

***The Future We Choose* – Extract:**

This is an edited extract from *The Future We Choose* by Christiana Figueres and Tom Rivett-Carnac, published by Bonnier, RRP \$27.99, out now.

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Twenty-five hundred years ago, Siddhartha Gautama, the man who became known as the Buddha, understood optimism. He said many times that a brightness of mind was both the final goal of the path of enlightenment and also the first step. A bright mind is how you proceed. Without it, you can't make progress.

The Buddha also understood that we are not subject to our attitudes in a passive way but are active participants in creating them. Neuroscience has now confirmed this. It does not matter if our natural tendency is to see things with optimism or with pessimism. At this point in history we have a responsibility to do what is necessary, and for most of us that will involve some deliberate reprogramming of our minds.

Psychological research has shown that attitudes can be transformed by first identifying our thought patterns, then deliberately cultivating a more constructive approach. The practice involves becoming aware of these patterns, drawing

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out the unconscious assumptions, and challenging them when they don't serve you.

It's not complicated, but neither is it easy. Essentially, we all have inbuilt reactions to adverse things that happen around us. From the latest alarming report on climate change to missing the bus, we have a learned response to all phenomena that we encounter in life, and those learned reactions dictate how we respond to a particular situation. When it comes to climate change, the vast majority of us have a learned reaction of helplessness. We see the direction the world is headed, and we throw up our hands. Yes, we think, it's terrible, but it's so complex and so big and so overwhelming. We can't do anything to stop it.

This learned reaction is not only untrue, it's become fundamentally irresponsible. If you want to help address climate change, you have to teach yourself a different response. You can do it. You can switch your focus, and you will be stunned by the impact such a shift can create. You don't need

to have all the answers, and you certainly don't need to hide from the truth, nor should you. When you are faced with the hard realities, look at them with clarity, but also know that you are incredibly lucky to be alive at a time when you can make a transformative difference to the future of all life on Earth.

You are not powerless. In fact, your every action is suffused with meaning, and you are part of the greatest chapter of human achievement in history. Make this your mental mantra. Take notice of how your mind tries to insist on your helplessness in the face of the challenge and refuses to

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accept it. Notice it, and refute it. It will not take long for your thought patterns to change.

When your mind tells you that it is too late to make a difference, remember that every fraction of a degree of extra warming makes a big difference, and therefore any reduction in emissions lessens the burden on the future.

When your mind tells you that this is all too depressing to deal with and that it is better to focus on the things you can directly affect, remind yourself that mobilising for big generational challenges can be thrilling and can imbue your life with meaning and connection.

When your mind tells you that it will be impossible for the world to lighten its dependence on fossil fuels, remember that already more than 50 per cent of the energy in the UK comes from clean power, that Costa Rica is 100 per cent clean,³ and that California has a plan to get to 100 per cent clean, including cars and trucks, by the time today's toddlers have finished college.

When your mind tells you that the problem is the broken political system and we can't fix that so there is no point in doing anything, remind yourself that political systems are still responsive to the views of people, and that throughout history people have successfully overcome extraordinary odds to achieve political change.

And when your mind tells you that you are just one person, too small to make a difference, so why bother, you can remind yourself that tipping points are non-linear. We don't know what is going to make the difference, but we

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know that in the end systems do shift and all the little actions add up to a new world. Every time you make an individual

choice to be a responsible custodian of this beautiful Earth, you contribute to major transformations.

You may not be religious or spiritually inclined, but consider the lot of the stonemason in medieval Europe building one of the great cathedrals. He could have chosen to throw down his tools because he was not going to personally finish the entire cathedral. Instead, he worked patiently and carefully on his one piece, knowing he was part of a great collective endeavour that would lift the hearts and minds of generations. That is optimism, and cultivating it will not only be a crucial step to advancing our human story, it will also improve your life today.

Václav Havel aptly described optimism as ‘a state of mind, not a state of the world.’⁵ Three characteristics are generally agreed upon as essential to making this mindset transformative: the intention to see beyond the immediate horizon, the comfort with uncertainty about the final outcome, and the commitment that is fostered by that mindset.

To be optimistic, you must acknowledge the bad news that is all too readily available in scientific reports, your newsfeed, your Twitter account, and kitchen table conversations bemoaning our current state of affairs. More difficult, but necessary for any degree of change to take place, is to recognise the adversities and still be able to see that a different future is not only possible but is already tiptoeing into our daily lives. Without denying the bad news, you must

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make a point of focusing on all the good news regarding climate change, such as the constantly dropping prices of renewables, an increasing number of countries taking on net-zero-emissions targets by 2050 or before, the multiple cities banning internal combustion vehicles and the rising levels of capital shifting from the old to the new economy. None of this is happening yet at the necessary scale, but it is happening. Optimism is about being able to intentionally identify and prescribe the desired future so as to actively pull it closer.

