbon sequestration and reduce levels of greenhouse gases. That's a hint of this connection between the local and global. Too often the climate narrative directs us towards global solutions at the expense of the local solutions that come from our love and connection to actual pieces of land. And it makes it seem like, "Well yeah, we could cut down this forest here because we can plant another one there. We can offset things." So the result is that it's somebody else who can do the work. That's not true when we're connected to the welfare, to the wellbeing of a particular river or a particular farm. We can't say, "Well, I'll destroy this one because I can love something somewhere else instead." We're connected to be in deep service to what's in front of our faces.

I hesitate to go too much into data about how much carbon can be stored through regenerative practices, holistic grazing. These numbers can be helpful to give permission to the inner Bean Counter that wants to do these things anyway, to fit it into the language of policy which prides itself so much on being scientific. What do we really mean by 'scientific?' We mean quantitative reasoning. Doing things by the numbers. And that has its place. But to paraphrase Einstein in his over-quoted saying, "We can not solve the problems that face us today from the

same level of thinking that created them.” So to extend quantitative reasoning, to extend financial incentives to a new level isn’t going to bring us to the place of love that we need to occupy to really do what we need to do. Not necessarily to save the planet, not because bad things are going to happen to us, but because we love this place.

What if we could? What if we could, through geoengineering, through carbon sucking machines, through algae pools to make oxygen, bleaching the skies with sulphur aerosols; what if we could endlessly engineer our way out of each crisis and end up on a concrete world where all human beings still survive, and in fact have rising incomes, and are better off by every measure? What if we could achieve that at the expense of all of the rest of life on earth? Would we want to do that?

This is the transition that’s upon us into a different set of values, a different set of motivations. One thing I’ve learned in my research for this book is that the things that we’ve ignored are a lot more important than we’ve given them credit for. That we tend to emphasize the things that fit easily into our existing ways of thinking. If you have a hammer, everything looks like a nail. So what we’re good at is reducing numbers. Or working with numbers; increasing numbers, reducing numbers, thinking in terms of Return on Investment, pay back periods, things like that. That’s familiar territory, that’s financial thinking. So it’s not too hard to transplant financial thinking onto environmental thinking and say that “this global problem is a matter of getting certain numbers down, not into coming into intimate relationship, reestablishing intimate relationship to place, to life, to rivers, to mountains, to forests, to farms. Reestablishing intimate relationship is kind of the opposite direction of improving and extending our metrics.

For example, in the car ride over, Matthew was talking about the weird weather that New Zealand has been having. The really long summer this year, the almost nonexistent summer last year. Nowadays when it comes to climate weirdness, weather weirdness, we have the go to explanation; “Well, it’s because of global warming. It’s because of global climate change.”

Whether or not that’s true, it obscures local reasons that are much more tangible that we might actually have a lot more power to do something about. Because if it’s a global thing then nothing you do is going to matter very much. At best we can vote for the right people, empower the right bureaucrats, and, especially if its urgent, give more power to the centralized institutions that have the wherewithal to deploy resources quickly.

But when we understand the importance of the hydrological cycle, the water cycle, in maintaining the stability of weather, of climate on a local, regional, and even global level, then we are no longer so disempowered. But you are familiar with the idea that we are entering a time of more drought and more flooding at the same time, and how this is caused by climate change. Well, there is another understanding of the causes of this that has to do with the water cycle that basically says, look: when you cut down the trees, when you deforest the land, when you plough up the soil, then instead of the water soaking into the ground, replenishing the water table, and then through evapotranspiration generating moisture, generating clouds that maintains regular rainfall; instead the water runs off into the oceans, you get flooding, you get

topsoil erosion, you get much less penetration into the groundwater, you don't have the trees transpiring water maintaining humidity. So you get longer droughts.

And I'm not going to get, I don't think I want to go too much into the science of this, but long story short: some of the things that we would like to blame global climate change for are actually local in their origin and can be mitigated or reversed when we devote care and attention and energy and healing toward these local Beings. Toward the rivers. How do you maintain a healthy river? You have to have healthy land. You have to have healthy forests. Rivers are not supposed to be fed by run-off. They're supposed to be fed by water sinking into the ground and then coming up sometimes decades later as springs. That's the full water cycle. And that's why in places they are practicing regenerative practices, springs that have been dry for ten or twenty or fifty years come back to life. Streams that were seasonal for generations become year round streams again.

The question then; this is the basic question of regenerative agriculture but it's also what we come to through the lens of seeing Nature as actual Beings worthy of love, worthy of respect. What we come to is: How can I serve you? How can I serve the soil? How can I serve the water? How can I be part of the collective thriving of beings that include not just human beings, but also the beings of Nature?

And this is not to sacrifice human welfare and to become an eco-nazi and say, "Well, humans aren't important and in fact maybe they're a pest and the earth would be better off without us." This is to say that human beings like all beings have a gift to give to the wellbeing of the totality. That it's an understanding, it's the ecological understanding that no species is superfluous. That a new species comes into being when there is an evolutionary need for that species. It's as if it were called into existence by the needs of the environment. And it sounds kind of anti-Darwinian, but really what is is a Lamarckian understanding. I'm not going to go there, even.

I'm just going to say that human beings are no exception to this. So it's not that we're a scourge on the planet, even though it has looked that way. The question is; what is the next evolutionary step of which we are a part? How can we serve that?

How do we even know that? That's not even a question that we've been asking. We, the Dominant Culture. We've not been asking that. One thing I appreciate about what Matthew said yesterday morning, and I might be paraphrasing a bit here, but he said, "Let's be a little careful about jumping too quickly to the answer, too quickly to the solution, because so often the answers that we come up with reflexively encode the same biases and assumptions that the problems come from. Maybe we have got to pause for a second here. Pause and listen."

