

Shifting Values in Response to Climate Change

Tim Kasser

Tamsen Butler was living the busy life of a mother of two, a college student, and a freelance writer when her 15-month-old son could no longer breathe properly. She carried him into the ambulance, clutching “my son in one arm while I used my other arm to balance my laptop bag.” After a couple of nights in a Nebraska hospital tending to her son and staying up late trying to meet writing deadlines, she had an epiphany: “My son was in the hospital and I was a fool.” Rather than working while her son slept, Butler realized she should have been resting. Rather than “clutching my son with only one arm I should have had both arms wrapped around him.” When her son recovered, Butler and her family began spending less time rushing from here to there and reorganized their lives around their health and their time together. They also gave to charity the many extra toys and clothes they had accumulated.¹

J. Eva Nagel awoke one autumn night in upstate New York to find her house was burning. The fire moved slowly enough that she got her children, pets, and photo albums out, but she watched as her clothes, her books, and her dissertation notes were destroyed. Nagel eventually came to see the fire not as a tragedy but rather as “a wake-up call.” Now, she writes, “Our priorities...are

as clear as a crisp autumn evening”: her family, her health, the pursuit of joy, and giving back to the community.²

These are true stories, but they are also metaphors for the situation facing humanity. The world is full of busy people whose lives are jam-packed with appointments and possessions. The Earth is ill and, although not on fire, it is warming at a dangerous rate. As these problems worsen, humanity is faced with a choice: Continue with life as usual, like Butler first did during her son’s hospitalization, or “wake up,” realize that only “fools” persist in a damaging lifestyle, and use the environmental threats humanity faces as an opportunity to shift priorities and values.

The scientific evidence is quite clear about the environmental dangers of continuing to focus on the values and goals so prominent in today’s hyperkinetic, consumeristic, profit-driven culture. A growing body of research shows that the more people value money, image, status, and personal achievement, the less they care about other living species and the less likely they are to recycle, to turn off lights in unused rooms, and to walk or bicycle to work. One study of 400 American adults showed that the more people pursue these extrinsic, materialistic goals, the higher were their “ecological footprints.” And when researchers have asked people to pretend to run a timber company and bid to harvest trees from a state forest, those who care more about money, image,

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and status act more greedily and cut trees down at less sustainable rates.³

In psychological parlance, life challenges spurred Tamsen Butler and Eva Nagel to care less about such materialistic aims and instead focus more on “intrinsic” values and goals. Intrinsic goals are those focused on self-acceptance (personal growth and pursuing an individual’s own interests), affiliation (close relationships with family and friends), physical health (fitness), and community feeling (contributing to the broader world).⁴

Such shifts toward intrinsic values after people experience a very stressful life event are well documented in the psychological literature on “post-traumatic growth.” Sometimes traumatic events (including brushes with death) jar people loose from their typical ways of living and the standard goals they thought were important. As they struggle to understand and assimilate these traumatic events, many people reject materialistic, self-enhancing values and goals and instead express a newfound appreciation for family and friends, for helping others, and for personal growth.⁵

Two recent sets of experiments have even documented that “virtual” death experiences can help people shift, at least temporarily, away from extrinsic and toward intrinsic values. In one study, people scoring high in materialism who were asked to deeply imagine their own death and reflect on the meaning it held for their life later behaved in a more generous, less greedy fashion than did materialistic individuals who thought about neutral topics. In another experiment, sustained reflection on their own death over six days helped intrinsically oriented people maintain intrinsic values, while daily reminders of death helped more materialistic people become more intrinsically oriented.⁶

It is crucial not to underestimate the importance of this shift toward intrinsic val-

ues as a way of helping humans avert ecological catastrophe. For just as scientific research has documented that materialistic, self-enhancing values contribute to climate change, the pursuit of intrinsic values has been empirically associated with more sustainable and climate-friendly ecological activities. What’s more, to ensure that ecological damage is not borne primarily by the most vulnerable (whether that be poor people, other species, or future generations), a shift toward intrinsic values will again be beneficial, as such aims promote more empathy and higher levels of pro-social and cooperative behavior. And, in a happy convergence, a shift toward intrinsic values may also benefit humanity’s well-being: whereas dozens of studies show that materialistic, self-enhancing goals are associated with lower life satisfaction and happiness, as well as higher depression and anxiety, intrinsic values and goals promote greater personal well-being.⁷

