THERE'S MORE TO IT THAN CLEAN ENERGY or new technology. To get to a climate-friendly world, we have to overcome our own denial, press for government action, and make the changes now, wherever we live and work. The good news is that joining together to build real happiness promises us all a better life, while also saving the planet. No small thing.

"It's a long way off."

"I've got enough problems."

"Who are you to tell me what to do?"

"I do lots of things for the environment."

"It's not me—it's those other people."

WHY WE FIND IT SO HARD TO ACT AGAINST CLIMATE CHANGE

George Marshall

It should be easy to deal with climate change. There is a strong scientific consensus supported by very sound data; consensus across much of the religious and political spectrum and among businesses including the largest corporations in the world. The vast majority of people claim to be concerned. The targets are challenging, but they are achievable with existing technologies, and there would be plentiful profits and employment available for those who took up the challenge.

So why has so little happened? Why do people who claim to be very concerned about climate change continue their high-carbon lifestyles? And why, as the warnings become ever louder, do increasing numbers of people reject the arguments of scientists and the evidence of their own eyes?

These, I believe, will be the key questions for future historians of the unfurling climate disaster, just as historians of the Holocaust now ask: "How could so many good and moral people know what was happening and yet do so little?"

This comparison with mass human rights abuses is a surprisingly useful place to find some answers to these questions. In *States of Denial: Knowing About Atrocities and Suffering*, Stanley Cohen studies how people living under repressive regimes resolve the conflict they feel between the moral imperative to intervene and the need to protect themselves and their families. He found that people deliberately maintain a level of ignorance so that they can claim they know less than they do. They exaggerate their own powerlessness and wait indefinitely for someone else to act first—a phenomenon that psychologists call the passive bystander effect. Both strategies lie below the surface of most of the commonly held attitudes to climate change.

But most interesting is Cohen's observation that societies also negotiate collective strategies to avoid action. He writes: "Without being told what to think about (or what not to think about) societies arrive at unwritten agreements about what can be publicly remembered and acknowledged."

Dr. Kari Marie Norgaard of the University of California reaches a very similar conclusion, and argues that "denial of global warming is socially

constructed." She observes that most people are deeply conflicted about climate change and manage their anxiety and guilt by excluding it from the cultural norms defining what they should pay attention to and think about—what she calls their "norms of attention."

According to Norgaard, most people have tacitly agreed that it is socially inappropriate to pay attention to climate change. It does not come up in

politicians urge us to act. The impacts directly threaten our personal and local livelihoods. And, above all, it is our consumption and affluence that is causing it.

However, people have decided that they can keep climate change outside their "norms of attention" through a selective framing that creates the maximum distance. In opinion poll research the majority of people will

But its causes (mainly pollution from burning fossil fuels) led it to be bundled with the global "environmental" issues during the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development in 1992. From that point on it has been dealt with by environment ministers and environment departments, and talked about in the media by environmental reporters.

The issue was then championed

WHAT WE DO

DISTANCING

"It's a long way off."

"The scientists still haven't made up their minds."

"It's not illegal yet."

"This isn't the really important issue."

"I already do lots of things for the environment."

FALSE POSITIVITY

"Call in the eggheads. They'll fire mirrors into space or something."

"The markets will sort it out."

"Haven't they solved it already?"

"Warming—sounds lovely. Bring it on."

REACTIVE DENIAL AND PROJECTION

"Aaaargh, I've got enough problems!"

"Don't take away my toys."

"Who are you to tell me what to do, you lentil-crunching weirdo?"

"It's not me. It's those other people … (rich/poor/the Chinese)"

WHY WE DO IT

Our response is strongest to threats that are:	Climate Change is:
Visible	Invisible
With historical precedent	Unprecedented
Immediate	Drawn out
With simple causality	A result of complex causes
Caused by another "tribe"	Caused by all of us
Direct personal impacts	Unpredictable and has indirect personal impacts

Source: George Marshall, "The Psychology of Denial"

WHAT TO DO ABOUT IT

We recognize that information alone cannot produce change.

