

A Little Inspiration Can Go a Long Way

by Tara Deporte

“I’ve learned that people will forget what you said, people will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel.”

— Maya Angelou

Some days I wish I didn’t care about climate change—it’s exhausting. I look around the neighborhoods I’ve lived in recently, from Brooklyn to Marseille, and see soot on the buildings, dog poop on the streets, trash on the beach, “buy more” commercials everywhere, and I’m inclined to think maybe we should just go out with the proverbial “guns blazing” climate edition. And here’s another guilty confession: I’m the “choir” of “preaching to the climate choir.” Heck, I’m probably the choir director, but I don’t want to read the latest scientific report about quickening feedback loops, or watch the new movie about retreating glaciers, or hear another exposé linking climate change and forced migration: I get it. I’m full. I’m at capacity and I am in dire need of good news—of hope.

Maybe this is why I’ve been increasingly turning to this idea of inspiration and trying to understand what gets us, as people, to want to take action. When leading a workshop on creative climate communication to a group of academics recently, I realized that most of us think we’re good communicators and even more of us have a strong opinion of what other people want to hear. And, whether we’re nonprofit leaders, students, or bankers, we tend to develop communication tools and even campaigns for our work based upon our opinions of what works. We allow our personal biases and perspectives to shape the way we distribute information. In some cases, this works, particularly when we’re talking “amongst ourselves” or with colleagues or communities where experience, values, and points-of-view are aligned. However, when these communication methods are applied to talking to people from other disciplines, cultures, or experience-bases, these often-too-wrong assumptions land us in hot water (warning: that might not be the last climate pun you’ll hear today).

When it comes to climate communication, many people think we need: a) more information, b) to scare people into action, and c) to tell people it’s their obligation. That’s what we environmentalists have been doing for years and, well, look around. The problem is, decision-making scientists look at this list of assumptions and cringe. It turns out, most of us don’t actually prioritize this list when it comes to taking action. What does drive us to action? There are many answers to this, but a couple of important ones that stick are: we take action when it’s personal and we keep taking action if we’re inspired by something or someone to do it.

DePorte creating paintings for Human Impact Stories Marseille installation on climate change, 2015.

So where do we find the inspiration? I’ve never had the hair on my arms stand up when reading a scientific article, and climate policy has never made me tear up (except maybe with boredom. Sorry, policy works!). However, some songs get me crying with the first notes and certain paintings can bring memories flooding back. But when the end-goal is climate action, inspiration and emotional response aren’t necessarily enough—I might cry, but I might not have the tools to do anything with that feeling. It’s when we can combine the personal connection we make through artistic inspiration, with quality, simple information, and tools for action, then we’ve got a winning recipe.

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A little inspiration can go a long way. When it comes to understanding and taking action on climate change, there's a bounty of mind-bending science, sound policy, and innovative action around the world. It's everywhere from Silicon Valley to indigenous villages to inner-city schools. There are so many human solutions that are available to us today to rebuild a healthy and livable planet. We created the broken systems that are causing climate change, but that's actually the best part: we broke it and we can fix it. Tomorrow, I'm co-creating an exhibit to tell the stories of inspirational climate actors across the globe. What are you going to do?

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