

Final Asilomar Speech - August 8, 2013 - Jim Hoggan

Good morning and thank you for taking time to listen to me speak about my new book *The Polluted Public Square*.

In the book I travel to Harvard's Kennedy School of Government, to Yale Law School, and to Columbia University's School of Business.

I interviewed an expert on public trust over tea in the House of Lords dining room, spent a week with the Zen Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hanh and travelled to the Himalayas to visit the Dalai Lama.

Over the last three years I have interviewed public intellectuals around the world about a number of environmental questions that trouble me.

How is it possible that climate scientists, with virtually all the evidence of a warming planet on their side, seem to be losing a public debate about the urgency of climate change to a gang of unqualified industry advocates with virtually no evidence to back up what they were saying.

I've asked these public intellectuals what they think about the state of public discourse on the environment. And most important, why, despite all the scientific evidence and calls for urgent action from experts in atmospheric, marine and life sciences, we are doing so little to address the big environmental challenges we face?

Why isn't public discourse on the environment, as Columbia's Eric Johnson put it, more data driven?

Why are we listening to each other shout rather than listening to what the data is trying to tell us?

At some point on this journey I came to believe that the most urgent environmental problem we face today isn't the threat of global climate change, mass species extinction or the rapidly declining health of the earth's oceans. The more immediate threat is the pollution that fills the public square. The bigger problem is why we are doing so little to combat these problems.

As Yale Law School's Dan Kahan told me, just as you can pollute the natural environment you can pollute public conversations.

Today the forum for public debate about the environment is choked with a smog of adversarial rhetoric, polarization and propaganda.

Deceptive and sophisticated industry propaganda combined with clumsy efforts by environmental advocates have driven the public into a state of disinterest, mistrust and despair.

We seem unable to weigh facts honestly, disagree constructively, and think things through collectively.

I started to write about Industry deception and climate change propaganda in 2005. Anger seemed the reasonable response to these oil industry attempts to manipulate the public and the politics of climate change. But after a few years I started to wonder why this made me so angry.

Eventually I started to figure it out. So let me step back and start with my own story of this anger and how I came to write this book, not three years ago when I picked up the pen, but back to when I was growing up on the wrong side of the tracks in Canada's oil patch, back to some rough neighborhoods in Calgary Alberta.

When I was seven my friend, Donnie Fisherman and I, were playing in a cave in a park. A gang of big kids blocked the entrance to the cave with a sheet of plywood and trapped us inside. When we tried to get out through the small hole in the roof at the back of the cave we got punched and kicked. It was dark and both of us started screaming, yelling and fighting to get out.

The more we panicked, the more fun they had. That's my first memory of bullying but there was a lot of bullying in my neighbourhood, including some at home.

My mom was an Irish Catholic. My family was large and poor, seven kids. I shared a bedroom with three other kids when I was growing up.

I remember my Aunt Edna once told me that she thought my mom was a saint, not in the canonization by the Pope way but more because my mom protected us from my dad, who was violent with all of us.

One afternoon my dad was in a bad mood. He was cutting my hair. My Mom was in the hospital with a serious health problem. I said something that made him angry. He blamed me for my mom being in the hospital then hit me with this razor. Gouged the side of my face. Then pounded me a few times with his fist. I grew up trying to protect myself, my brothers and sisters and my mom from my father. There weren't just the bullies in the street.

But before you start feeling sorry for me I grew up determined to fight back. I left home early, made friends with some of the toughest guys in the city. The bullies just stayed away from me.

In the '60s my friends were reading eastern philosophy. Getting into meditation. I joined in. It was good for me. Meditation calmed me down, helped me sort myself out.

After I went to law school, I took the crisis management skills that I learned at home as a kid and I turned them into one of the most successful public relations companies in Canada.

But I've grown up quick to anger at unfairness especially when there was that extra layer of bullying involved.

As a public relations consultant I learned that many of these schoolyard bullies moved to the public square. And just like in the schoolyard they want your lunch money and they expect you to shut up.

The bullies in the public square want to take away your freedom to speak out. They do it by name calling, demonizing and by pumping the public square full of misleading propaganda, and they expect you to accept it.

If you work on environmental issues like climate change it is likely you have been bullied.

Bullying in the public square is becoming more common in Canada. In 2011 the Oil and Gas industry and the Federal Government launched a campaign to demonize Canadians opposed to TAR sands expansion and pipelines.

