SinglePlanetLiving1 – What is Single Planet Living?

December 29th 2018

This is the first instalment of a series of blog posts I intend to write throughout 2019, looking at ways we in Ireland can reduce the negative impacts of how we currently live, so that over the next decade or so we can substantially decarbonise what we do, to give us a chance of mitigating the worst effects of climate breakdown.

This is written primarily in response to the IPCC SR15 report (https://www.ipcc.ch/sr15/), published earlier in 2018, in which the case for reducing carbon emissions by 45% globally by 2030 is outlined. In Ireland, to quote our Taoiseach, we are the "climate laggards" of Europe. For Ireland, given our already overly high carbon outputs, this means we need to reduce our carbon emissions by more than 50% in the next decade or so, and then continue to reduce carbon outputs for the following decades. This is possible, though it is an enormous challenge. We simply as a society have not taken climate breakdown seriously at all, and we have not, and are not, adapting how and what we do to take climate into consideration. If we are to achieve anything like this level of reduction, we must work collectively together, every single one of us, to try to achieve this. There is simply no room on the bus for laggards.

We only have one planet to live on, albeit one very beautiful planet. Those of us in the "civilised" west are currently living as if we have 3-4 planets, in terms of the carbon and other resources we are using. What we are doing is inherently unsustainable; literally the planet cannot support that level of consumption of resources. There are a group of technogeeks, mostly centred around Elon Musk, who think that in order to maintain this level of consumption, we should start mining the moon, Mars, or any other available planetary bodies. This is patently ludicrous if considered from an energy perspective. Surely it is much better that we learn to live well, within the finite resources provided to us by our beautiful home planet. This is why I have called this Single Planet Living.

The age we live in has been called the Anthropocene, which literally mean that human activity is now the dominant factor affecting our climate and environment. We must get out of the Anthropocene as quickly as possible, and get to a state where the human population is living within the constraints imposed by nature and the finite resources of our home planet, so that we are no longer having such a negative influence on the very systems which sustain our lives on this planet. This requires us to fundamentally reassess our relationship with nature and the environment around us.

We have, for too long, generally viewed ourselves, Homo Sapiens, as somehow separate and "above" nature, rather than just one species among a myriad of interconnected species which make up the complex web of life on this planet. In the book of Genesis in the Bible it says: "And God said, let us make man in our image, after our likeness: and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creepeth upon the earth." We have taken this idea of dominion literally, and have sought to dominate nature, rather than working with nature, and being a part of nature, and it is largely, in my opinion, this attitude which has led us to the crisis we are now facing. This is the key reason we have put the earth systems under immense pressure, and why we are in the middle of a mass extinction, as we have forced nature to react to our abuse of its generosity and abundance.

This also leads us to the key obstacle, and that is that the vast majority of people are happy to keep going with "business as usual", and see no sense of crisis. There are many names for what is happening: global warming, climate change, climate breakdown, etc. At a recent meeting I was at Dr. Margaret Desmond of the EPA described it as: "It's not about climate change, it's about everything change." Unfortunately the number of people who see is this way, while it is steadily growing, is still realistically a tiny minority of the population.

Therefore the key challenge facing all of us is how to persuade our friends and family that, first of all there is a crisis, and that secondly, we have it within our grasp to rectify that crisis. Yes the changes we need to make are radical and extensive, but we humans have proven before that in times of crisis we can make radical changes to how we go about our daily lives. I think the most startling example in recent history is how society changed so radically and extensively during the Second World War, from how the role of women changed, to the development of a myriad of new technologies, to setting the seeds of internationalism which resulted in the UN and the EU and other organisations. When you are in the middle of a war, it is easy to see you are in a crisis, and to adapt your behaviours to the common and collective good. The really difficult part of the current crisis is persuading people that it is in their own best interests to act in favour of the common good, and to ditch their own selfish objectives and desires. The great British film-maker Adam Curtis aptly called his examination of the roots of the consumer age "The Century of the Self" (which are available on YouTube here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DnPmg0R1M04&list=PL6pY_60DybELxkbu23bC6NahuxF1edoVw, though not correctly licenced!) Moving beyond this selfishness is our most difficult task.

Over the years, when I have entered discussions on this kind of thing with many people, the instinct is to always blame others. We can always point the finger at someone over there who is worse than us – that does not mean we have permission to do nothing. No-one on our little green island is living in such a way that they are in fact Single Planet Living. We are, as a nation, the worst per capita in Europe, and our first task is to move ourselves rapidly down that European league table. We all have a journey to make, and the first thing we must all do is accept that fact, and not blame others. The default Irish response to anything like this is to blame the politicians. This is a lazy and dangerous response. We elect politicians to reflect who we are as a population, so until we are ready as a population to meet the challenges ahead, and to make the necessary changes, we won't have the politicians to enable those changes. Politics in Ireland follows, it doesn't lead, and we actually don't want it to lead, and we don't vote, by and large, for leaders.

I hope that in reading this I have helped convince you, if you weren't convinced already, that we are in a crisis situation, and that this crisis requires radical change in how we do everything. The time is short, but I am confident we can do this, as long as we do it together. Those who are reluctant to come on this journey must be convinced and cajoled, and ultimately coerced, into it. I hope and pray that in twelve years time, at the end of 2030, as we look forward to celebrating the start of 2031, that we will be well on our way to preserving life as we know it on this, our beautiful fragile planet. Wishing everyone a happy and peaceful 2019, and that we may all have the resolve to start this journey of change together.