

CHANGE OR DIE

What will your life be like in twelve years? That depends on what we do together now. The UN Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change report of October of 2018 [1] warns that we have only twelve years to address the climate crisis before the damage becomes irreversible. Geographer Jared Diamond [2] asks - “‘What did the Easter Islander who cut down the last palm tree say while he was doing it?’ Like modern loggers, did he shout ‘Jobs not trees!’? Or: ‘Technology will solve our problems, never fear we will find a substitute for wood’? Or: ‘We don’t have proof that there aren’t palms somewhere else on Easter Island, we need more research, your proposed ban on logging is premature and driven by fear-mongering’?” If we don’t take action now, we doom ourselves to a struggle for survival in a world with a diminished capacity to support life. All the other problems we now face will be magnified.

Humanity is in a battle for its life. We are facing the greatest threat to our planet since the invention of the atomic bomb. In addition to climate disruption, we face dramatic loss of biodiversity, the Sixth Great Extinction since the beginning of life on earth, and the loss of the critical ecosystems that support all life including our own. Let us not fulfill the Native American prophecy: “When the last tree has been cut down, the last fish caught, the last river poisoned, only then will we realize that one cannot eat money.” [3] Our actions, as humans, have driven these mutually reinforcing crises, and it is only by our actions that we can hope to reverse the damage that we have done. We have the means and ingenuity to tackle this crisis. What we need is the drive and willingness to make it happen.

So why isn’t the environmental crisis front page news every day? There are many reasons, but the most important are greed, lust for power, and denial. Powerful people have become wealthy exploiting our current situation. And they dominate the media. Even those in the middle class think their wealth can insulate them and won’t willingly give up their privileges. Like a person who finds a suspicious lump but would rather not go to the doctor, we don’t want to hear the bad news. Washington Post reporter Dan Zak sums it up: “*Everything will be okay.* We say it even when we don’t believe it. Maybe we should stop saying it. There is opportunity in this acceptance. [Climate scientist Kate] Marvel thinks we need courage, not hope. We must know what’s coming, we must realize it will hurt, and we must be very strong together.” [4]

Change is inevitable and always uncomfortable, but with good choices our lives will actually improve. By focusing less on nonessential material goods, we can focus more on things that really matter: our families and communities, our health, our creative capacities, and the beauty of a healing natural world. By eating less meat, we will reduce heart disease and produce more food to feed everyone. In return for giving up sprawl and gasoline-powered vehicles, we will gain improved mass transit, cleaner air to breathe, and space for recreation, wildlife habitat, and growing food. Rather than glorifying the accumulation of wealth and power, we can provide for everyone’s needs and learn to cooperate better with each other, in order to save our world for ourselves, our children,

and our fellow living beings. Our personal health will improve in a cleaner environment. Our collective health will improve as we reduce inequality and rediscover unity and empathy working together to restore the vitality of our world. Scientist and environmental activist David Suzuki spells it out: “There are some things in the world we can’t change - gravity, entropy, the speed of light, and our biological nature that requires clean air, clean water, clean soil, clean energy and biodiversity for our health and well being. Protecting the biosphere should be our highest priority or else we sicken and die. Other things, like capitalism, free enterprise, the economy, currency, the market, are not forces of nature, we invented them. They are not immutable and we can change them. It makes no sense to elevate economics above the biosphere.” [5] If we don’t change voluntarily, change will be forced on us as ecosystems collapse and the changes will be much harder to bear. Even the Pentagon says the climate crisis poses immediate risks to our national security. [6] Wouldn’t it be better to choose to change rather than be forced to change?

Our collective will is powerful. We have accomplished amazing things in the past. In less than a decade, we fulfilled John F. Kennedy’s goal to send a man to the moon. We eradicated smallpox, not just in the U.S. but the entire world. We dramatically improved the quality of our air and water through the Clean Air Act of 1970 and the Clean Water Act of 1972. Through an international treaty, the Montreal Protocol of 1989, we are allowing the ozone layer to recover. Sadly, many of these improvements are being reversed. During WWII, we planted victory gardens and lived with rationing. Today we can’t even imagine making do with weekly rations of three gallons of gas, twenty-eight ounces of meat, and four ounces of cheese; but we pulled together then for the common good and took pride in working together. Instead of having to explain to our children why there are no more polar bears or why so many people are suffering from hunger and thirst, we can tell them how we all worked together to leave a better world for them.

We are better than this. Racism and misogyny, greed and inequality, violence and hatred are worsened by the environmental crisis and are standing in the way of our taking action to stop it. A “not in my backyard” mindset does not make us safe, but does turn the most vulnerable among us into the canaries in the coal mines. Many of us recognize this. What we struggle with is understanding how we can make a difference and how collective action can replace our need for private security. Ecological degradation contributes to the massive wealth inequality we see today and is worsened by it at the same time. Every action we take to lessen our negative impact on the environment must also be aimed at reducing the health and wealth gaps that divide humanity. And every action we take to challenge systemic oppression and privilege must also be aimed at drawing attention to the ways privilege and oppression are killing all living things, humans included.

How do we start? We need a global plan that includes everyone; the UN is already addressing the issue and seems the logical choice to coordinate our efforts. The United States must change course. Every country should be a party to the

Paris Accords, but we need much more. In the U.S., one initiative is the “Green New Deal” that has been taken up in Congress. It is described as a “program for moving America quickly out of crisis into a secure, sustainable future”. [7] This proposal will push candidates for office to explain what they plan to do about the climate crisis. The Green New Deal will create good jobs and tackle inequality. It will help people of color and indigenous communities, as well as those whose livelihoods are disrupted by the necessary technological changes ... if we have the courage and determination to implement it. [8]

Action Now. The young people of this world are currently leading the struggle to save the earth, and they are the ones who will suffer the most if we do not act now. They cannot do it alone. We must add our voices and actions to theirs. Contact your representatives, talk to your friends and neighbors, join a rally, share this letter, demand that your local news media cover this emergency. This needs to be in everyone’s consciousness every day. Swedish teenager Greta Thunberg is one who is leading the fight to save our world. At the World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland, speaking before some of the most powerful people in the world she made an urgent plea for all of us: "Adults keep saying we owe it to the young people, to give them hope, but I don’t want your hope. I don’t want you to be hopeful. I want you to panic. I want you to feel the fear I feel every day. I want you to act. I want you to act as you would in a crisis. I want you to act as if the house is on fire, because it is." [9]

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References

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