

**Facing An Existential Threat with Radical Hope:
Building a Global Consciousness to create a Future beyond Climate Change.
Dr. Robert Oppenheimer**

**A talk being given Thursday 13th September at Victoria Central Library
5 pm to 7 pm. As part of “Conversations for a One Planet Region.”**

For me “Radical Hope” means believing we can change the direction that we humans have been heading and create a global consciousness of our urgent responsibility to take better care of our planet.

I want to begin with some personal background. My father Alfred was a Jewish child refugee from Germany in the mid 1930's. I have always known that were it not for my grandparents prescient actions to get their family out of Germany, together with their lack of denial of the very real danger the Nazi regime represented to them and their children, I might well not be standing here today.

My own attitude to existential threats owes a lot to my grandmother who taught me not to get too comfy with the status quo and to always be aware that serious dangers may lurk ahead even though things seem fine on the surface. My father described my grandmother as having good peripheral vision and always thinking ahead. As an engineer he also believed that whatever can go wrong will, which he called Sod's Law. He was involved in climate change initiatives in Europe, which he continued to work on into his late 80s. My dad taught me that any danger of a truly catastrophic event is worth paying attention to.

I want to explore some of the issues raised by the existential threat of runaway global warming. Given my family background I would say that we need to accept the dangers we face head on, rather than by retreating into denial, minimizing or fear.

There is no sugar coating the reality that as a species we have been responsible for shifting our planet into the anthropocene age. So our first task is to acknowledge the damage to our Mother Earth that we humans have already caused. Sadly the impacts of climate change are already being felt especially harshly by the poorest of the poor, living in the global south, who derived little or no benefit from the industrial era that led to these problems. So, where is the hope in all this you may be asking yourself?

I believe it is important that we be able to imagine a future in which our world's inhabitants, including ourselves, can again live safely and securely in harmony with the earth.

The problems caused by greenhouse gases will not be resolved in our lifetimes. But we can make a solid start in changing the direction our planet is headed and leave a legacy of more responsible energy policies for future generations to follow up on.

One thing I find particularly helpful is to remember that we have already resolved some previous man-made catastrophes. When I was a young child living in the UK there was a five day smog event in London that killed 12,000 people and sickened 200,000. It was the worst air pollution event in London's long history of living with frequent such episodes (called pea soup fogs) caused by sulphur dioxide, ozone and other air pollutants from large scale coal burning in homes and from heavy industry.

This disaster eventually triggered national clean air legislation in the UK, the first in the world. This was brought about by political action backed by rigorous science that showed that banning the use of raw coal in cities would significantly improve health outcomes for UK citizens.

In the 1950s and 60s mothers and scientists in the USA campaigned against above ground nuclear testing using data showing that breast milk and children's first teeth were heavily contaminated with strontium 90 and other forms of nuclear fallout. Their campaign resulted in a major change in public opinion that led to the above ground nuclear test ban treaties.

A successful campaign in the 1970s and 80s banned tobacco advertising and movie portrayals of smoking as glamorous, resulting in a significant reduction in tobacco related deaths. At the same time lead was removed from gasoline and paint, which caused an improvement in the IQ scores of inner city children and a long term reduction in the violent crime that is associated with lead poisoning.

In the 1980s a massive ozone hole over Antarctica was rapidly growing. In the far south of Argentina and Chile, sheep were going blind while shepherds had to wear strong sunglasses. Several cases of radiation burns were reported from sunbathing. However the Montreal Protocol came into effect in 1989, which regulated the world-wide refrigeration and aerosol industries to remove ozone depleting substances from their products. This resulted in the ozone layer hole gradually starting to close instead of continuing to expand.

This has ensured that the planet is now safe from the loss of a critical protective layer of radiation shielding in the earth's atmosphere. This threat would eventually have made life on earth untenable, much as uncontrolled global warming threatens to do. The Montreal Protocol also had an important impact on greenhouse gas

emissions as the fluorocarbons that were damaging the ozone layer were also major contributors to climate change.

I believe we are currently facing not one but two possible tipping points, the first is the growing potential for runaway global warming involving the loss of the polar ice fields and eventually resulting in a possible hothouse earth scenario. The other is a potential global shift in consciousness leading to the kinds of rapid changes we need to see to significantly reduce worldwide CO₂ emissions.

