

S2-- "OUR LEGACY: LOVE FOR THOSE WHOSE FACES WE WILL NEVER SEE AND WHOSE VOICES WE WILL NEVER HEAR", CHAPTER FOR IMAGINE, EDITED BY MARIANNE WILLIAMSON, RODALE PRESS, 2000

Note: the following is the original version of the chapter which appeared in Imagine.

"People place themselves first, family second, tribe third, and the rest of the world a distant fourth. Their genes also predispose them to plan ahead for at most one or two generations. So today the human mind still works comfortably backward and forward only a few years, spanning a period not exceeding one or two generations. --"Is Humanity Suicidal?", E.O. Wilson, 1996

We are the first generation of humans, through our suddenly newfound ability to manipulate the biosphere without and the gene within, to pose a greater threat to people who will live centuries from now than ourselves. As six billion human beings pursue a U.S. standard of living at the turn of the millennium, humanity has reached a kind of critical mass in material consumption. We are heating our climate, massacring numberless plant and animal species, fouling our oceans and seas, poisoning our fish and depleting our water aquifers, forests, soil and ozone layer. We are introducing thousands of chemicals into our air, water and bodies and using biotechnology in ways that amount to a dangerous and uncontrolled experiment on the lives of billions who will live in the centuries to come.

This behavior has occurred so quickly and is so unprecedented in human experience that its implications have barely begun to sink in. You and I just happen to be alive at the first moment in all history when one generation's material comfort threatened the well-being of all who would follow them. This fact overturns many of the very foundations of human civilization. All cultures everywhere including our own, for example, have taken it for granted that elders serve their young. We cannot yet even see that we have suddenly become the

first generation in all history who pose the single greatest threat facing their progeny.

If America and the world are to thrive in the year 2050, therefore, we will have become the first generation in human history to feel the same love for our more distant descendants that we now experience for loved children or grandchildren. We will neither see the faces nor hear the voices of those who will follow us in the centuries to come. And we will be no more remembered by them than we can recall our own ancestors. But learning to love them is key to our own lives nonetheless. For we can only feel truly alive and at peace in the present if we know that we are contributing to the future. Our lives can have no meaning now if we diminish those of our descendants later. We care for our descendants not only for their sakes but for our own.

Learning to care for future generations will not be easy. As E.O. Wilson's "dour scenario" quoted above suggests, it may well require suddenly reversing an evolutionary heritage stretching back thousands of years. While he believes it possible to do so, Wilson suggests it will require an unprecedented redirection in our science, technology, ethical and spiritual systems. It seems clear that making the required shifts in our economics and politics will require a psychological and spiritual transformation on a scale reached before only during periods of great religious awakenings.

Ours is a terrible responsibility. None of us now alive need fear a crippling disease because of human-caused global warming or decline in biodiversity that began 200 years ago, or that we will die of thirst because long-dead ancestors depleted our water aquifers. But all those born after us will live with those fears - and owe the quality of their lives to our wisdom and mercy.

If we continue to misuse this power, we will be cursed by our descendants, robbing our own lives of meaning and dignity. But our power over the future is also a potential blessing. Human beings have struggled through the millennia to find some meaning to this candle flame life. We are the first who can know that if we use our powers

wisely we can directly contribute to the tens of billions who will follow us for all time to come.

Never before has one generation been given so great an opportunity to live lives of transcendent meaning, to take action which can be of so great benefit to so many over so long a period of time. If we can preserve and protect the biosphere and conduct the genetic revolution in a way that extends and improves life far into the future, we can experience a significance to life previously available to none before us.

We are far closer to our descendants than we often realize. When our grandchildren speak to their grandchildren of their memories of us, we will directly enter the living memories of people who will still be alive 100-150 years from now. Our lives gain added meaning when we can know that these memories will be fond ones, that they will remember us with gratitude for caring how they would live.

Psychological and Spiritual Transformation: The Key

To realize this new potential for a meaning to life will require transforming the very fabric of our society. We will need to shift massive sums of money from present consumption, fossil fuels and the military to generate the investment needed to create a Hydrogen Age. Automobiles will run on, and electricity will be generated by, solar photovoltaic cells and hydrogen. The great rainforests of the world upon which biodiversity depends will have been saved and expanded. The oceans, coral reefs and seas will have been cleansed, water aquifers replenished, and safe substitutes found for dangerous chemicals.

Doing so will require institutionalizing a concern for future generations in our legal, political and economic systems. Our descendants will have standing in our courts of law, represented by Public Advocates for Future Generations. We will have a new politics that unites around the great cause of saving humanity over the long-term rather than divides over a fight over short-term spoils. Special interests, largely corporations seeking short-term advantage, will no

longer be dominant. Politicians will be rewarded rather than penalized for raising fuel efficiency standards or promoting massive buys of photovoltaic cells. Our economics will prioritize long-term investment over short-term consumption, price products at not only their social but generational costs, and have created whole new sustainable energy and energy conservation industries that generate millions of jobs and substantial economic growth.

