

The first time I remember thinking about the environment, I was in the summer before seventh grade. I was looking at the cover of a landmark *Time Magazine* edition: “Be Worried. Be Very Worried.”¹ I wasn’t worried but curious, so I peered inside. As I tried to sift through the stories, decipher the data, parse the sentences, and deconstruct the jargon, I had one takeaway: the way that we live – especially in America – has consequences. I was worried and I was scared. I felt a sense of urgency and agency, but I didn’t really know what I could do. When a distraction came along later that day – I think it was either ice cream or a water park – I welcomed it as a convenient and well-timed out to stop fretting and temporarily forget about the planet’s problems.

That was just over 10 years ago, and everything I read and learned rang as true then as it does today. The graphs of projected increases in mean global temperature and carbon dioxide concentrations that I cursorily discovered – and then rediscovered later that year watching Al Gore’s *Inconvenient Truth* – leaped from the dimension of perception and into reality over the course of my adolescent development.

It was a jarring and uninvited interruption into my life, and for a while, I wouldn’t let the issue interrupt my wishful thinking. In the early years, I found credence in the ‘renegade’ cherry-picking climate contrarians, and I opted to believe that the dominant consensus and paradigms of climate scientists were erroneous, ill-informed, or maybe either a fluke or centralized conspiracy. I mulled over the simple, clear, and stable explanations in lieu of the more uncertain, complex, and confusing ones. This was short-lived, as scientific consensus and reams of corroborating data made their way into the mainstream and my own mind. My attitude shifted to one of shrugging and resounding indifference. I realized that the globe was warming and that it was a direct result of us, but for a while I just didn’t care. With the quotidian concerns and attendant trials and

¹ Apr. 3, 2006, edition of *Time Magazine*

tribulations of high school life, how could I focus on this nebulous concept that scientists, countries, and the planet itself were wrestling with? Grappling with teenage angst and adolescence seemed to outweigh an existential, disturbing, and personal affront like climate change. Even now, I often feel compelled to succumb to the blissfulness, convenience, and comfort of resignation.

Since I've come to college, I've started to pay more attention, in no small part due to my own volition, but also due to the issue thrusting itself into my life. The stuff of fiction, of movies like *The Day after Tomorrow* or *2012*, is becoming reality – intensified droughts, blistering heatwaves, coastal inundation, coral reefs stripped of their luster, the wipeout of species at a manic rate – so fast that we've ushered in “The Sixth Extinction,” where the deadly change is not an exogenous shock to the system but an endogenous one. In other words, the freak catastrophe driving extinction is not a giant asteroid or glaciation but man itself. Others have another term to describe it: the Anthropocene age, a geological and historical juncture in which human activity is said to be the foremost influence on climate and environment. Evidence shows that this is true; we are influencing Earth's geologic, hydrologic, biosphere, and atmospheric processes.

As we've ushered in this new era, I've struggled to keep up with the torrent of pessimism that comes with paying attention. In the past six months alone I can vividly and viscerally recall reading about shockingly immediate and dangerous changes. In August, I read about hundreds of Indian farmers killing themselves as a direct result of “the debt and crop loss caused by the changing weather.”² In October I read a “eulogy” lamenting the demise of Australia's Great Barrier Reef. As a result of climate change, the reef is “in the midst of the most catastrophic bleaching event in its history.” The scale and scope of this harrowing development is

² <http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/116-farmer-suicides-in-first-3-months-of-2016/articleshow/52002524.cms>

unfathomable: the reef was “born” 25 million years ago, is 1400 miles long, and is home for thousands of species.³

A month later, I saw that incoming presidential administration appointed Myron Ebell to lead the president’s transition team for the Environmental Protection Agency. Ebell referred to Pope Francis’s recent encyclical on climate change, *Laudato Si’*, as “scientifically ill informed, economically illiterate, intellectually incoherent and morally obtuse.”⁴ I fretted that in the election, which could have been a referendum of sorts on tackling climate change, the American body politic opted—at best—to stave off meaningful efforts to fight the issue and—at worst—to double down on the harmful behavior and activities that dangerously perpetuate the problem. Even worse, I mused, maybe Americans just decided to shirk the issue altogether. After all, as I’ve learned from research and reading, the U.S. has a track record of inactivity and neglect with the issue.

