

Chapter 2: On the Relationship Between Young People and Adults

How We Can All Write History

A wakeup call – how do we get through to the adults?

What is needed now? A wakeup call for everyone, those in power and the wider public? “An alarm clock can just be switched off,” say Loukina and Isabelle, “set on indefinite snooze.” “We need something else.”

That makes sense to me: the danger is that parliaments and governments – and with them a large part of the public – will simply continue to delay everything. That they will say: “There is a problem, and we’re taking it seriously. We have goals (such as ‘net zero and climate neutrality by 2050’) and we will give the markets incentives to change things as necessary. We are investing more in green projects.” At the same time, they refuse to base their plans on concrete emissions budgets. This means that young people cannot know whether emissions will really go down. It is totally unclear what their future will hold. Until now, this hesitant political strategy has not achieved much, particularly on a global level. The CO₂ concentration in the atmosphere continues to climb, and accordingly, so do global temperatures – with all the devastating consequences, including drought, floods, and ruined harvests, in the warmest decade since records began.

It’s “wilful procrastination,” as Isabelle says. “We have to open everyone’s eyes and keep them open, not just wake them up,” Loukina adds. “Their noses, their ears, their sense of taste – so that they can’t start dozing again.” What would be needed so that all of us could once again sleep peacefully and breathe deeply? She recalls a quote from Joanna Macy (2014): “Of all the dangers we face, from climate chaos to nuclear war, none is so great as the deadening of our response.” We need to make sure that a gigantic social project has been set up

which will really take the crisis seriously and stop global warming and the loss of species. We all ought to be sitting down together, admitting that there is a crisis, and defining and implementing a new framework. That would be possible within a few weeks or months if we were allowing ourselves to feel and connect to the crises in the first place.

Publicity

“But how do we change public opinion? There are so few public spaces,” says Loukina. “We need citizens’ assemblies in which everyone can take part. People don’t want the foundations of their own lives to be destroyed.” As can be seen from opinion polls in April and June 2019, at the time of the first global strike and the XR blockade of London, public opinion is shifting. Suddenly, more than half of British people believed that politics should react quite differently to the ecological and climate crisis, including by declaring a state of emergency (Barasi 2019). A “disruption” led to a change in public opinion.

“We children and young people can make a unique contribution to solving the crises,” say Isabelle and Loukina. “We’re still prepared to think unconventionally, or rather, to think sensibly. We are not caught in the mechanisms that explain away the dangers, developed by those powerful people at the Davos WEF – and this is what makes our contribution necessary.” Isabelle and Loukina think back to the first strike, to the moment when they made that step. “I shouldn’t do it, I shouldn’t do it, I thought, but it is so important,” says Isabelle. “And then it almost becomes a routine, and when there was one time that I didn’t go on strike, it felt so wrong.” “We always went on strike from 10 am,” says Loukina. “So we really went out of the school, which is a big step because the teachers are right there. You take a megaphone, and you call: leave the school, go on strike! We knew we wanted the right thing, that we didn’t want to avoid going to lessons but to draw attention to the crisis. We explained to all classes in the school why it was important, and then we called out: It’s time to strike!”

The role of the adults

What is the role of the adults, of the broader population? “You could use the image of a hand with fingers. Fridays For Future is one finger, the one that was initiated by us young people and led by us. Adults can help by being supportive but not suddenly taking on leading roles,” the two of them say.

“Their task is mainly to believe in us, to trust us,” Loukina explains. “We have our unconventional ideas, we do things that might be wrong, but we need this freedom. Adults can get fully involved in the parents’ groups or the scientists’ groups.” “But that doesn’t mean that we don’t need everyone. We need them as parts of a comprehensive climate justice movement, a hand with all its fingers,” Isabelle continues. “Unfortunately, it often seems like only young people and grandparents are really involved, but not the middle generation, which is in power. That’s why we tried to make a general strike happen, to bring all working people into the movement,” says Loukina. “We need everyone. Many people may have briefly thought about the climate, but everything happens so fast, and people forget again what’s important. That was the good thing about the Week For Future in September, when all of us protested together in the streets.”

But isn’t there still a problem that it’s the adults who have caused this dire situation, and that they are now the ones with power, casting a shadow over the children’s future? “That dynamic does exist, and sometimes we’re incredibly furious, including when we’re standing in front of politicians. But that does change with time. Sometimes we no longer expect anything from them, because they have such a narrow view of their own options.” “It’s as if they can’t grasp the crisis as a crisis. They’re trapped in their way of thinking.” “But this definitely can’t be about the younger generation rejecting and despising the older one. We’ve never said that, we’ve just said that we won’t forgive them and we won’t accept their actions, unless they start looking for a solution with us.” “We need the power and strength of the adults on our side. It also isn’t about mistakes by individuals; it’s a systemic problem. And some of them have been fighting for decades in all parts of the world for their survival and for the protection of nature.”

