

# How Then Do We Choose to Live? Facing the Climate Crisis and Seeking “the Meta Response”

Jan Inglis

**Abstract:** The author observes that a sense of hopelessness appears to be forming in our culture in response to recent descriptions of the impact of climate crisis. This reaction is compared to the way people respond to diagnoses of life threatening illness. Stages of reactions to difficult news are known to accompany such responses. The author shares her own sorting of responses as an example of stage transitions in the process of grappling with the difficult news of climate crisis. Transitions from one stage to the next are developmental. The importance of bringing resources from the field of adult development into the field of public deliberations to address the climate crisis is emphasized. A meta approach, “the Gaia approach,” is proposed, as are many questions for individual and public reflection.

**Keywords:** adult development, climate crisis, deliberation, developmental, Gaia approach, meta approach, stage transition processes, complexity

## Introduction

This article shares observations about and reflections on the progression of peoples’ responses to climate change. Here, climate change includes the associated challenges of ecological overshoot, overpopulation, peak oil, and political economic instability. Although originally I had not planned to write a series, this article does appear to be a sequel to my essay in the December 2007 issue of *Integral Review*, *Reactivity to Climate Change* (Inglis, 2007). In that essay, I observed how it seemed that a tipping point had been reached and a shift was occurring. The shift was from the disbelief that there could be a climate change crisis, to a widely-accepted belief that there would be such a crisis, and thus a belief that corrective responses were needed. Now, scarcely five months later, I am writing about my observations that many people are feeling it is too late to turn the tide of devastation. This indicates a belief that the crisis is growing exponentially and cannot be averted. What a rapid leap — from acknowledgement of the existence of a planetary crisis to resignation that it is impossible to do anything to make a difference. Some have noticed there are different reactions in various regions of the world. Some have likened this range of differences and acknowledgments of the situation to being on the Titanic, recognizing or experiencing the crisis at different times, depending on the class of berth inhabited on the ship (Baker, 2008).

## Voices of Resignation

One woman I spoke with the other day said that the human race should die off, because it had messed up the planet so terribly. I asked how that was for her, to think that way in view of the fact that she was a new, proud grandmother. She said firmly, “I just don’t think of it.” A friend, a



father of two who has been an active environmentalist working to protect water quality and wildlife habitat, told me the other day that he feels that his last 30 years have been a waste. He said he is getting older and wants to focus now on taking care of himself, travelling and enjoying the things he can while he still has the health to do so. Renowned scientist, author and futurist, James Lovelock, is saying nothing can be done to avert the catastrophe. Forty years ago he proposed the Gaia Hypothesis, indicating that all living and non-living aspects of the earth form a complex, interacting system. This system can be thought of as a single organism. Now, based on his and others' research, he is saying that as soon as 2040, much of the Earth's current population of 6.6 billion people will be culled. By the end of the century, he forecasts, only about 500 million will be left hanging on to life by living in the cooler latitudes of the planet.<sup>1</sup>

At the institutional level, the United Nations' Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, considered by some to be conservative in its estimates, is saying that we have only three to five years to reduce greenhouse gas emissions, after which it will be too late to avert climate change. It forecasts the devastating heating up of both land and oceans by 2°C, resulting in the extinction of at least 30% of plant and animal species mainly due to flood, drought, storms and disease. Behind the "too late" assumptions are the analyses that the amount of carbon already emitted into the atmosphere will remain for several generations. It forms a heat-trapping, life-threatening greenhouse roof over the earth. It is predicted that further emissions will result in temperatures rising by 6°C. Just as in our bodies, even a slight rise in temperature in the atmosphere disturbs the delicate balance required to maintain interdependent life systems. Such a rise would result in a 70% species loss by 2100.<sup>2</sup>

Even when confronted with such scientifically-based information, we see little organized response that seems to have any potential to reduce the use of fossil fuels. The topic of climate crisis, peak oil, food and water shortages, or other associated challenges are barely mentioned in the campaigns of US presidential nomination-hopefuls. People do not seem to be clamouring loudly for attention to climate change in those campaigns, either. Many people are versed enough on this issue that they do not want to be handed simple or optimistic platitudes. However, in the absence of leadership offering grounded-in-reality comprehensive approaches, it is hardly a wonder that there is a sense of hopelessness developing. This hopelessness seems to be named by those who simultaneously continue to participate in the collective "business as usual" mode. On one hand, dire hopelessness, on the other, no change in behavior to alleviate the problems driving the hopelessness. A crazy-making mixture! And for those who do express hope, saying that something will surely emerge, there is little clarity on what that emergence might look like or the detailed steps needed to bring it into effect.

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<sup>1</sup> Articles about Lovelock's predictions can be found in the Daily Mail of London by Sarah Sands (March, 2008) Accessed April 4, 2008.