It is always easier to cling to certainty than it is to work for something because it is right and good, regardless of whether it currently stands a decent chance of success. All the measures to address climate change still require further maturation; none guarantee ultimate success. We don't know which renewables, if any, will predominate, or which are

more likely to scale quickly. Problems with the batteries of electric vehicles (weight, cost, recycling) must still be solved, and charging networks still require substantial expansion to succeed. Financial instruments must more effectively manage the risks of new technologies. Market models that shift us from single ownership of homes and cars to shared ownership must gather steam and make peace with regulation.

When you look at the future broadly instead of narrowly, you see that you must take these uncertainties in your stride, or you will stay stuck in the knowns of the past. You have to be willing to risk mistakes, delays and disappointments, or you will be at the mercy of only the tried and true, to your ultimate peril.

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This mindset is all the more important once you realise that the habits, practices and technologies of the past will lead us only to ecological demise and human suffering. Viewing our reality with optimism means recognising that another future is possible, not promised. In the face of climate change, we all have to be optimistic, not because success is guaranteed but because failure is unthinkable.

Optimism empowers you; it drives your desire to engage, to contribute, to make a difference. It makes you jump out of bed in the morning because you feel challenged and hopeful at the same time. It calls you to that which is emerging and makes you want to be an active part of change. Rebecca Solnit puts it well: 'Hope is an axe you break down doors with in an emergency; ... hope should shove you out the door, because it will take everything you have to steer the future away from endless war, from the annihilation of the earth's treasures and the grinding down of the poor and marginal... . To hope is to give yourself to the future, and that commitment to the future makes the present inhabitable.'⁶

In other words, optimism is the force that enables you to create a new reality.

Optimism is not the *result* of achieving a task we have set for ourselves. That is a celebration. Optimism is the necessary *input* to meeting a challenge.

Optimism is about having steadfast confidence in our ability to solve big challenges. It is about making the choice to tenaciously work to make the current reality better.

Optimism is about actively proving, through every

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decision and every action, that we are capable of designing a better future.

From the darkness of an Alabama jail, Martin Luther King, Jr., kept calling for the realisation of a deeply held dream, no matter how bleak its prospects. Many others have done the same throughout history: John F. Kennedy refusing to accept that nuclear war was inevitable; Gandhi marching to the ocean to collect forbidden salt.

In all these cases, key people believed that a better world was possible, and they were willing to fight for it. They didn't ignore difficult evidence or present things in a way that wasn't true. Instead they faced reality with a fierce belief that change could happen, however impossible it might have seemed at the moment.

On the road to the Paris Agreement in 2015, we learned just how critical optimism is to transformation. When Christiania took over responsibility for the United Nations' annual rounds of climate negotiations in 2010, it was in the wake of a total collapse of the previous year's negotiations, which had been held in Copenhagen.

Copenhagen was nothing short of a disaster. After years of preparation and two weeks of excruciating around-the-clock negotiations, the only result was a weak, inadequate accord that was politically unacceptable and legally irrelevant. The United States had embarrassingly declared success prematurely. China and India had put up major roadblocks, supported by all developing countries. It had been a free-for-all of political frustration, outrage and disagreement.

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It was far from the 'Hopenhagen' the hosts had advertised. In fact, there had been blood.

Claudia Salerno, the Venezuelan representative, had been excluded from the small room where only a few leaders had negotiated behind closed doors. She was so angry and so adamant about getting the floor, she incessantly banged her country's metal nameplate on her desk until her hand was bleeding.

'Do I have to bleed to get your attention?' she screamed at the Danish chairman. 'International agreements cannot be imposed by a small exclusive group. You are endorsing a coup d'état against the United Nations.'

Each sentence was punctuated with the pounding of metal and blood.

If this is what saving the planet looked like, we were all doomed.

Six months later, UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon asked Christiana to assume responsibility for the international climate negotiations. There was little hope in his request: pick up the pieces from the political garbage can and make something of them.

No one, from a high-level administrator at the UN to a government delegate to a climate activist working from home, believed that the world had a shot at ever achieving a workable agreement. Everyone thought it was too complicated, too costly and too late anyway.

As a result, one of the toughest challenges Christiana

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faced was bringing everyone to believe that an agreement was even possible. Prior to considering the political, technical, and legal parameters of an eventual agreement, she knew she had to dedicate herself to changing the mood on climate. The impossible had to be made possible.