And I would go even further to say not only do we not know the right answers, but we don't necessarily even know the right questions.

This is the humility that our converging crises have brought us to. I'm not sure if we're there yet. But I'm seeing signs of it, especially in my country - where that kind of 'gung-ho, we can do it, we can solve everything, technology is going to solve all of our problems, the world is going to get better and better, we're going to engineer a perfect society through material technology, through social engineering, political science, etc., etc., we're gonna solve this thing!' - that confidence is unraveling.

That's one reason why we are so interested in the ways and perceptions of the indigenous. Some of it is like an identity piece and they become a fetish object etc., etc., cultural appropriation. But there's also a humility there that's like, "Wow... we don't know after all, maybe you know. Or maybe you know something. Maybe you remember something. Maybe you can weave a thread of knowledge into the tapestry of 'how are we meant to live on this planet.'"

So the first step then is to listen. To answer that question, "How can I serve the land and what is the next evolutionary step?"

The first step to do that, to find that, even to ask those questions starts with listening. And listening doesn't mean like some new age spiritual state where I'm going to channel the beings of the land - I mean it might include that, actually - but it also includes what we call science. It includes careful observation. It includes the knowledge that farmers and ranchers gain if they're paying attention through long connection with a piece of land. It includes the knowledge held by communities, held by lineages, that's been passed down by the ancestors through stories. What Grandpa remembers when things were like this.

To recover connection to land it requires rebuilding a culture.

The right relationship to place only happens collectively. One person living on the land can gain part of that knowledge, but not the same way that a culture can. Not the same way that a lineage can. Not the same way a community can. That means that - ok, so draw the logic here. The logic, that I haven't pretended to rigorously establish, but, the logic is that planetary health, global health, depends on the health of the local. That cutting emissions is not enough. It's not sufficient because even if we cut carbon emissions to zero overnight; if we continue to destroy forests, mangroves, wetlands, rivers, mountains, coral, seagrass, then the planet will die a death of a million cuts. This Earth is not a complicated machine; it is a living Being. And when we destroy these ecosystems we are destroying the organs and tissues of Gaia because it is a living Being. It would be like destroying your own organs. Maybe you destroy your hypothalamus and your body temperature goes up and you're like, ah, warming! Let's cool it down. But no, we're destroying - so -

So the health of the global depends on the health of the local; the health of the local depends on our ability to serve its health, to live in a way that is aligned with its - with its thriving, with its regeneration, with its renewal - because it's so damaged today. And that requires social health and cultural health, and there then is a link between what we might call climate activism and social activism, political activism, social entrepreneurship. All these realms of healing

contain each other. And that's why when you hear about, like yesterday, one of the Fellows was presenting about her social enterprise that brings intellectually disabled people into meaningful employment and into society, into community. You know, the climate puritan would say, "Well, that's all very nice, but you know, you're wasting your time, because when the sea levels rise 50 feet there aren't going to be any jobs. Let's do that social stuff later and take care of the urgent problem first."

Now that thinking is called fundamentalism. I would call it climate fundamentalism. That thinking is war thinking that says "Everything must be sacrificed to the One Important Thing." That's fundamenatlism. And it ignores the interconnected nature of all things. It ignores that we ourselves are among the organs of a living planet. That's why you recognize that woman as an ally. Even if your cause is saving the whales, or your cause is protecting the rivers, restoring New Zealand's rivers to purity, or your cause is regenerating the soil, or changing the criminal punishment system, we recognize you as an ally because all of this work is necessary.

So I guess I'm, I don't know, how is this going to be useful to you as you sit at tables and try to formulate the Carbon Zero policy? And I guess if I was going to make that bridge, I would say, "Give a bit more attention to the health of the land."

And I know this is part of it already, but even more. How do you transition to a holistic, agricultural system from where we are right now? How do we bring politically conservative farmers and ranchers onboard? Because it's not like they hate nature, you know? They should be allies too. How can you narrate this endeavor, that we really are all in together, in a way that doesn't alienate them right away? That respects where they are, that respects that they're up to their ears in debt, that they're trapped in a commodity agricultural system? How do you make that transition, knowing that maybe the word 'subsidy' is politically poisonous? So maybe you're starting to talk about 'transition grants' that say we're going to help you repair your relationship to the land because we know you love the land and we know that you are probably, right now, the person best equipped to serve that land. You know what this land needs and we're going to help you do it, because it's in the interests of the nation and its in the interests of the planet for us to have healthy watersheds, healthy farms, healthy forests.

So maybe that kind of narrative would be a step to the enactment of what we are becoming conscious of, which is that we are not alone on this planet; we are not the only sentient, conscious Beings here, but we are among our brothers, and that our role here is to give to the evolution of the whole from the gifts that have been given to us.

And I'll, and I have like a minute here left, so I'll say, maybe I'll just end with um -

The question that often comes up: "Well, what should I do?" When we understand that social healing, relational healing, personal healing, ecological healing, climate healing, are all part of the same healing, then the scope of our activism broadens and we allow ourselves to listen to the communication of the world to ourselves about what is needed. What am I called to do? What is mine right now to do?

The mind may not be able to say how this will bring down CO2 numbers. “To house homeless people, how is that going to bring down CO2 numbers?!” But we don’t need to listen to that. We can trust that what is called by our care, as our informational horizons expand, it’s not about ignoring what the science is telling us. But we can trust that as our informational horizons expand, and as we listen, that our care will call us to the right action. Even if it doesn’t obviously bring down the numbers, even if it doesn’t obviously scale up or go viral. But we can trust that just like humanity and just like every other species we ourselves are brought into being with a gift.

I would say that that is where the initiatory ordeal of climate change is taking us. Thank you for your attention.