[http://www.dailymail.co.uk/pages/live/articles/news/news.html?in\\_article\\_id=541748&in\\_page\\_id=1770](http://www.dailymail.co.uk/pages/live/articles/news/news.html?in_article_id=541748&in_page_id=1770) and in the Rolling Stone (November, 2007) by Jeff Goodell. Accessed April 4, 2008.

[http://www.rollingstone.com/politics/story/16956300/the\\_prophet\\_of\\_climate\\_change\\_james\\_lovelock](http://www.rollingstone.com/politics/story/16956300/the_prophet_of_climate_change_james_lovelock)

<sup>2</sup> United Nations Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, Fourth assessment report, Climate change (November, 2007). Synthesis report: Summary for policymakers. Accessed April 4, 2008. [http://www.ipcc.ch/pdf/assessment-report/ar4/syr/ar4\\_syr\\_spm.pdf](http://www.ipcc.ch/pdf/assessment-report/ar4/syr/ar4_syr_spm.pdf). Arthur Max, (November 17, 2007), *UN Panel Gives Dire Warming Forecast*, Associated Press. Accessed April 4, 2008.

[http://news.nationalgeographic.com/news/2007/11/071119-AP-climate-change\\_2.html](http://news.nationalgeographic.com/news/2007/11/071119-AP-climate-change_2.html)

## Processes and Results of Coping with Difficult News

This prognosis is stark. It is incomprehensible! It is also so vivid and apocalyptic that it can focus our attention and frame our beliefs. I am noticing even as I write, how this dark cloud of absolutist doom can be compelling, overtaking my sense of other life options. I may have taken you, the reader, into this cloud with me. It can spread, become pervasive and self-generating. In this dark light, it could make all of our efforts in all kinds of fields of endeavour seem irrelevant and futile. How then do we choose to live? How do we define motivations and priorities in the context of possible mass extinction?

It is hard to talk about the possibility of this catastrophe, just as it is hard to talk about the prognosis of terminal illness. It is hard to write about it. It may be hard to read it. However, not opening this topic for direct attention, and in a publicly shared manner, would cut off the opportunity to engage and catalyze new perspectives and actions. Several years ago it was common practice for physicians to not tell patients they had been diagnosed with a terminal illness. This information was withheld out of fear of upsetting patients or their families. This was a paternalistic approach to physician-patient communication. More recently, this physician-patient relationship has changed from one of paternalism to one of respecting and supporting the patients' needs and rights to know about their health status (O'Rourke, 2000). In the Western world, the topic of death now has less taboo associated with it. This contrasts to years ago, when people died in relative isolation. As they went through the dying process, their loved ones mostly carried on in a "business as usual" mode. This was not for lack of caring, but for lack of knowing how to navigate such vulnerable and unknown territory. Often the inability to share this poignant journey became as painful as the physical dying itself. A cultural change is evident as hospices and conscious dying processes are becoming more widely available and publicized.

It is one thing to contemplate one's mortality from the abstract distance of years in the future. It is a different thing to have it take on a closer, more concrete reality within a possible two to three year time frame. Accepting death sits in tension with wanting life. There are almost as many ways of responding to this tension, as there are different people. Some wish to avoid the tension and do not transition beyond the overwhelmed feeling of shock. Yet, there are also stories of other people, who in the process of dealing with this tension, have shifted from the daily habits of a life they used to take for granted, to an awakening of aspects and experiences of themselves and the world that they had not observed before. Some have been thankful to have this wake up call; it allowed them to appreciate and therefore live the last part of their life with a fuller consciousness, redefining what a good life is. For some, this shift in perception has extended their life, and for others, it has even changed the diagnosis of their health status and its prognosis.

Can the intense work of noticing, sorting, prioritizing, and reconciling choices actually transform an individual's biological, neurological, cognitive, and emotional patterns and thus allow a more integrated pattern to emerge? Many studies, including those on brain plasticity (Doidge, 2007), would suggest it can. This process, then, of confronting difficult news about personal survival can have generative impacts resulting in life-changing qualities and even transformative outcomes. What might we glean from this?

## Towards Making Connections and Synthesizing Directions

The transition process of moving from hopelessness or denial to changes in attitudes, behaviors, and assumptions has been observed in numerous studies of “the grieving process” and by many who have companioned dying persons and their loved ones. Widely recognized, this is a nearly universal, if not truly universal, human process of adapting to new circumstances and arriving at new insights. I suggest this model of stage transition (see Commons & Richards, 2002), which describes the process individuals use to sort responses and make decisions, offers us a way to understand the universal, developmental stage transition and cultural decision-making.<sup>3</sup> To step back and to view this process as a natural developmental transition process offers a perspective from which to make sense of the divergent often confusing mix of thoughts and feelings that arise on the road to resolving angst.

