

Perspective

Building a Successful U.S. Climate Movement from the Ground Up

Julia Frost Nerbonne*

Climatologists, like other scientists, tend to be a stolid group. We are not given to theatrical rantings about falling skies. . . . Why then are climatologists speaking out about the dangers of global warming? The answer is that virtually all of us are now convinced that global warming poses a clear and present danger to civilization.

Lonnie Thompson, Ohio State University.¹

We still have the opportunity to preserve the remarkable life of our planet, if we begin to act now. We must rally, especially young people, to put pressure on our governments. . . . We must be jolted into recognizing the remarkable world we inherited from our elders, and our obligation to preserve the planet for future generations.

James Hansen, author of *Storms of My Grandchildren*.²

I.

From the sixteenth to the twentieth of March 2012 it was eighty degrees in Minneapolis for five days running.³ With the weather forty degrees warmer than average, a swallowtail butterfly emerged in my backyard only to find that no flowers had yet opened to provide life-giving nectar. As friends and neighbors celebrated this early gift of warmth, turning their gardens and getting out their flip flops, I privately shed tears for the swallowtail, for mothers in Africa, for my own children, and for the delicate system so violently altered by this “extreme weather event.”

It is well documented: Climate change poses significant risk to the future of the

* Julia Frost Nerbonne teaches Ethics of Natural Resource Management and Sustainability Studies at the University of Minnesota. She runs an experiential learning program on Environmental Sustainability through the Higher Education Consortium for Urban Affairs is the lead convener of MN350, a group dedicated to building the climate movement in Minnesota.

¹ Joe Romm, *Lonnie Thompson on Why Climatologists Are Speaking Out: “Virtually All of Us Are Now Convinced That Global Warming Poses a Clear and Present Danger to Civilization,”* CLIMATE PROGRESS.ORG (Dec. 13, 2010, 2:56 PM), <http://thinkprogress.org/romm/2010/12/13/207169/lonnie-thompson-climatologists-global-warming-a-clear-and-present-danger-to-civilization/>.

² JAMES HANSEN, *STORMS OF MY GRANDCHILDREN* 269 (2009).

³ See *Weather History for Minneapolis, Minnesota*, THE OLD FARMER’S ALMANAC, <http://www.almanac.com/weather/history/MN/Minneapolis> (last visited Jun. 1, 2012).

biosphere and the well-being of humanity.⁴ Many scientists and progressive national governments recognize that **350 parts per million is the safe upper limit for CO₂ in the earth's atmosphere.** We are now at 392 ppm.⁵ Despite scientific consensus on the reality of global climate change the United States has failed to adopt a national policy to reduce anthropogenic greenhouse gas emissions, the primary cause of climate change. As of December 2011, polling shows that 55% of Americans believe the U.S. Congress should be doing more, and 65 % of Americans believe that citizens themselves should be doing more to address global warming.⁶ In fact 66% support the idea that we should sign an international treaty to cut emissions, and 63% believe we should regulate CO₂ as a pollutant. Despite the countless claims to the contrary, only 15% of Americans believe that environmental protection will reduce economic growth and cost jobs. Even 51% of Republicans (whose party publicly denies the existence of anthropogenic climate change) think that it is a high or very high priority for the President and Congress to work toward developing sources of clean energy.⁷

If these data are in fact true, why don't we have a comprehensive climate policy in the U.S.? Why aren't people flooding the streets as they did during the 2011 labor protests in Madison, Wisconsin, demanding policy change at the highest level?⁸ One reason frequently cited for this is the lack of an effective grassroots social movement pushing for climate policy at a national level.⁹ While Americans may believe that climate change is real, few have made climate change a top priority¹⁰, and even fewer have taken it on themselves to get the job done. America has seen other social movements in her history—the civil rights movement, the women's movement, and the environmental movement are well-known examples that led to national policy changes—but for a myriad of reasons climate change has failed to galvanize the same kind of support. Why?

