

Bob's Opening Talk

Good morning and welcome to the first ever international conference on building personal and psycho-social-spiritual resilience--or in short form--human resilience for climate change

It's great to see everyone here. The conference is sold out with people from throughout the U.S., many from Canada, and a number from Europe and other locations-- welcome to you all.

Before I go further please allow me to go over some logistical information.

Please silence your cell phone and other electronic devices and please keep them silent throughout all keynotes, plenaries, workshops, and panel discussions.

The conference agenda is packed and there is just 15 minute breaks between sessions. We therefore ask that you move promptly between this floor and the 9th floor breakout rooms because there are only two elevators to move everyone.

If you want to leave the 9th floor to come back to this floor during or after a workshop look for one of the students with an elevator monitor badge who can swipe the wall sensor to give you access to the elevators.

Today and tomorrow there will be a number of plenary discussions and at the end of the day today there will be a brief Q&A session with today's speakers. If you want to ask questions during any of these sessions there are note cards in the foyer outside this room where you can write them down. We will not take live questions from the audience.

More logistical information can be found in your information packet.

I now want to give a great big thanks to the ITRC steering committee members who worked very hard organizing this event.

- **Trudy Townsend from Creating Sanctuary in The Dalles**
- **Dr. Lise Van Susteren,**
- **Mark Johnson ED of the Center and Library for the Bible and Social Justice,**
- **Elaine Miller-Karas ED with the Trauma Resource Institute,**
- **Jennifer Andrews from the UNH sustainability institute**
- **Dr. Maggie Bennington Davis with HealthShare Oregon,**
- **John MacIlwain with the Garrison Institute Climate Mind and Behavior Program**
- **Patrick Caroline from the Franciscan Action Network**
- **Dr. Susan Spieler**

Let's give a round of applause to this group of visionary, committed people, many of which are here today, who worked very hard making this conference happen.

I also want to thank Katie Gloede who worked for the ITRC as a climate fellow from the Sustainability Institute at the University of New Hampshire this past summer and did so much to get the conference organized. Katie, thanks very much.

Katie is going to be tweeting throughout the conference about key points made in some of the sessions and other important information. The twitter handle and hashtag can be found in your information packet as well. Please join in if you hear something noteworthy.

Another individual who helped make this conference possible is Peggy Bloom, the conference administrator--and who is also my wife. This event would not be happening without her!

Last, but not least, I want to give a tremendous thanks to all of the organizational co-sponsors of the conference

- **American Public Health Association**
- **Health Care Without Harm**
- **The International Consortium for Organizational Resilience**
- **National Center for Health in Public Housing**

- **George Mason University Center for Climate Change Information Program on Climate & Health**
- **National Association of County and City Health Officials**
- **Climate Access**
- **EcoAdapt and the National Adaptation Forum**
- **The Washington DC Department of Energy and The Environment**
- **DisasterDoc**
- **Practice Greenhealth**
- **Franciscan Action Network**
- **The Trauma Resource Institute**
- **The Center and Library for the Bible and Social Justice**
- **University of New Hampshire Sustainability Institute**
- **The Garrison Institute Climate Mind and Behavior Program**
- **and last but not least the The Resource Innovation Group and Willamette University in Oregon-- my affiliations**

Let's give a big round of applause to all of these organizations for helping to make this conference possible.

I'd now like to invite everyone to take a moment to settle yourself, turn inward and tune into what's happening within you. If you are willing, I invite you to watch yourself breathing for a few moments, watching the breath enter and then leave your body. Or, you might notice the type of thoughts going through your head without getting caught up in them. Or, you could scan your body to notice pleasant, neutral, and unpleasant sensations without judging them in any way or trying to change anything.

Just take a few moments to turn inward, notice what is going on within you and become more present.

I've just described 3 different skills you can use to regulate your nervous system. Over the next two days you are going to hear a whole lot of information. You might want to take time every now and then to use of these skills, or others you learn at the conference to calm your nervous system and become more present.

With that I want to turn for a moment to why we are all here.

Experience from around the world, and a growing body of research, indicate that the psychological traumas resulting from more frequent and extreme storms, floods, wildfires, and other disasters resulting from rising global temperatures...

as well as a growing boatload of persistent overwhelming--or toxic--stresses such as long-term heat waves and droughts, water and food shortages, involuntary migration, new illnesses and diseases such as Zika Virus, the loss of community, connection to place, and culture, and much more...

are eroding vital personal and collective protective systems and amplifying pre-existing mental health problems, generating many new instances of severe anxiety, depression, PTSD, suicides, and more, and increasing a sense of hopelessness, helplessness, crime, interpersonal violence, and other psycho-social-spiritual maladies.

Left unaddressed, as temperatures rise, the adverse human reactions to climate change are likely be as bad or worse than the physical impacts.

This conference seeks to raise these mounting crises to the national and international levels and respond to it by kick-starting comprehensive preventative initiatives to build the capacity of individuals, organizations, and entire communities to cope with the adversities associated with climate change without harming themselves or other people...and help them learn how to use those adversities as transformational catalysts to learn, grow, and increase personal, social, and environmental wellbeing.

Our response to the climate crisis so far has focused on:

1. Mitigation--- Aggressive greenhouse gas reductions significantly above what has occurred so far is absolutely essential.
2. Technical adaptation--- which focus almost exclusively on external physical changes. This is all also extremely important--the less physical impacts the less trauma and stress
3. More recently efforts to prepare for the Physical Health impacts have also begun

As important as they are, these responses are totally insufficient to address the adverse human reactions to climate change. To the extent that the personal mental health and psycho-social-spiritual impacts have been addressed, the dominant response has been to improve our disaster mental health programs.