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Across interdisciplinary studies and at-large observations, humans have grappled with various conceptual explanations and theories for why the problem exists. To take a few explanations: Economists refer to the emission of fossil fuels and deterioration of our planet as a tragedy of the commons, whereby rational people reduce the stocks of a natural resource (in this context, a stable climate) until it is depleted or damaged, which paradoxically compromises the common good and these same peoples’ long term-interests. Sociologists deem it a collective action problem: everyone would benefit from a certain action, but nobody wants to go at it alone and there’s no impetus for everyone to cooperate and share the cost of the action. Political scientists consider the short-term horizons of democratically elected politicians and the influence

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<sup>3</sup> <https://www.outsideonline.com/2112086/obituary-great-barrier-reef-25-million-bc-2016>

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.latimes.com/politics/la-na-pol-trump-climate-20161127-story.html>

of industry as reasons the U.S. is unwilling to spearhead aggressive change. International Relations scholars point to anarchy at the global level – in other words, the lack of true international governance – as a determinant in the global community failing to make serious headway fighting climate change.

Climate change is even the quintessential challenge to our natural way of thinking, “because as individuals we’re hardwired to shirk existential challenges.”<sup>5</sup> There are numerous psychological impediments – cognitive dissonance, perception of threats, loss aversion – that affect our ability to understand, conceptualize, and address the issue.

These are only a few of a plethora of reasons why little has been done. There are other realities. Some are politically and ideologically hostile to the idea of doing anything to stop climate change. There are many individuals, companies, and countries that have an economic or political stake in perpetuating carbon emissions. Like myself in middle school, there are many who are repelled by the enormity, complexity, and tragedy of the issue altogether. Indeed, the cards are stacked against the climate, as many of our personal, political, economic, organizational, and international systems and structures point one way, while the obvious solutions – and our ethical values – point the other.

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When I think about our imperiled planet I feel a flurry of emotions. It goes without saying that I feel powerless, anxious, and alarmed for the obvious reasons. We are changing our planet for the worse and largely not coming to terms with it. This thing is happening, it will affect me, it will happen to the world I live in, and it will touch the people and things I love. There are actions we can take to stop it, but for the most part we aren’t doing them.

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I often skirt on the verge of the most despondent end of the emotional spectrum – discouragement, desperation, hopelessness, and defeat. This is a depressing but predictable fatalism that many climate scientists and professionals who have built their careers around studying this issue succumb to. The sheer immensity of the forces in play and the torrent of backlash and skepticism that accompanies speaking up on the issue are but a few deterrents to feeling hopeful or optimistic. To put it bluntly, it's depressing to think about what's in store as the formative time to do something is slipping away.

I often feel frustration and anger. Frustration because it seems impossible for our world's leaders to treat this as a top priority or because we don't believe it is a priority. Even if we care about it, we are likely to prioritize other issues such as health, finances, family, careers, or personal wellbeing. I feel angry in the face of all the denialism, skepticism, and "doubt" campaigns that powerful economic interests and their corresponding political arms have peddled. The irresponsible agenda of profit over health harkens back to the days of the tobacco lobby, political hacks, dark money politics, and back room deals. I'm angry that in this system politicians and businessmen can mortgage our future to make a quick buck or hold their seat in congress for the next midterm election. I'm angry that climate change ranks so low as a national priority for U.S. citizens, and that poll after poll, we elect politicians who do not consider it a high priority. When gas prices dip, we buy gas guzzlers, and when the new iPhone comes out, we ditch the version we upgraded last year.

I'm ashamed when I read about my country's withdrawal from the Kyoto Protocol, an international treaty aimed at reducing greenhouse gas emissions, and how our exit prompted the collapse of the treaty. I'm disheartened about the sheer inequity of the world I live in; with less than five percent of world population, we are the second largest source of greenhouse gas

emissions in the world. I'm confused with the people around me in my life, who will be affected by this issue but don't seem to care.