We can begin by looking at what makes social movements successful at mobilizing enough support to sway public policy. In the U.S. there have been three major schools of thought about what creates successful social movements. Beginning in the

⁴ See generally CLIMATE CHANGE 2007: THE PHYSICAL SCIENCE BASIS: CONTRIBUTION OF WORKING GROUP I TO THE FOURTH ASSESSMENT REPORT OF THE INTERGOVERNMENTAL PANEL ON CLIMATE CHANGE (Susan Solomon, Dahe Qin, Martin Manning, Zhenlin Chen, Melinda Marquis, Kristen Averyt, Melinda Tignor, & Henry Miller eds., 2007), available at <http://www.ipcc-wg2.org/>; A.J. McMichael, *Global Climate Change and Health: An Old Story Writ Large*, in WORLD HEALTH ORGANIZATION, CLIMATE CHANGE AND HUMAN HEALTH: RISKS AND RESPONSES (A.J. McMichael, D. H. Campbell-Lendrum, C. F. Corvalan, K. L. Ebi, A. Githelo, J. D. Scheraga, & A. Woodward eds., 2003).

⁵ See, e.g., 350 Science, 350.ORG, <http://350.org/en/about/science> (last visited Jun. 1, 2012); CO₂NOW.ORG, <http://co2now.org/Current-CO2/CO2-Now/annual-co2.html> (last visited Jun. 1, 2012).

⁶ ANTHONY LEISEROWITZ, EDWARD MAIBACH, CONNIE ROSER-RENOUF, NICHOLAS SMITH & JAY HMIELOWSKI, YALE PROJ. ON CLIMATE CHANGE COMM., CLIMATE CHANGE IN THE AMERICAN MIND: PUBLIC SUPPORT FOR CLIMATE & ENERGY POLICIES IN NOVEMBER 2011 3 (2011).

⁷ *Id.* at 6, 11-12, 14.

⁸ See 2011 Wisconsin Protests, WIKIPEDIA, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2011_Wisconsin_protests (last visited Jun. 1, 2012).

⁹ See, e.g., Ted Glick, *Why Isn't There a More Massive, Activist Climate Movement?*, GRIST (Dec. 30, 2011, 12:12 AM), <http://grist.org/article/2011-12-29-why-isnt-there-a-more-massive-activist-climate-movement/> (arguing that “there is no way we will ever turn this crisis around unless much larger numbers of people take visible action in support of a clean energy revolution”); Gary Bryner, *Failure and Opportunity: Environmental Groups in U.S. Climate Change Policy*, 17 ENVTL. POL. 319, 320 (2008) (noting the limitations of partisan “interest group politics” in achieving environmental reforms and the need for a larger bipartisan movement).

¹⁰ LEISEROWITZ ET AL., *supra* note 7, at 2.

early twentieth century with the advent of the labor movements, the collective behavior school hypothesized that when individual grievances reach a critical level, the victims of economic or social injustice will rise up to challenge the status quo. Movement actors, who in this case are not traditionally powerful, will risk even their own lives to change the situation. Of course urgency alone does not produce effective social movements, and so in the 1970s a new analysis emerged: Resource Mobilization (RM) theory.¹¹ RM theory relied on the assumptions that people are rational actors and that even without critical stress points, if people bring the essential resources (such as time, money and influence) to the table, they can win on the policy front by strategically engaging in shifting power and opportunity. And lastly, a new focus on individual identity and the cultural roots of movements emerged in the mid-80s, deepening the conversation by hypothesizing that an emergent cultural identity that arises from the community indeed powers social movements at a root level.¹²

What has rendered the climate movement unable to move public policy in the United States? Are we missing the urgency, the strategic application of resources, or the collective identity? I believe we are missing pieces of all three, but in the article below I will focus on individual barriers to building a collective identity. How can we re-engage people at the root level to build a climate movement that will send people confidently to their elected officials to demand change? While I was trained in the study of collective behavior and social movements, I find that the field of psychology has a lot to offer the climate activist trying to build a lasting and effective movement. As the leader of an organization tasked with catalyzing a climate movement, I am challenged to understand the individual and group barriers to participating in collective action. Drawing heavily from a must-read report by the American Psychological Association released in 2009,¹³ I would like to sketch out a path to building a movement that will more effectively harness the public participation we are lacking.