“But we children still relate to the world in a different way. We’re more free, more independent, and often more open. We’re not as corrupt, and as a group we don’t care that much what adults think. Adults should listen to us much more,” Isabelle continues. “Especially if we want to change all the underlying conditions, we have to bring in young people much more,” says Loukina. “Basi-

cally, politics and the economy and even the whole of society should be based on principles which young people fundamentally understand, otherwise something is wrong," she adds. "That is also a kind of power struggle, because it's a question of worldview."

The best thing that can happen at these moments, in my experience, when young people and adults work together, is that we manage to see what is most important, to see the whole picture, and to see what would be needed in order to change all the conditions, so that it would work out well for everyone. We should include the young people much more, I think to myself, and show them real respect; we should lower the voting age and give them a voice in all institutions.

"When we spent a few weeks working at all levels, locally in Lausanne, nationally and globally, we were able to ask ourselves this question: what does the global justice perspective mean here in this city or in the region? And vice versa," says Loukina. This, I think to myself, is the perspective we need now, as we develop new rules for our shared life. We shouldn't just be continuing as usual with a few corrections, but should have the courage to set out the necessary framework, to outline what is "really needed." That is similar to what Scientists For Future are doing with Maja Göpel and Kate Raworth, who has been testing out her doughnut model in many cities together with the people who live there (Boffey 2020).

If we now sketch out the common principles and agree on them democratically, locally, and globally, we need this holistic compass. A compass for children and adults everywhere, pointing towards what we would need for a dignified life, for all of us. We have to hold onto this global and local holistic view and make it accessible to everyone in such a way that a continuous movement emerges which everyone can get behind. Then young people could relax, knowing that the adults are taking care of the world and trying to create as much security as can ever be possible in interaction with nature.

Conclusions for all of us – into the future

How can adults just carry on as usual and not try to ensure that this fear disappears now, I ask myself. We could sit down as an international community, together, and change the underlying conditions so that productive energy would emerge; that's the utopian ideal. That is how we humans work, my students at the university and probably most other people: as soon as we have a shared

framework, principles and rules, and we can rely on people following them, we have energy – for instance, that is how it was with the first global strike, when we really only knew the date and the basic demands.

“Change doesn’t just happen when we get new information,” Loukina adds, “or when we’re called on to behave differently, but when expectations change in terms of what’s seen as normal. We can shift the expectations of the whole population, including the people in power.” Often, these young people are presented in the media as a moralising or puritanical group. But they are not accusing other people; their target is the framework or the mindset (Göpel 2016); they want to shift normality so that we can learn to live in a sustainable way that works in the long term.

Those are the two alternatives, I think to myself. Either we go on as we have been for the last thirty years. With diffuse goals for “climate neutrality” in 2050, annual COP meetings where barely anything happens, market incentives for consumer-focused change, slightly different flows of investment, hopes for new negative emissions technologies, everything only coordinated loosely on a global scale, and fossil fuels being treated as goods to be managed nationally – and the likelihood that emissions will only fall slightly, if at all, and global warming will continue.

“There always seems to be a higher authority,” says Loukina. “The people in power give you the feeling that they can’t actually do anything. So that you ask yourself the whole time: but then where is the power that could change something? They often act as if they aren’t responsible at all. Barely any of them say: yes, that’s right, we’ll bring in new legislation now. I might not be elected again, but who cares, I’ll do my best to act on the science and try to mitigate the crisis.” “And many of them are so convinced that they’re doing enough, or they claim that this isn’t their area, but instead has to be solved at a global or local level,” Isabelle adds.

The alternative: together, as a global population, living together in such a complex biosphere, we establish a new set of rules to respond to the crisis as a crisis. We decide, as we did with a contract for nuclear disarmament, that the coal, gas, and oil have to stay in the ground, because the GAP report says that the existing infrastructure will produce so many emissions in the next ten years that it will be impossible to uphold the Paris Agreement, because the earth will become more than 0.5 degrees warmer (UNEP Production Gap Report 2019). And we agree on how this can happen fairly. We decide on emissions budgets at a global, national, and local level (and perhaps an individual level), so that we can be sure that emissions in richer countries will be reduced every year and

will soon be stopped. We decide together that the rainforest in Brazil, Congo and Indonesia will not be razed any longer to meet western demand for meat or palm oil, but on the contrary, that forests will be protected and expanded, that powerful countries like Germany and China cannot rely on coal power any more, and that no new investment by Swiss banks can go into the fossil society, because that is not compatible with the emissions budgets. We understand ourselves as being an integral part of nature. We reposition ourselves in a non-extractive and non-abusive relation to our surroundings and other beings.

