

GUEST ESSAY

How to Talk About 'Extreme Weather' With Your Angry Uncle

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**By Margaret Renkl**

Ms. Renkl is a contributing Opinion writer who covers flora, fauna, politics and culture in the American South.

NASHVILLE — Articles on how to talk about the warming planet with climate skeptics always thrust me into a state of mild anxiety. I live in Tennessee, where the governor professes not to understand what's causing the country's extreme weather. Right-wing pundits on the airwaves and right-wing trolls on social media dominate what passes here for public discourse on climate. Republicans funded by obscene oil profits keep doing the industry's bidding.

In this context, it's easy to assume that climate skeptics are everywhere. Even in the country as a whole, only 1 percent of voters identified climate change as the most important issue we face.

Though I write often about the environment, and specifically about climate change, I almost never discuss the subject with across-the-aisle friends and family. Just thinking about it makes my heart speed up.

I want to get along with the people I love. I'd hate to give them any reason — any more reason than my writing already does — to see me as the enemy. It's painful to be reviled in your own family, your own community. No wonder only 35 percent of Americans discuss climate change even occasionally, according to survey results from the Yale Program on Climate Change Communication.

In a democracy as polarized as ours, trying to move the needle on climate is a conundrum: We can't just bully people into demanding dramatic action, and our elected officials won't take dramatic action until Americans, including those who vote Republican, demand it. If Senator Chuck Schumer, the Democratic majority leader, couldn't move Senator Joe Manchin to vote for his party's signature climate legislation, what hope do the rest of us have of convincing our own obstinate Uncle Joes?

But reading Katharine Hayhoe's new book, "Saving Us: A Climate Scientist's Case for Hope and Healing in a Divided World," has made me reconsider my silence. What if the average Uncle Joe, one who hasn't made himself a millionaire by way of the coal industry, isn't as hard to talk to as I imagine? More to the point, what if the skeptics actually *aren't* everywhere? What if everybody else is just as terrified to talk as I am?

Last month, I got the chance to sit down for an hour with Dr. Hayhoe, a professor of atmospheric science at Texas Tech University and the director of the Climate Science Center there. Dr. Hayhoe is also an evangelical Christian, and she has many ideas for how to connect the seemingly disjunct human ecosystems of science and faith. In fact, she was in Nashville for two reasons: to speak at the Christian Scholars' Conference at Lipscomb University and — in connection with her role as the chief scientist of the Nature Conservancy — to meet with the staff of the Nature Conservancy in Tennessee.

This bilingualism underscores the way Dr. Hayhoe talks about how to talk about climate change, particularly within conservative communities. As she likes to point out, more than 70 percent of Americans believe climate change is happening. The vast majority are worried about it, too, understanding that it is harming the natural world and the human world alike.

Regardless of how they vote, most people — even the most ideologically invested — don't discount their own senses. They can feel the effects of this summer's heat wave. They can see the lakes drying up and the trees dying. They can smell the smoke of wildfires. They can hear the hurricane's roar. They may prefer a term like "extreme weather" over a term like "climate change," but they understand what's going on. You'd never know it from listening to red-state politicians or right-wing "news," but only 14 percent of Americans are outright climate deniers.

Nevertheless, says Dr. Hayhoe, "a lot of the news outlets are doubling-, tripling-, quadrupling-down on fear-based messages because they think more fear is going to make more people pay attention. What they don't realize is this: Most people are already worried. And if you're already worried but you're not activated, more fear is not going to activate you."

OPINION CONVERSATION

The climate, and the world, are changing. What challenges will the future bring, and how should we respond to them?

- **What does climate change look like around the world?**
From “Postcards From a World on Fire,” these 193 stories show how climate change is reshaping reality.
- **What should our leaders be doing?**
Al Gore, the 45th vice president of the United States, finds reasons for optimism in the Biden presidency.
- **What are the worst climate risks in your country?**
Select a country, and we'll break down the climate hazards it faces.
- **Where are Americans suffering most?**
Our maps, developed with experts, show where extreme heat is causing the most deaths in the U.S.

For many Americans, concern about the actual climate isn't the only worry when climate change is concerned. The fossil fuel industry, aided by right-wing politicians and right-wing media, has successfully convinced many conservatives that doing right by the environment will involve pain, a complete repudiation of their current lives, or both. It's an effective strategy.

“The ultimate outcome of fear is to paralyze us, which leads to the preservation of the status quo,” according to Dr. Hayhoe. “We feel completely disenfranchised, powerless, without any sense of agency or efficacy. That's what turns worry into anxiety and depression, which we see happening today. It's because we don't know what to do.”

What would “activate” a person, to use Dr. Hayhoe's word, who is worried about the climate but hasn't yet taken any steps toward change?

First, undercut the politics. Becoming a climate activist doesn't require changing political parties or renouncing long-held values. “It's really a matter of showing people that they are already the perfect person to care *because* of who they are, and that climate action would be an even more genuine expression of their identity,” said Dr. Hayhoe. “It's about holding up a mirror and reminding people that they *want* to be a good steward, that they *want* a better future. That's when we see change.”

One key to making the case convincingly is to listen first, and then to meet people where they are. Someone who loves the birds at her backyard feeder might become an advocate for renewable energy when she learns how dangerous climate change has made the songbird migration. Hunters might urge their representatives to fund highway wildlife corridors and protect forest habitats. And such small actions can be necessary first steps toward greater change.

But small changes inevitably raise the question of whether personal choices can truly make a difference. Beyond the obvious — recycling, taking public transit, eating more plants, etc. — what can individuals possibly do to ameliorate a problem so immense and so overwhelming?

The solution is to offer a vision of a better future. People are willing to make all sorts of changes if they're convinced it will make a difference. Democrats aren't coming for your hamburgers, contrary to what Fox News might tell you, but eating one-fifth less beef can cut global deforestation, a leading driver of climate change, in half. With stakes so high and inconvenience so low, who wouldn't happily cut beef consumption by 20 percent?

It's true, of course, that individual actions alone cannot solve the problem of a burning world, but that doesn't make individual action merely a symbolic drop in the bucket brigade. Dr. Hayhoe cites successful examples of sweeping historical transformation in pointing out the power of advocating for change, individual by individual.

“When you look at how women got the right to vote,” she said, “it wasn't because the president woke up one morning and said, ‘Women should have the right to vote.’ It was because women used their voices consistently to advocate for that change. When you look at the civil rights movement, when you look at apartheid in South Africa, when you look at gay marriage, when you look at any large societal change, it did not come from the top. It was instigated in every single case by ordinary people who used their voices.

“There's this endless argument on social media — individual actions or systemwide change — and my answer is, ‘Yes.’ Because what is a system made up of but individuals?”

This is why it's so important to learn how to talk about climate change with others. Convincing people on both sides of the aisle that they are not alone in their fears, that there are solutions to the challenges we face, and that their own actions can make a difference is the first step toward holding politicians to account.

Margaret Renkl, a contributing Opinion writer, is the author of the books “Graceland, at Last: Notes on Hope and Heartache From the American South” and “Late Migrations: A Natural History of Love and Loss.”

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