

Greta Thunberg in exclusive interview

She has crossed the Atlantic twice to be here. Greta Thunberg has reached Madrid and is in the absolute centre of the climate meeting's attention. But her own expectations for the meeting are low. "The politicians will probably be very proud once it is over", she says. "But it will not lead anywhere."

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The ground is no longer rocking, for Greta Thunberg. Her sea legs are still a bit rickety at night, but walking around in daytime in Lisbon works fine. As we do that together, two days have passed since she reached land in the city, over three weeks since she left the East coast of the United States. And in a few hours her night train will leave for the climate meeting in Madrid. She is happy to be here.

– No matter how well I was greeted in North America and how much fun I had, there was a constant feeling of insecurity. I did not know how and when I would be able to get home, she says.

Two meetings in America was the reason she crossed the Atlantic this summer – in a sailing boat. The speech at the first meeting, the one at the UN Headquarters in New York on the 23rd of September – reached all around the world. The attention was huge. Wherever she went for her Friday strikes during her months in North America, people joined her. New York: Approximately 250.000 people. Montreal: 500.000. Where she came, others followed. She was leading the movement.

– September was intense, at the end of the month my spirits were low. When you are an introvert, you don't want to be in the centre of attention too much. If you find yourself there, you have to play a version of yourself, not to get overwhelmed by all the impressions, says Greta Thunberg.

– So, after long, intense periods of time with a lot of media attention – you get tired. Not at the media, but you start to feel some kind of self loathing. Because you feel false in a way.

She took a break from the limelight. Said no to almost every request from newspapers, TV and radio. For her own sake, but also to give other activists space to be heard. And so, she and her father Svante Thunberg travelled around North America in an electric car. Slowly making their way to the COP25 in Santiago, Chile. They had made it to Los Angeles, when the announcement was made: The meeting was being moved. From Chile, to Spain.

Greta Thunberg had to go back to Europe and got a ride on a catamaran, known from Youtube. The British skipper Nikki Henderson helped to take the boat through thunderstorms and rough conditions. From her leading role onboard Henderson could see how the weight of responsibility lifted from Greta Thunberg's shoulders in the first few days. She went from her public self – to Greta.

– I watched her relax. Slowly the "iron wall" that we as leaders all need to protect our vulnerability, our reality – broke down. I recognized it from my own experiences. Whenever I get off a boat that I have been responsible for and sit down in a public transport, I always fall asleep immediately, Nikki Henderson says.

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It is Friday and there is a strange feeling in the room of the press conference at the cultural centre in Madrid. The first working week of the COP25 is to be crowned with a large climate strike and the media attention around Greta Thunberg is huge, unimaginable. The same morning she was escorted by police from the train, surrounded by about fifty camcorders. Later she wrote on Twitter:

"I successfully managed to sneak into Madrid this morning! I don't think anyone saw me..."

Yet only a few reporters take the chance, when the press conference on Friday merges into question time. It is like the Beatles have resurfaced, the journalists in the room seem paralyzed by the 16 year old activist's star quality. But maybe they got what they wanted, a picture of Greta

Thunberg. A few quotes. Several journalists take selfies with her in the background.

The few questions that are asked, are aimed exclusively towards the Swedish 16-year-old. After a while she asks the journalists to include also the other activists – Vanessa Nakate from Uganda, Alejandro Martinez and Shari Crespi from Spain. And when the next question also goes to Greta Thunberg, she answers it, looks at her co-activists on stage. And ends the answer with:

– And, what do you think about that?

Vanessa Nakate takes the chance. She speaks about the African countries that already face the impacts of the climate crisis – created by human-made emissions.

– There are countries like Uganda, Kenya. For two months they have been having crazy floods. And people have been dying, people have been left homeless and children have been left as orphans, she says.

– People are already dying as a result of this crisis. So it is not a matter of the future, it is a matter of now.

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Ominous reports about the climate situation on Earth have succeeded each other in the past few weeks: Our decade is likely to be the hottest one measured, the gap between the emissions and the targets set by the countries of the world in the Paris agreement is huge. And, the emissions are increasing. Even now.

2019 has been described as a "gap year" in the climate negotiations. COP25 has been described as a meeting focused on technicalities rather than revolutionizing proposals. Greta Thunberg says we don't have time for that. But she doesn't dare to hope for too much in the second, and politically most important, week.