The most sobering emotions are the sadness and guilt. Climate change is an intergenerational, international, interspecies, transfrontier dilemma that largely starts but does not end with us. The stakes are highest for others. The World Wildlife Fund says that we could be losing up to 100,000 species a year.⁶ Future generations are at greatest risk as the planet warms. When more ice melts, sea levels continue to rise, and natural phenomena get more disruptive – all a function of what we have done and continue to do – the young children of today and unborn grandchildren of tomorrow will face the most catastrophic storm. And right now, in the far-flung corners of the globe, the people least responsible are most at risk. Poorer countries and island-states are in the crosshairs of the coming storm.

All of these 'others' – species, Earth's future inhabitants, and current communities most impoverished and underdeveloped – are at the greatest risk simply for the most absolvable reason of existing. What they will lose comes at the expense of what we have- the comforts, conveniences, and culture we take for granted in the West of manufactured desires, lavish lifestyles, and a proclivity for throwing away and constantly upgrading.

On climate, we need a paradigm shift in ethics. As Americans, we often espouse and celebrate the view that we have a right from something: from being told you can't eat as much meat or fly as much. But the merits of this argument pale in comparison to the rights of the 'other' that is so endangered. Namely, the rights to life on a hospitable planet trumps the right from interference with one's non-essential pleasantries. Whether other species deserve this 'right' entitlement – and how to exactly define these 'rights' – are beyond the purview of this essay. However, our kin – the invisible, unborn, or otherwise downtrodden fellow humans – are

⁶ http://wwf.panda.org/about_our_earth/biodiversity/biodiversity/

certainly entitled to the birthright of a hospitable and humane planet. The divisibility and proportionality of food allotment should not be so that one starves when his or her neighbor is overfed. In a similar fashion, we are living in a world where the excess and decadence of one lifestyle directly imperils another. The latter lacks the means or capabilities to absorb or adapt to the change. Therefore, is the former not ethically obliged to help the latter?

Humanity has reached a fragile and critical planetary tipping point, and its increasingly clear that we are approaching a looming moral crisis.

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These ruminations are meaningless without deeper personal introspection. The messy truth is that when I read *Laudato Si'* or the statements of climate ministers in the least developed countries, I'm inclined to agree but conveniently gloss over the sometimes subtle, sometimes overt indictments of my lifestyle. I am wont to churn out manicured, footnoted, and well meditated policy papers or op-eds on the matter and then consider my job done. In effect, I self-righteously justify my advocacy and attention as having done enough. I sleep easy thinking that studying the politics and economics of climate change means I'm doing well. Am I?

Every emotion I've felt or explanation I've encountered has been directed outwards, projected onto the landscape and people around me. And therein lies the important reality; I am complicit in this catastrophe. Sure, there are the back-room corporate bogymen, puffing on cigars and cooking up doubt, delay, and denial to distort the American public, keep the bottom line low, and keep politicians in tow. But to exclusively blame these boogeymen, the easy targets, is to prop up a strawman in lieu of serious considerations of the deeper problems. So long as someone stands to gain from the current system, he or she will. The problem lies not only with them but also me.

In taking a detached view of the problem I have neglected the personal. It is all well and good to take the clinical angle – to weave through the ins and outs of the science, scrutinize the policy prescriptions that we have put out on the table – or shelved – for our planetary malaise. But I have not atoned or absolved myself in any part from the act. I am a materialistic urbanite American. I eat an oversized share of red meat, fly often, drive a personal car, and contribute disproportionately high amounts of greenhouse gasses to the atmosphere. There is a dissonance between my intentions and actions that must be reckoned with. I have an ethical mandate to reconcile this dissonance. I shouldn't differentiate myself from other Americans if I am not willing to accept the costs – such as more expensive goods, less energy consumption, and a less lavish lifestyle. This isn't to say that caring for our climate amounts to asceticism, but it certainly entails a different lifestyle and way of thinking.

Weaning off of our petrochemical addiction and love for manufactured desires is an enormously difficult and disruptive task. And unfortunately, as long as the pernicious and pervasive frontier sentiment exists – that there is no restraint or limit on the degree which we can amass wealth and expand our footprints – the ecological crisis will persist.