We openly recognize the tendency to denial.

We encourage emotional responses and "whistleblowers."

We develop a culture of engagement that is visible, immediate, and urgent.

As individuals, we act with integrity and clarity.

conversations, or as an issue in voting, consumption, or career choices. We are like a committee that has decided to avoid a thorny problem by conspiring to make sure that it never makes it onto the agenda of any meeting.

There are many different ways that the proximity of climate change could force itself onto our agendas. We already feel the impacts in our immediate environment. Scientists and

define it as far away ("it's a global problem, not a local problem") or far in the future ("it's a huge problem for future generations"). They embrace the tiny cluster of skeptics as evidence that "it's only a theory," and that "there is still a debate." And they strategically shift the causes as far away as possible: "I'm not the problem—it's the Chinese/rich people/corporations." Here in Europe we routinely blame the Americans.

In all of these examples, people have selected, isolated, and then exaggerated the aspects of climate change that best enable their detachment. And, ironically, focus-group research suggests that people are able to create the most distance when climate change is categorized as an "environmental" problem.

If we take a step back we can see that the impacts of climate change are so wide-ranging that it could equally well be defined as a major economic, military, agricultural, or social rights issue.

by environmental campaigners who stamped it indelibly with the images of global wildlife and language of self abnegation that spoke to their own concerns. The current messaging of climate change—the polar bears, burning forests, calls to "live simply so others may simply live" and ''go green to save the planet"—has been filtered through a minority ideology and worldview.

Thus, within a few years, the issue had been burdened with a set of associations and metaphors that allowed the general public to exclude it from their primary concerns ("I'm not an environmentalist"), as could senior politicians ("environment is important but jobs and defense are my priority").

Progressive civil society organizations also avoided the issue because of its environmental connotations. Two years ago I challenged a senior campaigner with Amnesty International, the world's largest human rights

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» organization, to explain why Amnesty did not mention climate change anywhere on its website. He agreed that it is an important issue but felt that Amnesty "doesn't really do environmental issues." In other words it was outside their "norms of attention."

Far more aggressive responses that stigmatize environmentalists create further distance. In a 2007 interview, Michael O'Leary, CEO of Ryan Air, the world's largest budget airline, said:

"The environmentalists are like the peace nutters in the 1970s. You can't change the world by putting on a pair of dungarees or sandals. I listen to all this drivel about turning down the central heating, going back to candles, returning to the dark ages. It just panders to your middle-class, middle-aged angst and guilt. It is just another way of stealing things from hard-pressed consumers."

O'Leary's diatribe—which could be echoed by any number of right-wing commentators in the United States—plays further on the cultural norms theme. By defining climate change as an environmental issue that can be placed firmly in the domain of self-righteous killjoys who want to take away working people's hard-earned luxuries, his message is clear: "People like us don't believe this rubbish."

But, as is so often the case with climate change, O'Leary is speaking to far more complex metaphors about freedom and choice. Climate change is invariably presented as an overwhelming threat requiring unprecedented restraint, sacrifice, and government intervention. The metaphors it invokes are poisonous to people who feel rewarded by free market capitalism and distrust government interference. It is hardly surprising that an October 2008 American Climate Values Survey showed that three times more Republicans than Democrats believe that "too much fuss is made about global warming." Another poll by the Canadian firm Haddock Research showed half of Republicans refuse to believe that it is caused by humans.

This political polarization is occurring across the developed world and is a worrying trend. If a disbelief in climate change becomes a mark of someone's political identity, it is far more likely to be shared between people who know and trust each other, becoming ever more entrenched and resistant to external argument.

This being said, climate change is a fast-moving field. Increasingly severe climate impacts will reinforce the theoretical warnings of scientists with far more tangible and immediate evidence. And looking back at history there are plentiful examples of times when public attitudes have changed suddenly in the wake of traumatic events—as with the U.S. entry into both world wars.