We may already be approaching that critical tipping point in public consciousness which will result in a wider acknowledgement of the climate realities we now face and the need for urgent action to confront them. I think the growing reality of increasing droughts, wildfires, flooding, stronger hurricanes (including Florence today) tornado swarms and the startling increase in frequency of “100 year” weather events is shifting the conversation in our favour.

Just as had happened previously with the ozone layer, banning leaded gasoline, reducing tobacco related cancers, even the adoption of seat belt laws, the carbon energy industry are desperately trying to confuse the public with their slick PR, their lies and their misleading ads. In each of these previous cases it took many years of solid science and active campaigning, which the industry fought tooth and nail, for sanity to prevail.

I am a child psychologist by profession and I am deeply concerned about how the dangers of climate change are impacting our children and youth. How can we avoid a repeat of the 1950s/60s era when many young people were expecting the world to end in a nuclear holocaust before they could start fulfilling their dreams, or could not imagine bringing children into such a world.

Many of our youth are very aware that they are growing up on a planet at risk and want to take action themselves. For example in Indonesia teenagers have taken the initiative to organize planting mangrove trees on the beaches to help protect their villages from sea level rise and prevent erosion. Locally at Claremont HS the global studies program currently has dozens of students exploring how to create a safe future for the earth.

We adults must be willing to take responsibility for the actions of previous generations and together with our youth make the needed changes now. Just as we have on past occasions when greed and ignorance resulted in threats to human survival.

As a parent I worry about our grandchildren and great grandchildren's future both in terms of direct climate change impacts and the psychological trauma of living on a planet that cannot absorb the pressures we have put on it. However I firmly believe that if we raise our kids in an intentional One Planet lifestyle we and they can be a positive force in the struggle to maintain a sustainable future on earth.

There is clear evidence that children growing up in families who were actively working against nuclear war had a more hopeful sense of the future than those whose parents were ignoring the imminent danger. I am convinced this is true for climate change too.

I have been reading the book Drawdown which explores in detail 80 practical ideas for reducing CO₂ emissions with the goal of reaching a peak of emissions in the near term. Some of the ideas in this book were already familiar to me, such as the need for more wind turbines, bicycle lanes, Electric Vehicles, retrofitted and passive homes, cheap solar panels, reforestation, and solar farms.

Others were not as obvious to me, such as creating universal access to primary and secondary education for girls in third world countries. There is a direct link between the number of years of a mother's education and family size, so combined with access to family planning this would result in fewer child marriages and smaller families. It would also change the lives of hundreds of millions of young women and girls for the better. This approach could significantly reduce future CO₂ emissions due to the reduction in worldwide population growth.

In my view the right response to the increasing dangers of climate change is to encourage an "all of the above" approach where many different practical ideas can be applied on a local level. I also believe it is vitally important that we each take whatever actions we can today on an individual and group basis to reduce our carbon footprint. We can start by making changes in our own lifestyles and explore become early adopters of the climate friendly technologies now becoming available. We need to be able to show we are willing to walk the talk, to be the change we want to see.

In closing I have a suggestion of one way that some of us might be able to come together to do this as a group.

With Trevor's help I have recently begun a conversation with Saanich One Planet staff about the idea of building a local net-zero cohousing community of thirty or so units. Our family lived in cohousing when our children were young and there are both practical and social benefits which we saw in our daily lives.

Families need smaller condo units to live in as there is a shared “Common House” equipped with things like a dining/meeting room, laundry room, playroom, guest room, office space, even a small gym. Children can safely run free within the community as cars are banned from central areas. Residents give regular volunteer hours to run the community, which eliminates management costs and gives the community full control.

Unit sizes can range from one to three bedrooms built in a dense format. Access to bike and EV sharing schemes could reduce the need for individual vehicles and parking spaces. Cohousing also addresses issues of isolation and loneliness as singles and retirees become adopted aunts, uncles and grandparents and are known and valued by their neighbours. Children grow up in a setting resembling an old fashioned village where everyone knows one another.

I know it sounds rather Utopian, but about 150 such communities already exist in N. America, including several on the island. A group in Sidney called Ravens Crossing is currently preparing to build 34 units of passive cohousing.

We have been invited to submit a brief initial proposal to Saanich planners to explore how this type of development might be done locally. It could include a request that Saanich consider donating some property to a land trust in order to make the community more affordable, which is a key concern. Such a proposal would likely qualify as a One Planet Region Action Plan and could then receive some development support from the municipality.

I will leave you with two words Radical Hope.