

Reading 8, Communicating the Climate Crisis

So, in addition to personal action (i.e. lifestyle changes), climate activism, and becoming politically active, today I would like to talk about yet another thing that we can each do to intervene in the climate crisis: communicate.

The reading for this week is the chapter by Professor Richard Somerville on “Communicating Climate Change Science” (Chapter 8) from the book *Bending the Curve: Climate Change Solutions*, which is, incidentally, a University of California publication.

As the Overview to the chapter notes, in it you “meet ‘Uncle Pete,’ a fictional character closely based on fact. Uncle Pete does not accept climate change science. Many people know a real person who strongly resembles Uncle Pete.”

The chapter thus seeks to prepare you for encounters for your own “Uncle Pete” – and similar skeptics that you may have already met.

Since the article takes up the formidable challenge of communicating the reality of the climate crisis to skeptics, in today’s talk I would like to consider a related but in many ways very different challenge: how to communicate the call to action to people who are not skeptics, perhaps like your friends.

If you are like me, many of your friends are already convinced of the reality of the climate crisis, as we are often surrounded, for a variety of reasons, by people who often see such issues similarly.

Hence, it may well be the case that what interests your friends most is knowing what can be done about the climate crisis. More to the point, what they can do about it.

While such people are very different from Somerville’s “Uncle Pete,” they offer a very real opportunity for communication, though of a very different sort. Moreover, many of the things that Somerville underscores, like preparation, stories, metaphors, and language, can also help you communicate with your friends and family.

So, exactly how does one open up a space for such communication?

Even though it sounds paradoxical, I would argue that the best thing is to not initiate talking about the climate crisis, let alone initiate talking about your personal actions.

In a book on mindfulness meditation, Jon Kabat-Zinn nicely suggests the same regarding meditation “Every time you get a strong impulse to talk about meditation and how wonderful it is, or how hard it is, or what it’s doing for you these days, or what it’s not, or you want to convince someone else how wonderful it would be for them, just look at it as more thinking and go meditate some more. The impulse will pass and everybody will be better off – especially you.”

We’ve all had friends who became enthusiastic about something and then immediately began to talk our ears off about it. This is, unfortunately, not a very successful way to spur people to action.

So, when is the best time to communicate new ideas? In general, I wouldn’t decide this for others, but leave it to your friends to tell you when they are ready to hear about it.

Allow me to give a few examples.

Up until relatively recently, I was a pretty hardcore vegan for five years. Before that I was a vegetarian. Before that a pescatarian. Before that, I did not eat a whole lot of animal products.

Whenever I was out to dinner with friends, this sometimes became obvious before I even ordered, as I would often ask the server for information about the food. Consequently, friends frequently asked me about my eating habits. When I replied that I was vegan, that often shut down the conversation.

Why? Well, because people know what being a vegan entails. Hence, for most people there is little need to ask about veganism as a lifestyle.

Moreover, as many people are vegans because of strong ethical convictions, they are often seen as feeling particularly virtuous and morally superior. Mind you that this may well not be the case, but, having been a vegan for years, I can tell you that people often assume that this how you feel – and how you feel about them, and their moral decisions (i.e. what they imagine that you perceive as their moral failure).

Consequently, experience has taught me that announcing that you are vegan can not only pretty much shut down all conversation on the subject, but can make for an uncomfortable meal for all involved.

How, then, does one go about communicating the importance of diet with respect to the climate crisis?

Here's my approach to such communication. I'm not saying it's perfect, but it has generally been working for me. It is certainly better than announcing to the world that I was vegan.

When asked about my dinner choices, I generally reply that, while I have been pescatarian, vegetarian, and vegan, I now largely think of myself as a "climatarian," though I admit to being intrigued by friends who are "freegans."

As you might imagine, people almost always immediately ask "What's a climatarian?" "What's a freegan?" Instead of shutting down conversation (i.e. communication), as the label "vegan" risks, these words initiate it.