It seems important to bear in mind that the prognosis of climate crisis is based on current perceptions and projected outcomes. We arrive at these based on our assumptions of what would continue to occur in a linear logical manner as a result of known conditions, actions or inactions to date. These assumptions may not be taking into account the impact that clear consideration *of* these projected outcomes might have *on* the outcomes themselves. This self-reflective inquiry creates feedback loops, and learning. These in turn can potentially generate new, yet unseen options and adjustments. These adjustments could alter the course of the prognosis.

Observing myself in this process of viewing the climate crisis offers a place from which to inquire and reflect. When I can do this, I am not so embedded in this prognosis as the only truth. This reflective analysis allows me to move beyond the either/or dilemma, i.e., either rejecting the climate change prognosis or just accepting the hopelessness of it. I am not able to reject it because I can see the legitimacy of this information and am not willing to put my head in the sands. Nor am I able to accept a life with no hope and impotent action, because I am not willing to live without trusting the power that observing, learning and choosing has on producing more satisfactory outcomes. This analysis is fed back into my original response to the stark climate crisis prognosis. Based on this feedback loop I realize I have to adjust and move beyond this unsatisfactory and stuck either/or position, and search for new and broader options.

This searching leads me to recognize that I although I see and accept the situation, if I labour under an assumption that I can create change of this magnitude alone, it is counter productive. I feel the necessity to engage with others who are willing to grapple with this challenge. I also recognize that this is not just your run of the mill, everyday quality of grappling. It means high stake investments of commitment and focus. It requires us to pay attention to both the personal (be self-reflective of one’s own experience), the interpersonal (work with what happens between us) and the global (notice patterns of systems within systems). It also requires us to be specific about what we have to grapple with and not get lost in abstract concepts. Then efforts can result in co-designed meta approaches (Ross, 2008) to undertake potent, rather than impotent, action. Through my sorting process, of generating and weighing out options, I eventually arrive at an

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<sup>3</sup> Stage transition outlines the decision making process as it moves from the original thesis (yes, this is true), to antithesis (no, it’s not), relativism (yes or no), smash (many additional options to weigh) and finally synthesis or resolution (ahhh, this is it).

acknowledgment that for any of us to assume we can resolve this issue without the generativity of diverse minds working together could breed a futility of its own.

The hopelessness or avoidance I have been noting in response to the climate crisis may be signs of being stuck in stage transition, unable to create and weigh out new options. Being stuck when facing a crisis does not gain us evolutionary points. How can the use of adult development theories and research on stage transitions help us move out of this stage transition stuckness? Because the crisis is a complex, interconnected planetary issue, no single individual, group, corporate conglomerate, government, or international agency will be able to solve it. It is necessary to build structures for public interactions that match the complexity of the situation and support the quality of outcomes we want to achieve (Inglis, 2007). These interactive processes need to support diverse minds working together to co-design and weigh out new meta options. If these processes are designed from an understanding of the developmental diversity of adults, they are much more likely to support the quality of shared meaning making and deliberative decision making required to create comprehensive responses. In this way, I propose that knowledge gleaned from theories of adult development and adult learning have much to offer to the work on climate crisis. My concern is that there seem to be few who employ such theories in specific, on the ground, initiatives in this climate crisis domain. In general, the related fields of public policy, dialogue and deliberative democracy, and the related fields of adult development and learning appear to be standing as surprisingly separate silos. I advocate for dismantling these and many other such silos that limit our ability to see and work with the whole. I also advocate for and even predict that a new integral field of public issue analysis is ready to emerge. Through being comprehensively structured, it can potentially move us beyond those limits and support more effective approaches to our complex challenges.

A plethora of books, movies, and programs focusing on climate change is suddenly available to us, but few of them are informed by empirical research into adult development. Many attempts to explain why we have created this desperate crisis blame our stupidity as a species, for example, for having moved from being hunter/gatherers to being agricultural users/abusers of the earth. Or they blame us for being mesmerized by illusions about the industrial or technological revolutions.<sup>4</sup> Both anthropological and adult development perspectives view these phases of evolution and societal changes as natural progressions, each building from the necessity to learn from and adapt our behaviors, attitudes, and systems to overcome the unmet demands of a previous phase. Through the process of development, limitations are reached within each stage. Although we can see these in hindsight, we could not have skipped going through these progressive stages at the time. There is little justification, then, for blaming the species for doing what a species does by its nature, or for thinking we can go back to and live the way we did prior to these phases.