They are extremely important and must be continually strengthened.

But as global temperatures rise toward 3.6F or 2C above pre-industrial levels as is now inevitable, our disaster mental health programs will be increasingly overwhelmed. Most also focus primarily on stabilizing people during and after disasters and few provide long term follow up.

In addition--and this is very important--our disaster mental health programs do not help people deal with the many non-disaster related chronic toxic stresses associated with climate change.

It is no surprise--and not a criticism--that our primary response to these challenges has been to strengthen the disaster mental health infrastructure. We have never faced anything like this before, and are struggling to understand and develop the concepts needed to adequately describe and respond to the situation.

Under these conditions, it is only natural to press forward with approaches we are familiar with.

But given what we have seen already, and given research on likely future mental health and psycho-social-spiritual impacts of rising temperature, in addition to strengthening our disaster mental health programs, it is imperative to launch comprehensive preventative initiatives to proactively increase the capacity of individuals and groups to respond psychologically, socially, and spiritually in constructive ways to the challenges that lie ahead.

We know prevention works! It has worked:

- To reduce smoking and HIV
- in minimum age drinking laws
- School drop out rates
- Seat belt laws
- and many other issues

These and other successful prevention initiatives took a long time to produce results.

Preventative initiatives to build human resilience for the climate change can also work ---but they will also require a persistent long-term effort. This means we must start now and continually monitor, evaluate, and improve them over time.

What's involved with building human resilience for climate change?

First, it is important to remember that effective human resilience has internal personal dimensions and external dimensions related to social norms, practices, and policies.

Good personal resilience skills increase an individual's capacity to regulate and stabilize their nervous systems in the midst of adversity, and avoid, or more quickly recover from, extreme fear-based fight, flight, and freeze reactions when they are not needed.

A basic understanding of how trauma and toxic stress can adversely affect the human mind and body and cause people to harm themselves or others is one important element of this capacity.

The ability to use a wide variety of methods, such as those I mentioned when I invited you to become settled a few moments ago, and stay connected to your social support are also key to calming our bodies, emotions, and thoughts.

When people have this capacity they have much greater capacity to make wise and skillful decisions in the midst of adversity.

But it important to understand that as temperatures rise, many deeply held concepts and beliefs about the way the world works and our role in it will be shattered.

This indicates that, going forward, another essential element of building human resilience for climate change is the capacity to find meaning, direction, and hope in the midst of trails and tribulations.

A clear sense of ethically-grounded purpose can help motivate individuals and groups to engage in concrete actions aimed at creating a good, meaningful, and hopeful life even when we are not sure what the future holds.

Within organizations and communities, this involves leaders coming together to promote norms, practices, and policies that create psychologically and emotionally safe, equitable, and just cultures of human resilience.

Psychologists often call the process of using adversity as a transformational catalyst to increase a sense of wellbeing above pre-crisis levels Post-Traumatic Growth or Adversity-Based Growth.

This is what we now need to focus on--and it is why we emphasize *Transformational* in the name of the ITRC.

Over the next two days we are going to hear from practitioners and researchers who focus on the internal and external dimensions of building human resilience.

I want to clarify that launching preventative human resilience building initiatives will not make people in saints, nor will it make the climate crisis go away.

But they will go a long way in minimizing adverse impacts, reversing them more quickly when they do occur, and helping people transverse the challenges ahead constructively without harming themselves, other people, or the natural environment so we can emerge in a form that is not yet fully understood that allows people to flourish.

It is also important to note that none of the skills, tools, and methods you will learn about in the next two days were developed specifically to address the impacts of climate change. They were developed to help people deal with ACES, organizational dysfunction, community violence, and other adversities.

This means that if comprehensive preventative initiatives to build human resilience for climate change are launched, they will also help millions of people deal with many other adversities they face now and in the future.

So let me now briefly explain the flow of the conference.

In a moment I will introduce Tom Di Liberto--- he will give Climate Change 101 talk so we are all on the same page about the physical risks individuals and communities face from rising global temperatures.

He will be followed by Dr. Jeff Stiefel and Dr. Lisa Van Susteren--who will provide an overview of the mental health and psycho-social-spiritual impacts of CC

The rest of the conference will focus on what we can do about these issues.

You will begin with different approaches for building the resilience of individuals and we will start with an inspiring keynote from Dr. Rick Hanson on *Hardwiring Personal Resilience*.

This afternoon you will hear a number different approaches to build human resilience within organizations

We will start tomorrow with a number different approaches for building personal and psycho-social-spiritual resilience in communities.

We will then focus on a number of issues that overlap with all that has been discussed so far, including building resilience to prevent interpersonal violence, and culturally appropriate methods for building human resilience within communities of faith, communities of color, and low income communities in non-industrial countries.

At lunch tomorrow a panel of federal officials will discuss how federal agencies are already engaged in and support this work.

Tomorrow afternoon we will hear from professionals in three different sectors about how what they are doing to build human resilience and how they can expand their efforts or launch new initiatives that integrate the information heard at the conference.

We will close the event tomorrow with a fabulously motivational call to action keynote by Mr. Disaster Doc, Dr. Mark Kiem.

I now want to introduce Tom Di Liberto.