



SUNDAYREVIEW | OPINION

The Climate Swerve

By ROBERT JAY LIFTON AUG. 23, 2014

AMERICANS appear to be undergoing a significant psychological shift in our relation to global warming. I call this shift a climate “swerve,” borrowing the term used recently by the Harvard humanities professor Stephen Greenblatt to describe a major historical change in consciousness that is neither predictable nor orderly.

The first thing to say about this swerve is that we are far from clear about just what it is and how it might work. But we can make some beginning observations which suggest, in Bob Dylan’s words, that “something is happening here, but you don’t know what it is.” Experience, economics and ethics are coalescing in new and important ways. Each can be examined as a continuation of my work comparing nuclear and climate threats.

The experiential part has to do with a drumbeat of climate-related disasters around the world, all actively reported by the news media: hurricanes and tornadoes, droughts and wildfires, extreme heat waves and equally extreme cold, rising sea levels and floods. Even when people have doubts about the causal relationship of global warming to these episodes, they cannot help being psychologically affected. Of great importance is the growing recognition that the danger encompasses the entire earth and its inhabitants. We are all vulnerable.

This sense of the climate threat is represented in public opinion polls and attitude studies. A recent Yale survey, for instance, concluded that “Americans’ certainty that the earth is warming has increased over the past three years,” and “those who think global warming is not happening have become substantially less sure of their position.”

Falsification and denial, while still all too extensive, have come to require more defensive psychic energy and political chicanery.

But polls don’t fully capture the complex collective process occurring.

The most important experiential change has to do with global warming and time. Responding to the climate threat — in contrast to the nuclear threat, whose immediate and grotesque destructiveness was recorded in Hiroshima and Nagasaki — has been inhibited by the difficulty of imagining catastrophic future events. But climate-related disasters and intense media images are hitting us now, and providing partial models for a devastating climate future.

At the same time, economic concerns about fossil fuels have raised the issue of value. There is a wonderfully evocative term, “stranded assets,” to characterize the oil, coal and gas reserves that are still in the ground. Trillions of dollars in assets could remain “stranded” there. If we are serious about reducing greenhouse gas emissions and sustaining the human habitat, between 60 percent and 80 percent of those assets must remain in the ground, according to the Carbon Tracker Initiative, an organization that analyzes carbon investment risk. In contrast, renewable energy sources, which only recently have achieved the status of big business, are taking on increasing value, in terms of returns for investors, long-term energy savings and relative harmlessness to surrounding communities.

Pragmatic institutions like insurance companies and the American military have been confronting the consequences of climate change for some time. But now, a number of leading financial authorities are raising questions about the viability of the holdings of giant carbon-based fuel corporations. In a world fueled by oil and coal, it is a truly stunning event when investors are warned that the market may end up devaluing those assets. We are beginning to see a bandwagon effect in which the overall viability of fossil-fuel economics is being questioned.

Can we continue to value, and thereby make use of, the very materials most deeply implicated in what could be the demise of the human habitat? It is a bit like the old Jack Benny joke, in which an armed robber offers a choice, “Your money or your life!” And Benny responds, “I’m thinking it over.” We are beginning to “think over” such choices on a larger scale.

This takes us to the swerve-related significance of ethics. Our reflections on stranded assets reveal our deepest contradictions. Oil and coal company executives focus on the maximum use of their product in order to serve the interests of shareholders, rather than the humane, universal ethics we require to protect the earth. We may well speak of those shareholder-dominated principles as “stranded ethics,” which are better left buried but at present are all too active

above ground.

Such ethical contradictions are by no means entirely new in historical experience. Consider the scientists, engineers and strategists in the United States and the Soviet Union who understood their duty as creating, and possibly using, nuclear weapons that could destroy much of the earth. Their conscience could be bound up with a frequently amorphous ethic of “national security.” Over the course of my work I have come to the realization that it is very difficult to endanger or kill large numbers of people except with a claim to virtue.

The climate swerve is mostly a matter of deepening awareness. When exploring the nuclear threat I distinguished between fragmentary awareness, consisting of images that come and go but remain tangential, and formed awareness, which is more structured, part of a narrative that can be the basis for individual and collective action.

In the 1980s there was a profound worldwide shift from fragmentary awareness to formed awareness in response to the potential for a nuclear holocaust. Millions of people were affected by that “nuclear swerve.” And even if it is diminished today, the nuclear swerve could well have helped prevent the use of nuclear weapons.

With both the nuclear and climate threats, the swerve in awareness has had a crucial ethical component. People came to feel that it was deeply wrong, perhaps evil, to engage in nuclear war, and are coming to an awareness that it is deeply wrong, perhaps evil, to destroy our habitat and create a legacy of suffering for our children and grandchildren.

Social movements in general are energized by this kind of ethical passion, which enables people to experience the more active knowledge associated with formed awareness. That was the case in the movement against nuclear weapons. Emotions related to individual conscience were pooled into a shared narrative by enormous numbers of people.

In earlier movements there needed to be an overall theme, even a phrase, that could rally people of highly divergent political and intellectual backgrounds. The idea of a “nuclear freeze” mobilized millions of people with the simple and clear demand that the United States and the Soviet Union freeze the testing, production and deployment of nuclear weapons.

Could the climate swerve come to include a “climate freeze,” defined by a

transnational demand for cutting back on carbon emissions in steps that could be systematically outlined?

With or without such a rallying phrase, the climate swerve provides no guarantees of more reasonable collective behavior. But with human energies that are experiential, economic and ethical it could at least provide — and may already be providing — the psychological substrate for action on behalf of our vulnerable habitat and the human future.

Robert Jay Lifton is a psychiatrist and the author of “Death in Life: Survivors of Hiroshima,” and a memoir, “Witness to an Extreme Century.”

A version of this op-ed appears in print on August 24, 2014, on page SR4 of the New York edition with the headline: The Climate Swerve.

© 2014 The New York Times Company