Step 1: Accept our Powerlessness

The case for a shift in climate policy toward adaptation and resilience

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Let's imagine a distant sci-fi future where our ambassador has been invited to an interplanetary AA meeting. Our representative might say "Hi, we were Planet Earth, and we had an addiction to fossil fuels." The ambassador might go on to say that we had explored various futile schemes to incentivize reductions in GHG emissions, all ignoring the basic fundamentals of human nature that actually govern our behavior. Sadly, it doesn't appear we'll ever get beyond Step 1 of this imagined 12-step process of planetary recovery. We stubbornly refuse to accept our powerlessness.

Judging from the latest flurry of press releases ahead of COP29, getting underway this week in Baku, UN scientists and others are finally getting beyond denial to confess that all efforts up until now to reduce emissions and therefore somehow keep warming below 1.5°C have utterly failed. According to its latest Emissions Gap Report, the United Nations Environment Program acknowledges that the world is now on track for double the pledged amount of warming through the year 2100, up to 3.1°C (5.6°F). I suspect this is only the first of multiple revisions upward.

And with COP29 now underway, we're also again getting showered with the expected urgent warnings that 2024 will be yet another hottest year on record. Reports are also highlighting the latest round of extreme weather events, such as the double-barrel whammy of Hurricane's Helene and Milton that ravaged America's Southeast in recent months – even though the linkage between the frequency of tropical storms and climate change is tenuous at best, and possibly even declining.

But I would argue that we are still stuck in Step 1 of the 12-step process. We haven't moved from denial to a full acceptance of our powerlessness to mitigate future climate change. And this isn't because I'm a "climate change denialist." As explained in a recent post, the physics of man-made global warming and its direct link to our excessive use of fossil fuels is self-evident to anyone with a college-level understanding of molecular realities. Instead, I would assert that policy-makers have largely still failed to accept the reality that our mitigation strategies have been futile and ineffective – that it is now time to focus our efforts on adaptation and resilience.

Of course, this entire conversation must now embrace the reality of what transpired here in the US last week, when the nation resoundingly re-elected a president who has repeatedly shouted "Drill, baby drill!" and who has also dismissed the elementary physics of global warming as a "hoax." For those of us who understand the science and realize the implications of a continuing reluctance to confront our addiction to fossil fuels, what are we to do?

As for me, I recall being invited by USDA to speak at COP18 back in 2012, where I emphasized the role of technology in helping US farmers adapt to unavoidable climate change – a message that seems even more relevant today. I reported that technology investments and advances had helped drastically lessen the negative impacts of a major drought that had afflicted much of the US that year – helping confer greater resilience to the system. I strongly believe that it is time for policy-makers for accept our powerlessness to mitigate future climate change and instead focus on efforts to help farmers make their operations more resilient to the ever-worsening weather impacts.

There should also be a focus on helping farmers build greater resilience to economic shocks, such as those the world recently experienced as a result of trade disruptions and the [over?-]reaction to COVID – the former of which seems likely to harm US farmers in the near future, should we once again find ourselves in a trade war with China or others. Earlier this week, I learned that US Dairy will be presenting an updated assessment of the "materiality" of various challenges to America's dairy producers, concluding that these same two measures of resilience should now be explicitly considered: resilience to weather extremes and resilience to economic shocks.

As noted in the earlier post, it turns out there are many cost-effective actions that could be taken to help farmers adapt to future climate change. I firmly believe this is where public investments should be directed, rather than in more precisely quantifying the ultimately inconsequential impact of these practices on reducing the more than 50 Gigatons CO_2e per year of global GHG emissions.

But if we were to fully embrace our powerlessness to overcome our addiction to fossil fuels, what would be Step 2 in Planetary Recovery? If the 12-step process were truly applicable, we would embrace the idea that only a Power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity. As a Bible-believing Christian, I have faith in such a Power when it comes to each of us as individuals – and I have personally accepted the free offer of salvation.

But is the analogous offer available to Planet Earth? My personal opinion is "yes, at least theoretically," but the truly tragic part of the story is that just as perhaps 90% of humanity will ultimately reject the free offer of personal salvation, so shall Planet Earth never get beyond Step 1. That is very sad, indeed. And so Jesus still weeps over us.