One of the puzzles of global warming is this: Given the catastrophic possibilities of global warming and given the relatively small reductions in comforts of most Americans that are needed to slow and stop global warming, why do Americans fail to act? Why are they so indifferent to current misery and impending catastrophe? Are people indifferent because the just don’t know about global warming and its increasingly dire consequences? People’s ignorance of basic facts generally is in fact enormous and embarrassing. But why are they so ignorant? Are people indifferent because they are ignorant or are they ignorant because they’re indifferent? Is it that they don’t care because they don’t know or is it that they don’t know because they don’t care? There is an affirmative and honorable answer to the first question if there is a good reason why people are ignorant, and a like answer is available to the second question if people are indifferent for good reason. People have good reason to be ignorant if literacy is unobtainable or information unavailable. But neither is the case for most people in this country. People have good reason to be indifferent to other people’s plight if they are struggling with mortal misery themselves. But that’s not the case either for most Americans.

Thus the vicious circle of ignorance and indifference seems to be self-reinforcing for no good reason. But where then can we hope to break into this circle and appeal to civic and global responsibility? The circle of confinement is embedded in contemporary culture. Those of us who are concerned with global warming and global responsibility have to understand that structure and its margins that promise access to people’s moral sense. We should not ask for a moratorium of technological fixes and frontal assaults on people’s ignorance and indifference. But neither can we ignore and remain indifferent to the cultural confinement in which most people find themselves.