

## Adapting to a Future of Disturbances

Ralph C. Martin

From our quiet, grade eight classroom, we were accustomed to seeing familiar patterns on the rural road, through the window. One fall afternoon, a house on a long flatbed trailer crawled into range. The rolling edifice, complete with flashing lights and escorts, was tracked by every student, except Clayton, who must have been more studious than the rest of us. By the time he glanced at the window, the view was nothing but house. He jumped up and shouted, “a house, a house!”

I don’t know what will happen in the future. However, I expect that beyond 2022, our views and experiences will be increasingly unusual. We will hear more startled Clayton-type exclamations about abrupt disturbances and rather than returning to normal patterns, we will more likely be jarred by ongoing significant disruptions.

The James Webb telescope has sharpened scientific peering into the skies and expanded our understanding of the grandeur of the universe, of which we are an infinitesimal part, and yet where we belong. It’s only within the last century that humans have applied exceptional creativity to gain enough technological prowess to reveal the extent to which we are connected to stars and galaxies. Ironically, in this historical moment of being awe-struck by the wonder of our existence, we are simultaneously the most chaotic species, with the potential to extinguish ourselves and other species.

In Canada, we’ve encountered fires, floods, hurricanes and atmospheric rivers and yet livelihoods, to date, have bounced back rather quickly, contrasted with those of farmers in Pakistan who do not have business risk management programs. Zain Haq, in the National Observer, warned that [“soon, Pakistan, or another country in the Global South, will reach wet-bulb temperatures unsustainable for human life. Overnight, millions of people will die, not just be displaced.”](#) Such disturbances will devastate farming and options for survivors in those areas and evoke contrasting Canadian responses to inevitable migrations.

Some humans assume they are more equal than others. An egregious example is the Guardian news exposure of the super-rich, with intentions to maintain luxurious lifestyles through any disturbances that may arise. [“Their extreme wealth and privilege makes them](#)

obsessed with insulating themselves from the very real and present danger of climate change, rising sea levels, mass migrations, global pandemics, nativist panic and resource depletion.”

Jesus’s insight is pertinent. “To whom much is given, much will be required” (Luke 12:48). Perhaps too late, the super-rich will understand ecological principles. Ultimately, their survival is also at stake. Hubris does not trump Earth system science.

While “the polluting elite”, indulge in high-carbon lifestyles to fuel the climate crisis, the V20 (20 vulnerable countries facing the worst impacts of the climate crisis) proposes to levy a windfall tax on oil and gas producers, or on frequent flyers, to raise money for a loss and damage fund. Children intuitively understand that those who have way too much should provide resources to people in the V20, rather than grabbing more.

Johan Rockström, a scientist I fully respect, has methodically laid out the scientific risks of being too slow to arrest human generated green house gas emissions and other human harms to the environment. He is now more urgent in his admonitions. “By the time a global temperature rise of 1.5C is reached ... it would mean that we would be handing over to our children and to all future generations, a planet that will be sliding irreversibly towards possessing fewer and fewer places to live.”

Recently, Ken Dryden opined in the Globe and Mail that “maybe, these past few years with Covid have been a good dress rehearsal to prepare us for the climate change fight ahead.” Nevertheless, we’ve been reticent to accept our part. Canadians act as though it is axiomatic that our lifestyles stay the same even as we carelessly ignore or interfere with the foundations of dynamic ecological stability. As a species we have yet to learn that we are an expendable part of life on Earth.

Let’s try to imagine what Mother Earth would type in a text to all people. “Why don’t you respect the limits of physics, chemistry and biology? You have the knowledge. Listen up; especially those of you who consume the most and have power!” I’m tempted to include an ‘or else’ in her reprimand but I’m guessing she would recognize that human agency can result in a range of outcomes from ethereal creativity to deplorable horrors. How we choose and act is up to us.

We can see the approaching challenge of adapting to more disturbances. Given that humans change reluctantly, it's possible that being forced to adapt to climate and environmental crises will be the only way for us to do what is necessary for our species to survive.

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