So, I explain that a climatarian is a way of eating, like the similarly sounding "vegetarian." A relatively new term, as it was coined in 2015, it denotes someone who eats with the climate in mind. For example, a climatarian would choose a turkey burger over a beef one, as 2.5 times more greenhouse gasses are emitted in producing a pound of beef than a pound of turkey.

Of course, eating a pound of lentils is far better than either a pound of turkey or beef, as the beef requires (astonishingly, as I noted in another talk) the release of 30 times more greenhouse gas than the lentils. However – and this is an important point to communicate – not all climatarians are purists. The main thing is to try, as much as possible, to be aware of the climate impact of the food that you eat, and to act on this knowledge the best that you can.

But is this enough? Shouldn't we all be eating a largely plant-based diet and forgoing turkey along with beef? Yes, that is true, but we are not only talking about bringing about greater awareness here (i.e. communication), but starting people on a path.

Because becoming a vegan can entail radical lifestyle changes and the notion of being vegan carries with it a great deal of cultural baggage – and, let's be honest, much of it negative in the eyes of the carnist public – it risks being seen like an alien, far-off shore.

Climatarianism, by contrast, can be seen as a bridge to that other shore – a welcoming bridge that anyone can step out on to, at any time.

For example, on hearing about climatarianism, people often ask me, if we are at a restaurant, to walk through the menu in our hands to compare the relative climate impact of the food on offer. As a consequence, more than once my dinner companions have chosen more climate friendly options right then and there. As with the example of beef and turkey, people are often surprised that one tasty menu item can sometimes have half the climate impact of a similar option.

Somerville's advice regarding preparation is worth repeating, as researching the relative climate impacts of different foods in advance is necessary here. However, this is the sort of knowledge that we all need to acquire if we want to eat with the climate in mind.

In any event, a single meal can thus result in someone not only learning about the relative climate impact of different foods, but also result in them acting on that knowledge, on the spot.

Yes, it would be great if telling people that you are vegan could instantly result in them swearing off of animal products, but, in my experience, this can completely backfire and have the opposite effect.

Climatarianism, however, offers them a new way of thinking about food choices – and, for many people, thinking about the climate impact of their food choices is indeed entirely new. If everyone were to think this way, it could have a profound climate impact.

Climatarianism is fundamentally different from veganism insofar as it does not present people with an either/or choice of either animal products or not. You're not telling people to stop eating that pizza, but maybe to decide to get one covered with appealing veggies rather than three different kinds of meat.

In terms of overall climate impact, it would be better if most Americans cut their climate footprint from food in half with choices like turkey over beef than if just 5 or 10% of the population switched to largely plant-based diets.

And, who knows, perhaps climatarianism will serve as a bridge to veganism for some people, as it offers them the first tentative steps in that direction, even though it may take years – as it did for me, as I went from being pescatarian to vegetarian to vegan.

As with “climatarian,” just the mention of the word “freegan” opens the door to climate communication – and perhaps action.

Since many people have never even heard the word “freegan,” it is a wonderful opportunity to explain that, while eating a largely plant-based diet can have profound climate consequences, wasting less food can have an even greater impact. It has been my experience that most people are truly startled by this fact.

Incidentally, as [Wikipedia concisely notes](#), “Freeganism is often presented as synonymous with “dumpster diving” for discarded food, although freegans are distinguished by their association with an anti-consumerist and anti-capitalist ideology.”

It's true that some people are pretty hardcore freegans. For example, Peter Kalmus, who is a climate scientist at NASA's Jet Propulsion Laboratory, collects food to eat that has been put out by his local supermarket because it is past its expiration dates.

On the other hand, as with being climatarian, being freegan is pretty flexible.

For example, if we are at a restaurant, we can take home everything that we order – and actually eat it at some point. When at home, we can prepare sensibly-sized portions and eat everything on our plate and eat everything that we have purchased, rather than letting large portions of it go to waste. Similarly, we can work at being freegan when we cook as much of what we have purchased as we can – such as leafy beet tops, as well as the root.