Our culture will have been transformed as well. Our youth will learn that contributing to their descendants is the most important measure of how they have lived their lives. We will place a higher value on psychological and spiritual experience than fame or wealth, e.g. interacting with people and nature, or sensual stimulation through food and music.

Given the present short-term orientation of our law, politics, economics and culture, however, it is clear that such institutional changes cannot occur unless they have been preceded by a psychological and spiritual transformation, built upon individual experiences of transcendence through connecting with the future.

On an individual level, the experience of feeling connected to future generations is one of the most painful and sublime known to humankind. It hurts because it reminds us not only that we will die but that our entire life span is but the blink of an eye in human - not to mention cosmic - time. If earth lasts another five billion years, for example, our entire lifetimes are but one fifty-millionth of the centuries to come.

But facing this pain can propel us to a far more exalted place, in which we are filled with a sense of awe, humility and mystery at having been privileged to have experienced the precious opportunity to be part of the Great Chain of Being, and energized by a feeling of transcendent meaning and purpose. We can be transformed by the experience of living on through our very real contributions to all those who will follow us, by knowing that though we must die others will not only live but learn and remember our experience - as we have stood on the shoulders of all those who preceded us.

The spiritual experience, closely tied to a desire to transcend personal death, has long been central to civilized life. Religions have built whole cultures around the promise that their gods will protect the faithful from death; Buddhists meditate to move beyond the individual self and experience a consciousness that cannot die; humanistic psychologists speak of peak and flow experiences in which conventional bonds of time and space disappear; people turn to ideology, ethnic kinship, nationalism, cultural identity or "making history" to achieve a sense of meaning beyond their own life-spans; and, of course, we raise our own children largely to transcend our creature-deaths.

What is needed now is to augment these kinds of religious and secular experiences with a new human-based spirituality that allows us to transcend death through feeling a deep connection to our more distant descendants.

Concern for the flesh and blood human beings who will carry our hopes and contributions into the future, and who will remember that we have lived, is perhaps the only psychic motivation strong enough to cause us to make the massive investments in new technologies and voluntary cuts in consumption needed to protect the biosphere.

Why Caring For Future Generations Is Suddenly Necessary

Concern for future generations is not presently institutionalized because it has not been necessary until now. The old adage of 'care for the present, the future will take care of itself' has largely held true. Despite all the horrors of the past millennia, human life -- at least as measured by numbers of humans times the years they live -- is today flourishing. And even most qualitative measures - women's rights, reduced slavery and manual labor, increased democracy - are up. Until now, we could live a life with meaning simply by assuming that future generations would be better off than ourselves.

But now, the experts who study such matters have reached a consensus that the earth's biosphere is seriously threatened by the

COMBINATION of global warming, biodiversity loss, chemical contamination, ocean pollution, nuclear and toxic waste disposal, and depletion of water aquifers, forests, soil and the ozone layer. There is also growing concern over endocrine disruption, and unintended consequences from biotechnology, nanotechnology and artificial intelligence. These phenomena jointly pose an unprecedented threat to the future. It as if our generation had suddenly declared itself a generation of rats, and decided to conduct experiments upon ourselves without the slightest concern about or knowledge of how our descendants would be affected.

This crisis has three unprecedented features:

-- It threatens future generations far more than ourselves, unlike nuclear war which we have an immediate self-interest in avoiding. Though we are living through the greatest mass extinction of species in 36 million years, for example, it is future generations, not us, who will suffer its effects.

-- It comprises a threat to the entire biosphere and not just local regions. Many before us have destroyed their local region through over-grazing or depleting their soil. We are the first to threaten the entire planet through our abuse of natural resources.

-- It will require reversing behaviors that have long been rewarded by evolution. The abilities to procreate, wage war and transform raw materials into finished products have until now been evolutionarily adaptive. But only as we can now value cocreation over procreation, conflict prevention over war-making, and investment over consumption will humanity flourish in the millennium to come.

Just as war and peace were the great issues of the past millennium, meeting these three challenges and saving the biosphere for future generations has thus become the great imperative of the next.

The Road From Here To There

What is maddening and encouraging about the effort to save future generations is that we know how to do it. Our problem is thus not primarily economic or political but creating the will to take the actions we already know are necessary. There is more hope than immediately seems apparent that we can do so. Four basic psychological and political trends already in place must and can be extended.

extending Concern for Our Children to Future Generations

Human beings have encoded within us a considerable degree of concern for future generations.

We can see this concern at work in the average family today. Parents do not seek to maximize their financial resources at the expense of their kids — say, by putting them on half-rations, making them go to work at age 10, or buying them secondhand clothing. They instead make huge investments in money, time, and energy, at the expense of their own short-term material gratification, for the future well-being of their offspring.

There is also much evidence to indicate that we have evolved far beyond a short-term hunter-gatherer consciousness. The international community is increasingly involved in global projects that go far beyond family, tribe or nation. The U.S. spends vast sums annually on the health and education of young people, spending which will continue indefinitely. Those who can afford it often leave bequests to society at large which far exceed what they leave their own kin. And professionals in all walks of life devote considerable energy to contributing to "history," not merely the next generation or two.

