

## CHAPTER 20

*Guess Who's in Charge?*

This is my final chapter, but it is certainly not ours, nor is it humanity's. This is just the beginning of what will be seen by historians as the next step on our long evolutionary journey from apes to our full human potential. It has not been and will not be a smooth ride, but it will sure be a ride to remember.

It appears the newspaper story I read in 1972 was correct. There *are* limits to growth and the trends that story forecast are now unfolding all around us. The question becomes what we will do about it, and this is the final thing I want to discuss with you—where do you fit in? Where on the bus do you want to sit for this, the last leg of that journey?

First, though, some reflection. I lived in Amsterdam for several years in the early 1990s. It is one of my favorite cities in the world, in a country steeped in the stories that symbolize much of our civilization's ebb and flow over the past five hundred years.

I was in a café in Amsterdam one day, pondering the country's history: of art and conflicts, of trade and globalization, of exploration seeking wealth, all with varying levels of tolerance and humanity. Across the canal from me was Anne Frank's house, now a museum honoring the girl whose diary became a classic of world literature, recording her family's experience hiding from the Nazis in an occupied city.

As I sat there, I wondered what my thoughts would have been if I was a resident of Amsterdam in 1938. Suppose I had sat then, in this same café, while a friend told me what he thought was coming. I put myself back there and imagined recounting the conversation. . . .

As we chatted over coffee, Pieter said he believed Germany would, in a few years' time, invade our country, despite our declared neutrality, then rapidly occupy most of Europe, round up and murder millions of Jews, and plunge the world into a war from Europe to the Pacific. He thought this would be the deadliest and ugliest conflict in human history, with unimaginable brutality and suffering leading to over fifty million civilian and military deaths.

At this stage, he couldn't see how we could succeed against this threat, because it would require focus, mobilization, and determination at a level we had never seen before. Pieter imagined a scenario where after Germany invaded our country and occupied most of Europe, it joined forces with the expanding Japanese empire. He continued with his scenario, suggesting that even then, the world's strongest defender of freedom, the United States, would still show no signs of engaging directly in the war. This all seemed incomprehensible to me, but I still shuddered at the thought of it.

Pieter told me the danger was now clear and we needed to act urgently to reduce the risk before the forces against us gained the upper hand, but he was despondent because our leaders were showing no signs of doing so. While he was confident a great alliance would eventually be formed to oppose this threat and a great mobilization would take place, including the United States, victory would then be far from certain because of our late response. He predicted that if we failed, we would enter a dark age of totalitarian rule, with brutal repression and freedom squashed for who knew how long.

Pieter and I discussed it at length, and he urged me to act. He said that while the details were uncertain, the evidence was clear this conflict was coming and I should immediately join the call for action and prepare my family while telling my friends to do likewise.

I cycled home, pondering deeply what he had said. I knew other serious and knowledgeable experts believed this threat was real, but I had also read that many others disagreed, at least with respect to its urgency. Political leaders at home and around



Europe also expressed concern, but they were urging calm. They assured us that yes, this was serious, but it was a quite manageable problem—we should not overreact, as doing so would be expensive and disruptive.

I considered that my children were doing well in school, my family was well settled, my career was nicely on track, and the streets of Amsterdam were calm and ordered. I heard my learned friend's concern, but I found it very hard to accept that a calamity on this scale was more than a remote possibility. If it were that bad, those in charge would surely be responding far more dramatically, wouldn't they?

I went home and discussed it with my wife, feeling rather unsettled. We talked about it, but if we suddenly declared to our friends that we were fleeing the country—indeed, the whole continent—and suggested they join us, they would think us quite mad.

So we waited. Waited to see what unfolded, waited for the situation to become clearer, waited for those in charge to do something if they needed to.

Think of all the millions of people in Europe and the United States who went through a thought process just like this and went about their daily lives, unprepared for what was about to happen despite all the signals around them. How would history have been different if more people had acted earlier and demanded their leaders do more to prepare?

So, back to today. It's hard, isn't it, to hear stories of impending dangers and to know how to respond. It's hard to separate fear from reality, probably from possibly, and the truth among conflicting arguments. While we always complain about the quality of our leaders in politics and in business, we mostly assume they know what they are doing and what's really going on. We assume they will take firm charge if they need to.