The very first step was to change her own attitude.

As the recently appointed Executive Secretary of the United Nations Convention on Climate Change, Christiana held her first and best-remembered press conference. The new voice of the entire international process, she sat before 40 journalists, gathered in a windowless room in the Maritim Hotel in Bonn, Germany.

After a few anodyne interjections, the most important question was asked: 'Ms. Figueres, do you think a global agreement will ever be possible?'

Without thinking, she blurted, 'Not in my lifetime.'

Christiana had instinctively spoken for the thousands of people who had been in Copenhagen, and for the millions more who followed the proceedings online. Hope was gone, and the pain was deep. Her words expressed the prevailing mood, but they also ripped straight into her own heart. The attitude she had just perpetuated was exactly the problem. If she succumbed to despair, and by extension let this whole political process succumb to it, it would define the quality of life for millions of vulnerable people today and determine the fate of future generations. She couldn't let that happen.

Impossible is not a fact. It is an attitude.

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When Christiana walked out of the press conference that day, she knew her primary task: to be a beacon of possibility that would allow everyone to find a way to a solution together. How it would happen she did not know, but she knew with clarity that she had no other option.

Bringing about a complex, large-scale transformation is akin to weaving a tapestry of elaborate design with thousands of people who have never woven anything or even seen the pattern. Almost 200 nations, 500 supporting UN staff members, more than 60 topics under negotiation across five (sometimes intersecting) negotiating tracks, and thousands of participants from all walks of life were involved. Of course, everyone wanted a good future for humanity, but once you dove just one level below that very basic goal, everything else was under constant negotiation, from agreeing on the agenda for one working session, to topics as contentious as how science should be reflected in policy. Predictably, setbacks and obstructions quickly became the norm.

Throughout the whole process, we paid attention to the underlying challenging dynamics, guiding them into a constructive space so that innovative solutions could emerge from the fertile ground of collective participation and wisdom. Careful and well-targeted interventions were repeatedly necessary to ensure forward momentum but could never become overbearing. The intention was to constantly unblock pent-up energy and catalyse the next level of work. Complex dynamic systems can be intimidating if approached from the expectation of control, but they are thrilling if seen as

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a carefully curated landscape of potential that blossoms as problematic issues find resolution and enrich the commonly agreed ground.

In December 2015, 195 nations adopted the Paris Agreement unanimously, and hundreds of millions of people widely recognised it as a historic achievement. Undoubtedly many factors contributed to this resounding success, as well as thousands of individuals, but the key was the contagious frame of mind that led to collective wisdom and effective decision-making. Everyone who was there at the adoption, and millions of people following online, felt optimistic about the future, but in fact optimism had been the starting point

of the journey. It had had to be, or else we would never have reached any agreement.

We need to remember, however, that in the challenging years to come, optimism on its own won't be enough, as it wasn't enough in Paris. What sustained us through the long nights and years of building that initial agreement was a particular brand of optimism that is necessary for the most difficult tasks: stubborn optimism.

Optimism is not soft, it is gritty. Every day brings dark news, and no end of people tell us that the world is going to hell. To take the low road is to succumb. To take the high road is to remain constant in the face of uncertainty. That we may be confronted by barriers galore should not surprise anyone. That we may see worsening climate conditions in the short term should also not surprise us. We have to elect to boldly persevere. With determination and

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utmost courage, we must conquer the hurdles in order to push forward.

We need both systemic transformation and individual behavioural changes. One without the other will not get us to the necessary scale of change at the necessary pace. We all sit at various points of society: members of families, community leaders, CEOs, policy makers. No matter where you sit, we all can and must exercise that responsibility in favour of the common good. No one is irrelevant.

Particularly in the face of grand human challenges, the only responsible approach we can take is to protect humanity and other forms of life and steer the course of history towards the better. Changing direction at this late hour is entirely possible, but only with a collective intent and optimism that is so robust, we jolt ourselves out of the currently established default path.

The story of the five-year process towards Paris is in many ways like the process we must now unleash. Today, most people believe it is impossible to transform our economy in one decade. But we cannot afford that fatalism; our only option is to turn our full attention to the immediate actions we can undertake to change direction. It starts with our own way of thinking about the challenge, our determined attitude, and our capacity to infect others with the same conviction, no matter how challenging that is. That is stubborn optimism.

The evolution of humanity is a story of adaptive ingenuity

to the challenges of the time. We face the greatest challenge of

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human history. We may be challenged beyond our currently visible capacities, but that only means that we are invited to rise to the next level of our abilities. And we can.