

## CHAPTER 12--SELF-DECEPTION

“You must get asked about global warming a lot. It seems so abstract to me sometimes.”

“There’s a lot of jargon and hype, like most things nowadays. I have a different perspective on the subject though. If you want, I can explain the basics first then tell you why I think global warming doesn’t really matter at all.”

“It doesn’t matter?”

She straightened up in her chair, eager to hear how this scientist who studied the climate up close could say such a thing.

Nathan started with the basics – the evidence for man made global warming. The most revealing data was the unprecedented levels of carbon dioxide level in the atmosphere, greater than at any point found in all ice cores going back to 800,000 years. Temperature changes also coincided with industrial age and volcanic weather events. The 20 hottest years on record had all occurred since 1980. He didn’t like coincidences.

It came down to – trapped gases, trapping heat. It was due to the combination of intensive

land clearing for agriculture, and pollution from industry, and automobile growth. One of the cores from Antarctica showed that a carbon dioxide concentration increase which took nature 10,000 years, had now occurred in less than 50 years. It corresponded between the last ice age maximum and pre-industrial times. Some warming was good, too much, too fast, and it would be like trying to bake a meringue too fast, it would burn.

Perhaps even more interesting were the changes occurring due to global warming and the potential future changes. He described the formation of more intense hurricanes in the Gulf of Mexico – such as Cristobal, Gustav, Kyle, and Omar – to hurricanes forming off the Brazilian coast for the first time in recorded history. Then there was the melting of glaciers, combined with long droughts which affected water supplies. There was also the potential shutdown of the annual heat pump, the Atlantic Gulf Stream, which would result in much colder winters for Europe and the end of the mild Mediterranean winters. Conditions which may have already begun as a slowdown of over 30% had been found in the global water circulation which powered the stream. Amanda saw this latter point better when Nathan explained that Buffalo, New York, notorious for cold winters, was at the same latitude as Western Europe.

It was his later remarks on other changes though that had Amanda sit up and pay even more attention.

“Polar bears?” Amanda sat up in her chair.

Nathan looked over at Amanda’s stuffed polar bear.

“I see you have an affinity for polar bears.”

“It’s a gift for a friend of a friend.” She effortlessly lied again, not even blushing this

time.

“Oh. You know someone in Greenland?”

“It’s a favor for a friend of my travel agent.”

Nathan sat back in his chair, taking a more relaxed posture. He looked at Amanda’s stuffed animal and was mesmerized for a moment by its beady eyes.

“While most of us will never see a polar bear in the wild, does it matter if they become extinct?”

“It matters.”

“Does it?”

“How might it happen?” Amanda pressed on with a sense of urgency in her voice.

He explained how most plants and animals had developed over time and did not have the same ability to adapt as fast as we did. He gave the example of how our skin would change over time if we moved to a different climate, either thinner or thicker. We survived in the meantime by relying on heaters, air conditioning, buildings, or changes in clothing.

Amanda was only half listening now as she imagined riding on the back of a large polar bear. They were looking for something to eat. With the poles of the Earth acting like sponges for heat, ice was melting all around them. The impact of global warming was magnified in the Arctic, Their hunting range had decreased by more than 20% due to thinner and reduced ice extent. They had trouble finding their main meal, seals. They were already thin and losing weight fast like their friends in Churchill, Canada.

The polar bear could walk no more, he fell limp to the ground. She tried to wake him up,

but she was so weak herself. The bear groaned and she screamed as loud as she could – but no one cared, as the people were too busy talking about war, unfounded fears, and celebrity scandals. If not these, then new technology gadgets, designer fashions, new cars, and clever ways of doing the same thing. The people were too busy, talking about themselves. Amanda and polar bear were left on the cutting room floor of gossip and narcissism.

Nathan had stopped talking now sensing Amanda's apparent disinterest.

She looked around the lounge and wondered what sort of conversations everyone else was having. Were they serious like this one? Were they talking about business? Or about to go on an adventure like herself? She noticed a smartly dressed woman, she didn't look like she was going on an adventure. She was all work and no play. What was her work life balance like? She gazed at how this woman carried herself. A glance at her purse revealed no familiar logos. Her eyes shifted to another woman wearing a fur coat before she looked at Nathan again.

"I'm sorry, my mind was wandering with the things you were saying. You know, traveling to a different country is exciting."

"It sure is. I have the travel bug virus. It's an expensive, but exciting addiction."

