

Rotarian Magazine, March 2022, published 3 Letters to the Editor re: Frank Bures' article about Global Warming

The first (of 3 letters) is our club's letter, authored by Paul Schwarz for RCWP:

(The original Bures article from December 2021 is reprinted below)

GLOBAL WARNINGS

We were shocked and dismayed to read the article by Frank Bures ["The End of the World as We Know It?"] in the December issue. Bures equates the warnings about global warming to ancient mythology. This isn't just nonsense; it's worse than that. Rotary has clubs in parts of the world that are already feeling serious effects of climate change. For that matter, here in the United States the changing weather patterns are unmistakable.

Of all organizations on the planet, Rotary should be at the forefront, a leader in urging the adoption of policies to stem the creeping danger. It is shameful to see you instead giving space to someone whose message might well be summed up as: "Don't worry, be happy."

— *The Board of the Rotary Club of White Plains, New York*

The information in "The End of the World as We Know It?" would certainly not pass The Four-Way Test. To borrow a phrase from The Music Man, "Either you're closing your eyes to a situation you do not wish to acknowledge, or you are not aware of the caliber of disaster indicated by" the rise of average temperatures on our planet!

As UN Secretary-General António Guterres wrote this past August, the world has already warmed by 1.2 degrees Celsius [compared with preindustrial levels], putting us at risk of exceeding the internationally agreed limit of 1.5 degrees. We need to start addressing the climate crisis today. There is so much that individuals can do, and even more that we can do as part of Rotary.

— *Rachel Williams, Georgetown, Massachusetts*

A line in Frank Bures' article refers to "the myths of the Judeo-Christian tradition." You could easily have edited it to say "the Bible," and it would have changed nothing. To the Christian, the Book of Revelation is not myth but prophecy.

— *Jewell Shivery, Christina, Pennsylvania*

This is the article about which we sent the "Letter to the Editor."

https://magazine.rotary.org/rotary/december_2021/MobilePagedArticle.action?articleId=1746212#articleId1746212

The end of the world as we know it?

Apocalyptic narratives on climate change don't foretell our destiny

By Frank Bures

ONE MORNING AS I WAS READING THE PAPER, I came across an alarming headline:

"A 'Code Red' on Climate Change." It went on: "New U.N. Report Shows Many Dire Effects Are Locked In; Avoiding Catastrophe Will Take Aggressive Action." My daughter, who's 13, glanced over at it.

"I don't like how we're called Generation Z," she said. For a moment, I thought she was changing the subject.

"Really?" I asked her. "Why not?"

"Because it makes it seem like we're the last generation," she said. "Like we have to fix climate change and save the world. Or else we're the last generation. The one that fails."

"Well," I said nonchalantly, "the world isn't going to end in your lifetime."

"But what about my kids'?" she countered. "And my grandkids'?"

I hesitated: "... probably not then, either."

This wasn't exactly the reassurance she wanted, but the conversation had caught me off guard. Perhaps I should have been better prepared: Many parents have been seeing in their kids what's known as "eco-anxiety" or "climate anxiety" — a phenomenon that has become a major mental health issue for some children. Some adults have even experienced it themselves.

The recent publication of the first major study of eco-anxiety in young people across the globe has shed some light on the issue. Researchers from the University of Bath in England interviewed 10,000 people between the ages of 16 and 25 from countries including Finland, India, Nigeria, and the United States. Their findings were similar to the results of my own survey of one young person.

Across the world, 56 percent of young people feel that "humanity is doomed," while 75 percent agree that "the future is frightening." A whopping 84 percent are either extremely, very, or moderately worried about climate change — and 39 percent say they are hesitant to have children. The authors noted that "over 50 percent felt sad, anxious, angry, powerless, helpless, and guilty. More than 45 percent said their feelings about climate change negatively affected their daily life and functioning."

I don't think eco-anxiety has affected my daughter's ability to function, but it's clearly clouding her view of her future. And amid a constant drumbeat of dire predictions, with politicians announcing we only have something like 12 years left to fix climate change, it's no wonder.

For weeks afterward, I thought about this conversation. Often I found my mind going back to my own adolescent fears. As a young child, I was mildly traumatized by an episode of Pat Robertson's *700 Club* that showed evidence that the four horsemen of the apocalypse were on their way. In grade school in the 1980s, the threat that hung over us was nuclear war. In college, I worried about the "population bomb" that was set to go off any day. And then came Y2K, peak oil, the Mayan calendar, and so on.

Climate change may be fundamentally different from those other potential world-ending events. The science shows that climate change is happening and that humans are driving it. But humanity doesn't have a particularly great track record of predicting even the end of your average recession or pandemic, let alone the end of the world. And there are some good reasons to avoid end-times thinking and language.

"The problem with apocalypticism and this doom and gloom about our inevitable fate," says Sarah Jaquette Ray, author of *A Field Guide to Climate Anxiety: How to Keep Your Cool on a Warming Planet*, "is that most people psychologically either check out or give up. They become so despairing that it's hard for them to do the work that would be required to stave off that fate, or to adapt to it."

The emotional effects of climate apocalypticism are one reason to avoid that framing, especially with children. "Telling kids over and over that their fate is sealed by what happens in the next 10 years is not only not true," Ray says, "it's cruel. It's unethical."

Another reason to not use doomsday language is that it isn't solely a reflection of the climate situation — it's also a reflection of what's known as the negativity bias, in which humans tend to give more weight to negative information than to positive.

