

“A Mosquito in the Baltic Sea”:
From Overwhelm to A New Kind of Leadership

Commentary on Vattenfall Report

The conversation on climate change and its impact on human behaviour

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At this moment in time, we find ourselves straddling between worlds.

These are the world of business as usual, the world of what is possible -- and the world of in-between. This in-between world is where many of us dwell: we know enough so there is no turning back, and yet the path ahead remains unclear.

It is at times such as these -- fraught, full of possibility and risk -- that we are each called upon to lean into what it means and looks like to be a human in 2020, 2030, 2040 and beyond. There is no roadmap, and the compass is forged with imagination, fortitude, and courage. It can feel treacherous, overwhelming, daunting -- and for some, as a thrilling opportunity to demonstrate a new kind of leadership. A new kind of being human.

In light of this new psychological terrain we find ourselves in, what is a balanced conversation on climate change? On the one hand, many of us worry that our personal actions are insignificant, it's too late, and we have well and truly crossed the line of no return. There seems to be no other option than to tune out, get angry, or shut down. It is easy to feel cynical and distressed. And on the other, we are seeing more businesses, governments and community leadership waking up to our new normal, and demonstrating bravery to chart a new path, even when it's unknown. At the precise moment many are experiencing "eco-anxiety" -- an entirely understandable low-grade or pervasive anxiety and worry about the state of our planet -- leaders are beginning to step out of their comfort zones, voice to their concerns for our planet and our future, and dedicate themselves to forging a new path others can be inspired by and follow. We are seeing boldness.

And, we are seeing people in retreat or actively denying and refuting reality.

Do we need to choose between hope or despair? Between courageous leadership or shutting down? Do we need to focus only on positive solutions, and avoid the hard facts?

These are the quandaries that have fueled my work as a climate psychologist for decades. The paradox at the heart of our climate crisis is, in my view, surprisingly psychological. Based on my years of research, a more complex story has emerged than whether we need to become cheerleaders or "doomers." This story is a more nuanced, fully human one, that allows us to show up as our full selves, and give each other permission to come to terms with our climate crisis however best we can. And the key is recognizing we are not in this alone, that none of this can be addressed without coming together in our shared humanity. And discovering what that looks like for each of us.

It's important to be clear: climate change is an existential threat that impacts all life on the planet, in profound, complex and disproportionate ways. And, it is also a threat created by our own human ingenuity. It is an ultimate unintended consequence of an entire generation of progress, much of which has made our lives easier, safer, healthier and faster. Facing the truth of our situation is a profound act for any of us to do, no matter who you are.

Climate change presents us with perhaps one of the most complex technological, social, economic, cultural and political challenges of our lifetime. As reflected in this report, it is also one of the most psychologically complex, for reasons we are only beginning to understand. For years, countless researchers, scholars, artists and scientists have been working to unlock the riddle to help unlock action on climate change. Is it too abstract and systemic for our minds? Do the threats need to hit home, and impact what matters most? Is it only when we begin to feel the impacts where it counts--what powers our lives, what we eat and use to get around--that will spark a response? Do we need to frame climate in terms of our values and beliefs?

As it turns out, the answer is becoming more of a 'yes, and' to these questions. Yes, climate change is highly systemic and abstract, the culmination and confluence of correlated variables, from how we produce food to what powers our planes, homes, hospitals and just about every aspect of industrialized life. Yes, information that falls outside our worldviews is likely to be rejected and denied, due to something called "motivated reasoning"-- when we find the prospect of revising our beliefs and assumptions threatening or "unsafe."

And, what we also know is that when information is distressing, threatening, overwhelming or seemingly intractable, we tend to tune it out. This has nothing to do with how much we may care about the issues, how good of a person we are, what's at stake, or how we will be impacted. Rather, as problem-solving creatures, if we perceive an issue as intractable and unsolvable, we usually shift our focus and attention to areas of our lives that we can have an impact on. Say, our gardens, what we eat, time with our loved ones, and so on.

I call this as "the myth of apathy" because how we respond to climate change news, whether it's positive or negative, is not a reflection of how much we care about what is happening. Apathy itself is not our biggest problem right now. I have yet to meet a single human being over thirty years of interviewing people of all walks of life, who is genuinely apathetic about what is happening with our planet and the grave risks posed to all life on it. What I have heard instead, is a profound sense of feeling caught in a double-bind -- a sensation that the issue is too huge and complex, and our lives are too small, to even know how to engage at all. The results of the report reflect this across the seven countries targeted by the research, as we see that climate change is selected by the largest proportion of respondents as the most pressing problem of our age, across a wide spectrum of pressing global problems such as wars and conflict, poverty and economic recession.

As a respondent from Finland poignantly shared, "One person's own actions are like a mosquito in the Baltic Sea, so void. Individual people are very worried and anxious. Companies that, however, produce most of the emissions that cause global warming are silent as large giants." We find ourselves deeply burdened by the impacts of climate and easily feeling oneself as a mere "mosquito."

Therefore, it does not surprise me that (as discussed in this report) people appear more impacted by the "negative" climate communications, than what is "positive." Yes, the solutions-oriented work tends to be limited to trade and industry platforms, perhaps deemed too wonky or lacking sexiness for driving traction. As the report states, "it is harder to get 'good news' to stick with people." Why is this the case? I have my views to add to the findings of the Vattenfall report. In addition to the "negativity bias" factor where we tend to focus on risk and negative threats as a survival mechanism, I believe something more is at place. I think what is also happening is that we are protecting our hearts. This is a harder metric to measure, but one that comes through the poignant and heart-felt comments from the respondents. We know too much. The facts are scary. And the scale at which we are encountering them is accelerating via news outlets and social media. It is shocking. We want to move towards solutions, and feeling this can be solved, but we may experience cynicism, or a lack of trust. We may withdraw.