"This is my first time out of the country."

"Exciting. You've picked quite a first place."

"I'll say."

"I like traveling to different places, it makes me look at the world and myself differently. We grow up with all these expectations about what is right and wrong and then after traveling, at least for me, I realized many of those assumptions were just silly. There is a feeling of

connectedness I feel with the world at large too. It's strange, but we are all just one big family. I don't think I would have ever felt it if I just stayed at home."

"Maybe. What were you saying about global warming before my mind wandered off?"

"I was saying that it isn't just the polar bears, but the traditional ways of living for the Inuit too. While people in large parts of the world debate the effects of global warming and wonder how much impact it will have, the effects on the people who live in the Arctic are ever so real. The Arctic is like a canary in a coal mine. Though in reality, the signals about our warming climate are all around us. I do mean more than just big hurricanes."

"Signals?"

"Advance warning signals."

"What sort of signals?"

"You said you're from Seattle right?"

"Yes."

"The Pacific Northwest will get more rain from what I've read."

"More rain in the Pacific Northwest?"

"Yes. You should be getting heavier rain storms and wind."

The idea had only crossed her mind in small, fleeting bursts. She had never pieced it all together, but the picture was coming into focus with far more clarity than she would have wanted to believe. Could the heavy rains that caused Stephanie's car accident been a result of global warming? She thought about the conversation back home about needing an umbrella in Seattle now. Could there be a connection? She didn't want to believe it.

“The rain is a substitute for what would normally be snow. It gets wetter in the winter, but then the summers are drier.”

“It gets both drier and wetter at the same time?”

“Where you live, yes. More extremes.”

“More extremes,” she repeated.

She knew it was true now. The bad ski seasons, the record days with rainfall, the longer summers, and record warm temperatures in the heart of winter. There could be no doubt, Stephanie’s accident was directly tied to global warming.

Nathan continued that there were some places which wouldn’t get more rain, such as in the Southwest US where drought conditions had been going on for many years. Or the Colorado River which had been well below historical levels for a long time now. He explained how it was like a whole chain reaction.

“I think I need a beer.” She needed to take the edge off. She didn’t want to know any more.

“I could use one too. Any particular brand?”

Amanda checked her watch. Another thirty minutes before hotel check in. She was starting to feel the jet lag but decided to grab a beer anyway. The conversation wasn’t uplifting.

“Heineken.”

“They don’t serve that here. How about Carlsberg?”

“What’s that?”

“Danish beer.”

“I’ll try it.”

Nathan walked back and placed the two beers on the table.

Remembering Nathan’s earlier story about the can ban, Amanda took a closer look at the beer bottle. 4.25DKK was the figure marked on the bottle. “Hey, that’s about 70 cents!”

“What?”

“The recycling deposit.”

“Oh, right.”

They chatted about recycling again. Nathan made an observation that a high deposit price on bottles not only increased the recycling rate, but prevented glass bottles from being smashed on the ground, and thus, less glass on the road – glass that could puncture bicycle tires. They speculated why the recycling effort had stalled in their home country and why some states had laws, and others didn’t. They both agreed that five or ten cents wasn’t high enough of a deterrent to carelessness. Why was there no index to inflation?

“Danes are the top beer drinkers in the world after the Irish, Germans, and Austrians I think.”

“Really?”

“Maybe that’s one reason why they are usually ranked the happiest country in the world. It ain’t watered down beer either!”

“They are? I didn’t know there were such rankings.”

“It’s been going on for over twenty five years.”

“How does our country score?”

“In twentieth place or so. Going down.”

“That far down?”

“Our ranking is also variable since we have such a large country and growing income gap. Wealth plays a role, but only up to a certain point, then it doesn’t matter.”

“That’s surprising.” Though Amanda wasn’t quite so surprised about the wealth part.

“I haven’t seen all the detail, but of about 10 West European countries, the only country that has gotten happier since the early 1970s is Denmark, and maybe the Netherlands.”

“Only Denmark?”

“The measurement is called life satisfaction, not happiness.”

“Life satisfaction?”

He twisted off his bottle cap. “None of it matters.”

“Happiness doesn’t matter?”

“It will be irrelevant if global warming takes hold. But global warming doesn’t matter either.”

“You mentioned that earlier. What do you mean?” Her eyes widened as she gave him a stern look, the connection between Stephanie’s accident and global warming still fresh in her mind.