The PMO labeled environmental groups "Foreign funded radicals" claiming that American Charitable Foundations are interfering in Canada's internal affairs.

Environment Minister Peter Kent said, "...some Canadian charitable agencies have been used to launder offshore funds. Whether you call it money laundering, or a financial shell game or three card monte, its inappropriate under those organizations charitable status."

And Senator Don Platt, "Where would...environmentalists draw a line on who they receive money from. Would they take money from Al-Qaeda, the Hamas or the Taliban..."

In parallel an oil industry front group called Ethical Oil launched a national media campaign parroting the Government's Foreign Funded Radicals message. Their other message was Ethical Oil, "Ethical oil is like fair trade coffee or conflict-free diamonds. Ethical oil burns the same as conflict oil in your gas tank and it costs the same, but it's morally superior and some people value that."

When pressed, the Government/oil industry had no evidence of any wrongdoing, but that didn't stop them. Bullies in the public square are not looking to debate but to belittle.

They are not trying to persuade but to misdirect and silence. So they have little need for evidence.

And here in the US perhaps someone in this room was one of the climate scientists Mark Morano of the Committee For a Constructive Tomorrow was referring to when he said:

" I seriously believe we should kick them when they are down, they deserve to be publicly flogged." Mark Morano.

I'm sure you have heard this quote from Senator James Inhofe, "With all of the hysteria, all of the fear, all of the phony science, could it be that man-made

global warming is the greatest hoax ever perpetrated on the American people?"

Or this quote from Glen Beck, "Al Gore is not going to be rounding up Jews and exterminating them. The goal is different... You must silence all dissenting voices. That's what Hitler did. That's what Al Gore, the UN and everyone on the global warming bandwagon are doing."

Perhaps you have been called a global warming alarmist and or heard someone from the Heartland Institute call NASA scientist James Hansen "a global warming hysteric."

This is not the language of persuasion but an attempt to humiliate, intimidate and silence. This is classic bullying. Bullying violates our sense of fairness and undermines agency.

As Harvard's Marshall Ganz told me, "Human beings want respect, a sense of our own worth, and the worth of those we care about, our loved ones and our community. And when this is violated, it can stir up strong visceral feelings of injustice. Or, we can lose the expectation of respect and justice and come to believe that we can't do anything about these problems."

Many of us working on climate change have struggled with the propaganda of bullies.

We have a choice, we can be the victims of these propaganda bullies, become discouraged and resigned to thinking we can't really make a difference. Or we can get better at fighting back. Maybe with a bit more skill at public narrative we can force the bullies back and clean up some of the pollution in the public square. That is what I want to talk to you about. How to get better at the science of science communications.

A few years back I wrote a book about climate change denial, outing industry front groups and fake scientists. It was called *Climate Cover Up The Crusade to Deny Global Warming*.

Not once on my book tour did a climate change denier throw up his hands and say okay you caught me, I was wrong, I'm sorry for being unreasonable, I won't do it again. When climate change deniers are confronted with proof that they are wrong, they don't change their opinions they defend them more vigorously.

Unfortunately we humans have a bad habit of justifying ourselves rather than taking responsibility for stupid things we have said or done. It's difficult to admit we are wrong.

We put enormous amounts of mental and physical energy into protecting our self-esteem and our group affiliations.

With the environment this tendency to double down rather than admit we are wrong leads to something you might call the advocacy trap.

On one hand if advocates don't speak up forcefully there is little public awareness or pressure to change. But when they do speak up there is a tendency to treat the other side as irrational opponents. Eventually we have a battle between good and evil.

And when the other side is treated as an evil force, they react with self-justification. Demonization energizes the opposition eventually polarizing issues into a state of ideological gridlock.

And to make things worse, the public turns away from this polarization with disinterest and mistrust.

As linguist Debra Tannen put it "when you hear a ruckus outside your house you open the window to see what's going on. But if you hear a ruckus every night you close the shutters and ignore it."

When conflict seems perpetual and extremes define issues, problems appear unsolvable. People tune out. That's what's happening in the public square today.

Daniel Yankelovich told me when you, "... add together: Public inattention, mistrust, polarization, normal kinds of communications of the type that policymakers and scientists think of as communication, just doesn't work."

The rules of communication are different when you speak in a polluted public square. Facts and evidence are not enough.

As Moral Psychologist Jonathan Haidt says, “I’m right, you’re wrong. Let me tell you what you should think”, is not a great communications strategy. “It doesn’t work because we all think we are right.”