In the meantime there is an urgent need to increase both the level and quality of public engagement. To date most information has either been in the form of very dry top-down presentations and reports by experts or emotive, apocalyptic warnings by campaign groups and the media. The film *An Inconvenient Truth*, which sat somewhere between the two approaches, reinforced the existing avoidance strategies: that this was a huge and intractable global issue. The film was carried by the charm and authority of Al Gore, but this reliance on powerful celebrities also removes power from individuals who are, let us remember, all too willing to agree that there is no useful role they can play.

It is strange that climate communications seem to be so deeply embedded in this 19th-century public lecture format, especially in America, which leads the world in the study of personal motivation. Al Gore, after all, lost a political campaign against a far less qualified opponent whose advisors really understood the psychology of the American public.

How can we energize people and prevent them from passively standing by?

We must remember that people will only accept a challenging message if it speaks to their own language and values and comes from a trusted communicator. For every audience these will be different: The language and values of a Lubbock Christian will be very different from those of a Berkeley Liberal. The priority for environmentalists and scientists should be to step back and enable a much wider diversity of voices and speakers.

We must recognize that the most trusted conveyors of new ideas are not experts or celebrities but the people we already know. Enabling ordinary people to take personal ownership of the issue and talk to each other in their own words is not just the best way to convince people, it is the best way to force climate change back into people's "norms of attention."

And finally we need to recognize that people are best motivated to start a journey by a positive vision of their destination—in this case by understanding the real and personal benefits that could come from a low-carbon world. However, it is not enough to prepare a slide show and glossy report vision that just creates more distance and plays to the dominant prejudice against environmental fantasists. People must see the necessary change being made all around them: buildings in entire neighborhoods being insulated and remodeled, electric cars in the driveway, and everywhere the physical adaptations we need to manage for the new weather conditions. If the U.S. government has one strategy, it should be to create such a ubiquity of visible change that the transition is not just desirable but inevitable. We need to emphasize that this is not some distant and intractable global warming, but a very local and rapid climate change, and we need to proclaim it from every solar-panel-clad rooftop. ⓨ

George Marshall is founder of the Climate Outreach and Information Network (coinet.org.uk). He is the author of *Carbon Detox: Your Step by Step Guide to Getting Real About Climate Change* (carbond-etox.org) and posts articles on the psychology of climate change at climatedenial.org.

REV. CANON SALLY BINGHAM | CLIMATE HERO

For years, Sally Bingham wondered why her church wasn't providing moral guidance on climate change. One of the first directives in the Bible, Bingham says, is to care for creation. When God gave Adam dominion over the Earth, that meant responsibility to "till it and keep it." Bingham decided she had to bring this message to the pulpit. She left behind her life as a homemaker, enrolled in seminary, and became an Episcopal priest. In 1993, she founded **THE REGENERATION PROJECT,** which has helped more than 10,000 congregations around the country become greener and more energy-efficient, and spurred a faith-based movement in support of climate policy. *Interviewed by Kate Sheppard*

How has climate change become an issue that religious communities are organizing around? Until 10 years ago, clergy got no instruction in environmental ethics in seminary, but it has become evident that there aren't going to be any souls to save unless we save the land, air, and water. Now when you talk to religious people, it's like the light bulb goes on—if you love God, you better love Creation. Once you open that possibility, people get it.

How do you get congregations to turn that understanding into action? The first thing for somebody in a congregation to understand is that every one of their behaviors affects another person: the clothes they wear, the cars they drive, the coffee they drink, the energy they use. Once you've got that awareness, you'll put in energy-efficient appliances, you'll walk instead of driving, and you won't create so much waste.

Greening the individual church, synagogue, or mosque is our first goal. When a clergyperson walks down the aisle and says, "This church is saving $12,000 a year on energy bills," people go, "Whoa, I bet I could do that at home." The congregation serves as an example to the people in the pews.

What's the role of the faith community in addressing the climate crisis? The faith community didn't start out in a leadership role on this issue, but I think we're going to end up there. Now that the moral voice of religion is involved in this dialogue, things are going to happen. We saw that with the abolition of slavery, women's right to vote, and the civil rights movement. We're going to be the voice that tips the iceberg enough to make change happen. ⓨ