

A Global Pandemic Is Not a Climate Solution

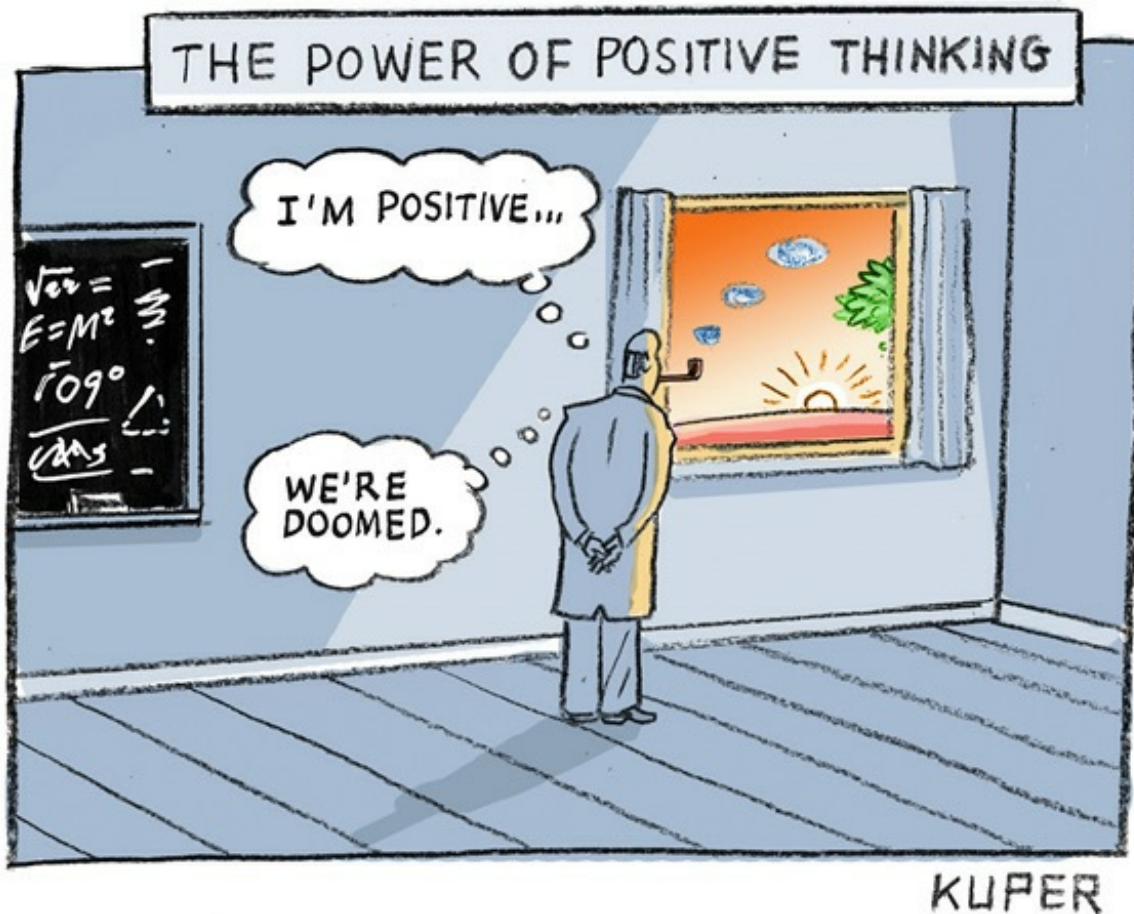
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By Emily Williams Wed May 13, 2020 |
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Voices

Rather Than a Sacrifice, Make It an Opportunity



Credit: Peter Kuper, PoliticalCartoons.com

On the first of the month, workers around the world celebrated May Day — the international day of workers' rights. Virtual and socially distanced rallies throughout the county highlighted the harsh realities coronavirus has imposed on workers this year — mass unemployment, lack of protective equipment and precautions, and the imperative of protecting livelihoods.