II. UNDERSTANDING BARRIERS TO ACTION

1. *Ignorance, uncertainty, and failure to understand the full nature of the risk of climate change are barriers to action.*¹⁴

Urgency defines a force or impulse that impels or constrains one from taking action.¹⁵ You've heard it before: "Climate change is not the weather." Indeed, for more than a decade we have been experiencing the impacts of climate-related severe weather events, but scientists have been unable to definitively link any single event to anthropogenic green house gases. Climate change is unique in that it is more uncertain,

¹¹ See David Snow, Sarah Anne Soule, & Hanspeter Kriesi, *THE BLACKWELL COMPANION TO SOCIAL MOVEMENTS* 51-52 (2004); J. Craig Jenkins, *Resource Mobilization Theory and the Study of Social Movements*, 9 ANN. REV. SOC. 527, *passim* (1983).

¹² Snow et. al., *supra*. note 11, at 92.

¹³ AM. PSYCH. ASSOC. TASK FORCE ON THE INTERFACE BETWEEN PSYCH. & GLOBAL CLIMATE CHANGE, *PSYCHOLOGY AND GLOBAL CLIMATE CHANGE: ADDRESSING A MULTI-FACETED PHENOMENON AND SET OF CHALLENGES* (2009), available at <http://www.apa.org/releases/climate-change.pdf>.

¹⁴ See *id.* at 68.

¹⁵ *Urgency Definition*, MERRIAM-WEBSTER DICTIONARY, <http://www.merriam-webster.com> (last visited Jun. 1, 2012).

more global, and more long-term than most issues humanity faces.¹⁶ Indeed, those who are suffering the most from climate change often do not have the power to shift the politics of global warming pollution. Those who are polluting the most are not receiving feedback at a personal level.

Because climate change cannot be understood through personal experience alone, the projected risk of “business as usual” must be interpreted through the scientist and reported on by the media. Naomi Oreskes,¹⁷ James Hansen, Joe Romm,¹⁸ and many others have presented detailed analyses of how powerful interests have worked to keep the U.S. public ignorant and uncertain about the climate crisis. This has clearly contributed to public confusion and misinformation. But to be clear, while 68% of Americans believe that global warming is happening,¹⁹ and 50% of Americans are “worried” about it²⁰, many people still choose not to take action. Psychologists have described this phenomenon in detail. While humans have the ability to use the rational part of their brains to reach conclusions about the risk of climate change, we often rely more on the emotional or affective part of our brain that leads us to have a “gut feeling” about something.²¹ Unfortunately lack of personally relevant feedback may make it challenging for the affective brain to send an early warning signal regarding climate change.²²

Research has shown that when we are not clear about an issue, we tend to push it out of our minds. To combat this, the climate movement must reclaim the narrative. Instead of relying on mainstream media to tell the story, we need to “connect the dots” by helping to illuminate feedback loops and lessen public uncertainty about climate change. By telling a clear and compelling story, we can link the science to the more affective part of people’s brains and help to build a clear identity for movement actors. In the Minnesota climate movement (MN350.org) we are doing this by creating space for activists to share their experiences and linking the science of climate change to things that people already care about. Communicating about local impacts such as the precipitous decline in maple syrup²³ or the impact of tornadoes on residents of north Minneapolis, as well as connecting with vulnerable communities across the globe—for example, by hosting a meeting and rickshaw rally with members of the Red Crescent who are working

¹⁶ Gernot Wagner & Richard Zeckhauser, *Climate Policy: Hard Problem, Soft Thinking*, 110 CLIMATIC CHANGE 507, *passim* (2012).

¹⁷ See generally NAOMI ORESKES & ERIK CONWAY, MERCHANTS OF DOUBT : HOW A HANDFUL OF SCIENTISTS OBSCURED THE TRUTH ON ISSUES FROM TOBACCO SMOKE TO GLOBAL WARMING (2009).

¹⁸ Joe Romm is the author of the blog *Climate Progress*. See *Climate Progress*, THINKPROGRESS, <http://thinkprogress.org/romm/issue/>.

¹⁹ A. LEISEROWITZ, MAIBACH, E AND ROSER-RENOUF, C. *Global Warming’s Six Americas*. YALE PROJECT OF CLIMATE COMMUNICATION 2 (2010).

²⁰ LEISEROWITZ ET AL., *supra*. note 19, at 4.