The most sacred value of a Social Conservative’s Moral Matrix is preserving the institutions and traditions that sustain a moral community. By contrast the most sacred value of a Liberal moral matrix is care for victims of oppression.

According to Haidt our “Morality Binds and Blinds” us. Our righteous minds were designed by evolution to unite us into teams divide us against other teams and blind us to the truth.

Haidt argues that people are divided by politics and religion not because some people are good and others are evil but because our minds were designed for groupish righteousness. When people share values/morals they become a team. Once the psychology of teams kicks in, open minded thinking shuts down. We get trapped in our moral matrix.

Haidt suggests that we might improve communications if we step outside the self righteousness of our moral matrix. He recommends looking to the Dalai Lama to see the power of moral humility – that we take the time to understand the values and worldviews of people we disagree with.

2008 TED prizewinner Karen Armstrong who has developed the Charter for Compassion told me that “We must speak out against injustice but not in a way that causes more hatred”.

She said remember what St. Paul said, “charity takes no delight in the wrong doing of others”.

The message was driven home by lobbyist and litigator Roger Conner, at Vanderbilt University, who said working collaboratively is the answer, as is suspending areas of disagreement, seeking common goals.

It is impossible to understand problems, let alone create solutions, without deeply hearing what other people are saying.

This master consensus builder explained that genuine collaboration or even compromise is almost impossible when you think someone is untrustworthy or

evil. In any sustained dispute, if both parties draw their impressions from the perceived behaviour of the other, they will mirror what they think the other is doing. That's the advocacy trap.

The way out of this circle of blame is to let go of the foe stance and replace it with respect — better yet, compassion.

Too much aggression will automatically and absolutely increase the energy coming from the other side, he said. "Nothing is so common as powerful groups creating resistance by overplaying their hands."

Daniel Yankelovich told me "Democracy requires space for compromise and is best won through acknowledging the legitimate concerns of the other. We need to nudge the opposing positions closer together not accentuate the differences".

He said: "Toning down our opinions will ratchet up our understanding – and the welfare of our nation."

BUT ON THE OTHER HAND.....

Adam Kahan, the famous guru on conflict resolution and scenario planning told me, "Environmental advocates need to make the political, economic and cultural costs of doing nothing about these environmental problems much higher, or there is no need... no motivation for government or business or the public to change."

So this is what makes moving to the middle ground so difficult.

I asked the famous Zen Buddhist Monk Thich Nhat Hanh, about environmental activism he told David Suzuki and me. "Speak the truth, but not to punish."

FACTS DONT CHANGE MINDS.....

I spent an afternoon with George Lakoff he spoke about the Descarte mistake.

"They learn... " and he's referring to progressives here. "They learn a false view of reason." Going back to Descartes, that says, "Reason is conscious and it can fit the world directly. It works by logic. It is unemotional. That if you just tell people the facts, they'll reason to the right conclusion."

"And that if somebody says something false", he said, "What you have to do is argue against them, and clear up what they're saying. That language is neutral and it fits the world."

He told me that all of this is absolutely false in every regard. Every one of these statements false. "Empirically false," he said. That comes out of the work in the cognitive and brain sciences.

Lets turn to narrative.

As my PR mentor Mike Sullivan use to say " If you don't tell them someone else will and it will be bad."

One of the reasons the public square is so polluted is the absence of a compelling sustainability narrative.

Here's some of what I heard about narrative from three leading social scientists.

Dr. Eric Johnson is the Director of the Center for Decision Sciences at Columbia University School of Business. Johnson explained the three principles of behavioral economics that influence how people make decisions: loss aversion, present bias and fairness.

About loss aversion, say I offer you a gamble. On the flip of a coin, I'll give you \$6 if it comes up heads, what amount you would be willing to risk, if it comes up tails? \$2? \$3? How about \$4?

Turns out most people are willing to risk losing \$2 to win \$6/, some are willing to risk losing \$3 to win \$6, but when it comes to a chance to win \$6/ but risk losing \$4, very few are willing to chance it.

With loss aversion: losses feel twice as bad as gains feel good. In our minds, 1 loss = 2 gains. Paying \$5 feels twice as bad as receiving \$5 feels good.

Then there is the problem of Present bias: we tend to discount things that are distant in time and space.

The impacts of environmental problems like climate change tend to be far away from us in time and space, polar bears, 2050 and future generations. You can get this bias working for you by framing environmental issues as immediate, nearby, vivid and concrete.

