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Major ‘cultural swerve’ on climate may be near

BY BOB DOPPELT

For The Register-Guard

NOV. 30, 2017

Even though climate change denial remains common, a major shift is underway in how Americans perceive the crisis.

That is the perspective of Dr. Sandra Bloom, founder of the Sanctuary Model — which helps groups function in a humane, democratic and socially responsible manner — and author of numerous books, including “Restoring Sanctuary.” She shared her hopeful perspective at a recent conference I coordinated in Portland. The need for an optimistic outlook hit home last month after a friend in northern Florida emailed me saying that Hurricane Irma miraculously missed her town, but many residents still had “hurricane hangovers ... they couldn’t think clearly or process things.” Further, she was distressed from helping her father, whose longtime home and neighborhood in Houston were destroyed by Hurricane Harvey.

They are among the millions of people who have been traumatized by the historic hurricanes, record heat waves, expansive wildfires and smoke, unprecedented monsoons and other disasters aggravated by rising global temperatures. Like the people in my friend’s hometown, thousands who were not directly affected still experienced secondhand trauma.

Not surprisingly, the Trump administration reacted by willfully denying that human-induced climate change played a role in the disasters. Instead, the administration continued to promote the unbridled use of fossil fuels. News reports indicate their efforts are driven in large part by the desire to protect their personal investments in fossil fuels, and the financial interests and power of their cohorts.

Trump’s climate denial can differ from the disregard seen among numerous federal, state and local officials, business executives and private individuals. In her

talk, Bloom described how for many people climate denial is a psychological defense mechanism used to avoid facts or experiences they fear might be painful to them or the groups they identify with.

For instance, the last time atmospheric carbon emissions were this high, sea levels were 100 feet higher than they are today, average surface temperatures were 11 degrees Fahrenheit warmer, and human civilization did not exist. These facts threaten to shatter some people's deeply held beliefs about the righteousness of burning fossil fuels, their faith in the ability to extract and consume resources endlessly, their trust in unregulated capitalism, or other creeds.

Bloom explained that the pain generated by these realities causes some people to go to great lengths to lie to themselves and others to avoid having to see the harm their worldviews and behaviors produce. She also said some people often deny their responsibility to acknowledge the climate crisis by blaming others, minimizing the problem, justifying it in often bizarre ways, or attacking others in childish, socially inappropriate ways.

An audience member blurted out that Bloom had just described President Trump to the tee.

These and other causes of denial often lead to collective denial, which is the refusal of a large group or an entire society to take responsibility for its destructive actions by forgetting painful realities and the suffering they produce. It is often caused by the people's collective desire to defend their cultural identity and believe in their goodness and innocence. Some oil and coal producing regions of the United States, for example, and groups such as the tea party, are in a state of collective denial about climate change.

Each form of denial, Bloom said, can lead to a repetition of the same ways of thinking and acting that created the problems in the first place. This makes continued denial very dangerous.

Despite these patterns, Bloom urged everyone to remain hopeful. She mentioned the optimistic perspective of renowned psychiatrist Dr. Robert Jay Lifton, whose new book "The Climate Swerve" says that, despite denial by many corporations and governments, there are signs that humanity is nearing a major change — a profound cultural swerve — in thinking and action on climate change.

Just as much as humanity in the 1980s woke up and realized that nuclear weapons could destroy most of the planet, polling and other signs indicate that the relentless disasters here and abroad are forcing people to realize that anthropogenic climate change threatens all of humanity.

Hopefully my friend in Florida, her community, and her father will take heart in the perspectives of Drs. Bloom and Lifton. Don't lose hope.

It is a primal truth that, as painful as it can be, adversity is often our greatest impetus for learning, growth and transformation.

Bob Doppelt of Eugene, executive director of The Resource Innovation Group, writes a monthly column for The Register-Guard on climate change and issues related to sustainability.