²¹ CHRISTIE MANNING, MINNESOTA POLLUTION CONTROL AGENCY, PSYCHOL. OF SUSTAINABLE BEHAV. 5 (2009), available at <http://www.pca.state.mn.us/index.php/topics/preventing-waste-and-pollution/sustainability/sustainable-communities/psychology-of-sustainable-behavior-report.html>

²² George Loewenstein, Elke Weber, Christopher Hsee, & Ned Welch, *Risk As Feelings*, 127 PSYCHOL. BULLETIN 267, 281 (2001); Elke Weber, *Evidence-Based and Description-Based Perceptions of Long-Term Risk: Why Global Warming Does Not Scare Us (Yet)*, 77 CLIMATIC CHANGE 103, 104 (2006).

²³ Curtis Gilbert, *Maple Syrup Producers Experience Worst Year In Memory*, MINN. PUB. RADIO NEWS (Mar. 30, 2012), <http://minnesota.publicradio.org/display/web/2012/03/30/early-spring-vignette-maple-syrup/> (article tweeted by MN350).

on climate preparedness and adaptation in Bangladesh.

2. *Social norms are a barrier to action. In today's world it is socially normal to be passive about the threat of climate change, but this isn't the whole story.*²⁴

An individual's response to the urgent message of climate change can also be moderated by social norms.²⁵ It is no fun to be a doomsayer. In our society it can be socially normal to be apathetic about climate change.²⁶ In a 2009 article in *Grist* Adam Sacks addresses the “[a]bsent heart of the great climate affair,” asking the question: how is it possible that people feel dispassion in such a critical time?²⁷ The specter of climate change is so great—and the world around us is so unmotivated—that in order not to be overwhelmed by the fear, we avoid thinking about it and revert to what is socially normal: a high carbon, highly individualistic approach to life. Psychoanalysts have argued for decades that anxiety can lead us unconsciously to deny what is threatening us, effectively repressing painful emotions.²⁸

3. *Lastly, another significant barrier to individuals joining in collective action on climate change is a sense of powerlessness.*²⁹

Because climate change is a global threat that operates at large spatial and temporal scales, one of the leading barriers to both individual behavior and the decision to join in collective action on climate change is a sense that nothing an individual or small group can do will make a difference. Those with an “internal” locus of control believe they have control over a situation. Those with an “external” locus of control tend to believe some external force ultimately has power.³⁰

Often when confronted with the issue of climate change, organizations have focused on the small and seemingly insignificant changes individuals can do in their own lives to lower their carbon footprint. Are these actions commensurate with the challenge of curbing this global problem? In her piece *Loss and Climate Change* Rosemary Randall warns us that the dissonance between the two competing narratives—“catastrophic climate change can only be averted through major structural changes to society” vs. “there are fun and easy solutions”—can deepen the sense of anxiety and confusion.³¹ As

²⁴ See AM. PSYCH. ASSOC., *supra* note 13, at 47, 67-68.

²⁵ Susanne Moser, *More Bad News: The Risk of Neglecting Emotional Responses to Climate Change Information*, in *CREATING A CLIMATE FOR CHANGE: COMMUNICATING CLIMATE CHANGE AND FACILITATING SOCIAL CHANGE* 64, 73 (Susanne Moser & Lisa Dilling, eds., 2007); Anthony Leiserowitz, Robert Kates, & Thomas Parris, *Do Global Attitudes and Behaviors Support Sustainable Development?*, 47 ENV'T. 22, 34-35 (2005).

²⁶ Moser, *supra* note 25, at 68.

²⁷ Adam Sacks, *Dispassion While the World Ends: The Absent Heart of the Great Climate Affair*, GRIST (Oct. 15, 2009, 4:45 AM), <http://grist.org/climate-energy/2009-10-14-the-absent-heart-of-the-great-climate-affair/>.

²⁸ Renée Lertzman, *The Myth of Apathy*, ECOLOGIST BLOG (Jun 19, 2008), http://www.theecologist.org/blogs_and_comments/commentators/other_comments/269433/the_myth_of_apathy.html.

²⁹ See Moser, *supra* note 25, at 68-69.

³⁰ Anja Kollmuss & Julian Agyeman, *Mind The Gap: Why Do People Act Environmentally and What Are The Barriers to Pro-Environmental Behavior*, 8 ENVTL. EDUC. RES. 239, 247, 255-56 (2002).