The third principle is Fairness: People want fairness for themselves and others but if the unfairness or fairness isn't facing us immediately in our own circles it is not a driver.

Eric Johnson's three principles work together. You need to address all three for a narrative or message to drive change.

Bob Doppelt of the University of Oregon is well known for his work on why we resist change on environmental issues.

Doppelt said, "Information alone doesn't change behavior; that (facts) have to be part of the bigger package".

According to Bob Doppelt, research in social psychology shows that people, organizations, and communities are less likely to change unless three factors are present: dissonance, efficacy & benefits.

Dissonance is the gap between how people see their current situation and where they think they would like to be.

Dissonance is about creating enough tension to warrant change. "No tension, no change".

But if dissonance is all people feel, or it shines a particularly bad light on them and their behavior, they will stick their heads in the sand and revert to denial. He said we've only created a modest amount of dissonance on climate change in North America.

The second factor is Efficacy. People have to feel that we have the skills, the know-how, the technologies, the right policies to solve the problem at hand, to resolve the dissonance to make the tension go away.

Doppelt says the sense of Efficacy around environmental problems is really low in North America. Most people don't have faith or any sense of what tools, strategies; capacities there are to solve environmental problems.

The third factor is Benefits. Unless the benefits far outweigh the downsides, people aren't likely to change – even if they feel a strong sense of dissonance and efficacy.

Doppelt suggests there's a lot of room for improvement here too – North Americans also have very low appreciation of the benefits of environmental responsibility.

PUBLIC NARRATIVE

I interviewed Harvard's Marshall Ganz who was behind President Obama's community organizing strategy in both elections.

Ganz got his start with Martin Luther King in Mississippi at the height of the civil rights movement and later worked with Chavez and the United Farm Workers on the grape boycott campaign in California.

In the Public Narrative model that Ganz teaches at Harvard what you're trying to do is motivate people to act. You're trying to motivate a change in behaviour because the presumption in organizing and movement building is that there isn't a tolerable presence, there is a real problem, and not just a grievance, but an injustice.

Here is some of what Marshall Ganz told me in the interviews I did with him and in the 16 week course I took at Harvard's Kennedy School.

Most of the time we're on autopilot, we screen out information that's inconsistent with what we already believe.

So, the first challenge from a public narrative perspective is how to break through that habit, that barrier.

Ganz says this doesn't happen easily. It takes creating some kind of urgency, some kind of anger, not like rage, but outrage, like Doppelt he speaks of creating dissonance between worlds as it is, world, as it ought to be.

It's creating enough tension and dissonance in the present that I have to pay attention. He says the neuroscience of that is about the surveillance system, which is setup to detect anomaly. And so, as long as things are going in a way that is predictable, everything is cool.

But if a truck pulls in front of your car the surveillance system says anomaly, anomaly, anomaly, and we experience that as anxiety. It gets our attention.

And so in a certain sense, public narrative is about creating anxiety. Creating enough uncertainty that people will be open to processing information in a different way.

The idea is to figure out how to challenge people's values and create the dissonance between values and reality, the world as it is and the world as ought to be. Then there is tension, and some kind of engagement.

But if all you do is create anxiety then what you are likely to produce is paralysis, some form of fear. Paralysis, running away, denial, whatever, and that doesn't lead to action. So along with the challenge, you also have to figure out how to evoke a sense of hopefulness.

And Ganz says this goes to, how do I inspire a sense of possibility? Not flowers in May, but an experience of possibility, of empathy, of a sense of one's own worth.

Ganz told me to read Henry V Saint Crispin's Day speech before the Battle of Agincourt. He has a handful of men, they are exhausted, dying from dysentery and the French are up there in all their armour. He is going to lose the battle.

Ganz says Henry V begins his speech, "Okay, anybody who wants to leave, leave. Look, that's fine. I wouldn't wanna die with someone who would leave, but leave. So for those of you that stay.. . () And then he begins to talk about the opportunity for immortality. "We few, we happy few, we band of brothers,"

What's interesting to Ganz is that Henry V never promises victory and he never even mentions the French.

"It's all about who we are, what our values call us to do, this moment we can grasp deep meaning, deep meaning into our lives and our deaths, if that's what comes."

Ganz says this "It's just brilliant. This is Shakespeare, of course. But if you look at that, you see someone who is restoring the sense of agency and of value and of worth to people who feel utterly despairing and defeated."

