

The Right to a Future: Urgent Need for a New Lens and Lexicon for Conveying Climate Collapse, 28 January 2011 by Raffi Cavoukian, t r u t h o u t | News Analysis

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Are we tweeting while Earth burns? Is climate collapse our new collective Titanic? How do we best describe the survival struggle of seven billion in a way that connects with the public and with decision makers?

The science on global warming is clear and compelling. Earth is in serious climate crisis. That's why many writers have recently upgraded climate change to climate collapse, climate catastrophe, the long emergency. To convey the climate threat fully, we need a new Story. If not for wonder, if not for reverence, if not for love, why have we come here?

In a well known Greek myth, the very rich King Midas, who loves gold above all else, is granted his singular wish that everything he touches turn into gold. The gift becomes a curse when his golden touch kills plants, food and even his daughter, who is turned into a statue. Bereft and repentant, forsaking greed, the king begs for deliverance. His curse is lifted by a wash in the river. All he holds truly precious is restored.

The modern version of the story is about a gold rush called globalization, a monetized world order that commodifies everything and poisons all that it touches: air, water, soil, whales, indigenous cultures, mothers' milk and babies, now born with a body burden of toxic chemicals. Money as symbolic reward for goods and services, when elevated above all else, becomes a curse. The symbol turns tyrant and casts a plague on the living. We're currently in the atonement chapter of the tragedy, praying we have time to write a happier ending.

Planet Blue

"Planet Earth, creation, the world in which civilization developed, the world with climate patterns that we know and stable shorelines, is in imminent peril." -James Hansen (2009)

There is no historical precedent, however, for what we must do if we are to endure." -David Orr, (2009)

"We're screwed!" -David Letterman (2009)

For over two decades, there's been a failure to effectively communicate the climate change crisis. Despite the best efforts of climate scientists and environmentalists to describe the dangers of inaction to policy makers and the general public, political response has been slow, most people have not sensed the seriousness of the issue and the rate of CO2 emissions, rather than falling, has accelerated.

Experts are using escalating phrases to describe climate change. James Hansen: "the coming climate catastrophe," "our last chance to save humanity"; Gustav Speth: "system failure," "looking into the abyss." Lester Brown writes: "The signs that our civilization is in trouble are multiplying." These are not doomsayers; they're telling the truth of this pivotal chapter of the modern saga as they see it.

I propose a new lens and lexicon for conveying climate change as the greatest threat on Earth, a tragedy of epic proportions, especially for the world's young.

Here are the main elements of the new story. The lens is Earth and Child - Child friendly means Earth friendly. The lexicon is a whole brain "linking language" of systems, not fragments. The frame is climate change as The Crisis, the compound threat to the human future. The story aligns present with future, connecting climate change to kids, health and behavior so families get that it's about them and their future. Just as the loss of King Midas's daughter melted his gold-worn heart, children may yet move humanity to bathe in a new river. The story's protagonist

is the Child, our conscience.

The moral of the new story is undeniable: We must not love money more than children. While there is time, societies must reorder priorities toward supporting life systems - what matters most - not maximizing monetary wealth, or else succumb to the Midas craze and kill what we love. The choice is clear: Gaia's gift of life, or the Midas curse.

IMAGE OF SUNSET & TREE BRANCH

Urgently, we need to create a world fit for children, with social and economic systems that constitute a culture of respect for them and for their planetary habitat. A livable future for children and future generations depends on a stunning paradigm shift that stabilizes climate by reducing suffering and increasing joy.

Nobody can guarantee a future. But who has the right to steal it?

Ticking

"Please, be bold. Be courageous. Be positive. Act and demand action." -James Hoggan (2009)
As Gaia's children, we're in a jam.