And as social creatures, belonging is a key survival strategy. As humans we must belong to a social group for our survival, so tend to need 'evidence' of others that it's socially acceptable to shift our ways of life. This is why people are inspired by seeing actions of others, as evidenced in the report. This is why, as the report states, "If people and politicians see businesses leading, they are more prepared to follow. In a sense, the impact of responsible corporate behaviour lies in more than simply the effect it has on the climate: it is also in the signal it sends to society and the effect this can have on people's behaviour."

These signals are where our attention must follow. Because it is via signals sent from high and low, that ultimately transform society and pave the way towards a more humane, just and healthy future for all life on the planet.

Where does this theme of needing others to lead the way, leave us? It takes us directly to the theme of this work, and Vattenfall's commitment to be fossil-free within a generation. It takes us to a place of acknowledging that we can feel vulnerable and concerned, and yet exhibit bravery and courage. That we do not have to sugarcoat or behave as cheerleaders. Rather, we can show up as people united in our care for our world, even when it means making tough decisions and navigating complicated choices. We can look to leadership across sectors, from private to public, to serve their true function: as guides and beacons, that can give us permission to access our own leadership qualities. Each one of us at some point in our lives has experienced a moment of leadership. It was a moment when you made a decision, and your life was never the same.

In actuality, each of us has the ability to meet this moment in time -- this period of a world between worlds, the past that we cannot return to, and the future full of opportunity, risk and possibility -- with ingenuity, courage and imagination. I know this to be true. However, we need help along the way. We need leadership and friends and allies who can show up, admit when things are hard, and continue nonetheless. We need a climate conversation that is grounded in reality, doesn't shy away from urgency, and yet is brimming with an invitation to step into a bigger vision of ourselves.

We are problem-solving creatures. We are designed to tackle improbable challenges. Our minds crave logistical connections between problems and resolution. When this doesn't happen it throws us into a highly distressing mental state. So often we assume that the answer, then, is to focus on the solutions, instead of the problems. However, this overlooks a simple fact: we as humans are also meaning-making creatures. Climate change is not a simple problem that falls neatly into a "solutions" box. Rather, it asks us to transform many aspects of our contemporary existence, from what we eat to how we power our lives. What is going to catalyze change at the rate and scale necessary, is a way of thinking that goes beyond problem-solution, that invites us into a regenerative, creative, and ultimately yes, fixing and repairing. However, the focus here is on what we can do differently, how can we innovate, how can we imagine a new and different way.

Psychologically and socially, we cannot expect to push simple solutions at people and expect this to address the fundamental, underlying sense of overwhelm, distress and anxiety that millions are experiencing. It will take more. It will take a way to connect the dots thoughtfully, skillfully and with honesty.

Solutions without candor and reality are one-sided. And reality and hard truths without a pathway out, is also one-sided. We need both, together.

A balanced conversation on climate change, allows for all of these responses: we can be both vulnerable and scared, and brave and activated. A balanced public conversation allows us to acknowledge the full spectrum of these responses.

Similar to the Vattenfall report, I started out my research in the late 2000s focused on surfacing people's anxieties when it comes to climate and environmental threats. After interviewing a number of people, listening carefully to what was shared, I realized a far more complicated picture emerged: in addition to anxiety, people were feeling anger, fear, sadness and a range of feelings including anxiety. To understand how best to respond to our climate crisis, we must absolutely be grounded in people's lived, direct experiences around the world, and expand our frameworks accordingly.

We no longer have to choose between feeling afraid or feeling inspired. We no longer have to play the ping-pong game between hope, optimism and despair. We can hold both and many more of these truths together, knowing that our attempts to put our feelings and responses into boxes is set-up for failure. Climate change is alarming. It is overwhelming. It does create tremendous anxieties, to the point where many people simply do not know how to cope. We even have new terminology for this -- 'eco anxiety' or 'climate anxiety' -- to normalize and name what millions of people are now experiencing.

Where this leaves us is in an extraordinary human moment. It is a moment where each of us must be honest -- with ourselves, first, and with each other. Our leadership must show up with the capacity to be "tuned in" to the nature and breadth of what we are dealing with, and not shy away from the scale and challenge. It means we each can tap into what leadership means for us, whether it's how we show up in our schools, work, communities -- and also how we meet real leadership when we encounter it.

As the report illustrates, business sectors have a highly complicated yet crucial role to play in how the coming years will play out on the planet. There is no doubt about this. And each one of us is part of this story, in how we support, foster and activate our concern in all kinds of small and big ways. It's all needed, and this moment is now.

Let's champion leadership when we encounter it, and discover our own leadership capacities, whether it's in our kitchens, our churches, our schools or at the highest levels of corporate and governmental institutions. When we allow ourselves to confront both the "positive" and the "negative" and hold these in balance together, in the context of community and relationship, we spark a more meaningful climate action for the long-term. For the next decade, and the one after that, and the one that follows.

You are invited into this story. You are this story. It starts with each one of us.

Let's join in sending signals far and wide.



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