

# A SOCIAL VISION FOR CLIMATE CHANGE

George McKibbon

James Hanson of the Goddard Institute of Space Studies has said, "If further global warming reached two to three degrees Celcius, we will likely see changes that make the earth a very different planet from the one we know." *Municipal World's* regular contributions in the climate change issue have described many of the physical dimensions of these changes.

The foundation of the planning profession is the management of change. But catastrophic change, such as that which may result from climate warming, is quite different from the changes for which we routinely plan. In addition to the physical change they may bring, catastrophic events can have massive effects on the social and economic circumstances of those affected. For planners (and other professions alike), the psychological and social implications for residents need to be considered to make our understanding complete, so that we may establish appropriate responses.

## Role of Story Telling

Why speak personally within the context of climate change? As I look back on my experience, I believe it serves as a metaphor for the adaptive changes James Hanson

predicts I will need to engage in. It provides a vision illuminating a way to address the new challenges that we will all face as we deal with global warming.

When I was seven, my family was involved in an automobile accident in which I nearly lost my life. While mending in hospital, my father visited me. He was in a wheelchair recovering from polio and told me my mother did not survive her injuries. Who was going to take care of us, I asked. There was no answer.

When I emerged from the hospital, my grandmother took me and my siblings into her home. Years later, my father returned from rehabilitation, and together we re-established our family while he pursued a career in business. As he prospered, we moved on.

Time passed and our family survived both illness and accident. It was a complicated time for my family and the farm community in which we lived. We could not undo what happened, but our memories of happier times, combined with a vision of how to live now, inspired our choices. Our challenges involved keeping the demands of this unique situation in perspective, while making the choices necessary to address the daily demands of maintaining a household, earning a living, gaining an education, and meeting the challenges

of various rites of passage.

If we are to address projected changes in meaningful terms that individuals and communities can absorb, we need to share stories of our experiences of natural events. Once absorbed, our understanding and assessment enables us to address the choices we need to make to adapt.

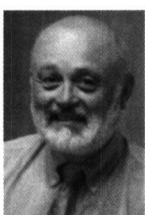
## Some Climate Influenced Stories

The 1995 Chicago heat wave and the more recent Hurricane Katrina are examples of events that may well have been influenced, to some degree, by the broader climate changes that we are experiencing. At the very least, they are analogous to the kinds of events we can expect more of. Both events were sudden, unexpected, and devastating in terms of their scope and the legacy they left behind. In each case, the devastation had been unimaginable before their occurrence, because of the complicating socioeconomic factors of their built environments.

## Hurricane Katrina

David Brinkley's book *The Deluge* recounts Hurricane Katrina's encounter with New Orleans, and vividly describes the intimate experiences of residents and first responders. In his analysis of the situation, Brinkley categorizes the collective experiences of the people of Mississippi and Louisiana into four separate sequential stages during the storm and in the days thereafter.

The first stage involved experiencing the storm's fury and magnitude. Many



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of those who remained in New Orleans either felt they could weather the blast, just as they had weathered previous storms, or hadn't the means or resources to move to safer areas inland.

The second stage relates to the collapse of the levees and the flooding of the city after the storm passed. Many residents emerged from their shelters feeling elated they escaped the storm's wrath, only to face rapidly rising flood waters from the collapsing levees.

The third stage recounts the breakdown of social order as residents waiting for rescue on rooftops and collection areas (eg. the Convention Center and Superdome) experienced vandalism and looting. Women, children, and the poor and frail were subjected to predation and senseless violence. Circumstances were further complicated by the failure of governments at all levels to implement effective and timely relief measures.

The fourth stage involved the spread of disease and natural and man-made hazards, as flood waters mixed a toxic brew of sewage and chemicals, snakes and insects, quickly followed by mold and rot.

To Brinkley's four stages, I add a fifth. Residents were evacuated during and after the storm to communities across the United States. Many people discovered new and attractive opportunities and opted to re-establish themselves in their new locations, rather than returning to New Orleans.

Others returned with the dream of re-establishing the city they fled, only to be confronted with an impossible dream. The spatial and design necessities for new flood control and surge measures required before reconstruction; the necessity to plan for a smaller population; and the need to address insurance and reconstruction costs, makes this dream impractical.

### Chicago Heat Wave

Eric Klinenberg's *A Social Autopsy of Disaster in the Chicago Heat Wave* documents the events of July 1995, when Chicagoans suffered through a blistering heat wave that left over 700 people dead. The book explains how socio-economic factors magnified mor-

tality rates resulting from this extreme event.

In Chicago, the complicating social factors included:

- ▶ the increased numbers of elderly urban residents living alone, with few close relatives or friends in their buildings and neighbourhoods to look in on them and help them meet the demands of the heat wave;
- ▶ widening social and spatial separation between the affluent and the poor, with the poor becoming increasingly vulnerable without access to the cooling centres and help needed to find relief;
- ▶ the delegation of emergency services to the police and fire departments, without accompanying softer social services to mediate and help direct these services in times of need and make the social connections required to provide a more responsive environment;
- ▶ the expectation that all members of the community are consumers with equal access to the information they need, and the ability to act upon that information in times of emergency; and
- ▶ the social distance between municipal governments and different ethnic groups and the disadvantaged. Our planning and community health

professions are ill-equipped to address the individual and collective pain we will encounter in the experiences James Hanson predicts.

### The Way Forward

Rowan Williams, Archbishop of the Church of England, was in the vicinity of the World Trade Center on September 11, 2001. The next day, he presented a homily at the Cathedral of St. John the Divine on Morningside Heights. His plea was for silence. Words spoken immediately won't last. Silence is essential to finding the words that express the shock and loss and to allow the demons of the moment to walk away.

Taking lessons from the preceding personal and corporate stories, a planned response to the catastrophic changes that climate change entails should involve: moments of silence, reflection and story telling to remember who we are as individuals and communities, and to comprehend what has transpired; an ambiguous and moving phase of grief, anger, and letting go of the past, as a clearer sense of the future emerges; and a time for imaging and collective design, responding to a changed landscape we will face while learning from the past, and rebuilding and adapting our communities for the future. Our journey towards a sustainable community demands this. MW

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