Moving beyond the tendency to lay blame enables us to see that the challenges and limitations can only be resolved through deeper grappling with them. The experience of limitations is what motivates the search for what would overcome these limitations, and build the next adaptive stage. As a species, we had only fragmented views of what we were doing in the agricultural and

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<sup>4</sup> See an overview of the recent film *What a Way to Go: Life at the End of Empire* produced by Tim Bennett and Sally Erickson (2007) and book *After Eden: The Evolution of Human Domination* by Kirkpatrick Sale (2006). [http://www.relocalize.net/blog/molly\\_brown](http://www.relocalize.net/blog/molly_brown)

industrial revolutions. At the time, they seemed like great adaptations to the limitations of the previous phase. We had no world wide web then. There were no wide scale, collective-engagement methods to gather and consider information, track feedback loops, and form a shared picture of what destructive patterns we were creating.

But now, in the communication era, with life conditions that support further individual, cultural and technological development, many of our previous communication and information limitations have been overcome. Now, for those living in such conditions, a meta picture is forming about our human and technological evolutions. This understanding is available for us to apply to this situation. If we had known better back then, we would have done better. We do know better now, and we have the option therefore to do better. We can feel the life threatening limitations of the phase we are currently in. We need to move beyond the taboo against discussing these threats, grapple with them in a publicly supported manner and be pushed by them to adapt. As a result, if we are motivated, we can potentially change the trajectory of the crisis.

## Diverse Minds Seeking Meta Approaches

Currently there are almost as many different perspectives on the climate crisis as there are people. These perspectives have tensions and trade offs associated with them that need to be surfaced and publicly deliberated so we can make decisions we are willing to live with. The following recounts some of the most prevalent perspectives I have researched and observed to date from various sources (Inglis, 2008). For some, protecting their own community is the best approach to the impending peril: growing food, conserving water, living simply, and independently gives a sense of power as it offers something concrete to do.<sup>5</sup> One consequence that would need to be considered in this approach is how to deal with the influx of environmental migrants, which could threaten the desired sustainability, and possibly trigger a militant form of protectionism. Through a different lens, some look to government to provide order and to develop and enforce corrective policies and structures. A consequence of taking this approach could be the slowness of government to respond and the distrust in leaders' ability to grasp the severity of the issue. From yet another perspective, some believe that many kinds of innovations and new technologies will offer creative strategies to solve the dilemma.<sup>6</sup> A consequence, which would need to be considered with this approach, is the unintended and often harmful results of short sighted and often short-term disconnected technological fixes. These trigger reactive suspicion of modernity in general, so incur resistance. Finally, looking through another perspective, some feel that deepening a sense of connections to each other and all living things will inspire less destructive ways of inhabiting the planet. A consequence of this approach is that it lacks details of how to coordinate and implement this inspiration into concrete steps that

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<sup>5</sup> Much of this approach is happening under the name of "relocalization" and information can be found at <http://www.relocalize.net/about/relocalization> (Accessed April 2, 2008). Justification for guerilla type action are described at <http://www.geocities.com/~dmdelaney/what-to-do-in-a-failing-civilization.html> (Accessed April 2, 2008).

<sup>6</sup> Ray Kurzweil, inventor, author and futurist states with optimism that he is confident that the acceleration and expanding capacity of information and nano-technology will solve, within twenty years, the problems that now preoccupy us. <http://www.kurzweilai.net/meme/frame.html?main=/articles/art0692.html> (Accessed April 2, 2008).

effectively impact the issue. A further consequence is that the sensitivity and large vision this perspective promotes often turns off those whom it hopes to include and therefore also incurs resistance.

These are all very different and very legitimate perspectives, each accompanied by implications. Movement forward is often blocked due to the competition between the ideologies of these approaches, each blaming the other for causing the problem. This paralysis is another example of the stuckness in stage transitions we need to be aware of and respond to. As mentioned earlier, being stuck when facing a crisis does not gain us evolutionary points and it is definitely a limitation we need to surmount in our current climate crisis. A meta approach designed from an adult development perspective could include these diverse voices and coordinate their multiple action responses to enable moving forward in a comprehensive effective manner (Ross, 2008).

Looping back to Lovelock's Gaia Hypothesis, is there a way we can integrate our diverse perspectives to function like Gaia: to knowingly *be* a complex interacting system of biological, geographical, cognitive, spiritual, scientific, political, emotional, and technical subsystems? What would a Gaia approach look like? If we put it in place now, could it allow many to not only survive, but evolve and thrive through and after the climate crisis?

It would mean acting out of a coherent synthesized meta response, not out of a stuck or chaotic transition stage described above. It could mean coordinating local sustainability initiatives with effective policy and structures (mentioned earlier), while creating, testing and distributing innovative technologies, with a sensitivity to our impact on others, locally and globally, human and non human. Are we capable of moving beyond our personal shock, disbelief, and hopelessness, beyond concern for the well being of just our descendants and communities, beyond our various ideological stances, beyond the dislike of sorting through tensions and attending to details, to thinking and acting like interdependent species? Are we motivated to overcome the limitations of this stage we are in right now? I believe in this motivation lie many possibilities to take us beyond the option of hopelessness to a response Gaia can live with.

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