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A vineyard on Srebrna Mountain near Kraków – a place where nature and culture meet. Grape growing is strongly dependent on and modified by climate. Certain changes are afoot in the field of wine-making these days: in warm years, the vines produce more fruit, and the grapes are sweeter, and the wine tends to be better and stronger. But there are problems with water and pathogens. At the same time, there are no ground frosts in the fall, which makes it practically impossible to produce the best ice wines. Average wine is not bad, but there is not enough time and space for the best wines. Quantity comes at the expense of quality. Is this the kind of world we want?

# CLIMATE CHANGE AND INDIFFERENT EMOTIONS

*Every man is dangerous... who cares only for one thing.*

G.K. Chesterton

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**M**ight there be such a thing as indifferent emotions? Wouldn't that be a ridiculous contradiction in terms? Indeed it would, but I think that this is exactly the level of absurdity we have reached in the discussions on climate change. Thousands of pages have been written, hundreds of calculations have been made, and numerous government agencies, NGOs, and even private initiatives have been established. Climate change has appeared on the front covers of reputable weeklies, and it has become an element of popular culture as well as political squabbles. The climate topic has made its way into textbooks, school curricula, workshops, and symposiums. We may think that everything has been said on the subject, but for some reason the message has yet to be driven home. Global warming continues, unabated. So has climate education been a waste of time and money? There is no simple answer to this question, but I have a few thoughts to share that have led me to tone down my own ties to research into the impact of climate change on living organisms.

## The end of emotions

Many people are striving to heat up the dispute even further, prophesying an impending climate disas-



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ter and calling for general strikes as well as radical changes in our habits and the values we espouse. But climate change is already taking place here and now, before our very eyes, and still the issue has ceased to spark people's emotions, either positive or negative. The question is, how long will this trend continue and is it permanent? We can see how threats related to the COVID-19 pandemic, real or imagined, have caused climate change to fade into oblivion in the media. The crisis caused by the epidemic has simply squeezed out the climate and environmental crisis. Slogans and proposals of bizarre solutions are being churned out on an unimaginable scale. Carbon neutrality goals are slipping further and further away. We, as a civilized world, were supposed to tackle the problem of biodiversity loss by 2020. And? We are alive and well. The front covers of magazines prophesied that the Earth would be frying two years after that. In all likelihood, we will yet again have to postpone the apocalypse. All attention is being focused in an insane as well as

intellectually and morally dubious way on a single virus, causing other important issues, including climate change, to be neglected.

## How much longer?

We are slowly bailing out of the climate change debate, because we can, or maybe even because we must. Good news is no news, but it is always better than another cry of "wolf" gone sour. There was supposed to be a major heat wave, but instead all we got was another failed vacation. There were supposed to be droughts, and they did indeed come, but this is a problem for farmers, and if it affects food prices, we will put the blame on speculators. Simply put, there is boredom in the air, and boredom breeds indifference. There is only so much we can say about one and the same topic. We react with a shrug of the shoulders, or – to use the vocabulary of behavioral sciences – we enter a phase of saturation and habituation. This is due to what I call



the liturgical character of the debate. Everything is mercilessly planned in advance, and we know who will say what and who will stand on which side of the barricade. All this is fine enough – in a liturgy. In a scientific debate, on the other hand, such an approach can only have catastrophic consequences. There is no creative reflection, no exchange of thoughts, but rather mud-slinging at those who dare to think differently. Nothing depraves people and debases science more effectively than an excess of emotions. An accusatory finger will be pointed at others, those who understand nothing – politicians and their voters, technocrats and engineers, meat-eaters and people of faith. Somehow, no admissions of “*Mea culpa!*” can be heard from the climate side of the barricade, no apologies for the dumbed-down oversimplifications, for the inaccurate messaging, or for the mistaking of ideology for science.

## Errors and frustrations

I do respect and admire the grit of those pursuing the climate mission. Sometimes I just pity them. Very few succeed, people react with a shrug of their shoulders, and airplane traffic has ground to a halt as a result of a virus epidemic, not international climate agreements. The losers are frustrated, and the public likes winners. A sad message with no inkling of optimism is not a good advertisement for how the problem should be solved. Expertise and goodwill could be put to much better use – to show what has indeed worked and what problems have successfully been solved. There are plenty of good examples: the revival of big predators, a decline in infant mortality, a growing share of the globe covered by forests. But not everything is rosy, to say the least.

It would be naïve to think we can solve the world’s problems merely by sorting and recycling our wastes, reducing our plastic consumption, and shifting over to renewable energy sources. The latter also carry certain costs for the environment, just like every energy production method. We just need to calculate what pays more: coal mining, cultivating energy crops, solar panels, or wind farms? We need to tally up all the costs, from production to waste disposal and recultivation, and issue the bill to consumers and to the environment, including the climate.

## Localness

Such heart-rending images as a polar bear adrift on an ice floe, a disappearing glacier, hungry penguins, and thirsty camels were all supposed to capture our imagination. Leaving aside the overly catastrophic, even apocalyptic visions, their authors were unfortunately unable to maintain the consistency and durability of their messages for very long. After the cuddly

koala bears, the call comes to wage a battle against bulldozers in the Amazon rainforest, infused with interventionism – a summons to let matters be handled by governments and international organizations. This works for a brief moment, prompting people not only to cry with emotion but also to transfer small amounts of money out of their bank accounts. So you can pay to feel a bit better.

