

The courage to challenge the status quo

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The switch from fall to winter came very suddenly in December, and few of us were prepared. Then a stationary cold front brought Vermont many days of ice and fog, while New York City hit a new record temperature of 70 degrees. Stationary weather patterns have become more frequent in recent years.

The weather this winter has brought us frequent changes between snow and Arctic cold, and rain with warm advection from the south — and too many days in between with ice. Starting a snow and ice-covered plow truck at minus 15 degrees may build character, but I would rather sit by the fire and contemplate the paper I am writing on the summer climate of the Canadian Prairies.

Yet when the ground is covered with fresh snow reflecting the sunlight, my heart lifts. I bundle up and set out for a morning walk. This winter I have kept crampons on my boots because of the ice under the snows.

On the warm days I watch the snow melt, pick some kale protected under glass and dream of spring planting. We got some late-season volunteer plum tomatoes that sprouted from the compost. I picked them green before the first hard frost, and with a smile we ate the last one on New Year's Eve, along with our final Brussels sprouts.

Every year brings us the opportunity for a new beginning in our lives, and in the choices we make about how we will live in this world. This year there will be a series of reports from the working groups of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, known as the IPCC. The topics will be familiar to many readers.

- The working group report "Climate Change 2014: Impacts, Adaptation and Vulnerability" will be released on the March 29, after a meeting in Yokohama, Japan.
- The report "Mitigation of Climate Change" will be released a few weeks later on 11 April after discussions in Berlin, Germany.
- The "Synthesis Report" will be considered in Copenhagen, Denmark at the end of October.

These will map out in great detail the state of our knowledge about the changing climate of the Earth, including what lies ahead for human society and the natural world. I hope the media will not ignore these reports — because they are not news anymore. They are just sad reminders that we have done far too little to stem the tide of climate change since the last report in 2007. The fossil fuel industry will shed a few crocodile tears and be glad when the year is over, hoping that no one will question its business model for another 6 years.

But the Earth will go on warming and the Arctic ice melting, and it seems likely that extremes of weather will increase as our planet moves towards a new climate state. This year may come and go, but really the future is up to us. This is the planet we have been given. We must keep asking what we would like to leave for our children — and look at the decisions we make as individuals and as a society in that light.

The words of John and Bonnie Raines, now both 80 years old, have been echoing in my mind this month. Back in 1971, they had young children and he was a professor of religion. With a small group of friends, they had the courage to raid an FBI office. The files they found revealed that J. Edgar Hoover's illegal domestic spying was being used to intimidate those protesting against the Vietnam War.

Looking back they said simply, "It became pretty obvious to us that if we don't do it, nobody will."

So I salute the first meeting of the Vermont Climate Caucus last week. I hope they will have the courage to pass a carbon tax, however small, to fund energy retrofits for low-income people in Vermont and help us all move in a new direction.