But here is the rub. While Butler and Nagel were both able to use their life challenges to reorient their lives, and while some people do grow out of traumas, this does not always occur. Stress, trauma, and fear often lead people to treat themselves, others, and the environment in more damaging ways. Experiments show that when people are led to think only superficially (instead of deeply) about their own death, they become more defensive, more focused on consumption and acquisition, more greedy, and more negative in their attitudes toward wilderness. Similarly, studies show that economically difficult times often increase people’s levels of materialism and decrease their concern for the environment and for other people.⁸

Thus, there are both potentially very scary and very hopeful outcomes of the looming climate crisis. On the one hand, humanity might respond in a defensive fashion,

becoming increasingly fearful and insecure as the climate changes, as species go extinct, and as Earth's resources become scarcer. If this happens, psychological—and, indeed, international—forces are likely to perpetuate the very materialistic values that have contributed to current environmental and social challenges. On the other hand, the present climate crisis could be the “wake-up call” necessary to help humans realize how foolish they have been to fixate on material progress and personal achievement to the detriment of Earth, civil society, and human well-being.

advertising messages almost always activate and encourage the materialistic values known to undermine environmental sustainability. Rather than allowing young children to be exposed to such messages and encouraged to develop such values, some Scandinavian nations have banned advertising to children, thereby helping lessen their materialistic values. Other countries need to follow this precedent. And rather than allowing corporations to deduct the costs of marketing and advertising, the government could tax the tens of billions of dollars spent each year inculcating materialistic values and use that revenue to promote intrinsic values.⁹

American families also need help to reorient their lives away from the pursuit of material affluence and toward the pursuit of “time affluence.” Research shows that people who work fewer hours per week are more likely to be pursuing intrinsic goals, are happier, and are living in more sustainable ways. What's more, a recent cross-national study concluded that “If, by 2050, the world works as many hours as do Americans it could consume 15–30 percent more energy than it would following Europe. The additional carbon emissions could result in 1 to 2 degrees Celsius in extra global warming.” Rather than maintaining practices and policies

that promote time poverty, time affluence can be enhanced by passing laws mandating that Americans be given paid vacations and family leave (which is the case in most every other nation in the world, rich or poor). And the number of holidays per year can be increased while the number of hours worked per week can be decreased so that people commute less and have more time to live in sustainable ways.¹⁰



Caroline Hoos

Extrinsic house of worship? Shopping mall in Hamburg, Germany

Butler and Nagel had little time to prepare for the crises they faced, but scientists have given humanity substantial forewarning about the ecological challenges ahead. Fortunately, there is still a window of opportunity to change lifestyles and societal practices so as to lessen the coming damage. There is much that can be done right now to promote such a shift in values.

First, it is important to recognize that

It is also important to recognize that seeking economic growth above all else is just another way that materialistic values dominate intrinsic pursuits. Rather than allowing a flawed measure like gross domestic product to direct national policy, new indicators such as the Happy Planet Index can be used that incorporate values like people's well-being and environmental sustainability. And rather than focusing on green consumption and the business case for sustainability, environmental organizations can stop capitulating to materialistic values and instead argue for the reduced levels of consumption that most know are necessary to avoid massive climate change.¹¹

And if these and other efforts are too little or too late to avert climate change, leaders from every arena will need to help people experience and interpret the coming ecological challenges in ways that maximize the

likelihood that humanity will grow from them rather than succumb to and worsen them. This will be an enormous challenge, for facilitating growth in the face of trauma entails a tricky balance of helping people to acknowledge, process, and accept the disturbing realities around them while at the same time seeing these realities as opportunities to create a new and better life. It will require leaders who can help people develop a new set of beliefs and meanings, a fundamentally new narrative of what it means to be a civilized human. Ultimately, this will have to be a narrative that promotes growing as people, loving each other, and transcending self-interest to benefit the poor in flooding countries, the species on the verge of extinction, and future generations of humans rather than the current dominant narrative that is obsessed with acquisition, self-enhancement, and profit.¹²

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