On Earth Day, one week earlier, County Supervisor Das Williams published an op-ed, "[Earth Day Challenge](#)," celebrating the fact that our collective confinement has reduced demand for oil and cut greenhouse gas emissions by roughly 5.5 percent this year. He congratulates

his constituents by saying, “You are successfully demolishing a significant part of the fossil fuel industry as global demand for oil tanks. Keep it up!” In the op-ed, our willingness to shelter-in-place proves that individuals actually can make the kind of behavioral changes that we have so far been unwilling to make to reduce our emissions. The pandemic thus exposes the “cop out” environmentalists have engaged in when they urge politicians to reign in the excesses of oil companies but refuse to chastise individuals for their own driving habits.

Unfortunately, as the May Day rallies illustrated, not everyone has such forgiving bosses or workplaces that will allow them to “keep it up,” nor can they necessarily afford to. Indeed, offered to people who are losing their livelihoods, who are desperately wondering where their next paycheck is going to come from, and whose employment-dependent health care is being revoked, congratulations may fall a little flat.

So how do we square away the reality of layoffs and the reduction in greenhouse-gas emissions both brought on by shelter-in-place due to COVID19?

We are not going to defeat the climate crisis by throwing 20 million people out of work. This is neither a climate solution, nor is it strategic. Not only does it harm workers, but we will also never build support for action on climate by threatening people’s livelihoods. While the advocacy in “Earth Day Challenge” clearly does not include that mass unemployment is the sacrifice climate change demands of us, mass unemployment is a direct result of the conditions in which this particular “climate solution” has emerged.

Moreover, the math simply doesn’t add up. The shelter-in-place order illustrates what could be achieved with behavioral change — a one-off reduction in emissions of 5.5 percent. Yet, to avoid catastrophic climate change, we need reductions of 7.5 percent every year. This gap exists because most of the emissions reductions have occurred due to reductions in transportation, while emissions in other sectors of the economy have remained largely unaffected. That gap would blow us well beyond the temperature thresholds climate scientists deem safe. Furthermore, the International Energy Agency’s 2020 report found that post-shelter-in-place, “the rebound in emissions may be larger than the decline, unless the wave of investment to restart the economy is dedicated to cleaner and more resilient energy infrastructure.” Individual action is necessary but insufficient on its own.

The op-ed correctly says that addressing climate change will “take significant changes.” These “significant changes” do not translate to a few more people who are able to telecommute to work twice a week and buy electric cars. It also means switching our electricity grid to 100 percent renewable energy. It means building energy-efficient buildings so we require less energy. It means free (or low-cost) and accessible public transportation. It means reining in the excessive power of the fossil fuel industry. And all of this means

demanding bold political will from the people we have elected to represent us. It is precisely this leadership that our politicians shirk when they tell us great personal sacrifice is required to meet the challenge of climate change.

The fact is, addressing climate disruption should not be a sacrifice at all but an opportunity. The county has an opportunity to vote in policies that move economic resources toward a green recovery. We need projects that spur a massive buildout of renewables, guaranteed housing, and jobs programs for displaced workers. The supervisors must not approve any further fossil fuel extraction and instead choose policies that protect communities from air and water contamination, allowing us time to phase out fossil fuels while phasing in renewables. Allowing any new fossil fuel infrastructure to be built now — let alone bailing the industry out — truncates the precious little time we have for energy transition. Instead, the Board of Supervisors must help manage the transition so that workers dependent on the oil industry are not left behind.

Individual behavioral change alone cannot accomplish transition on the scale and timeframe the climate crisis demands; it requires collective action with individuals coming together and articulating their vision to decision-makers, as well as bold leadership from the county. Supervisor Williams has demonstrated such leadership in the past. He and his fellow supervisors will have an opportunity to demonstrate such leadership again this summer when Aera's proposal to drill 250-plus new oil wells in the county comes before the Planning Commission.