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Beyond Climate Optimism, Beyond Climate Pessimism

or: Starting From the Position That We're Fucked

Margaret Killjoy

September 11, 2026

I was right about climate change, about its severity and its immediacy.

I've never wanted to be wrong about something more in my entire life.

But we can't fall into easy traps like optimism. Or pessimism. We can't let "we're fucked" be the end of the conversation, but we can't pretend like we're not also, well, kind of in trouble. We're kind of fucked. That's just got to be the start of the conversation, not the end of it.

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Retrieved on 25th September 2026 from substack.com

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This summer has been devastating, and it might wind up in history books (if we're around to write history books) as the summer where global warming became really and truly a *present* threat and not just a *future* one.

This summer has been devastating, but when we watch Nepal flood, when we choke on wildfire smoke from a thousand miles

or ten miles away, while we watch the ocean warm and read that coral reefs are likely a thing of the past, we have to remember: this isn't the new normal. This is the best it's going to be.

This summer has been devastating, but it's not the new normal. We might never reach a new normal. There will **never be a normal again unless we stop the omniscidal maniacs who are knowingly and willingly destroying every person, animal, plant, and ecosystem on the planet.** Until we take fossil fuel infrastructure offline, there will never be a new normal. We can adapt our society and our lives to a *changed* world, but it's much harder to adapt to a *permanently changing* world.

Eventually, of course, the warming will stop. Either we transition away from climate-changing infrastructure or the climate will eventually destroy that infrastructure for us. Since I'm fond of life, both my own and that of the people, animals, and plants around me, I far prefer working towards the former than simply accepting the latter.

The UN admitted last week that there's no way to keep warming within the 1.5 degree celsius threshold that they'd hoped, and the internet filled with think pieces in response. I'd be a hypocrite to get mad at people for writing think pieces. I'd rather be a cold-take machine than a hot-take machine, so I gave it some time and had some conversations.

Most of the conversations didn't go anywhere, though, because there's nothing that will shut down a polite conversation faster than talking about climate change.

The UN admitted last week that there's no way to keep warming within the 1.5 degree celsius threshold that they'd hoped, and people said "how dare they give up?" and people said "there's nothing that can be done" and people said "it's okay, they have a good

- Don't give up on your future. Don't take up smoking.
- Be brave. Courage is not the absence of fear, but the presence of bravery.
- Deescalate all conflict that isn't with the enemy. The enemy wants us fighting each other. We want each other fighting the enemy. Support people who have different ways of fighting than you.
- Talk to people about climate change and help them move through their fear and their hopelessness and their fatalism and the naivety. Help them see that there are things that they can do.
- Don't assume we'll win. Don't assume we'll lose. Keep your head in the game.
- Least important, but probably of some value, develop the habits of simple living in order to prefigure the world we hope to create. Reduce, Reuse, Recycle. Grow more of your own food. Share more food with others. Eat less meat. Get backyard chickens. Use less electricity. Get a plug-in electric car (ironically) but drive less overall and carpool more. Fly less or not at all. If your state allows it, get plug-in solar (don't actually do this illegally, it's a risk to the electrical workers if your area isn't prepared to do this correctly). Probably don't pick all the possible "good climate habits" all at once but try a couple and see what you can make stick. Living simply is probably a better way to live anyhow, but never confuse it for the systematic changes that are necessary.

solid plan that they outlined to bring warming down and I'm sure it will work" and I don't like any of those responses.

I don't actually have any problem with the report itself. You cannot solve a problem without looking soberly at it, without accepting the reality of the situation. Arrogant overconfidence will lose every war. We are going to overshoot the 1.5 threshold very soon (and the only reason we haven't already is because they calculate it based on 20 year averages, not every given year). That's the truth.

It's also the truth that the governments and corporations of the world are not taking their responsibilities seriously and most of them have shown no indication that they ever will. There is no reason to believe that the current status quo will lead to anything but ruin at an unimaginable scale.

Neither naive optimism not fatalistic pessimism will save us, and both are forms of denial that are, frankly, just as embarrassing as outright climate change denial.