"Urgency and apocalypse sell," Ray says. "It's really effective. On the political side, it gets people to surrender stuff. It helps pass legislation. But the doom and gloom is not necessarily the only reality we live in. The science is nuanced. There's so much gray area, but there's enough evidence that many things are improving, or turning around, or people are taking action, that we must hold on to that to counterbalance the negativity bias in the news and in our brains."

Michael Shellenberger, author of *Apocalypse Never: Why Environmental Alarmism Hurts Us All*, contrasts what he calls "apocalyptic environmentalism" with "environmental humanism," which he defines as an approach that puts economic development and technology at the center of the environmental effort.

In his book, he points out that many of the things we take to be signs of the end of the world are actually more complex than they might seem. And, he notes, there are positive trends that don't make the headlines.

"U.S. carbon emissions declined 22 percent between 2005 and 2020," Shellenberger says. "That's massive. The Paris Agreement called for 17 percent. So we beat the target, which never happens."

While some of that decline was due to the pandemic, it accelerated a trend that was already underway. And it gets us closer to where we need to be.

"The risk of triggering tipping points increases at higher planetary temperatures," Shellenberger writes, "and thus our goal should be to reduce emissions and keep temperatures as low as possible without undermining economic development."

Even though the climate situation may be starting to turn around, the appeal of the apocalyptic scenario still runs deep. Shellenberger points out how climate apocalypticism mirrors some of the myths in the Judeo-Christian tradition. But in truth, it may go back even further.

In his book *The Origins of the World's Mythologies*, Michael Witzel, a professor of Sanskrit at Harvard, looked at myths from across the world and mapped the similarities. What he found was that mythologies from across the globe share a certain structure, or narrative: one in which the world is created in darkness or chaos, then goes through various ages until, finally, it ends.

Tracing these stories through time and geography, Witzel found that the original narrative probably emerged somewhere in southwestern Asia about 40,000 years ago, then spread with human migration across emerging cultures, appearing as far away as Iceland and the Inca empire.

All of these cultures' mythologies share what Witzel calls the "Laurasian" storyline — named for Laurasia, the ancient northern landmass on whose remnants many of these mythologies evolved. Over time, it proved remarkably powerful and subsumed nearly all other mythological systems. All major world religions are founded on a Laurasian narrative, where the world is born in a cosmic soup and ends in a bang, and today 95 percent of the world's people subscribe to some version of it.

None of this, of course, is very helpful to your average 13-year-old kid. But the realization that for as long as 40,000 years we have been predicting the end of the world, and it has yet to arrive, could provide some stress relief. Maybe for now it's enough to assume that the future will probably not look much like our predictions. Because the apocalyptic narrative and the resulting climate anxiety can ruin your day, and even your life. And it could become a self-fulfilling prophecy that destroys our world.

"It requires work to focus on the positive," Ray says. "It's very hard. It's a discipline. But we have all the technology we need to do this. We have all the science we need to do this. We have significant political and public will. We're poised to do some important stuff here."

For my part, I'll tell my daughter that climate change is a problem to be solved and that we are on our way to solving it. I will tell her that hope is humanity's greatest renewable resource. And I will tell her that good things are happening, and that they matter at least as much as the bad.

Frank Bures is a longtime contributor to Rotary and the author of *The Geography of Madness*.

For the record, here is the email thread between Rotarian Paul K Schwarz and the Rotarian magazine leading up to the publication of our club's letter.

#1

From: Paul Schwarz <pkschwarz1@gmail.com>
Sent: Wednesday, 01 December, 2021 7:48 PM
To: Yourletters <yourletters@rotary.org>
Subject: Article by Frank Bures

That article is a disgrace. Shame! This was the most polite and printable version. We hope you got many complaints. This is from the Board of Directors of the Rotary Club of White Plains, NY

To the editor:

We were shocked and dismayed to read the article by Frank Bures in the latest issue of The Rotarian. You must have searched far and wide to find a climate change denier, one so deaf to science that he equates the warnings about global warming to science fiction and ancient mythology. This isn't just nonsense – it's worse than that. We certainly have clubs in parts of the world already feeling serious effects of climate change. For that matter, here in the U.S. changing weather patterns are unmistakable. Of all organizations on the planet, Rotary should be in the forefront, a leader in urging the adoption of policies to stem the creeping danger. It is shameful to see you instead giving space to someone whose message might well be summed up as, "Don't worry – Be happy."

The Board of the Rotary Club of White Plains, NY

#2

On Mon, Dec 6, 2021 at 9:48 AM Yourletters <yourletters@rotary.org> wrote:
Dear Rotarian Schwarz,

Thank you for sending the letter regarding the essay, "The end of the world as we know it?" from our December issue. We will consider running it in an upcoming issue but cannot promise publication due to the many letters we receive each month. We appreciate hearing your views.

Thank you again for thinking of *Rotary magazine*.

Best regards,
The Editors

#3

From: Paul Schwarz [mailto:pkschwarz1@gmail.com]
Sent: Monday, 06 December, 2021 10:54 AM
To: Yourletters <yourletters@rotary.org>
Subject: Re: Article by Frank Bures

I respect the fact that you receive many letters. I would hope that this month many of them were expressing the same shock and disgust at that dangerously ignorant article. You might consider that this was the unanimous view of the board of our club, and not a single individual.

#4

From: **Yourletters** <yourletters@rotary.org>

Date: Mon, Jan 24, 2022 at 7:14 PM

Subject: RE: Article by Frank Bures>

To: Paul Schwarz <pkschwarz1@gmail.com>

Dear Paul,

I just wanted to let you know that the magazine has decided to publish your letter below in our March issue (attributed to The Board of the Rotary Club of White Plains, New York).

Thank you for reading.

John M. Cunningham
Associate Editor, *Rotary* magazine