True, we have not dumpster dived for our meal, but we have eaten food that otherwise have likely wound up in landfill.

In other words, as with climatarianism, freeganism is not an either/or lifestyle choice like veganism. Instead, anyone can make freegan decisions throughout each and every day.

Communicating through your actions can be a very effective form of climate activism. It at once underscores that you really care about this issue (rather than just give it lip service) and that anyone can do the same, even if doing so just involves ordering a turkey burger.

After all, to get anywhere you need to make a first step.

Such communication can happen in all sorts of ways. People are always asking me about my electric bike, as they are truly curious about just what is. It is even the case that, noticing that I have a limited wardrobe (OK, noticing that I wear the same clothes a lot), people sometimes find polite ways of asking if I am a minimalist, which is, in fact, something that I work at being.

In fact, I get asked about lots of things: being an urban farmer, living in a small (though not tiny) house, swearing off flying, having only one child, climate activism, my meditation practice, and so forth. I do not advertise any of these lifestyle choices, but rather wait until people want – and are themselves ready – to hear about them.

When they are finally ready, people often come to me with scores of questions, as they really want to learn about something – like urban farming or meditation.

This communication strategy also leverages personal climate action. Not only do these actions have a direct impact on the crisis, but they encourage others to act as well, as they underscore how seriously you take this crisis – and that you are willing to “walk the talk,” as they say.

Such personal actions also underscore an often-ignored truism: Before you can change the world, you need to change yourself. Otherwise, to be honest, you may well cause

more trouble than good. To again echo that injunction often attributed to Gandhi, “Be the change you want to see you in the world.”

Such communication is not limited to personal action. When people ask me about my climate decisions, one of the most common questions is "What's the number one thing that we can do to reduce our climate footprint?" When I answer that they are in luck, as the single most important thing that they can do just takes an hour or two per year, their ears often really perked up. They are generally surprised to hear my answer, which is "Vote."

This too often leads to a communication opportunity, as it can prompt questions, such as "How exactly does one vote with the climate in mind?"

As with introducing climatarianism and freeganism, the important thing here is that communication has been opened up. In practical terms, *people are asking, rather than me telling*. This is a crucial distinction, as it is motivated by their curiosity, rather than my desire to convert them to my way of thinking – though, in the end, they often (if only a little ways), become converted.

And, sometimes, since voting can take such a small commitment (after all, it really does just take an hour or two per year), people ask what more they can do. Their asking this opens up another wonderful communication opportunity, this time for a discussion of climate activism. Specifically, the sort of organizations and groups that they can join.

In any event, I am curious to both hear what you think about Somerville’s advice on how to talk to “Uncle Pete” about the climate crisis, as well as ways of communicating with concerned friends and family who want to do something about this crisis, but are not quite sure just how to go about it.

Class discussion of Communicating the Climate Crisis

(Note that the following observations, which are in italics, have not been paraphrased or altered, though I do correct the occasional typo and, because of space concerns, often just part of the comment is reproduced here along with my reply. In working through these, I will first quote an observation by a student, followed by my thoughts.)

Talking to an Uncle Pete I think would be challenging because it’s hard to control the anger I feel in their ignorance on something that is obviously happening.

This is a wonderful observation. By the way, many people made similar comments.

It is such a perceptive observation because it acknowledges a personal shortcoming, rather than finding fault with the person to which you are trying to communicate. In other words, instead of starting off believing that the problem is with *you* not me, this person acknowledges that, before any communication can happen, they need to address their own shortcomings. In this case, their anger.

This is not to say that you should not feel anger about the fact that tens of millions of Americans are, one way or another, reluctant to act on the climate crisis.

However, is anger toward "Uncle Pete" misplaced? After all, how does Uncle Pete stand to personally benefit from outright denying or delaying action on the climate crisis? Like most US citizens, Uncle Pete will be profoundly and negatively impacted by the climate crisis, which may threaten his community, home, and even his life.

