

Global Warming:

Maybe Denial is Working for Betty and Lou, but it Isn't for Their Teenagers

Scott H. Thompson



Kevin Anderson, a climate scientist at the University of Manchester in the U.K., is one of those humans who somehow never learned to be a proper, timid professional, and is therefore honest to a fault. One of our species' success stories: may his genes pass on. So it wasn't surprising that in a lecture in November, 2012, he said, "...the scientific community repeatedly underplays the story. That's what I'm trying to show here. Very unpopular with some of my colleagues..."

...
"So across the board everyone's saying we can't be honest about two degrees C [of warming above pre-industrial]. I

was at an event recently, a Chatham House event so I can't tell you who was there, but a very senior government scientist and someone very senior from an oil company...these very senior people said, 'Well, I think we're on for 4 to 6 degrees C, but we just can't be open about it.' But that is going on all the time behind the scenes, that somehow we can't tell the public."

Shout it, brother: not only is the public not being told that at least a 4 degree C world is hurtling toward us like a Texas-sized asteroid, it also isn't being told what that world will be like once it hits. So being Kevin Anderson, he tried: "For those sort of temperatures you may find that there's no transport network...this is not a world that we know how to contemplate...you'll see significant reductions, 30% to 40% reductions in some of the staple crops, in maize and rice and so forth..."

...There's a widespread view that a four degrees C future is incompatible with organized global community as we see it today. Particularly with nine billion people and all the other stresses that we face. It's likely beyond adaptation. Lots of us will not be able to adapt to the impacts...Some of us might be able to adapt but many people won't and it's devastating for the majority of ecosystems. Ecosystems always change but this is a very fast rate of change. Ecosystems are probably not tuned to this rate of change..."

...

"...for an outside chance of [only] 2 degrees C [of warming]...we need about a 40% reduction in the next three years in our energy consumption...A 70% reduction by 2020 and basically be completely de-carbonized by 2030 – fridges, planes, ships, cars, everything we do...to give a little bit of space for the poorer parts of the world to help them develop and improve their welfare...So...we'll all say that that's impossible. The question I was asked...was, well, is living with 4 degrees C temperature rise by 2050 to 2070, is that any less impossible? The future is impossible."

Other than Anderson's academic co-author Alice Bows and the Australian academic Clive Hamilton, who based his seminal book *Requiem for a Species* on Anderson's work, and of course *The Canyon Country Zephyr's* own Doug Meyer, I don't know of anyone out there who's been this blunt about what global warming means.



Close are the American stalwarts Dr. James Hansen of NASA and writer Bill McKibben. The difference is that the latter leave more room for hopeful outcomes, which is a cultural expectation. Because in America, with its boosterism and expansive optimism, those who insist on an unvarnished prognosis for global warming run a greater risk of being shunned. In his book Clive Hamilton said, "Optimism as a social norm is particularly strong in the United States, where the culture of self-help and self-improvement

reigns...Optimism is closely tied to the norm of individualism, because it is

believed that hopes are realized through personal accomplishments. Although a caricature, it is sometimes said that in the United States a homeless person is just a millionaire temporarily down on his luck." (pp. 129-130).

The flip side of expansive optimism, however, is psychological denial, and even a wonderful caricature that lies at one side of a continuum can end in pathology.

Consider this. According to a Rasmussen Reports "Energy Update," dated February 19, 2013, only 43% of Americans agreed that global warming is primarily caused by human activity. For over four years this figure has remained stuck at this level, even less at times, in spite of overwhelming scientific evidence demonstrating that global warming is both perilous and human-caused.

If people were the rational creatures they pretend to be, not connecting the dots on something this obvious would be evidence of a learning disability. What it is instead, sadly, is evidence of psychological denial bordering on delusion.

I think the pervasiveness of psychological denial within our borders developed in this way. The last thing a critical mass of our elites want to see happen is the prolonged period of planned economic austerity that is necessary for serious progress in addressing the most devastating long-term consequences of global warming. Nor do they want to witness what will happen to massive fossil fuel companies once the market value of their oil, gas, and coal reserves, the ones that will never be produced or mined because of global warming, collapses. Brothers and sisters, these people are protecting the golden calf of economic growth and all its key features at all costs.

Kevin Anderson says it: "So it doesn't matter if we wipe the planet out, if we all die, so long as we're not interfering with economic growth."

That's why it's no surprise that none of our mainstream politicians (except for Al Gore) have put themselves on the line to inform the people how dire the scientific findings are. Nor is it a surprise that our major media outlets, which are owned by honcho for-profit corporations, continue to play global warming down by giving it spotty, equivocal, and incomplete coverage. Or that money-suffused right wing sources, including fossil fuel companies, have flooded the airways with propaganda as cruel and warped as that of a dictator regime, without meaningful refutation or response.



That's why it's no surprise that none of our mainstream politicians (except for Al Gore) have put themselves on the line to inform the people how dire the scientific findings are. Nor is it a surprise that our major media outlets, which are owned by honcho for-profit corporations, continue to play global warming down by giving it spotty, equivocal, and incomplete coverage.