³¹ Rosemary Randall, *Loss and Climate Change: The Cost of Parallel Narratives*, 1 ECOPSYCHOLOGY 118, *passim* (2009), available at <http://online.liebertpub.com/doi/abs/10.1089/eco.2009.0034>.

a number of psychologists have reported, when people believe that they have no control, they tend to lack motivation to take action.³² In some cases people continue to talk about the problem but in a disassociated way. An example of this is the college professor who studies the impact of climate change, and yet makes no modification in his own behavior because he believes that the problem will only be solved at the level of global policy. Anxiety is an appropriate response to the climate crisis. It can help to motivate people to take action on an individual and collective basis. However, unmanaged anxiety can lead to powerlessness and or denial³³.

III. CONCLUSIONS

In order to combat these barriers of uncertainty, fear, and powerlessness, the climate movement must actively work to address this dissonance between the narrative of catastrophic loss and contrasting apathy. We need to make participation in the climate movement not only “normal,” but also empowering for individuals who feel alone in their grief and anxiety. As a movement we must create the community and the space where we can cut to the heart of the issue and talk honestly about loss, about anxiety, about personal power, and about the solutions.

To begin with, we can work with psychologists to develop techniques to help individuals take an honest look at the risk associated with climate change and give them the tools to avoid moving straight from ignorance to hopelessness. In the U.S., where a hyper-individualistic culture has obscured the power of the group, we must build a community space where people can work together and feel secure in knowing that they are a part of a whole that is bigger than the sum of its parts. As Kate Faye, coordinator of MN350 expressed, “In this work it is just as important to learn to take care of each other as it is to work on policy solutions. If we care only about the problem, we lose the people, and we ultimately lose. We can’t battle the sense of powerlessness if we don’t take care of each other.”³⁴

We can also bring “rights-based” approach to ethics back to the table. In the U.S. we tend to gauge the value of an action by asking ourselves whether the action will ultimately be successful in furthering what we feel is good. We then dismiss the action if we don’t believe it will make a difference. What if instead we used a rights-based approach that focused not on whether an action was ultimately successful, but on whether it was the right thing to do?

I recently traveled to Bangladesh where I met with climate activists and those on the front lines of climate change. Farmers, scientists, and NGO officials talked about taking action to prepare their communities for the present and coming challenges. I was very surprised to hear that on the whole they were not as fearful or despondent as I expected. They were taking care of what they had power to change, but they were also rooted in a worldview that did not over-emphasize their individual power. Bangladesh is a largely secular Muslim country, and so as a parting message people often leave by

³² Robert Gifford, *Psychology's Essential Role in Alleviating the Impacts of Climate Change*, 49 CANADIAN PSYCHOLOGY/PYCHOLOGIE CANADIENNE, 273, 6 (2008).

³³ See AM. PSYCH. ASSOC., *supra* note 13, at 45.

³⁴ Interview with Kate Faye, coordinator of MN350, in St. Paul, Minn. (Mar. 2012).

saying “**Insha'Allah**”³⁵ or “God Willing.” And they mean it. Metaphorically released from the anxiety of being the architects of their own future, they have the presence to move forward without the psychologically crippling burden of anticipating failure. We can learn from them.

So what does this mean for building such a movement on the ground? How can organizations such as 350.org and MN350.org who have identified their mission as catalyzing a global climate movement succeed in mobilizing the political capital necessary to change public policy? The answer lies in engaging in a strategy and mobilizing the resources necessary to bring the power of the people to bear on public policy, but it also lies in creating space for people to talk in small groups about how they are feeling that day. And so at MN350's last meeting we started in small groups. I had the opportunity to share my story: “You know I found a swallow tail on my back deck today...it made me feel a momentary sense of deep despair.”

Building a movement also means focusing on team building so that we can strategically accomplish things together and build a sense of power despite the uncertainty. If we are to be successful, we need to not only educate people, but also be prepared to provide the social tools necessary to overcome the uncertainty, powerlessness, and anxiety, and build a space that will welcome the unexpected. Indeed this is the only way to transformation.

³⁵ See *Insha'Allah*, WIKIPEDIA, <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Insha%27Allah> (last visited Jun. 1, 2012).