It will also personally cost Uncle Pete quite a bit of money, as delaying action on the climate crisis only makes it worse. Recall that the wildfire in Paradise, California was the most expensive natural disaster on earth that year.

So, Uncle Pete is vehemently and vocally arguing for a position completely counter to his own interests.

Why in the world would anyone do that? The answer, as we have seen, is that powerful groups, such as the fossil fuel industry and its affiliates, who profit every day that we delay action on the climate crisis, have targeted people like Uncle Pete. Why? To make them into unwitting advocates for their true cause, which is to make money - for them, of course, not Uncle Pete.

Since Uncle Pete is in no way sharing these profits, and in fact will lose much here (perhaps even his life, like some of the people in Paradise, California), Uncle Pete is really a victim. It may be difficult to see it this way, but this is a reality of the situation. Consequently, anger toward Uncle Pete is largely misplaced.

Our anger should, instead and of course, be directed toward the corporations and individuals who have duped Uncle Pete into helping them profit at his (and our and the earth's) expense.

While we might still be angry at Uncle Pete for foolishly allowing himself to be duped, recall how convincing climate change denial literature can be. The book that the Heartland Institute sent out to 300,000 US teachers, *Why Scientists Disagree About Global Warming*, is just one of many, many examples across all sorts of media.

Although it may be difficult to do, we really should be sympathetic with Uncle Pete. Understood in this way, we need to help Uncle Pete, help Uncle Pete understand.

Of course, this is easier said than done. Nonetheless, for anyone wanting to do something about the climate crisis – and I hope this includes you – working on an effective, multipronged communication strategy is absolutely essential.

In some ways, a communication strategy is more effective than any individual thing that you can do, such as switching to a large plant-based diet. After all, if you can convince five or ten friends (or just people that you encounter) of the merit of making this dietary shift, it would be five or ten times more effective than your personal actions.

I think that the most striking point this reading made was comparing climate scientists to physicians or doctors. I had never thought of making this comparison before reading this and it really stuck with me. It is true that people do not question doctors in the same way they question climate change and this can be due to political influence or sheer ignorance.

Another excellent point.

When we take up any issue, we rarely do so with an entirely open mind. By this I mean not only that we often have preconceived notions, but also that we conceptualize the issue in certain ways.

Take the issue of a physician's credibility. From a very young age we are usually taught that when we are really sick, nothing can compare to the expertise of a doctor in helping us get better.

This is absolutely a good thing, as it forms the basis of trust between patients and healthcare professionals. And this trust is extraordinary, as we are actually willing to entrust our lives to our doctors.

Unfortunately, although most of us have our own doctors, few of us have actually encountered climate scientists. This opens up an opportunity for climate change deniers and others to paint a picture of climate scientists as corrupt and unreliable. Since most people have no direct experience with these scientists, it is easy to see why some people buy into this image.

However, Somerville's article and this comment rightly encourage us to make the comparison. If we care about the planet in the same way that we care for bodies (and we absolutely should), then, when the earth is clearly having health issues, we need to call in experts to both diagnose what's wrong with the earth's climate as well as to offer up a cure.

And we should trust them enough to act on the cure. After all, after being diagnosed with a life-threatening infection, who would reject the cure of a course of antibiotics? To the contrary, we would both be grateful that we had a doctor that was able to successfully diagnose the problem and to provide us with a cure.

If we reflected on the situation, we would likely be profoundly grateful to the doctor for having saved our life. Similarly, every person on the planet owes an enormous debt of thanks to climate scientists, for both diagnosing our ailing earth's problem, as well as coming up with a cure.

Climate scientists have thoroughly examined the cause of the problem, rising greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions, and prescribed a simple cure: reduce these emissions.

One of the main problems with climate change is that big businesses, like oil companies, are much better at communicating an idea to the general public than scientists are.

Since oil companies are some of the wealthiest companies on the planet, they can easily spend hundreds of millions of dollars annually to communicate disinformation on the climate crisis to the public.