Naive optimism is the belief that things are already getting better. Not that the earth is cooling down, but that we are on track to slow down and reverse the damage. There are a few different versions of this: some people think that fossil fuel infrastructure is winding down globally (while fossil fuels make up a lower percentage of overall power production every year, the actual amount of coal and gas being burned goes up because overall power production goes up); some people think once their candidates are in power, there will be a large enough shift to the left without needing to change the political and economic systems on a fundamental level; some people think that cold fusion power will soon give us limitless clean power (people have been saying it is just around the corner for decades) and everything will solve itself.

Naive optimism is the belief that the problem is being handled. It's a way of shrugging off the responsibility of making a better world.

Fatalistic pessimism is its corollary. The oft-derided "doomerism" is another way of offloading responsibility. If there is nothing that can be done, you can just throw your hands up in the air and walk away from the problem. If there's nothing that can be done, then you might as well do anything you want.

We, collectively, have to take responsibility for fixing this mess. And I don't mean changing out incandescent lightbulbs for LEDs and pretending like recycling is a thing that actually happens (most everywhere I've ever lived, you can watch your recycling taken away in the same truck as the garbage). You don't solve systemic problems with individual solutions, and obsessing over your individual carbon footprint was an idea foisted onto us by British Petroleum.

Taking responsibility for fixing this doesn't mean accepting fault. There's a difference between responsibility and fault. It's not my *fault* that I live in a transphobic world (for example). I haven't created the conditions in which people distrust and hurt trans people. But my own liberation is my own responsibility. I can't sit around waiting for my oppressors to do it for me.

Most liberal activism tends to forget this difference. In the most common liberal mindset, you can never tell an oppressed person that their freedom is their own responsibility, because it might imply that the oppression is their own fault. But when we remove *responsibility* from people, we remove their agency as well. LGBT rights—and material resources, like free clinics and mutual aid programs—were not granted unto us from on high. They were built, largely by the survivors of the AIDS genocide. We have agency because we took responsibility for our own freedom and survival.

That said, some systematic changes *do* involve individual change. We should probably fly less. We should probably eat

- Fight the expansion of fossil fuel infrastructure, through lobbying and direct action.
- Fight the rise of climate fascism, through community organizing and community defense, through legislative means if possible and through insurrection if necessary.
- Support people who are arrested fighting against fascism and climate change.
- Fight against the inertia that keeps us complacent with the status quo, whether we reach that complacency through denial, naive optimism, or fatalistic pessimism.
- Build resilient communities through individual and community preparedness: create prepper organizations that combine mutual aid and skillsharing with gathering resources, learning skills, developing relationships, and building infrastructure.
- Get involved in disaster relief, whether through on-the-ground work or fundraising or gathering supplies to support the on-the-ground workers.
- Prepare your town to accept climate refugees, through developing physical infrastructure like housing and other systems that allow higher population densities, as well as through learning multicultural and multilingual organizing
- Prepare to *be* climate refugees.
- Build resilient infrastructure. Insulate all housing for temperature and smoke. Build air conditioning. Build cooling centers.
- Live your best life here and now, because the future is far from guaranteed. Tell your friends you love them. Take care of each other.

It's the "I've got mine, fuck you" approach to the apocalypse. Right wing nutjobs without systemic power build bunkers and fill them with dried food and bullets and fantasize about shooting anyone who tries to steal their beans and rice, because they're not planning on sharing. Right wing nutjobs *with* systemic power do the same thing but at the nationstate level. Fortress Europe and Trump's USA are both sealing the doors so that they don't have to share as things get bad around the world.

Billions and billions of people live in regions that are facing extreme heat, facing unlivable outside temperatures, and it is horrifically evil to be battenning down the hatches just as more and more people wind up in need. (And, of course, it's not the global south that got us into this mess in the first place.)

In order to fight climate change, we have to fight climate fascism. There's no getting around it. There is a powerful minority of people who have decided that the end is coming and that rather than mitigate its worst impacts, they'll just kill people. We have to stop them. I don't know exactly how, but I *will* say my grandfather and my grandmother's brother were both involved in the last big worldwide struggle against fascism and their solution involved torpedos and aerial bombing, respectively.