But dirty dishes are piling up in the kitchen, make-up needs to be fixed, the dog needs to be taken to the vet, and there is a shopping list waiting to be made for the Saturday barbecue. The emotional climate story gets overshadowed by precisely such things. By ordinary, sometimes slightly chimerical, everyday routines. The problems of ordinary life, both small and big. Shortening supply chains and eating locally (not necessarily vegetarian, even venison) – this is the desired kind of local focus. Collaborating with neighbors, working for small water retention, supporting native species. All the things that are practically imperceptible over a soy milk latte in a fashionable Warsaw café.

## Specifics

People like specifics: examples of what works or does not work, and where. Globally, we may have our heads in the clouds, but in the lithosphere, what matters are local problems. Localness has a future and carries great significance for climate change. However, for those crusading on the climate mission, the battle over the vegetarian diet (so what if it is based on soya beans, if they get hauled thousands of kilometers?) has become more important than understanding those who rear sheep and rabbits. They eat them and respect not only every mouthful of their meat but also their wool, skin, and even bones. Why have I listed all these examples? Do I hope for a change in the climate narrative? I do, but at the same time I do not expect it. I follow the discussions that are being held in social media and in serious science magazines. It’s a lost cause, the train has gained momentum, and neither the driver nor the passengers know where it is headed, why they are going there, or even what train they are on. What they want is for things to be “cool,” and so they are. There are birds flying above the train, goldenrods and knotweeds blossoming along the tracks, and the meadows are strangely dry, but cranes seem to be doing just fine, even though the models said they should have gone extinct long before.

Instead of bemoaning a temperature rise of 2°C, warmer winters, and less greenery (which is not true on a global scale), we need to demonstrate how these factors affect local ecosystems. There are winners and there are losers. Birds return home and sing earlier, and they stay with us longer, sometimes through the

winter. Plants bloom earlier provided that they have access to water, because there is more carbon dioxide in the atmosphere. All these tiny elements are interconnected. Plants blooming early are not only a treat for the eyes but also a problem for people with allergies. Warm winters not only bring down heating costs but also favor ticks and mosquitos. The climate affects our health and quality of life, vegetable and fruit prices, access to health care, transport-related social exclusion, as well as many other elements of everyday life.

## Complexity

The most important inherent characteristic of climate change, namely its complexity, somehow gets lost in the shuffle. Grasping the full complexity of climate change is not enough, because people want simple solutions anyway. However, putting complexity into the picture opens up room for reflection on changeable and transient nature of things. This means not so much accepting death, because that is the realm of metaphysics, as realizing the limited lifespan of species, ecosystems, and even the Sun and the entire universe. This topic gets buried deeply within climate education. You are a member of *Homo sapiens*, so you are guilty, and there is no room for nuance or doubt. Not a shred of debate on the actual needs and costs or the possible impact on the climate. And, finally, no reflection on the fact that the effects of even the most radical action will not manifest itself for at least a decade or two. And by then, according to the pessimists, the Earth may no longer exist.

## The apocalypse

Gloomy pictures of the climate disaster promote apocalyptic visions. This has continued for some time now, and we yet can see no apocalypse. Again, people are growing indifferent, because the message is weak and too emotional. It is also too political, which may entail negative consequences. In polarized societies, many participants get excluded from debates at the outset. And that is a bad thing, because we need social solidarity, and even those engaged in the efforts to prevent a climate disaster admit that. But is the idea of imposing solutions by force more powerful than scientific arguments and the eagerness to convince the unconvinced? Optimistic facts have an uplifting effect: cleaner water and air, a victory over famine, reduced morbidity rates. This does not convince the pessimists (who call themselves climate realists), who are sketching out visions of future problems. But we should understand that the world is not stuck in the muck, the Earth somehow does support 7 billion people, and famine is less widespread than obesity. We can see a great experiment being carried out: the freez-

ing of the world's economy, lockdowns, and a slow-down in globalization. Another interesting opportunity to make the world a better place. But in order to achieve this, we need to have priorities. I propose the development of such virtues as prudence, justice, temperance, and fortitude. It is thanks to them that the world as we know it came into existence, as opposed to today's consumerist garbage – with clothes for one season, home appliances with short lifespans, food waste, and glitzy gadgets.

## Ideas have consequences

When I look at the participants in the climate dispute, I see fewer and fewer cool-headed scientists familiar with the complexity and difficulty of natural systems and more and more writers, politicians, journalists, celebrities, musicians, and all those who suddenly realized that they could piggyback on the topic of climate change. They can do so by weaving it into their treatises on philosophy, depression, veganism, the psychology of lost souls, prose, poetry, and bridge engineering. Over time, such individuals express their astonishment that people are growing indifferent to the issue of climate, to the heating up of our Mother Earth. But this situation results only from earlier acceptance of indifference to the truth and the hype surrounding postmodernity. The time has come to face the logical consequences of this situation

## Upcoming innovations

Climate change is a serious issue. We should not leave it up to the loudmouths, no matter which side of the barricade their shouts come from. Fearmongering tends to be both intellectually dishonest and counter-effective. I have no good advice on how to reverse this insensitivity on the issue of climate, and I am not even sure I would like to. Instead, I can see and hear the old business-as-usual mentality, and the same holds true for climate. What a pity! The postponement of the potential positive effect of today's actions is too much for human imagination. I prefer the type of action that follows from the old Dutch saying, "You can't tell the wind not to blow, but you can build windmills." Human imagination and stupidity have no limits. Paradoxically, both lead to the development of innovative solutions. Having crazy ideas, taking action, suffering a failure, making progress, and taking action again. And finding effective solutions. People invented the wheel, the steam engine, and the space shuttle. Truth be told, it does not matter if climate is helped by modern technologies that make it possible to live comfortably while keeping energy consumption low or to conquer the universe outside of the Earth. What if we fail? Well... Everything has a beginning and an end. ■

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