In this way, we will create trust in each other. And a gigantic shared project for the whole of society. We will give influence to those who have knowhow when it comes to sustainable agriculture, town planning and so on. But we will not start with these sectors, but with the basic underlying framework (see Appendix). It is this crisis management which we now have to achieve together, fairly, through discussion. And at the same time, we can formulate it in such a way that we can stand up for it, young and old, and work every day to realise it; through disruptions, but also by building a broad popular movement on the other, and through jurisdiction and education.

This, I think to myself, is the wonderful thing about FFF and S4F, and this is what makes the story of the last two years so important. They have not only shifted public discourse through their strike and made millions of people aware of the ecological and climate crisis. They have also worked on this framework the whole time, by uniting with us, the scientists. That was our shared project, which actually started already after a few days in September 2018, when we were inspired by Greta's idea and sent the first #ScientistsForFuture email to various professors in different disciplines in different cities and said: we need to support these young people, and we need to show that what they want is not impossible.

This whole time, we have been using public funds to work on ideas for the sustainable transformation of society. We are able, at least at some institutions, to bring together climate science and ethics and develop precisely the framework needed as a result of research, globally and locally. And we are able to think systematically, as the young people are asking – when it comes to the financial sector and the economy in general, for example. How exactly the overall picture of this transformation of society will look is something we might not yet be able to know. There are countless scenarios. But the framework can be sketched out. “And to think of the framework, we need to face three well-known counterproductive feelings: judgement, cynicism, and fear. From the moment that we manage to hold back, even for some seconds, our inner voices

of fear, cynicism, and judgement, we will be able to let the sketch of the framework emerge in us. But that requires a lot of courage, compassion, and curiosity (Scharmer 2009). That is part of our democratic duty and our central task, all of us who work, teach, and learn at universities. We need to let the future emerge,” says Loukina.

In the weeks after two years of joint activism, there is a sketch of such an alternative, when Greta, together with scientists and other FFF activists, sends a letter to the EU, and twenty FFF activists from the Global South send a similar letter to the G20 (as described in the chapter on the corona crisis and in the Appendix). So many discussions were needed before we reached this framework, both among the young activists and among the scientists. Precisely that is the story of FFF and S4F, as well as the story of the discussions between Isabelle and Loukina. They have had so many conversations, already at the beginning in Strasbourg and then in Lausanne and in Davos. How exactly should we stand up for these principles? Should we negotiate climate action plans with scientists, or only rough outlines? What should these look like; what does climate justice mean for these plans? In spite of differences of opinion, they have not lost themselves in the details, but have kept their shared project in view. As Reto Knutti says (Ryser 2019), the big environmental problems (such as the damage to the ozone layer) have never been solved through incentives. We all need to be given a jolt which brings us onto a different level by changing the underlying conditions as a response to the crises. As soon as this has happened, we can start on the real work. We need to change our lives. And this process must centre those, and be led by those, who are most affected by injustice and crises.

Taking the crisis seriously as a crisis, as the corona crisis was taken seriously: that means changing the fundamental rules and adjusting them to reality. And it means agreeing on the principles and establishing them democratically, locally, nationally, and globally. By admitting that we are vulnerable and totally dependent on each other, across national borders. And now we need to bring ourselves onto this new level of living together. Two years ago, there was a sign and a sheet of A4 paper which Greta took with her. Then five young women had the courage to join her, week after week, even when no one took any notice of them and nothing happened, in the cold and rain. And now a global movement exists, with tens of thousands of young activists and scientists who have set up a program we can build on, and which can be joined by all people who are active in other movements, whether for justice or for the climate, such as XR or the NGOs, to form a huge shared popular movement.

On a Friday, at some point, we can say to each other: we agreed together to protect the rainforests, to stop emissions, to keep fuel in the ground and to look after everyone's basic needs worldwide on a just basis. Painting this picture of a shared new crisis agreement might be an important part of what Loukina and Isabelle describe as "opening people's eyes": not only waking them up and making them aware of the crisis; not only protesting, but making it clear to them that we will only be quiet when we, all of us, have changed the rules. And not in any old way, but in the way that we all need, as interdependent creatures on a living planet. The idea for the mechanisms needed already exists (see Appendix).

Then we can wake up in the morning and know, or at least hope: oh, the oil will stay in the ground in Venezuela and Saudi Arabia, and the coal will stay in the ground in China and Germany. The forests will stay standing. People are eating plant-based diets. Energy is being produced more decentrally and sustainably. And above all: no one can dominate others or exploit them. Along with the oil drilling towers, we will dismantle the injustice which oppresses many people (especially children, women, and BIPOC), and which has oppressed them for so long, through this fossil society which benefits just a few people. On the contrary, we will make sure all people have what they need to live, as equals. We have the tools and the ideas to do it. We have a democratic framework; and we are millions of people, young and old. We will not give up until this has been realised. And along the way, we will go on inventing new ways and means to realise this together, with disruptive, nonviolent direct action at the centres of power, so that those in power can no longer keep going as usual, and with broad educational efforts. Everyone is welcome, everyone is needed.