“People can be conditioned to believe anything.”

“Conditioned?”

“Have you ever heard of self-deception?”

“No.”

“Self-deception is when we believe our own lies.”

She sat frozen for a moment. On the one hand wondering how this was possible and yet at the same time realizing how true it could be. She glanced over at her stuffed polar bear and felt a lump in her throat.

“Studies have found that when people are more depressed they are more honest with themselves. Have you ever noticed that when people are sick their behavior changes?”

“Changes?”

“Not just their voice or physical symptoms, but how they communicate and what they say.”

“Now that you mention it, I think so.” She thought a little longer. “People seem to be more straightforward and less confrontational. It’s as if their personal wall has come down.”

“Same idea with self-deception. When the test subjects emerged out of their depression or sadness, they tended to lie themselves more.”

“Lying to ourselves?”

“You know – those everyday lies we tell ourselves.”

“The everyday lies?”

He explained that lies were part of our everyday life. They ranged from false answers to everyday greetings to necessary social courtesies, such as when we express joy over receiving a Christmas fruitcake.

Amanda let out a good laugh.

Nathan noted that the more profound lies were those involving more important parts of

our lives. Such as when we say we love our job, but deep down really don't. Or when we tell ourselves how much we love our significant other when we really don't. Or we tell ourselves how much we need the next gadget or new car, when we know that deep down it won't give us real joy. Many things more often than not, were just short term drugs. His theory was that maybe this was why some people have a mid-life crisis when some event pushes them off their high, then causes them to ask themselves the hard questions and listen to the real answers, then act on them.

It all seemed to make sense to Amanda. She had questioned more parts of her own life now. She wouldn't be here if she hadn't.

He went on to explain the winner's curse. A phenomenon where the winners of some competition or series of events would become too confident, too proud, of their own skills, or their way of life. They would stumble for awhile, before tripping on themselves. The collapse of stock markets and fads were good examples of this in a group setting. Or victorious countries in war or empire. Without exception, empires always collapsed. Then there were all the tragic individual stories. A quick glance at the supermarket tabloids would reveal a lot.

"Sometimes I think global warming is the hot air from all the lies being told around the world. Political correctness, clever advertising, saving face, onerous traditions, whatever. So much of it is bullshit masquerading as the truth."

"Can you excuse me for a moment?" she interjected.

"Of course."

The bathroom was empty as she rushed in. She looked into the mirror and burst into

tears. "I'm so sorry Steph. So, so sorry. I'm so ashamed of myself. I'm ashamed about lying to you, my best friend since forever. Deep down I felt like we were competing to see who would be more successful. My life has never been as good as how I described it. I was always jealous of you. Will you forgive me?" The face in the mirror gave no response as she sniffled. She had never cried like this before. Or talked like this before. Not even when her parents got a divorce, that was drawn out and she felt a little heartless after all the fighting.

Another woman walked in. Amanda turned her head but looked away quickly.

"Are you alright? I thought I heard some sort of commotion."

"No, everything's fine. Thank you."

"Good." The woman proceeded to an open stall.

Amanda wiped her tears away, freshened up, and returned back to her seat.

"Are you alright?" Nathan inquired.

"I ate something bad I think. I must have a weak stomach."

"That's odd. They have very high hygiene standards here. You're alright now?"

"Yes." She wanted to get right back in to the conversation. "I was thinking in the bathroom, are you saying that people tell themselves or believe all sorts of bullshit to maintain some fantasy rather than admit their wrong headedness or acknowledge that a change is needed?"

"You got it."

Amanda had come to understand one tenet about her chosen profession, marketing, repeat a message loud and long enough, and you could convince the average person of anything.

Had she fallen for the tricks of her fellow marketing compatriots? Was there more evidence for global warming than what she had been led to believe too? Was the problem more urgent?

As soon as she said that, it became apparent as they talked how easy in fact it was for people to change. Mobile phones, computers, and fancy cars being just a sample of things that many thought were indispensable, yet, these items did not exist not long ago. It was an excuse she had given. Perhaps she was one of those who preferred to live in denial until one no longer could.

“Maybe we are just not conditioned to act unless a problem is imminent or has already occurred, kind of like September 11.”

“I agree. I wish I had more answers.”

Amanda knew all about getting people to act. A big part of marketing was understanding the psychological behavior of people. Why people bought things, why they didn't. What attracted people's attention, what turned them off. Color, shape, smell, placement, and that trendy word these days, perhaps of the last decade or two -- buzz.

