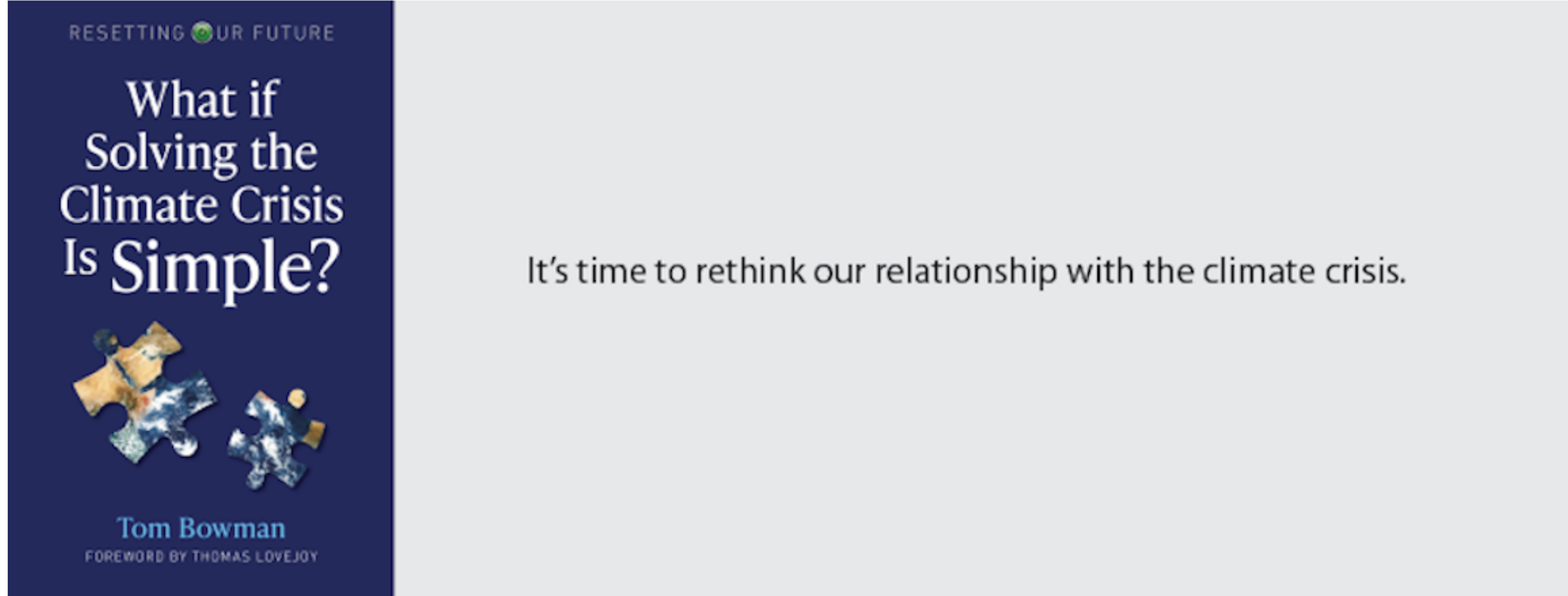


Rethinking the Climate Challenge to Motivate Action: An interview with Tom Bowman

Submitted by Meredith Herr on Tue, 2021-02-16 11:53



What if solving the climate crisis is simple? This is the question posed by Tom Bowman, social entrepreneur and strategic advisor for the U.S. Action for Climate Empowerment Strategic Planning Framework, who proposes a more productive way to talk about climate change and build hope. I spoke with Tom about his new book and how climate communicators can reframe the climate crisis. (Our conversation has been edited and condensed.)

Meredith Herr: Can you share how the initial idea for the book came about?



Tom Bowman: I've been grappling with these issues for a long time. I was asked to join a group organizing the [Action for Climate Empowerment](#) (ACE) Strategic Planning Framework for the United States and introduced to Tim Ward, the publisher of Changemakers Books, which are short, punchy thought leader books produced extraordinarily quickly. The [Resetting our Future](#) series is focused on how we can tackle some of society's biggest challenges as we rebuild from the COVID pandemic and create a future we would prefer.

Who did you have in mind as your core audience?

There are three key audiences, with the first being the climate action community; those who do outreach and informal education, including interpreters and leaders at aquariums, zoos, and museums, people who run community organizations, and Climate Access members. A second is policy leaders. I think the book can help them think about their work differently. And the third audience is ordinary folks in all walks of life who have the potential to be leaders in their communities and empowering them to come forward.

A key focus of the book is rejecting the framing of climate change as a “wicked problem” and moving toward what you refer to as a “simple premise”. How can that shift help climate communicators combat fatalism and motivate action?

People have learned about climate change from scientists, who inevitably encourage us to build our systems thinking skills. That's a wonderful goal, but it's not something that's easily done, and it doesn't happen quickly, especially given the low levels of science literacy in the United States. If you make climate action contingent upon that happening first, we're in big trouble.

The “wicked problem” idea is a byproduct of a systems thinking approach to the climate crisis. It happens when we frame climate change as a tangle of interacting global systems. A wicked problem is one that is too complicated to fully understand, let alone solve. We can our best to manage it and expect to take our lumps along the way.

I can't think of a more dispiriting way to interpret the issue. It leaves people feeling small and powerless. But here's the thing: the wicked problem idea is just and interpretation, and interpretations are not reality. We can examine them and, if we find them wanting, we can change them.