But the hi-jinks and self-absorption of the powerful don't by themselves explain the pervasiveness of psychological denial in America. The other half of this vicious cycle is that people in the street don't want to hear about what global warming means – truly means - because they're not interested in scientific findings that question the American Dream of prosperity. They buy those lottery tickets to keep that dream alive.

Interestingly, if there were a mass demand for a public discussion of the stark scientific truth, as unlikely as that now seems, along with a willingness to endure the austerity measures that would follow such honest talk, there are sympathetic elites who would, after first chewing their nails for awhile, stand up and join them.

Elites are people, too.

But denial reigns supreme and Hurricane Sandy hasn't changed that. It's only spawned some polished rhetoric and more equivocal proposals.

Psychological denial is hiding the truth from yourself. It is a lie. Here is what the eminent psychiatrist Carl Jung said about how lies work on the mind: "The lie is there objectively, either in the conscious or in the unconscious. If I don't admit it, if I have not assimilated it, it becomes a strange body and will form an abscess in the unconscious." (Dream Analysis: Notes of the Seminar by C.G. Jung, 1928-30, p. 20).

We know such an abscess is there in two ways. First, the person will project his or her own dishonesty onto other people, unfairly perceiving negative motivations or attributes within them. We see this in the irrational suspicion of climate scientists that so many people in denial harbor; in some cases even accusing these scientists of a vast conspiracy to invent global warming in order to procure research funding and destroy capitalism.

We know such an abscess is there in two ways. First, the person will project his or her own dishonesty onto other people, unfairly perceiving negative motivations or attributes within them. We see this in the irrational suspicion of climate scientists that so many people in denial harbor; in some cases even accusing these scientists of a vast conspiracy to invent global warming in order to procure research funding and destroy capitalism.

Second, the person will pass the abscess - the lie and its consequences - down to the next generation: to her or his own children. And if the lie is pervasive it will be passed down to children throughout that culture. Jung covered both levels when he said: "...the more unconscious [that is, younger] children are, the more they are under the influence of the collective unconscious, or they may absorb the unconscious problems of their parents." (p. 19).

Consciously or unconsciously, children know that their well-being and future should come first, and that a parent who fails to honor this ancient obligation of our species has betrayed them.

This betrayal is almost always sealed with a lie. The parents lie to themselves as much as anyone else, because shoving their kids down a chute violates the conscious picture they have of themselves as proper, caring parents. More important, such parents lie to their kids: "Mommy and Daddy love you, honey. You know that." Thus implying that their children's needs have priority when their own actions as parents belie this.

Many of the chronically self-destructive behaviors we see in teenagers - heavy drug and alcohol use, self-mutilation, nose-smashing fist fights, suicidal talk and gestures, risky sexual behavior, school failure, and so on - are rage-ful responses to these lies. The teenager delivers a sarcastic message indeed: "If

you don't care about my future, why should I?"

Now for a common example. (Bear with me: we will return to global warming.)

Let's say mom is an opiate pain pill addict whose boyfriend is her supplier. In this configuration her teenager's function in life is to keep them out of jail by not bringing down too much scrutiny from school principals, the juvenile court system, and other authority figures in the community. At the same time, mom and her boyfriend are so obsessed with getting high and the ongoing financial drama associated with it, that they utterly fail to give the teenager the consistent, caring attention and supervision that she or he needs to stay out of trouble.

The kid gets it: getting in trouble means getting even.

Anyone growing up with an addicted parent, regardless of the drug - and alcohol is a drug - knows that it is a consuming spirit. And that procuring an ample supply of the drug, while also avoiding the consequences flowing from its use, are the priorities around which the family's life must revolve. What might benefit the teenager and help him or her feel appreciated and loved, will receive sporadic attention by comparison. Should the teenager turn away from such an insane family mythology in order to embrace honorable values, family members will respond with cold silence if not scorn and derision.

There is every reason to expect that most of our teenagers will live long enough to experience either a 4 degrees C world or one that's moving rapidly toward it. We are fools if we think clear-eyed fifteen and sixteen year olds won't unearth the works of Kevin Anderson, James Hansen, Bill McKibben, and Clive Hamilton, and spread the true word to their friends. At some point teenagers will realize that those of us over 40, maybe over 30, are denying our responsibility for the long-term consequences of our addiction to cheap energy, thereby condemning them to a dire fate so that we can continue to live in carbon-based comfort.

They'll also realize that we'll be safely dead by the time the cataclysm hits them.

At some point teenagers will realize that those of us over 40, maybe over 30, are denying our responsibility for the long-term consequences of our addiction to cheap energy, thereby condemning them to a dire fate so that we can continue to live in carbon-based comfort.

They'll also realize that we'll be safely dead by the time the cataclysm hits them.

Consider the following. While we adults are much more able to process difficult emotions and are far better adapted to workaday reality and relationships,

next page



FACING THE STORM...

Facing the Storm documents the complete history of human relations with the largest land mammal on the continent. From the first North Americans who relied on bison for food, shelter and clothing for at least 10,000 years, to modern wildlife conservationists - descendants of those first North Americans among them - *Facing the Storm* introduces viewers to a rich history of human sustenance, exploitation, conservation, and spiritual relations with the ultimate icon of wild America. *Facing the Storm* is a Co-Production with The Independent Television Service (ITVS) & Montana Public Television.



<http://www.highplainsfilms.org/>