On paper, I disagree with everything happening around me. But in fact and deed, I am complacent and complicit in the climate catastrophe. If I study this issue and so deeply care about it, am I not obligated to work for the change in the world and spaces that I'm in on a daily basis? Unfortunately, for myself and many others, our ethical compass points one way while reality is dangerously pointing in the other way.

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Climate change has made multiple interruptions in my life. First, in seventh grade and *Time Magazine*. Then *An Inconvenient Truth*. A significant physical interruption in 2015, when I

was in the Dolomite mountain range in Italy, a UNESCO world heritage site. High altitude peaks and remote passes are untouched by human activity, save the occasional intrepid adventurers. The more accessible parts of the region are a mainstay for mountaineers, hikers, and mountain bikers in the summer and a haven for skiers, snowboarders, and ice skaters in the winter. The landscape of the Dolomites – mountains of changing dimensions, distance, and geographical composition – is aesthetically closer to perfection than man could get if he tried.

The day before I trekked to the mountains, I watched on a television screen when delegates from around the world, locking arms and cheering in a self-congratulatory, cathartic hurrah, as French foreign minister and President of the COP21 climate talks Laurent Fabius slammed his gavel onto the podium, thus setting into motion an ambitious plan to stymie global climate change. But this was not an important interruption – that came the next day.

At such a high altitude, and with winter season in full swing, like me, the region had expected precipitation, snow banks, and lower temperatures that just weren't coming. Towns were stocked with ski shops, and adverts for ski slopes and lifts lined the two lane highway, but the only veneer of winter was a thin film of artificial snow that covered a narrow and short run down part of a hill. In a cabin situated atop the mountain, classic ski lodge fare and hot chocolate seemed starkly out of place on slope where we couldn't even see our breath. When I approached our guide to discuss it with him, he was more shocked than anyone and belabored to express just how unprecedented this situation was. "Usually the snow is to here" he motioned to his knees, "and you cannot go outside without a jacket." This is true; on average, at that time of the year temperature was about 30 degrees colder. In his 20 years as a mountaineer and tour guide, he had never seen such an aberration. He'd seen "light or heavy" snowfall, and some years "more warm" than others, but nothing so drastically deviant from the norm.

This was a deeply symbolic interruption, in which I was as close as I'd ever been to fully understanding and feeling the extent of our footprint. The Dolomites are mountains given life by plate tectonics, refined by chemical weathering, and gradually altered over billions of years by other earth processes. They will survive our existence by hundreds of millions of years. Yet in our short time on the earth, we have managed to drastically shape the weather surrounding the hardened shell of the mountains. Ultimately, these changes will be inconsequential for the Dolomites. But the same cannot be said about us.

In *Laudato Si'*, Francis writes: "Obstructionist attitudes, even on the part of believers, can range from denial of the problem to indifference, nonchalant resignation or blind confidence in technical solutions." That captures how I felt that weekend. COP21 wasn't a petrochemical exoneration, nor was it a pardon for an increasing standard of living. Contrary to popular opinion, signing a treaty saying that a certain action will get done to save the environment does not indeed save the environment in and of itself. As it dawned on me in the Dolomites, these changes that we are making to the environment will increasingly interrupt the comforts and expectations of our own lives, and until we are ready to acknowledge and address it big changes are here to stay.

Obviously, it is appallingly clear that climate change will wreak much more havoc than affecting a skiing trip in Italy. It's a life or death issue for millions, and could eventually be so for billions. It threatens to throw us into a parochial dystopia that even the thought of is difficult to stomach.

The most profound interruption – by orders of magnitude – is coming to terms with the looming moral crisis. Though the tone of this piece is thoroughly pessimistic, the issue of climate change offers humanity – and me – a chance to be better and do right. It offers an opportunity to

extend care and understanding beyond one's borders and spur a revolution in the way we think about responsibility and rights. It is an opportunity – at a time when so many in the world seem short raising walls, building moats, and rolling out the barbed wire fences – to care for one's neighbor. I have an ethical charge to not retreat to the bliss of ignorance or resignation of my youth, but to speak up and hold myself accountable.