

## **Rational Hope: Connecting Hard Truth with Climate Solutions**

**An interview with Katharine Hayhoe, Tine Hens**

October 25, 2019

**“Yes, the situation is serious. No, it’s not hopeless and yes, solutions are there for the asking.” Tine Hens interviewed Canadian climate scientist Katharine Hayhoe about her experiences speaking truth to climate denialism and how rational hope – a solutions-focussed approach which looks the crisis in the eye – must be the cornerstone of discussions on the climate emergency.**

“To fly or not to fly?” Lately this has been the topic of heated debate among climate scientists. Is their message more powerful when they put their money where their mouth is? Or does the number of people they reach by flying outweigh their personal carbon footprint? In short, what has the greatest effect: personal lifestyle or personal contact? Climate scientist Katharine Hayhoe, who lives in the United States, is convinced that she achieves more by meeting people than by scrapping her flights. Nevertheless, she doesn’t take the decision to travel by plane lightly. “I save up my appointments until I have enough to square them with my own conscience. If I can’t manage this, I give lectures via skype.”

At the moment she’s in Europe. Her schedule is overloaded with appointments and conferences. As director of the Climate Science Center at Texas Tech University, Hayhoe is considered the woman who not only masters the science behind the climate crisis, but who knows how to best communicate it. She’s the driving force behind the [Global Weirding channel on YouTube](#), where she dissects any argument imaginable against climate action or any confusion around the cause of climate change with the necessary passion.

To her, talking about the planetary emergency in which we find ourselves is only meaningful if you connect the hard truth about the situation with a clear analysis of the solutions. What Joanna Macey in her book of the same name describes as ‘active hope’, Hayhoe likes to call ‘rational hope.’

“Without hope, we’ll be paralysed by fear,” she says. “The function of fear is very specific: it’s a response to an immediate danger. It helps us to run away from the bear or from a house on fire, but we cannot survive long in constant fear. In that case dissonance occurs, we disconnect from reality. We either throw our hands in the air and say, ‘All is lost’, or we decide not to bother and continue with our lives as if there’s nothing wrong.”

“That doesn’t mean that we must disguise the seriousness of the situation. That is irrational hope and false optimism. Because yes, the situation is serious. And no, we are not going to solve this by recycling more or by replacing light bulbs with LED lamps or by inflating our car tires. Those who claim that this will suffice are lying. The effect is the same as with a constant flow of stories of doom. When people discover that you don’t save the world by putting plastic in the right bag, because those plastics aren’t recycled but burnt, then they get disillusioned and drop out.”

“With rational hope we look the crisis in the eye. But we also focus on the solutions that are already there. Renewable energy is an important one, as are alternative agricultural techniques and a circular production system.

We can start with those now. But in order to push the politicians in that direction, we need a global movement to get the message across. That's why it's so important to see youngsters taking to the streets worldwide. We don't need small changes, but big ones and they are clearly calling this generation of politicians to account."

**Tine Hens: On social media young climate activists get a lot of opposition from adults. It offers some politicians a way out by minimising the voice of those youngsters.**

**Katharine Hayhoe:** Let's not mince matters: this counter-movement is organised. I come from the US, so I know how the doubt brigade works. I have specialised in addressing venues full of people shaking their heads disapprovingly about all the climate hysteria. There are five stages of climate denial. The first one is claiming it doesn't exist, that it's some sort of left-wing invention. The second is admitting that the climate is changing but not that human activity is the cause, or saying that we just don't know why. The third one is admitting that the climate is changing, but claiming that this isn't necessarily a bad thing. Who doesn't want a bit more sun and less rain? And maybe there'll be palm trees all over the place. The fourth is admitting climate change and that it isn't necessarily good, but that the solutions are worse and that's it's just better to adapt. Finally, there's the last stage where people say, 'Yes, it's true. Yes, it's bad. But you should have said this sooner, because now it's too late.'

Each of these five stages has the same goal: a delay or an abandonment of climate action. Claiming that we'll adapt is just as damaging as denying climate change because the outcome of both these attitudes is the same: doing nothing.

My experience in Texas has taught me that talking about solutions takes the sting out of the debate. I often meet people who cast doubts on climate change, but who are one hundred percent in favour of wind energy because they prefer breathing healthy air.

**A lot of people want to make lifestyle choices, but without being subject to 'the moralising finger'. It seems to boil down to this idea we mentioned before that you're a better person when you decide not to take a plane.**

Oh yes, that sounds very familiar. I think it's totally counterproductive, and it's something I often experience myself. Because I talk about climate change, people tell me I'm a hypocrite because I drive a car, I still eat meat, I fly, or because I have a child.