Nathan continued. “There is a certain irony about changing weather, it depends on how you look at it. You may get less gloomy skies and be able to get a better natural tan, but then, as you mentioned, you can't ski as long. Maybe you don't ski, but hike more often. So your hiking season is longer.”

“I haven't thought about it that way.”

“It takes time for people to adjust. We get accustomed to behaving in certain ways based on simple mental cues, the name of the month for example. If the definition of that month

changes, we might not change our behavior along with what is happening, we might still be stuck in the old month mindset.”

“Are you saying that if it gets warmer in December, and appropriate for hiking a certain area, we may not go out to hike there just because we think it will be too cold, even though it isn’t?”

“Exactly.”

They continued talking about how people looked at global warming. How Asian women valued fair skin over tan skin. That a tan used to mean you worked in the fields, whereas fair skin meant you were wealthy enough not to. In Europe and America, it was just the opposite with women and men going to tanning salons. It was all a matter of perspective. Some places would be luckier than others. Other places might suffer a lot more, even if they themselves were not major contributors to global warming.

Amanda pondered his words as she looked out the window. There were planes coming and going from their respective gates.

“I think the better question is what kind of world do we want to live in.”

“What do you mean?”

“Does it matter if it gets hotter more often and people spend more of their days indoors in air conditioning?”

Amanda didn’t say anything, perhaps still wondering what sort of world she wanted to live in.

He mused how even in places with a non-humid and pleasant climate for being in the

outdoors, a lot of people still ‘worked out’ in air conditioned fitness clubs. Rather than getting natural sun they would go to a tanning salon. It was as if the outdoors no longer mattered.

Perhaps for sprawled and car dependent places, people didn’t want to go outside, they were habituated to the car, never mind the smog in some places. He noted how comparing the streets of a well designed city versus a sprawled suburb, anywhere in the world, it wouldn’t be hard to see why most people didn’t walk outside. Parking lots and exhaust fumes weren’t inspiring.

Amanda thought about her earlier exploration of Copenhagen and how different it would have been if it was car dominated. Prior to this trip, she had never questioned this aspect of life. She now understood first hand how life could be lived in a very different way.

“Have you ever been to Los Angeles?”

She didn’t want to be thinking about sunny weather. California could be on another planet. Ice, that is what she was thinking about. As visions of crystalline ice danced in her head she was reminded of one of her favorite marketing stories, diamonds. Shiny diamonds. Few knew about the diamond monopoly and the efforts of the primary cartel, to associate diamonds with love and marriage. They held high the illusion of rarity and that phrase, a diamond is forever, neither of which were true. It was a ‘tradition’ that wasn’t really a ‘tradition’ at all. It was the epitome of the power of marketing. She kidded around with co-workers about how she would react when the first sucker would propose to her with a diamond. That is if she could ever find the right man.

“I didn’t like it at all,” she murmured, trying to quiet down her mind and get back to the

conversation.

“LA is a perfect example. Because of all the auto pollution, you can see the smog almost everyday of the year. You can’t even see the San Gabriel mountains on many days. I bet a lot of people there still say they love LA. If they are just focusing on the sports teams or the all the nightlife choices, ok.”

An image of nightmarish traffic jams flashed across Amanda’s mind, it wasn’t from LA, but her hometown Seattle, the Emerald City. A gemstone that she would much prefer to diamonds. She remembered reading how it ranked in the top ten worst cities for traffic, perhaps even the top five.

Nathan summed up his thought. “They aren’t seeing the forest for what it is. It’s a narrowing of vision.” I’ve seen it all over the world. Maybe it is just a human defense mechanism or denial of reality to keep our spirits up.”

“Rose colored glasses?”

“Yea. Rose colored glasses might be a good way to describe self-deception.”

The only reason he thought people accepted degraded living conditions was what some called creeping normalcy and landscape amnesia. The idea that people forget what life once was or could be. Or the conviction that it’s all good, so why change.

Amanda thought about how long it had been since she had ridden a bicycle. There was the memory of a happier time with her parents married. A tricycle, then training wheels, then just two! It was so long ago that her attitudes about it had even changed for the negative – for she could drive a car. That lusty, four wheeled, mechanical beast. Her experience in Copenhagen had

made her see the bicycle as she must have seen it as a child.

