

How to Be a Climate Hero

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One afternoon a few summers ago, I was on a commuter train when I heard someone yelling behind me. I didn't pay attention because I was breaking up a fight between my kids. I figured the noise was from some college students having fun. The third time the person yelled, I turned around.

It was a boy, about six years old. He was standing on his seat, screaming, "My mom's having a seizure." The only part of his mom I could see were her legs sticking out into the aisle, convulsing. Arrayed around the train car, staring, were forty other people, mouths open. Not one of them doing a thing.

Humans tend to freeze like this—the bystander effect, as it's called. The phenomenon was first demonstrated in 1968 in a famous psychology experiment by John Darley and Bibb Latane. For the experiment, the subject was asked to fill out some forms. He or she assumed that these forms were necessary information preparatory to the experiment, but in fact the experiment had already begun. While the person circled multiple-choice answers, smoke began to sneak out of a vent in the room—thick smoke, grey smoke, the kind that says *fire*. The experimenter timed how long it took for the subject to leave the room to find out what was going on.

The single variable was whether there were other people in the room. If the subject were alone, 75% of the time she or he would leave the room inside of a minute. But if there were others in the room working away at their papers—actually actors paid by the experimenter to stay there, heads down, pencils working, ignoring the smoke—the subject stayed there with them, 90% of the time. Stayed there filling out forms until the smoke was too thick to see through—until if there had been a fire, it would have been licking at the walls.

In the decades since that first bystander experiment, it's

been repeated with many variations on the type of emergency: staged robberies, lost wallets, people in the hallway crying for help, etc. Every time, if there were more than one person witnessing the event, all of them were almost certain to do nothing. In some of the later bystander-effect experiments, the subjects have blood pressure cuffs on and what they say is recorded. Their pulse races, their blood pressure rises. They mutter "shit" and "holy hell." From their reactions, it's clear that they recognize what's happening as an emergency and feel great urgency about it. Still, they stand there, frozen.

Remember this fact: although we feel safer in a crowd, that's actually where humans are most incapacitated. The bigger the crowd, the stronger the effect.

On the train, the boy was loudly identifying this as a true emergency, his mother physically demonstrating the urgency of the matter—and still everyone sat there, mouths open. Half of them had cell phones clipped on their belts, but not one of them dialed 911. No one ran to get the conductor. While they watched the woman convulse, each of them glanced around and believed everyone else must be sitting still for a good reason. Perhaps the others had some inside knowledge, that this was a movie being filmed or a scam being tried or that the kid was playing some sort of mean joke.

Each person thought that if this were real, then surely with forty other people here there must be someone who knew how to deal with seizures. There must be someone competent, with professional training and a medical vocabulary. Each person assumed, "I should be the last person to help. I don't know dinky about seizures."

Right now, everyone understands that something horrible is happening to the planet's climate. The heat waves and forest fires, the floods and droughts. But there's seven billion of us now—quite the bystander effect. So we stay in our seats filling

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out forms, working dutifully, trying to ignore the smoke swirling thicker around us. We mutter under our breath, our hearts race, while we wonder why no one else is doing anything. Like the adults on the train, passively watching as a child screams for help for his mother, each of us bustles about our normal lives, feeling increasingly uneasy about the shifting climate, but assuming that it couldn't be as bad as it seems because then surely everyone would be marching in the street about it. We all seem to be saying to ourselves, "If climate change *were* real, then there must be someone better than *me* at getting people to demonstrate against it. I don't know dinky about activism."

On the train with the epileptic mother, I got to my feet for two reasons.

One, I knew about the bystander effect, I had studied it in school and written about it before. Knowledge about how badly humans react in emergencies is the best way to short-circuit the effect. Research has shown that as long as you remember this tendency of humans to passively gawk, you are inoculated against it. In fact, simply by reading this essay, you are much more likely in the next emergency you encounter to get out of your seat and do something.

The second reason I didn't sit still is that I'd experienced the bystander effect in the past. As a teenager, I'd found a lost puppy sleeping in a park. It was maybe three months old, with a pure white coat and pink tongue. A friend and I patted it for a few minutes before it bolted away from us, out into the street. There was a car coming. Let me be clear: the car was not that close, and I easily could have stepped out, holding up my hand to stop it, or simply scooped the puppy up and walked away to safety. Instead, both my friend and I stared, as passive as if watching TV.

As the car got closer, in that elastic moment of fear, I learned something about myself—that I could be a small scared person, that I could passively watch harm happen to something defenseless. I didn't like that feeling. Although the car skidded to a halt

in time and the puppy was OK, I never wanted to see myself behave that way again.

On the train, hearing the boy yell, I didn't wonder why everyone stayed still. I knew why. I stepped forward, yelling out, "Someone call 911. Someone get the conductor. Anyone here have medical training?"

Then, something fascinating happened. Before I moved, everyone's faces were contorted with terror, as though they were the ones having the seizure or as though this woman thrashing around like a dying fish might start biting their ankles. But as soon as one person did something, telling them what to do, how to help, the fear in their faces melted away. Two other people stood up to help. Four others whipped out their cell phones to call 911. One person ran for the conductor. They just needed someone to break the group cohesion and start the action. They desperately wanted to do good. Like me with the puppy, while they'd stared at the woman convulsing, their assessment of themselves had been rapidly plummeting. They didn't know why they were frozen, but they were beginning to grasp the possibility that they might live out the rest of their lives knowing they hadn't done a thing while this kid screamed louder and louder.