We are all challenged by this dilemma. I remember clearly when I wrote the first version of these arguments in my "Scream Crash Boom" letter in 2005, I was very nervous about how people would react. As I sat there about to press the send button, I thought: "Will they think I'm mad? That this time Paul has really lost it?"

I sent it, and while I had many reactions of agreement, I had many that thought I was, while not mad, certainly exaggerating the threat. Some thought it was a shock tactic to get people to respond more urgently. I took this response seriously and went back again and again to challenge myself: Was it really this serious, was I getting carried away with the emotion of it all? And if I was convinced, what was the right thing for *me* to do, given who I am and what skills I have?

Others also agreed with the analysis but didn't know how to respond. It made what they were doing now on the issue seem wholly inadequate as a response. They would say things like this:

But what can we do? If you're right, maybe we should sell everything and hide in the countryside somewhere and grow food. But then our friends will think we've gone mad when they look around and see the world calmly going about its business while I'm calling the end of the world. And anyway, we can't just walk away, we need to stop this from happening; this is really the most important moment for us all.

Yep, it's just hard. To hold the paradox in our heads—that things are desperately dangerous and urgent but we must act positively and full of hope—is an enormous test for the mind and the soul to act together. The challenge was well expressed by the great American writer F. Scott Fitzgerald: "The test of a first-rate intelligence is the ability to hold two opposed ideas in the mind at the same time, and still retain the ability to function."

So it's hard, but what do you do? Do you run away and grow your food in some far-flung corner of the world, in case we fail, in case humanity can't rise to the occasion? This is, after all, the outcome predicted by some serious experts. What would motivate us to do that? Would it be to save our children and our genes in the belief that if society fails in this historic task, we can rebuild a new world from the ashes of the old?

This is sometimes an appealing thought, even for me. After all, no one can argue I haven't had a go at preventing the situation we now face from emerging. So even I have had days when simply withdrawing has its attractions.

But then I consider the counterargument. That running away could



just be fear of failure and the opportunity for a blameless escape, as argued by the writer Paul Williams, who in 1982 wrote the following in his extraordinary poem "Common Sense":

*On the edge of the dream  
we face our deepest doubts.  
Now that it all is almost real  
a terrible fear of success takes hold  
and we grab desperately, uncontrollably, for failure.  
One last chance to get off easy.  
Who among us really wants to save the world,  
to be born again into two thousand more years  
of struggle?  
How much sweeter to be the doomed generation,  
floating gently on the errors and villainy of others,  
towards some glorious apocalypse now . . .  
Hallelujah! It's not my fault—  
Bring on the end times!*

And so we're back at Scott Fitzgerald's paradox, the one we now have to live with, without our heads exploding or our souls aching, at least not too much. We need to fully acknowledge the challenging times and inevitable suffering ahead but stay focused and determined to move forward and past this. Easy to say, harder to do.

So yes, it is challenging to know how to respond to all this and what to do personally. It is easy to see what the world should do, but what should *you* do? After all, the kids are doing well in school, things are calm on the streets, we've got busy lives. Maybe we should just wait until those in charge work out what to do. After all, with all those advisers, resources, and global experts, surely those in charge would make sure we acted dramatically if we really needed to.

Do you really think so?

For decades, those of us trying to change the world have sought to convince those we perceived to be in charge to act. We've argued for stronger regulation, for corporations to behave responsibly, for our political leaders to focus on the long-term interest of our society.

What can I say looking back? The best I can conclude is that it seemed like a good idea at the time, but alas, it didn't work. Why not?

When I left Greenpeace in 1995, I moved into the rarefied world occupied by global corporation CEOs. I engaged them through private conversations as a corporate adviser and personal provocateur and spent time with them in places like the World Economic Forum at Davos and other gatherings like the annual meeting of the Business Council in the United States and the World Business Council for Sustainable Development in Switzerland. I flew in their private jets and had dinner with them in their executive dining rooms.

I was delighted when this began. I thought, "At last, I'm working with the people in charge, the ones who really run the world! Now I can get into their minds, work out how they think, and convince them of the peril facing humanity (and their companies). They will then change the world, and my work will be done."