So, I did a thought experiment to ask what happens if you set the wicked problem premise aside. What happens if our premise is that solving the climate crisis is actually simple? From this perspective, there is only one thing that we need to do: stop burning fossil fuels. We want to do it quickly, of course, and we don't want to fail. So I offer a new formula for climate action in the book: “stop burning fossil fuels well before mid-century and absolutely, positively do not fail.”

This interpretation has lots of advantages, one being that it puts meaningful climate action in reach of every household, organization, and government. I might not be able to untangle global transportation systems, for example, but I can certainly figure out how to manage my company's shipping needs differently. A second advantage is that a big, bold stretch goal like this causes people to rethink everything they do. In other words, solving the climate crisis is no longer a hugely complex Gordian knot of entangled systems. Instead, it is a problem that we can attack from all sides by pursuing a single, actionable imperative.

You weave the pandemic into the narrative, particularly in relation to behavior change and the dangers of politicizing science. Can you share how you see the relationship between the public response to COVID and climate?

The horrors of the COVID pandemic also demonstrate how rapidly societies can change when the motivation is high enough. Everybody suddenly stayed home last March and it happened in a heartbeat. You could sense this shift in consciousness and in that moment. People sacrificed their jobs and businesses; governments shifted trillions of dollars toward relief; and we all responded to simple, clear, actionable mantra about flattening the curve. After that, the Trump administration ignored the CDC playbook for effective public health messaging, created confusion with a counter-narrative, and undermined the unity of action.

We've been dealing with confusion, dissuasion, and disinformation about climate change for a long time too. But now, with public concern about climate at an all-time high, we have a real opportunity to rebuild from the COVID pandemic and the economic crisis differently.

For one thing, it's high time we stop trying to convince deniers and just acknowledge that the science is real, the crisis is urgent, and move on to building hope and giving people a sense of self-efficacy. Hope has been a missing link, and people are unaware of how much good climate work is actually going on.

What is the role of state and local decision making in tackling climate change? What do city leaders need to build their capacity?

The local, municipal, and state levels are where climate action is. There are federal agencies doing some really helpful work, of course, but a lot of good policy-making is happening at sub-national levels. The work being done by Climate Access, the Urban Sustainability Directors Network and C40 Cities is really important because this is where people experience better health, improved equity, and stronger social capital directly. There is more work to be done in cities too, because so much of the public outreach is managed by municipal leaders who don't have communication training, or the budgets to hire outreach professionals. Let's build their capacity to do effective climate communication in their own communities.

I'm encouraged that Biden and Harris have announced that they are focusing on supporting state and local action. This aligns with a major finding in the ACE strategy, which to bring elevate local knowledge, local decision-making, and local community participation. The issues are most salient where people live. That's where people experience climate and climate justice impacts and where people feel motivated to effect change.

You have a chapter called “Climate Justice and a White Male” where you describe the necessity for white people to release power and take on the work of genuine engagement and building mutual trust with Black, Indigenous and People of Color. Can you talk more about this process and why all climate solutions need to have justice and equity at their core?

The ACE work has been transformational for me in many ways because the approach we took from day one was to build an equitable process in developing a strategic planning framework and bring forward the voices of the people who participated. The ACE process revealed a depth of knowledge, experience, and wisdom in this broad community. When you experience this inspiring potential first-hand, it changes your perspective on who can really solve these crises.

Who really owns the climate crisis? We've been led to believe that only technical elites can understand it well enough. We've been told that our national political leaders need to forge solutions. Many of us who work on these issues struggle to gain influence within these spaces. The truth is, though, that the expertise is everywhere. People are doing extraordinary work in communities across the country, and in a wide variety of professions. The ACE work is all about finding and mainstreaming ways to build genuine dialog, collaboration, and co-creation of our shared future.

One of the things everyone can do right now is become a signatory to the ACE framework because the more signatories we get, the more influence this work will have in hopefully leading to an equitable process for developing a national strategy.

You assert that information is not enough and that culture change is necessary. We've seen that addressing the information gap is insufficient. How can communicators help drive this culture of informed empowerment?

We are social animals, and we are highly attuned to the people who matter to us. Culture change is about the behaviors and unconscious signals that people send to each other and that influence all of our decisions. Talking about climate change still makes people uncomfortable because we haven't yet created a social context that rewards people for doing so. So, we have a lot of norms are counterproductive.

Changing culture is about shifting our shared expectations, identities, and understanding of what matters most. It's about creating a safe space for prioritizing climate action. I see it as laying a foundation for policymaking. If we do this right—meaning, if we give communities a sense of ownership in their climate future—we could potentially build bipartisan support as well.

In these difficult times, with most people unsure that leaders will do what's necessary to address climate change, how can we build a greater sense of efficacy and hope?

I think 2021 is going to be the year of hope but it's going to be a bumpy ride. Biden has assembled a first-class climate team and his administration has drawn the right connections between climate action and racial justice. There's hope around the COVID vaccine too. This means we have new tools, but the challenges are still there.

Part of our job as communicators is to start weaving together and amplifying the hopeful signals that demonstrate humanity's capacity to tackle these challenges. It's about getting away from a our reliance on top-down leadership and acknowledging the bottom-up work and innovation that create new opportunities. I think this moment calls upon those of us who have the capacity to deal with uncertainty to take new risks and find new ways to learn, provide support, and lead. I know that Climate Access members are already doing this work, and we need to draw more people in from the sidelines and encourage them to join with us.

- [Learn more about "What if Solving the Climate Crisis is Simple" by Tom Bowman](#)

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