I cradled the convulsing woman's head so at least she wouldn't thunk it hard against anything. Two other people tried to reassure the boy. The conductor stopped the train and we waited for the EMTs. By the way, it turns out that aside from getting people to start moving, I wasn't terribly useful. I remembered reading that during seizures it's important to make sure the person doesn't swallow their own tongue and suffocate on it, but after this incident, I found out that the swallowed-tongue thing is a myth and that the most you should do is to make sure they don't hurt themselves slamming their body parts around. However, in the moment, without this information, I determinedly tried to jam my fingers between her grinding teeth to grab hold of her tongue. The point is not to be the most competent per-

son—which I am definitely not—the point is to get people moving. Anyone can do that.

Psychologists know a lot about fear: how it starts, how it changes over time. If a person experiences fear for long enough, especially if there's no perceived way to fight the danger, the fear shifts into anxiety and depression. In a famous experiment by Martin Seligman, dogs were caged up and then repeatedly electrocuted through the metal floor. The shock was hard enough to hurt, not kill. The shock was preceded each time by a bell being rung. After the bell there was nothing these dogs could do but wait for the pain. After a few days of this experiment, the dogs lay down and whimpered—not just when the bell rang, but all the time. They wouldn't eat; they wouldn't take interest in other dogs. They basically acted like they needed a lot of Prozac and a straitjacket. That whimpering puddle of depression is called “learned helplessness.”

Seligman had a second group of dogs that had a safe room inside their cage. This room wasn't electrified. When those dogs heard the bell, if they jumped super-quick for the safe room, they could possibly avoid the pain. These dogs never lay down and whimpered. They ate normally and functioned. Yes, they sometimes didn't reach the other room fast enough and then they got shocked and it hurt like hell, but the pain wasn't the point. The point was that they had a sense of power in the world, of agency. They felt active and capable of defending themselves. They weren't sitting frozen in their seats with no idea of what to do.

A few years ago, when my first child was born, I became paralyzed with fear about climate disruption. It was so clear that our children would be punished for what we adults were doing to the world. My child would suffer for our sins and there was nothing I could do about it. I got depressed. I got anxious. I lay on the floor whimpering for a while—metaphorically. Then, from sheer

desperation, I started writing letters to editors. Finally, one of my letters—in support of Cape Wind, the proposed large wind-turbine farm off Nantucket on the Massachusetts coast—was published in the *Boston Globe*. Soon after, the head of Cape Wind, Jim Gordon, called me up personally to thank me. The thrill I got. The sense of agency.

After that I was out of my seat. I believed that there was a safe room I could at least try to get to, if I moved super-quick. Now I go to every demonstration. I write to every politician. I insulate my house fanatically. I don't own a car. Every year I do a little more: composting kitchen waste, buying at farmers markets, recycling, buying secondhand. Using carbon calculators, I've figured out that I lowered my family's emissions 50% in seven years. That's a big step. Because of my actions, my fear for my children's future is not incapacitating. I'm not depressed. I'm striding down the aisle trying to help. I'm learning as I go. Not only have I improved my emotional state, I've broken group cohesion and started to pull others from their seats. I've gotten friends and relatives to insulate more and drive less, to admit the problem and to start thinking about solutions.

By the time the EMTs arrived, the woman had stopped convulsing and was breathing easier. I was still holding her head, and I've got to tell you, a human head gets heavy after a few minutes. They woke her up to lead her, dazed, from the car. The boy trailed after her. Every one of us passengers called out to him he'd done a great job. We told him he'd saved his mom. That group that had been so scared and frozen a few minutes ago was now grinning and relieved. We were slaphappy with love for other humans and ourselves.

Each of us knew that the situation could have turned out so differently.

The scientists tell us that Americans must lower our carbon emissions at least 80% by 2050 to avoid the worst effects of cli-

mate disruption. Let's imagine the year is 2050 and we've managed to lower our emissions enough. As I've already seen in my own home, radically decreasing emissions is not so hard. Surely the U.S., the most innovative and wealthy nation in the world, can do a lot more in forty years than I did in seven. Let's imagine we've gotten out of our seats. We've strode down the aisle. We've done our best with whatever information we had. Whether or not we incompetently tried to grab at slippery tongues, we still broke the bystander effect. We got the country moving. We didn't lie down whimpering and depressed. Filled with our own sense of agency and our communal effort, we grin around at each other, proud of humanity and ourselves, slaphappy with love for our planet.

We are already at 400 parts per million of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere, the point at which the scientists say the Earth has a 50/50 chance of shifting to a new climatic system. Because the planet is so large and unwieldy, the climate takes a little while to shift. We can balance here for a few years before the dice are cast. Every indication, from ice caps to defrosting tundra, seems to show that this, right now, is the tipping point.

This is our moment.

The kid on the train is standing up and screaming for help. The weather is convulsing. We are all staring. Perhaps you never thought you'd get a chance to play hero. Here it is. Let me tell you, you'll feel better. As soon as you get out of your seat, much of the fear and depression will go away. Others will follow. It's so much easier than you can imagine.

It doesn't matter if you aren't sure what to do. Make your best guess. Call the EMTs. For God's sake, get the conductor.

FACING THE CHANGE

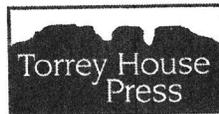
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