Incidentally, if you are wondering why so much of this climate change denial literature comes from the United States (and hence is written in English), [the US produces and consumes more oil than any other country on the planet](#), by a long shot. In fact, we produce and consume nearly as much oil as the next two countries on the list, Saudi Arabia and Russia, *combined*.

This raises an obvious question: if the fossil fuel industry and its affiliates are spending so much money creating this disinformation, who is financing the dissemination of accurate information on the climate crisis?

The answer is... drumroll please... no one. This has been the case ever since the climate crisis emerged as a popular issue of concern decades ago. No one paid James Hansen to speak before Congress about the issue in 1988, or Bill McKibben to publish an incredibly popular book on the subject (*The End of Nature*) the following year.

This is still the case today. Writers like Naomi Klein and Elizabeth Colbert (and Bill McKibben) largely rely on book sales and talks to make a living. And no one paid Greta Thunberg to go on her "School Strike for Climate." True, climate scientists may be able to find funding sources for their research, but no one generally pays them to communicate their findings to the general public. Nor, for that matter, are they usually trained in that sort of communication.

It would be terrific if the US federal government stepped to communicate the severity and urgency of the climate crisis to the general public. Our government spends enormous amounts of money for all sorts of projects. For the cost of a single B-2 bomber aircraft, [which cost over \\$2 billion each](#), our government could easily outspend the campaign of disinformation waged by fossil fuel interests. Moreover, the government could step in and simply make spreading this sort of information illegal.

However, for this to happen, we need to vote in politicians who will make the climate crisis a major priority.

Until that happens, the job of communicating what the climate crisis is in what we can do about it falls on each of us. This can be as simple as talking to family and friends about the problem.

I agree with Ken in that sometimes I feel it is best to communicate without words and let people come to you. A couple years ago, I became close with a friend I met at UCSB. She was vegan, but she did not advertise it in the way that I had seen others advertise their veganism on social media. I became intrigued about her experience with eating a vegan diet and what led her to those choices. After a few long informative discussions and a couple of vegan turkey sandwiches, I made the decision to cut meat out of my diet. I have now been vegetarian for over two years without any pressuring or persuading. When I moved in with a different friend last year, she eventually noticed I didn't eat meat and asked why. I explained my reasoning to her and we would occasionally have casual conversations about the climate crisis. One day she came up to me and said "I am giving up beef for lent," and she hasn't eaten beef since. A few months later she informed me that her brother stopped eating beef as well! In retrospect, I am amazed by the power of this form of passive communication and the domino effect it had created.

Quite a few people made comments like this one, confirming that it is possible to "communicate without words and let people come to you."

However, this strategy doesn't always work. This thoughtful comment has a second-half:

My little domino train came to a screeching halt when I moved back home at the start of COVID. My family has constantly made fun of me for all of my choices and opinions regarding climate change ever since I became vegetarian. I have tried countless methods of communication with all of my family members, but they refuse to even consider anything I say. I have shown them the data and cited my sources and debunked the myths and presented the solutions. I have explained the science and politics and industries behind everything. They just aren't interested in hearing what I have to say. Both Ken's video and this week's reading, "Communicating the Climate Crisis," provide a lot of useful tools for communicating climate change, but I am not sure if there is any way to effectively communicate with someone that refuses to listen. I used to be passive about my feelings regarding climate change because my family would immediately knock them down. The struggle of communicating the climate crisis is real.

Is there, as this person perceptively asks, "any way to effectively communicate with someone that refuses to listen"?

Somerville's article offers some ideas on how we might "have constructive and civil conversations about climate change with people who do not accept the fundamental findings of climate change science."

It is worth noting, however, that there are limits to communication. Some "Uncle Petes" will no doubt never acknowledge the climate crisis or support action to mitigate it, regardless of arguments made to them.

But that's OK. If enough people in the US are convinced and vote accordingly, then we can enact comprehensive legislation, such as carbon pricing, that will require everyone to reduce their climate footprints.