But to speak concretely, I believe some actions we can take are, in no particular order:

- Develop the capacity to express collective agency in a horizontal fashion (such as but not limited to unions, collective workplaces, activist groups, direct action groups). Support people who are building this sort of agency: shop at worker-owned business, don't cross picket lines, go be a body in the streets at protests.

way less meat. We should probably drive less, and we should probably move away from gas-powered cars. But all of those things only matter when they happen at scale—it's not about changing your individual mode of transport, it's about changing our infrastructure to allow people to use mass transit and ride bikes. It's not about going vegan, it's about developing a food economy that favors in-season foods that are mostly plant-based.

An "individual boycott" isn't a boycott, it's a lifestyle choice. A boycott is an organized, collective action or it isn't an action at all. If an individual goes on strike, that's not a strike. You need a meaningful percentage of the workforce to walk off the job if you want to build collective power (and not just get fired).

Most of us know that we're not getting out of this mess by changing our habits as individuals. Most of us also grew up in a society that systematically strips us of any sense of agency. In school, you are subordinated to authorities and expected to learn in the manner they expect. In college, it's the same thing. Teachers and administrators control you *even though you're paying your teachers to teach you*, paying the administrators to run the place.

In the workforce, it's the same thing. Wage labor should ostensibly be a contractual agreement between equals: the restaurant wants its dishes washed, and you want to get paid. But your boss yells at you, tells you what you can and can't do, even though you are generating wealth for him.

In public life as an adult in a democracy, it's still somehow the same thing: you are surveilled and policed by the institutions that you pay for, that you ostensibly empowered through voting.

We are trained from birth to have no agency. And people wonder why we struggle, as a society, to meaningfully address climate change.

What little agency we are allowed is generally small-scale and individual. We can choose where to spend out money, we can choose who to vote for. What we need, though, is to find our collective agency.

Building power together, learning to practice our agency, is not a small part of what it will take to address climate change. Unionizing your workplace (or forcing your union to act more democratically). Forming worker cooperatives and fighting for workplace democracy. Learning to treat one another as equals and learning to deescalate conflict are how we build power.

Teaching responsibility to children should be like teaching them to ride a bike: they might need training wheels at first, but your goal is to take those wheels off. All of us need direction and guidance from time to time, especially young children, but a friend of mine always puts it like this: “if you have responsibility over someone, your primary goal is to empower them to be responsible for themselves, so that they have agency over themselves. You’ve got to work yourself out of a job.”

I’m certain there are pedagogical methods that teach children to take agency not only over their own education, but collectively together. I’m just not as familiar with schools as I am with workplaces.

Any sober analysis of the climate situation leads inevitably to the conclusion that we’re in trouble. One might even say “we’re fucked,” though of course that particular phrasing tends to shut people down.

It’s a delicate balancing act, once that I haven’t mastered. How do we tell people “things aren’t alright and a fuckton of people are going to die including possibly you and me but mostly people in other countries and that doesn’t make it okay” with enough sin-

cerity to push people towards action but without driving people to despair?

My theory is that we must always, when possible, pair our sober analysis of the problem with actions that people can take. Action, not hope, is the antidote to despair.

The catch, of course, is that no single given action is going to save us.

It’s a good thing, then, that there are 8.3 billion people in this world. That’s 8.3 billion people whose future depends on stopping the omnicide of our globe. That’s 8.3 billion people who can stop the expansion of fossil fuel infrastructure, who can develop alternative infrastructure for transportation, who can develop different food chains. That’s 8.3 billion people who can [REDACTED] or [REDACTED] or go directly to [REDACTED] and then [REDACTED]. (Did you think we were going to get out of this without a fight?)

For years, I’ve been calling fascism the miniboss and climate change the big boss, but that doesn’t mean that fascism is less of a problem. You have to fight the miniboss first. He stands between you and the big boss. But, to continue my video game analogy, fighting the miniboss teaches you how to fight the big boss. You get experience points. You go up a level. You get new magic spells... okay maybe not that part.

The current rise of fascism seems directly traceable to climate change. No part of me believes that the right wing politicians in power actually disbelieve climate change—downplaying and denying its severity is a calculated move on their part instead.

Because right wing governments *are* preparing for climate change. Locking down borders, building walls. The global north knows that the global south is in trouble, so they’re locking the doors.