**'Overpopulation is the problem, not climate change,' is what people often say.**

Exactly. But it's not the number of people, it is the way in which people consume and produce, and the totally unfair distribution which is the result. So yes, I have a child and I wouldn't want otherwise, because my twelve-year-old gives me the hope and the power to keep working for that better future. I owe it to him. And yes, I do have a car, because I live a six-hour ride away from Dallas, the closest town with something resembling public transport. And yes, I do eat meat. I live in Texas. Here meat is important to people. At the University we're researching how farmers can keep cattle and store CO<sub>2</sub> in the soil. Of course, that can only work with fewer cattle and more space, a bit like the buffalos that were grazing the plains here some 200 years ago. Whenever I do eat meat, it comes from this university trial project.

For many people in Texas, being a cattle farmer, growing food, is part of their identity. If you attack them because of that, the only thing you achieve is that they become disaffected. I don't know about you, but when someone tells me what I can and cannot do, I somehow feel inclined to do the opposite. I remember a pastor in church saying that you sin every time you turn your car key. When I heard that I felt like walking out, getting in the biggest possible truck and driving round and round him with screeching tires. We must trust people, not tell them how to live. When I talk about solutions, I present them as possibilities.

**Yet these possibilities scare people off. ‘It’s impossible to make the world turn on 100 per cent renewable energy!’ ‘If we do that, it’s a return to the Middle Ages!’ You probably recognise these objections. How do you react to them?**

What I hear most often is ‘The sun doesn’t always shine’ and ‘What if there’s no wind?’ I try to explain to people that partly we’re living in the 18th century because we’re using exactly the same fuels we did back then. ‘Don’t you want new, modern technologies? An energy source of the 21st century? That’s solar panels. That’s wind energy.’

**And then people answer: ‘No, I’d rather have nuclear energy.’**

That’s applying a 20<sup>th</sup>-century solution on a 19<sup>th</sup>-century principle. It’s true that nuclear plants don’t produce any CO<sub>2</sub> in the production stage. I think it’s good to retain the nuclear capacity that’s there already as long as it can be done safely. I advocate looking into the potential of nuclear energy. But we mustn’t kid ourselves. Currently nuclear energy is the most expensive means to create electricity and one of the least effective. Poor countries can’t build nuclear plants. Even in the United States, no new nuclear plants have been built in the last three decades. One was planned but has been scrapped because it was too expensive.

In order to make progress, it is important to neutralise the opposition between nuclear and renewable. Who profits? The fossil fuel companies. That should remain the focus. As long as we don’t pay the right price for the emission of greenhouse gases it will be difficult to roll out new emission-free technologies. A Swiss company has invented a technology to take CO<sub>2</sub> out of the air and store it in certain types of rock. Right now, it is impossibly expensive because CO<sub>2</sub> is free.

**Isn’t that exactly where the hopeful story about all the possibilities gets bogged down? Citizens can get something done, but without political courage and vision that too remains a form of therapy. You undoubtedly know the figure that is annually spent on fossil fuels in terms of subsidies. An ordinary citizen can’t change that.**

You have to take to the street to do that. Absolutely. That’s why the global movement of climate strikers is so essential. I know what it means to live in a country where the federal government is ignoring science. I co-wrote the national climate report (National Climate Assessment) which the government simply dismissed.

At the same time, I notice the reaction to that denial of reality. People, corporations, and states are doing what they can to reduce emissions. Together they account for 40 per cent of total US emissions. Is that sufficient? No. But the Yale Program on Climate Communication opinion polls, held four times a year, has shown that more Americans than ever before are worried about climate change.

On the other hand, in the US more money is pumped into the fossil industry in terms of subsidies than into the entire operation of the Pentagon. Changing that requires a lot of pressure from the street. Political will is only going to come when people are indignant, when they discuss it, and when they realise what’s going on. As I remarked when I was asked to do a Ted Talk about the most important thing you can do for the climate, it is to talk about the impact and about the solutions.

**Just now we were talking about the fear that exists that climate action will send us back to the Middle Ages. If that’s not the future, how does it look according to you?**

The good news: for all the dreams I cherish for my future and particularly for my son’s, the technology is already there. We need innovation to take the surplus levels of CO<sub>2</sub> out of the atmosphere again in order to stabilise rising

temperatures, but we shouldn't wait for that instead of reducing our emissions now.

Concretely, I envision a future where people live in houses which generate energy, where our roads propel our cars, and where neighbourhoods are so closely connected that we can get anywhere by public transport, by bike, or on foot. Farmers will become CO<sub>2</sub> managers – they will work the soil to make it store CO<sub>2</sub>. We will no longer throw away 30 per cent of our food. Worldwide, there will be support networks to take care of the consequences of climate change and to help each other in the process.

Maybe that's the most important thing that I've learnt in the past fifteen years: material things don't make us happy. People need one another. Experiences, building something together, meeting each other – that's happiness. And we're being robbed of that because other stuff has taken its place. So yes, I envision a much happier world. Not a world in which everything gets more and more difficult, where our lives get tougher, where we have less because we need to solve climate change, but a world in which everybody flourishes and is better off.

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Katharine Hayhoe is a climate scientist and professor of political science at Texas Tech University, where she is director of the Climate Science Center.



Tine Hens is a journalist on climate change for *MO\** and author of *Het kleine verzet* (Epo, 2015).

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