

My Pen Pal

Recently, I wrote a letter. Then, I got a letter. Specifically a hate letter, via the US Post Office, at my home.

I'm not a politician or public figure. I'm just someone concerned about the climate crisis who occasionally writes letters to the editor about climate-related articles and op-eds as a way of increasing their visibility and impact. It's how I calm my climate anxiety, my increasing dread about the existential threat we face from global warming.

In my [letter to the editor](#), I called out [Shell for its record profits](#) during this period of global instability and argued that Shell will continue with its business model until the public starts demanding clean energy for our power grid, homes, investments, and communities. But here's the line that really caught my pen pal: If Shell won't pivot to clean energy, then we'll have to put them out of business.

That really pissed off my reader. They had many choice adjectives for me: elitist, snotty, out of touch, Marxist, authoritarian, thug – and that was just one sentence. They also wished nasty things for me, including that I and my “depraved ilk” be “catapulted back to a Stone Age existence FIRST,” which includes living outside, eating bugs, being hot, being cold, and wearing rags. The living outside part is because I have “graciously given up [my] abode” to one of the more than “5 million illegal aliens” who jumped our border 2 years ago. Certainly, a lot to unpack there.

And did I know that fossil fuels are the “staffs of life”? Unfortunately, this is pretty accurate, for now at least. Our entire world economy is built on the burning of fossil fuels, so they may indeed be considered the staff of life. That's the problem. We burn fossil fuels to grow our food, heat our buildings, power our vehicles, run our industries, and operate our electric grids. All that burning of fossil fuels over the past 150 years has released enough CO₂ into our delicate atmosphere to raise average global temperatures nearly 2 degrees Fahrenheit. It doesn't sound like a lot, but it's already creating intense hurricanes, long droughts, heat waves, flooding, mass extinction. And very weird weather.

We humans are facing this threat right now, not in some distant, vague future. We are living through an era of climate chaos. You need only look at this month's temperatures. And we humans are the single cause of this threat, mainly through the continued burning of fossil fuels. Moreover, only we humans have the power to stop this threat, by rapidly pivoting to an economy powered by clean energy sources.

Finally, my letter writer ends with an endearing “F*#@ all the way off, Ms. tone-deaf, dumb, blind, and obtuse.”

My letter writer's anger is misplaced. But our public sphere is so angry and divided that anyone who speaks out becomes a target, instead of the powerful corporations that continue to stymie the transition off fossil fuels. I wonder, what is this person truly angry about? Why would a letter in the paper incite such fury? Maybe it's related to that bit about people jumping the border and anxieties about somehow being replaced. Those fears are in turn stoked by unethical news organizations to maintain the status quo. All of this fear and loathing is about everything but the real danger - global warming. It's easier to yell at me – and the letter I received did feel like a tongue lashing – than to target a faceless industry. Shell, Exxon, and other oil and gas companies are heavily implicated in this disaster – for decades, they've covered up their own research showing that their products are inherently deadly to the planet.

We *should* be angry, but not at someone like me who's only trying to raise the alarm. I mean, what's not to like about a stable climate – along with the cleaner air and water that comes with less pollution?

My pen pal failed to identify themselves, nor did they include a return address, but it's scary to know that someone feels such hatred and animosity toward me - enough to put pen to paper, research my address, and buy a stamp to mail me a letter. It's not the first one I've received from this person, either. About a year ago, I got another letter that called me a fascist dumb ass. I reported the letters to the police, whose only advice was to "keep a low profile."

I'm on someone's radar, and not in a good way. I know that the only way we combat climate change is to stop burning fossil fuels. That makes me an evil person, according to my reader. I wish I had a way of communicating with this person to let them know I'm only a fellow inhabitant of this planet who fears what will happen if we continue pumping CO₂ into our atmosphere. And that the changes we must make to achieve a clean-energy economy will take work and commitment on all our parts. I will keep using my voice and actions to support this transition.