It's the prototypical locker room speech. Ganz told me to watch Al Pacino in Friday Night Lights for the football locker room speech that never demonizes the opponent, never promises victory, and makes the action a measure of what we're about. You find the same thing in Bhagavad Gita, in the Arjun and Krishna story.

It's the question of what motivates hopeful action and where do you place hope. Is hope placed in winning or in the meaningfulness of what you do?

And so, then the challenge is in how on one hand to create the sense of the anxiety, the urgency, the need for action, and on the other side, the sense of possibility that action can be fruitful.

And fruitful doesn't mean necessarily winning the battle, but it has to have real meaning.

Public narrative articulates the experience of a character facing an urgent challenge, making a choice and experiencing an outcome. Through narrative we can learn to draw on our values to better manage the anxiety of agency.

Ganz explains that public narrative is woven from three elements: a story of why I've been called, (a story of self), a story of why we have been called (a story of us) in the story of the urgent challenge on which we are all called to act the (story of now).

"A story of self communicates who I am, my values, my experience, why I do what I do. Story of us communicates who we are—our shared values are shared experience and why we do what we do. And a story now transforms the present into a moment of challenge hope and choice. "

Ganz explained, "this is all about emotion, this is all about the language of emotion because we map the world both cognitively and affectively. And cognitive mapping is how we understand how the world is, very useful for strategy.

But affective mapping is how we experience what the world means, what's good, what's bad, what motivates us, what inspires us, what scares us. And so our values really are affective in content. They're not the intellectual abstractions, they're emotional congruence. And so if you're going to bring values meaningfully into the source of action, then it's all about emotion, it's called language of emotion."

Narrative is about the why question- Why does this matter? Why do we care?

In other words, he says think surveillance system. It monitors for the unexpected, so the protagonist is going along and then something unexpected happens. And up to that point it's boring. When that happens everybody leans forward, and you have to ask, "Well why do we all lean forward at that point, what's at stake? Why do we care?"

Ganz teaches that stories enact those moments. Stories are built around those moments, because that's what plot is. It's a moment of an encounter with the unexpected and uncertain. And because we can identify empathically the protagonist we are able to experience the fear and the hope and the courage and all the rest of it.

We're able to experience the emotional content of the experience, not just the intellectual takeaway. And so the moral that the story teaches its not just haste makes waste, it's the experience of haste making waste. And so stories teach the heart about agency and about how to access the emotional resources because that's where the protagonists go.

How did they find courage? How did they find hope? How to access the emotional resources or moral resources to deal with the challenge of agency and choice?

And it turns out we're incredibly pretty curious about that because it's important to our lives.

IN CLOSING

There is a lot to learn from these social scientists about how we clean up the polluted public square, but much of it is common sense.

We don't need to go to Yale to learn that shoveling environmental facts out the door won't change minds.

We don't need to go to Harvard to find out that more inspiring stories do a better job of motivating people.

Or go to Cambridge to learn that standing in the shoes of others builds understanding.

We already know much of this...what puzzles me is why don't we act as if we do?

I suspect part of the answer is the feelings that public debate about the climate change and the environment stirs up.

Feelings of guilt and anger and the feeling that the problems are so big that whatever we do isn't going to make much of a difference.

One lesson that stands out for me after interviewing all of these amazing people is that without an emotional dialogue that connects people to values of fairness and justice there is little communication.

If we don't speak to how people feel about these issues we won't connect.

If we aren't aware of how we feel about these issues we won't connect.

If we don't moderate our own feelings with patience and compassion we won't connect with people either.

At the end of my interview with the Dalai Lama he said that when he first started speaking about compassion 40 years ago people didn't pay much attention.

Since 1973 he has repeated his message about compassion, a thousand times with little reaction, but now people around the world are showing genuine interest.

He said there's a Tibetan saying nine times failure, nine times effort. Once you fail then more effort, again fail, again effort.

I found this simple message about patience something of a relief.

As we stood up the Dalai Lama reached out to touch my forehead and said we sometimes think the western brain is more sophisticated, but I think the Tibetan heart has something to offer.

The Tibetan heart may be stronger. Perhaps if we combine the western brain and eastern heart we can be successful.

Perhaps that is it. When people on either side of this climate change debate are operating in different realities with different facts. When we are so far apart that we are just speaking past each other and communication isn't really taking place.

Perhaps its not more facts we need but warmer, more compassionate hearts.

Thank You