Nathan continued. “Another example might be when health officials give a warning to stay indoors due to smog or avoid the beach – so we do. We do something else. Rather than demand a clean up of the beach, we go find another one or don’t go at all. Pretty soon the whole idea becomes that you have to travel some place exotic.”

This was beginning to make a lot of sense. At least she didn’t have to run circles around that excuse to visit exotic Greenland.

“What kind of world do we want to live in?” Nathan asked.

Amanda let her imagination wander for a moment, realizing deep to her core that there were so many places she hadn’t seen. If her experience in Copenhagen was any guide, there were many more exciting and insightful places to explore. Perhaps Mary’s prophecy of this being the first of many adventures would come true after all.

“A better world?” She answered meekly. “What does the future look like to you?”

“It may not be pretty. If a bunch of people don’t get a knock on the side of their head soon, we may not be in a position to make any choices for our future.”

“Like with all the hurricanes?”

“Yes. The problem isn’t just global warming but also in the way government is set-up. I think the problem is much deeper than we like to believe. But, I guess change begins at home. If you can’t change yourself – it’s a moot point to try and change others. Lead by example. I’m frustrated. If we can’t solve self-deception, then we won’t solve anything.”

This conversation was not cheering her up. She took a swig of beer as Nathan shared his

final stories on recent climate changes and their impact.

There was the Medieval Warm Period, the time when the Vikings settled on Greenland, which turned into the Little Ice Age and caused their eventual demise. Apart from climate records, one could see the change in museum paintings. A historian named Neuberger had studied 12,000 paintings in forty-one art museums in the US and Europe. Neuberger found a distinct change in the landscapes painted by artists, from clear blue skies before 1400 to more cloudy and dark skies after for the next 500 years. The kicker was that the average temperature difference between the Little Ice Age and the Medieval Warm Period was 2°F. A small change, but big impact.

Amanda thought about these words. A small change in climate had affected the way she would live now. Perhaps it was kind of like bacteria and viruses. We couldn't see them, but they could do major damage to us.

“There is an even more interesting example for which we can look back on as a guide to what might happen.”

“Let's hear it,” she proclaimed as she finished off her beer.

“In addition to man made global warming there are natural factors that have influenced climate and weather patterns around the world. A lack of sunspot activity matches up with some of the coldest periods of the Little Ice Age, but the most interesting one is a volcanic eruption in Indonesia, Tambora. Ever heard of it?”

“No.”

“Tambora is on a little island in Indonesia. It erupted in 1815 and to date is the largest

eruption in recorded history. It spread gases like sulfur dioxide way up in the stratosphere, the upper layer of our atmosphere. The gas was so dense that it blocked about 20% of the solar radiation, heat, that would otherwise reach Earth. Its effects lasted for a few years.”

“What happened?”

“It caused poor harvests, food shortages, and crazy weather across many parts of the globe. Europe and the Northeastern US were hit hard. The worst year was called – the year without summer. Thousands of people died from starvation. An interesting thing I learned is that this period of time was when dark stories such as Frankenstein and Vampyre were written.”

“Vampire?”

“Vampyre was a novel written by John Polidori, it was the inspiration and spark for how people view vampires today in fiction.”

“You should go into Hollywood,” Amanda teased.

“I never get tired of watching Vampire movies and what happens to them because of their lust for immortality.”

Amanda’s concentration was distracted by a handsome gentleman walking past their area. “I’m sorry, what did you say again about vampires?”

“I said I never get tired of watching Vampires and the trials and tribulations they go through because of their lust for immortality.”

“Lust for immortality?”

“You know, they have to constantly suck blood and they can’t come out in the daylight because they will burn up when exposed to the sun.”

“Yeah, burn up in the sun.”

“Their trade off for immortality is a life of darkness and evil.”

Amanda paused for a moment, realizing that she never got past the blood sucking to realize the true intent of the story.

“We might all get to be stars in the film before too long. I think a lot of us already are vampires.”

“Already vampires?”

“Just look at all the super-sized houses, super-sized bodies, and all the big cars with their tinted windows. They’re like moving coffins.”

“Moving coffins?”

“Maybe my language is a bit strong, but the square look is in.”

She thought about the latest ‘in’ cars. They were very boxy.

“Maybe it will only be when we have our backs against the wall, when enough people see the errors in their ways. Or when knowledge and courage triumph over hope and fear.”

“Hope and fear?”

“Fear makes people hope. And we both know what springs eternal for better days ahead.”