

Letter to Pat Kenny, RTE

Broadcast August 20th, 2009

Paula Downey
downey youell **associates**

This letter responded to an interview on August 19th with people participating in the week-long Climate Camp in Co Offaly.

Hello Pat

The way a complex issue like this is framed - the questions that are asked and so on - make a big difference to whether or not the item serves to increase people's understanding, or add to their confusion.

I thought the spokesperson for the Climate Camp did a good job in trying to communicate the big picture, but the bulk of the listener responses that I heard suggests most people are failing to appreciate some fundamentals.

It really doesn't help when people name-call and pit people against each other - like 'townies' vs 'locals'. These are false opposites.

Raising the issue of cows and methane is another false argument.

Accusing people of burning up CO2 to get to the camp is just silly.

And defending a peat powered station as a provider of local jobs misses the point entirely.

We have one very big problem. It is expressing itself in all kinds of troubling symptoms, like climate change - all of which are regular topics on your show. But our real problem isn't climate change, or rising sea levels, or species

decline, or the collapse of water tables, or impending food shortages.... all of which are real, serious, and potentially catastrophic.

The problem is us. You and me. The problem is the *mindset* at the heart of our *culture*. We have built an entire way of life that is at odds with basic physics and based on a set of assumptions that are just plain wrong.

And despite the warning signs that this approach isn't working - that our boat has sprung several leaks - we continue to believe that the only way to secure our future is to keep rowing the same boat in the same direction.

If our current financial catastrophe teaches us anything, surely it teaches us what happens when the politicians, the institutions and the people collude to ignore the warning signs, and make short term decisions at the expense of our long term well-being and the common good?

If you don't like the financial crisis and its consequences, then boy, you won't like the climate crisis either. And in the same way that many people in the past decade tried to be heard above the ka-ching-ching of cash registers, shouting: "*This is a bubble economy! It's going to burst!*", the people who have

invested time and energy taking part in the Climate Camp are part of a community of people who are also trying to send us warning signals.

The question is, are we going to listen? Or are we going to find ourselves wringing our hands five, ten, twenty years from now saying: *"Nobody saw it coming. We were all caught up in it!"*

The problem they're trying to highlight isn't their problem. Or my problem. Or your problem. Or a problem for the people in the midlands. Or the people in the far east, or Africa. It's OUR problem. We're all in this together. If your end of the boat sinks, my end of the boat sinks too.

And given the seriousness of our predicament, and the urgency with which we need to turn our culture in a new direction, none of us is doing enough. So none of us has the right to either beat our breasts proudly, or throw stones. We're all living at the edge of the future.

The challenge of our time - the challenge for politicians and leaders in all walks of life - is to find a way to tell the people the truth about the seriousness of our collective situation, and then paint a vision of a very different future which every single one of us can and must play a part in creating.

Yes, we need different energy systems and fuel sources. Yes, we need to eat less meat. We also need a different approach to farming and food production - one that respects place, reconnects producers and consumers, and strengthens our sense of relationship with the land. Yes, we need different kinds of transport and a different mindset around travel. And we also need to design our houses and towns and the relationship between our places of working and living in ways that help us lighten our footprint. And we need an education system

that teaches our children new things about the world and their role in it. We need a money system and a marketplace that rewards right work rather than celebrating dysfunctional destructive behaviour... so we need courageous legislators who will make robust laws that protect the common good... And we need conscious voters who will reward those willing to make tough choices ... And we need conscious leaders everywhere who are aware of what's at stake and willing to make good institutional decisions for the long term.

In fact, there's no end to the work that awaits us in creating a new way of living and working for a very different world. And we need people in every industry, every profession and every walk of life to play their part in creating that future, rather than waste precious time denying the evidence, fighting each other, and clinging to a sinking boat.

Above all perhaps, we need our media and marketing professionals to recognise the crucial role they play in cultivating our minds and our aspirations. Babies aren't born into the world craving a two litre engine, two weeks in Majorca, regular retail therapy in New York, more than one house... you have to be persuaded to want these things. Look at the kids around you - they're instinctively interested in nature... our journey through life begins crawling about in it, and putting it in our mouths. We have to be taught to ignore it, to stop feeling an affinity with it, to believe we're separate from it, that it's there for us to consume, or that what happens in that field or river or town over there won't affect us over here.

Developing this destructive mindset - this feeling of separateness - has taken a long time. We're going to have to put our minds to putting a new head on our shoulders. And when we do, we might see that these crises are our opportunity - perhaps the last one we will ever have - to create a world where our

institutions and our jobs, our income and our security, our well-being and our future are in sync with nature, not at odds with it.

The Earth is our home. We only have one home. If we look after it, it will look after us. It's really that simple.

About the author

Paula Downey is a partner at **downey youell associates**.

She has a Distinction in *Communication Studies* and a Masters with Distinction in *Responsibility and Business Practice* from the University of Bath and has studied *Systems Thinking* at the Open University. Alongside her organisational development work she writes and speaks on the challenges and opportunities of system change.

She is a co-author of *Exploring the Communication Dynamic: 301 Building Blocks to Enrich your Working Relationships*. She helped create *Q5 - New Leadership at Work* to prompt a movement for personal and organisational change, in which each of us begins to see our working and professional life as an opportunity to address the critical issues of our generation.

Discover more at www.dya.ie

downey youell associates

is a resource for leaders and change agents who want to take a living-systems approach to organisation, culture and change.

CultureWork - for a world in transition

is our unique resource - a suite of concepts and practical processes designed to support the work of transition in organisations and in the community.

Find out more online at www.dya.ie

a: 123 Lower Baggot Street
Dublin 2
Ireland
p: (353 1) 661 2636
e: mail@dya.ie
w: www.dya.ie