I spent a good fifteen years of my life working at this. It taught me a lot about how the world works. Convincing them of the peril we all faced was relatively easy. These are, with some notable but rare exceptions, generally decent and very smart people. They respond to logic and science, they have kids, they care about the future, and they want to do the right thing. So convincing them we were in serious danger wasn't the problem.

The problem was they weren't in charge.

If the world were really run by powerful men making decisions in smoke-filled rooms, we could go and knock on the door and explain the problem. We could tell them that things had become so bad that now even *they* were under threat. That would be great. But unfortunately, it's not the way it works.

Our system, the global economy, is a complicated array of interconnected components. Each component is individually managed but works within a system, and while some very smart people try to guide it, no one is, or ever can be, in charge.

Yes, there are places that resemble the apocryphal smoke-filled rooms full of powerful men, where men and women with great influence meet, but they are not in charge. I'm not naive about their power, influence, and self-interest—I've seen them at work using it, for good and for bad. But they are not going to fix this.



The good ones, of whom there are many, will do important things that contribute, pass better laws to incentivize action, make huge investments that take new technologies to scale, encourage consumers to do things differently. But they will do these things as a *reaction* to the system changing around them, not as those in charge of it.

We have a system problem, so we need a system solution. How do we do that?

The only force on earth powerful enough to fix this now is us. The woman entrepreneur bringing energy to her village in India, the organic farmer in Australia locking up carbon in the soil, the CEO in Davos cleverly using his power to shift market attitudes, the scientists taking ice cores in Antarctica, and the mother in China teaching her children how to shop less and live more. All of us, acting collectively.

The world is now connected as never before. Remember how if a friend of a friend is happy, you're more likely to be happy? Well, the same applies to them shopping less, to them being friendly to their neighbors, to them doing work with meaning.

We must remember, the solutions are ready to go; they are the examples I have discussed throughout this book. Solutions working today that deliver energy with zero CO<sub>2</sub> pollution, that build great companies, that deliver water to the urban poor, that create jobs in villages in India, that make communities in America stronger. These solutions are being driven by individuals with passion, people making a difference and making things happen. All we need to do is replicate and accelerate them.

As this unfolds, there will be many different types of action from many different types of people. There is even a clear role for well-directed anger. As well articulated by one of the world's great environmental campaigners, Bill McKibben:

We definitely need art, and music, and disciplined, nonviolent, but very real anger. Mostly, we need to tell the truth, resolutely and constantly. Fossil fuel is wrecking the one earth we've got. It's not going to go away because we ask politely. If we want a world that works, we're going to have to raise our voices.

McKibben is right. This is a time we need to be clear, loud, and focused in our message. What big oil and coal companies are doing is just

plain wrong, and it must be stopped, urgently. The right strategy model for this is Nelson Mandela and the end of apartheid. He was a leader who never once backed away from the rightness of his cause or compromised his goal, but still approached those who opposed him with humanity. This was all the more remarkable remembering that *his* enemies kept him in jail for twenty-seven years and murdered his friends and colleagues. Yet he still worked hard to reach them as human beings. We must advance our cause with determination and strength, but also with the highest integrity.

Most important, we must get on with the job. With all of us in charge, we live in the ultimate global democracy and we vote every minute of every day. We all know what we need to do. Shop less, live more. Raise chickens, and children who think. Build more community, make our lives more connected. Make good companies grow stronger, make bad companies go broke. Elect good political leaders, throw out bad ones. Roll out technologies that work and phase out those that don't.

Most of all, we need to stop waiting for someone else to fix it. There is no one else. We are the system; we have to change. Companies will respond when consumers and investors change their demands. Politicians will drive change when we make them do so.

It won't happen by itself; it will happen because people like us become part of a global movement where we all come together, in a distributed way, in small ways and big ways, to drive a change in thinking, a change in behavior, and a change in our world. Now that we're all connected, if we all act together, we'll change the system.

Will we succeed? Yes, if we decide to.

We must remember to do so, recognizing the threat but living with a lightness of heart and in the opportunity—the exciting, uplifting, civilization-shaping opportunity to make a difference greater than anyone since that ape worked out she could crack open the nut if she used the rock as a tool.

So let's do it. It is time.