

Exhausting Our Natural Resources

Aileen Few

It is difficult to conceptualise climate change, even as we see it happening. There are floods from Pakistan to Penrith and my brain still can't quite grasp the fact that this is caused by rising levels of CO² pumped into the atmosphere, largely by the oil-guzzling lifestyles of the wealthier portion of humanity (myself included). Of course, I can watch news items about islanders having to leave their ancestral homes and feel awful, but when winter sets in and I'd like to be a few degrees warmer and get a few more lifts I soon return to my state of caring in principle rather than in practice. The truth is that campaigning has exhausted me so many times that I find my enthusiasm dwindling.

There are moments when I get it; brief fleeting hours when the immediacy of this crisis bares down on me and I feel the impetus to act, to fight, to really make changes; not just separate my glass from my plastics. In March 2009, I sat in Coventry Cathedral with hundreds of fellow Christians who gathered to pray and protest together. We listened to James Galgallo, a climate change campaigner from Northern Kenya, talk about how drought and increasingly unreliable rainfall is already endangering the livelihoods of pastoralists (that is, livestock farmers who move their herds to find fresh pasture and water). As water disappears, some of them are resorting to lives of crime in order to survive. It was the first time the direct link between poverty and climate change hit me. I remember being suddenly and strongly convicted that if you contribute to climate change you are directly contributing to poverty. Of course I probably already *knew* this, but somehow it felt stronger, more real.

My problem is that, though an underlying sense of injustice persists, the strong inspiration to action is more fleeting. Issues like climate change are so vast and wide-ranging in their implications that they become almost abstract. When things are this big it is easy to become so overwhelmed that the only way out is apathy. Well, apathy when it comes to political campaigning; many of us are still committed to 'green' behaviour. Short flights are out of the question, recycling is executed with religious efficiency and meals become more seasonal. Perhaps these are seen as token gestures by the more active campaigners among us, but they at least communicate an awareness and a willingness to change. More than this, with an issue so huge that it can leave us feeling powerless, they are things we can *do*, areas of our lives that we have control of. I have marched many times, I have even blockaded a petrol station, but have been left feeling drained and questioning what impact any of it has made. When I make small changes in my own life there is something more solid about what I'm doing; in a tiny way I'm being the change I want to see in the world.

Before a chorus of 'boos' ring out from the activist wing, I would never try to play down the value of public protest and direct action. It is vital that the issues remain high profile, in the media and in the minds of politicians. I wish I could keep up with the momentum and determination of some of my activist friends, but when I throw myself into these kinds of things I often find that I'm exhausted by them mentally and physically. Perhaps it's the vastness of the issue and the pigeon-steps of the victories that leave me feeling this way.

Mozaik 27, *Climate Justice Now!*, "Divided Loyalties", David Masters, 2011.

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Perhaps it is the culture of activism, which accepts burn-out as a sort of collateral damage. Perhaps I just don't care enough...

At last year's national SCM conference in Britain, I went to a seminar on local campaigning where I expressed this feeling of exhaustion when confronted with global justice issues. The seminar leader, Chris Howson from Bradford Just Space, suggested that one way to access these issues is by addressing them at a local level. For example, during the Iraq war he connected with the Iraqi community in Bradford and this shaped his response to the conflict. With climate change we can support and establish local grow-your-own, cycling-promotion and transition town projects. These community initiatives combined can make a big difference and ground our response to climate change in tangible local change.

I am not naïve, I know all the council estates in Britain could produce all the fruit and vegetables they like but make little difference if government and big business don't get on board. But these projects can help to change minds as well as diets and they can connect people with issues in a more concrete way than rallies and letters to Members of Parliaments. Hopefully those who become connected will make the transition into more direct campaigning, not as overwhelmed individuals but as empowered communities. Wouldn't that be something?

And these communities could be the key. When campaigning, I have never really had a sense of mutual support in the groups I've been a part of. There is certainly a lot of fun; jokes and drinks after meetings, entertaining late night circular-debates, but there never seems to be a culture of care for one another. As I mentioned earlier, burn out is seen as just one of those things; it happens to everyone, so it doesn't engender much sympathy. But is this right? Is this the kind of ethos we want in groups that are supposed to be changing the way we think about and interact with our planet? Aren't we, too – body, mind and spirit – natural resources that need care?

My parents met in an active socialist part in the early 1980s. It was exactly what it sounds like; a far left party campaigning against the heartlessness of capitalism and a Thatcher government that oversaw an ever-enlarging gap between rich and poor. There were some great ideals in that party; a desire for equality and better world where the rich no longer oppressed the poor. They made good friends there too, some of whom they still know today. But, though there was kindness on a person-to-person level, there was no general culture of care. In fact, when my mother had just given birth to me and said she couldn't attend a sector meeting they brought the meeting to her house instead – how thoughtful! As she said to me many years later, a group can have great ideals and be striving for a better world, but if it's not kind, then what the point?

This phrase has stuck with me and I often wonder how much more involved I'd be if I got a bit more kindness with my campaigning. Perhaps it wouldn't make any difference. But I can't help thinking that on issues like climate change our attitudes need to change holistically. Human energy, like other forms, should be valued and cultivated rather than squeezed until little is left. I would like to see this principle lived out in our campaigning culture. In fact, I

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feel it would be really revolutionary in a society that sees us as resources to be exploited, along with everything else. This kind of overarching shift in mindset, this rejection of exploitation in all its forms is surely a Christian calling.

Could we build a place where it was okay to be overwhelmed by the weight of the issues we face? Where care is both global and local? I believe the answer is yes and that in so doing we cannot but help to tackle climate change. There is a reason that we are commanded to love one another; because when we do this we have to choice but to change the world.

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