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Reflections on the Climate Reality Leadership Corps training in Chicago

October 2, 2013 | Todd Barsanti |



I never considered myself an environmentalist before I undertook a Master's degree in Environmental Studies. To be perfectly honest, I still don't see the stereotypical tree-hugging, granola-eating environmentalist when I look in the mirror. I did the degree in an attempt to diversify my knowledge base and because I was curious about the linkages that might be made with design. But what I have come to understand is that we all need to become more aware of the impacts we are having on this planet if we have any hope of sustaining any sort of a livable existence on spaceship Earth.

The concept of sustainability is what really speaks to me because the environment is but one part of the equation. A sustainable approach is a process of analysis, questioning, and framing that includes economic, social, and environmental perspectives. When I grasped this concept and looked at it through the eyes of a designer, I came to the realization that this broad-based, systems approach is very much in line with the design process. As a design educator, this realization was my life-altering moment and has spurred pedagogical explorations into ways of integrating the former (sustainability) into the latter (design education).

In July, 2013, I was invited to attend a training session in Chicago with former U.S. Vice-President Al Gore. I was selected as part of an application process and the training was free, but it was up to the individual delegates to pay for their own transportation and accommodation at the three-day event. There were more than 1200 delegates in the training with 70 countries represented, including all 50 US states.

I entered into this training event with both eyes wide open. While excited at the prospect of what lay before me, and fully aware that a rare opportunity had presented itself to me, I was a bit skeptical and conscious of not "drinking the kool-aid" on a left-wing propoganda machine. What I have come to realize is that the climate crisis is not a political condition, it is a human condition. For all intents and purposes, it is the only condition that really matters. If we were to allow life on this planet to become truly UNSustainable, then political posturing, personal agendas, any of our imagined self-importance really does not matter any longer.

When I call the climate crisis a human condition, I am talking about the reality that our planet is heating up and that carbon pollution from dirty energy is absolutely to blame. It is our fault. It is not a cyclical event and it is certainly not "God's will". 97 percent of top climate scientists and every major National Academy of Science agree that man-made pollution is warming our climate. And a hotter planet means dirty weather, from extreme rainstorms to prolonged droughts.

What impressed me most about the training is that from word-one, the emphasis was on human connections. I have always believed that if we are going to make any sort of headway in convincing climate deniers, we need to personalize the perspective and make it something everyone can relate to. There is a desensitization that happens when you bombard people with too many facts and figures, but frame the conversation in a way that people can relate, in a way that places them in the narrative, and you can affect people, and affect behavior. Day 1 of the training was all about story-telling. The presenters talked about traditional forms of story-telling and used modern-day examples of Star Wars and The Matrix to identify the arc that happens in the traditional hero story. They encouraged us to really spend some time developing our own story and to

place it into the Climate Reality presentation so that we are not simply inundating our audience with scientific facts and heart-wrenching images of humans around the world dealing with extreme weather.

Day two was all Al Gore. He took the stage at 8:20am and spoke eloquently and passionately right through dinner, but nobody seemed to notice. He started out by taking two hours or so to go through an up-to-date version of the presentation most of us were introduced to in An Inconvenient Truth. We took a break and came back to have him walk us through the presentation slide by slide, expanding on the details and explaining the science. He peppered the rest of the day with personal stories and his passion for the topic was palpable. I never once got the sense that this was some sort of prophet preaching to his followers. This was an educated perspective on the realities we all face on a global scale and after each section, there was time given to reflection and questions were answered thoroughly. Mr. Gore was accompanied on stage by Michael McCracken and Dr. Henry Pollack, two of the world's leading climate scientists who answered and clarified every part of the presentation that required it. I was also impressed that the delegates at the training have been encouraged to edit and change the presentation to suit their needs. This presentation is not a canned set of facts that must be administered to audiences uncompromisingly. It is more of a roadmap, that we are welcome to customize for different audiences. We were encouraged to add our own content that would help us to tell our own story and we were told that we could remove any parts of the presentation that we are either not comfortable with presenting, or do not suit our needs.

This is not propaganda or indoctrination. It is an attempt by concerned global citizens to spread the truth about the climate reality we find ourselves in and it is a recognition that the best way to go about spreading the message is through other dedicated citizens who are willing to freely give of their time and energy for the greater good.

Day three was about more story-telling, but this time put into practice. We heard from Maggie L. Fox, the CEO of the Climate Reality Project and she told about being fortunate enough to meet the Dalai Lama when she was young. She carries with her, to this day, a piece of red string that he gave her and it stands as a reminder to her to always laugh and find humor in any and all that this world can throw at you. We also heard from Kim Wasserman, a Chicago community activist who helped shut down a coal fired power plant next to her low income community, and who received the 2013 Goldman Environmental Prize. She exemplifies the famous Margaret Mead quote, "Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world; indeed, it's the only thing that ever has." Day three also gave us several break-out sessions where we could get more information on topics that interested us personally, from business applications, to the perspectives of moms, from health costs to spiritual faith.

I still don't consider myself an environmentalist, but not because I think it is a bad word. I just think that activist has more positive connotations and it speaks to the active role I plan to take in spreading the reality of our climate crisis.

We are told that even if we were to stop burning fossil fuels immediately and that if tomorrow, all of our energy came from renewable sources, it would still take decades for the Earth's atmosphere to correct itself. My hope is that by the time my young children reach adulthood and become parents themselves, that they will not need to be driven to the same activism I plan on dedicating the rest of my life towards

An award-winning graphic designer with 20 years of industry experience, Todd Barsanti is Professor of 2D Design in the Art Fundamentals program at Sheridan College. Todd has a Master's degree in Environmental Studies and a diploma in Environmental & Sustainability Education. His current pedagogical focus is on integrating sustainability issues into design education. Recently selected to be trained by former U.S. Vice-President Al Gore as part of the Climate Reality Corps, Todd is dedicated to spreading the reality of our climate crisis through public speaking engagements. Todd maintains a blog about his experiences in the design classroom at www.design-sustainability.com.