

Talking about the unmentionable

At the Environmental Footprint Group meeting on 13 October Philippa Seymour started with a review of the book *Don't even talk about it: why our brains are wired to ignore climate change* by George Marshall. Since there was a small team of professional actors to hand, they were able to illustrate some of his points, the first being the 'social taboo' that often makes people reluctant to talk about climate change in social situations. We then explored some of the reasons for this, which boil down to climate change being a 'wicked problem', i.e. multifaceted, incomplete and constantly changing, and our brains having evolved to cope with threats from identifiable enemies and sudden changes to our present circumstances rather than a future threat that doesn't feel particularly dangerous to us in Western Europe at present.

Marshall criticises messages about climate change (CC) because they don't engage people's emotions as well as their analytical brains, or because the narratives or symbols used are confusing or frame CC in a particular way. One mistake, which he describes as possibly fatal, is that treaties designed to limit CC were based on previous treaties on acid rain and the ozone layer and concentrate on limiting emissions rather than capping the amount of fossil fuels that can be produced, which would have been more effective.

Marshall, who says he 'respects, but does not share' religious views, thinks that those who want to raise public awareness of the need to combat CC could learn a lot from churches, which he describes as 'a real-time experiment in what moves, excites and persuades people' using narrative, image and enactment. In particular, he commends churches for engaging both hearts and minds, embodying non-negotiable sacred values, recognising the importance of contact with other people in person not just on websites, and forgiveness, which he sees as the way to transform destructive feelings of guilt, blame and anger into positive emotions such as empathy and reconstruction.

An American member of the Mennonite Church confirmed Marshall's view that CC divides Americans along 'class' lines. The right-wing and the ignorant anti-authoritarian vote is sceptical, regarding it as a federal government plot, so the American Dream, the South and cynical Big Business oppose the North and the left. 'Environmental' is seen as a 'muesli term'. Hence a trend to speak rather of 'creation care' for CC. He had the impression that the EU had already accepted the existence of CC and moved into discussion of possible mitigation, as witness the German government's decision to end nuclear energy. The Mennonite Church, a 16th century pacifist movement, emphasised the need for sustainability and peace with the earth. Simplicity is a core value, as is the importance of collective decision-making for survival.

Marshall lists about 50 ideas for ways of proceeding from the current situation. Our discussion focused mainly on one of these: framing CC as an informed choice between desirable and catastrophic outcomes, in which people could understand that inaction was itself a choice. The trick with toddlers was to offer them an apparent choice for an ineluctable course of action: Which colour raincoat, not Do you want to come shopping? Should work with adults: do you want to take the train or the bus?

Although Luxembourg is ultra-materialistic, there were signs of progress: Mercedes Luxembourg reported that V8 engines were no longer selling. The high cost of CC investment implied a choice; but shorter-term considerations, such as the vote on preserving the NHS or Ebola action, implied shelving CC. History showed that major shifts in behaviour waited for an existential threat; evidence of major weather events was accumulating, but still not convincing people here. Perhaps it was more effective to speak of 'atmospheric energy release' rather than 'global warming': CC experts weren't good at communication skills. Unrelated problems, if visible, could help create a response from the emotional side of the brain: ocean pollution, for instance, or rising sea levels with

maps to show the effects, which would be felt even in the Netherlands as well as in India, China and the USA. Faith in white coats and 'ingenuity will find a way' continued to prevail. But Fos-sur-Mer in southern France, which apparently cannot be saved from a sea-level rise, showed this was mistaken.

Population was likely to stabilise in 200 years' time; meanwhile, making a big issue into a sacred value, thus widening the 'circle of moral concern', was difficult. Ethiopia had chosen hydro power to drive its industrialisation programme, but damming the White Nile had created tension with its neighbour Egypt. It was difficult for Western politicians to tell emerging nations that 'We did it wrong', but some lessons had been learned, e.g. African reliance on the mobile phone rather than landlines. Perhaps the automotive example was instructive: the tax system had incentivised invention to promote fuel efficiency in cars.

Public resistance to logical change was exemplified by the mass opposition to the introduction of water charges in Ireland. A simple symbol focuses resistance; CC needed to find the right icons, and the right level of municipal representation to introduce change.

Edward and Philippa Seymour

George Marshall's book is published by Bloomsbury. It is available now in hardback or e-book, but the paperback won't be ready until next summer.