– I think that the meeting will be a lot like the one last year. There will be negotiations that nobody really knows what they are about. And then the politicians will probably be very happy once it is over. And then it won't lead to anything.

What do you expect from the politicians?

– The leaders need to understand the emergency and communicate the emergency. Only then, others can understand the urgency of the situation.

Don't they understand the urgency?

– When I meet world leaders I realize that they are unaware of how serious the crisis really is. It feels like they are only spending time with people from the business sector, who assure them that "we will solve this".

Isn't it good to listen to the business sector?

– Yes, but in an issue that is so scientific, you primarily have to listen to the science and the scientists. And people are not doing that right now. We have the facts. There is science on this. We have just not managed to communicate it. Some kind of information war is going on: The people with the loudest voices, are the ones getting heard. And of course the people with money are the people who are being heard the most.

How do you want the change to happen?

– The hope lies in the fact that people don't know what is going on. If we become aware, then change can happen. Democracy is everything. It goes on all the time, not only on election day. The changes that need to be made will not come from current parliaments or governments – or primarily from general elections. They will come from off year elections, extra elections, when people have had enough. At least, that is my conviction.

Can you see that happening?

– If, for example, the population of Sweden right now would say "We have had enough!" and start protesting, then the government could fall very easy. Or be forced to accept the will of the people and fundamentally change their policies.

And that doesn't only apply to Sweden?

– No, of course not.

How would it work in China?

– China is not a democracy. That is why it is so hard to affect China. But what we can do is to affect our own societies, then China would ultimately have to follow. Because economically, China is dependent on the rest of the world.

We have made our way high up in the city, we have passed sunlit facades covered in mosaic, and the tinkling trams of Lisbon. Up here, at the square, the view is magnificent.

– Oh, that's me, says Greta Thunberg and points to a large photography, sitting on the wall behind a street vendor.

What do you think about the attention?

– If I could choose I would only be normal, a normal teenager, and go to school. But this is not a normal situation and we must all do things we might not find comfortable.

You could have just run away from this. Is it a sacrifice for you to go on?

– It is no sacrifice. I have put myself in this situation. I am very privileged. And I am amused by the fact that the situation is so absurd. You have to be able to laugh at that. Otherwise you get a self-image that is not healthy.

How do you mean?

– When people keep saying that "you are the hope" and "thank you for everything you do, we are eternally grateful". You can't listen to that because... You can't look at yourself in that way.

Is that something you think actively about?

– It is natural. This attention will disappear pretty soon. And then people will forget who I am. It would probably be challenging to have seen yourself in a certain way and then having that disappear.

We are interrupted by a woman. It is not the first time during our conversation that someone asks to talk to Greta Thunberg, but it is the first time today that somebody is crying.

– I am very sorry to disturb you, she says. Thank you for everything.

She pauses every second word, it is hard to hear what she is saying when she tries to talk through the tears.

– Continue, please continue and don't listen to bad people who criticize you. You are fantastic.

Greta Thunberg says thank you. Once we are alone, she continues.

– Like that, for example. You can't take that in.

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In January this year Greta Thunberg was in the Globe arena in Stockholm to hand out a prize for the leader of the year, at the Swedish sports gala. In the speech she gave her view on good leadership. The core: A leader needs to dare to be uncomfortable, make decisions that are made for the future. And give room to others. At that time her movement was only a few months old – now she is at the forefront of the world's young people's determined march towards a future free from fossil fuels.

Are you a leader who creates other leaders?

– I don't see myself as a leader. Even though many others do, she says from the lookout in Lisbon.

How do you see yourself?

– As a part of a very large movement. But I understand that many consider me a leader, so I try to use my platform to create new leaders, among other things.

We move along, soon finding ourselves back at the place where Greta Thunberg and her father Svante are staying. The night train to Madrid is a few hours away. On Wednesday she will be giving a speech in front of world leaders again.

Have you written the speech yet?

– No. But I know approximately what it is going to be like.

What is your line of reasoning?

– Apparently I am quite bad at giving speeches. Because what people

dare you? You have stolen my dreams and my childhood” and that is not what I want to communicate. I want to communicate facts. And if you leave out what the rest of the speech is all about, if you only take out three sentences, then that makes me sound like an idiot.

What are you going to say?

– I don't give speeches so that I in some magical way will talk world leaders into realizing that I am right and they are wrong. My long term goal is that the gap between what science is saying and what is actually being done is made so clear that it can no longer be ignored. So now I am not going to give them any emotional stuff. Now they will get real content.