As more of us come to understand the biospheric crisis facing our future flesh and blood, we may well be motivated to extend our concern for our descendants out in time.

From Fiscal To Environmental Responsibility

The experience of the debate over reducing the budget deficit and now, to reduce the national debt, indicates that the human need to contribute to future generations can be translated into the political arena.

It was widely believed in the 1980s, as the Reagan Administration joined Keynesian-oriented Democrats in expanding the budget deficits, that seeking to reduce the deficit - let alone our national debt - was fruitless. This conventional wisdom was proven incorrect, however. Though politics played a large part, as did the booming economy, deficit reduction was largely driven by a moral belief that indebting our children was wrong, held by a wide variety of conservative and liberal forces.

The task now is for this fiscal political success to be extended to political action to save the biosphere. This will require that the environmental movement go beyond its present focus on largely technical issues to touching deep psychic and emotional concerns for our descendants.

From an Environmental To Future Generations Movement

The environmental movement has of course done an extremely important job in beginning action to end global warming, promote biodiversity, save the oceans, etc. Unfortunately, however, the movement's current focus on technical, legal and short-term political strategies is not enough to save the biosphere. By its own admission, the biosphere is growing worse despite the tens of millions of dollars it spends annually. Its current strategy implicitly relies on the hope that the weather will grow bad enough to wake up the public.

There is also a tendency to believe that the biospheric crisis will solve itself as corporations shift to renewable energy sources on their own because they are more cost-effective. But while this is devoutly to be hoped for, there is little evidence yet that it will occur soon enough to save a biosphere which is degrading daily. And arguing for this thesis becomes a kind of non self-fulfilling prophecy, as it

diminishes the nation's political will to take the tough actions necessary to create a renewable energy future.

Many environmentalists themselves are motivated by a concern for future generations. If they are to succeed, they will need to extend their own concerns for their descendants into new strategies that touch the deep psychic concerns that people have for passing on a better world to their offspring than they inherited from their parents.

Baby-Boomers Face Their Mortality

While worsening weather and a redirected environmental movement will help, more is needed. Americans will likely only act on a scale sufficient to save the biosphere if they themselves undergo a psychological and spiritual transformation on an individual level.

How 77 million American baby-boomers - who will soon largely control the world culture and economy - respond to their growing awareness that they will die may well be key to how future generations will live. The baby boom generation's first confrontation with death in Vietnam spawned a cultural explosion. If the prospect of their personal death now creates a new explosion that propels large numbers of boomers to seek transcendent meaning, there will be hope for saving the biosphere.

The sun has begun to set on the lives of America's once-proud baby-boom generation, a huge and self-aware cohort that began their lives with so much promise, idealism and commitment. Vietnam, materialism, and the responsibilities of adulthood have taken their toll.

But if the sun is low in the sky, it is also a richer and deeper orange than ever before. And its descent may well see its light illumine vast portions of our psyche and soul that we never before knew existed. If we can discover the part deep within that cares about our grandchildren, and their offspring in turn, future generations can still be saved. If we are the single biggest threat facing our descendants, we are also their potential salvation.

We baby-boomers always knew we were special, but it is only now that we can understand how. We are distinguished not by our size, wealth, or colorful past, but because we are the first humans in all history who have had to seriously answer a simple question:

"How much do I care about future generations?"

Much is riding on the answer to this question. Not only the lives of tens of billions of our descendants, who have no more but certainly no less a right to a decent life than ourselves. But also how we will experience the short time we have left. There is, it turns out, something worse than dying. It is to die badly, to die knowing that we have failed all who will follow us, that not only will they not honor us but rue the day we ever lived.

As individuals, there is both little and much we can do. We cannot on our own hope to reverse the course of evolution. But we can, each of us, transform ourselves. We can just stop our present way of life and begin instead, on our own, to live for future generations. Our individual acts, by themselves, will change nothing. But if enough follow, it will transform everything - the only way fundamental change has ever occurred: person by person, life by life, dream by dream.

We can perhaps begin this process by summoning to our imagination a single face from among the tens of billions who will follow us - perhaps someone who will resemble us, perhaps a child, perhaps our grandchild's great-grandchild. And we can give her or him a name, a smell, a voice, a laugh, a personality. We can reflect or meditate upon this person who now exists only in our imaginations as we once existed only in the dreams of our ancestors. How will she or he think and feel? What will be his or her fears, loves and hopes? How will she or he feel within? How important is to us that they live well and remember us fondly?

Such reflections can transport us to undiscovered regions of thought and feeling that can redeem our lives. For as we approach our final hour our memories of our past will fade, our desire to connect to coming life will grow. And this desire to tend the garden of the future

can birth an impulse that will not only save the biosphere but ourselves. We will be able to take satisfaction in our lives because we will know that we will survive in their grateful memories - the only true measure of how we have lived. And the pain of accepting our deaths will be eased by a deep love, the love we will feel for them, and the love we will know that they will feel for us.