Industrial activity of 250 years threatens the evolution of billions. The relentless commerce of just decades has assaulted planetary life supports and left our fractured commons in peril. Planetary physicians say the patient is ill, the prognosis is not good. In this time of downward and upward spirals, the wane of empire amidst the rise of something new, the heavily-armed global disorder makes things much worse in the short term, while a green revolution grows in the cracks, praying for time.

The climate alarm's been ringing for a long time. Since 1979, scores of scientists, environmentalists and diplomats have tried their best to wake people up to the issue. NASA climate scientist James Hansen outlined the "greenhouse effect" causing the planet's warming in 1988. The following year, David Suzuki referred to global warming as "a matter of survival." Maurice Strong, who organized the 1992 Earth Summit in Rio warned: "Frankly, we may get to the point where the only way of saving the world will be for industrial civilization to collapse" (The Province, Vancouver, May 10, 1992).

From Rio's Agenda 21 Report and Earth Charter declaration, to the 1993 Union of Concerned Scientists' Warning to Humanity and beyond, we've had a long parade of warnings for twenty years. Yet we've lost ground. Recent books forecast a range of dire scenarios related to warming. None are anything to look forward to.

Lester Brown urges a worldwide green house gas reduction of 80 percent by 2020 in a comprehensive plan with an annual global budget for doing so. According to James Hansen, among the world's leading climate scientists, delays on CO2 cuts will impose a heavy burden on our ability to meet climate adversity, let alone stay civil.

There's still hope. If a child moved King Midas's heart, the Child can move ours.

If our species could be granted one wish, what would that be? Wouldn't it be to lift the Midas curse and restore what we have lost?

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It's essential to connect the climate threat to the present state of the world. Without global warming, the state of humanity on our ravaged planet would still be perilous. Humanity lives in profound inequity and hardship: A billion thirsty, another billion impoverished, yet more and more billionaires. Banks receive bailout billions, while families lose their life savings. Destitute children survive in refugee camps, favelas and barrios, while, in some affluent countries, children are sexually violated at pandemic levels, and large numbers are homeless. Synchronous failures

threaten our life support in a long list of crises, including mass species extinction, desertification, deforestation, freshwater shortages, marine life depletion, coral reef die-off, nuclear weapons, war mongering and, not least, rogue and state terror. The fossil fuel gorging of wealthy as well as developing nations comes at a huge cost to their own citizens and to the world. Repeatedly, monetary concerns override wisdom at incalculable expense.

Any child can see how dumb this worldwide system is, how unjust and how suicidal it is. The globalized gold rush, despite its supposed benefits, is a disaster. "Business as usual" has failed its children. With global warming, the breadth of that failure becomes clearer.

Climate change is not one among many issues, it is THE crisis, the greatest threat on Earth.

It represents the cumulative damage done, the aggregate calamity for which there is no partial remedy. It can best be addressed with changes to systems, beginning with belief systems that are learned very early. The root cause of global warming and future loss is found in the belief systems that drive predatory commerce, relentless advertising and rampant consumption.

To change societal priorities and cut harmful emissions for good, change personal belief systems. Start young.

Earth and Child

Coming to grips with future loss, we must link Earth and Child, self-interest with group survival and child health to global health. Earth and child, mother and young. Earth harm becomes child harm and, seen the other way, child friendly means Earth friendly. In sustainability strategies, we can't overlook the Child.

"This revolution has to transform the way we think ... we can't accept the greed, the denial, the short term thinking and the pollution." -Alec Loorz, 16

"I am fighting for my future. Losing my future is not like losing an election or a few points on the stock market... You grownups say you love us. But I challenge you, please, make your actions reflect your words." -Severn Cullis-Suzuki, age 12 (Rio, 1992)

In Rio, young Severn's voice scolded the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development delegates, saying she'd come 5,000 miles "to tell you adults you must change your ways." Had world leaders heeded her message, we'd not be facing climate chaos 18 years later. (Severn is now 30, the mother of a baby boy.)

In 2006, a 12-year-old California boy, Alec Loorz, founded Kids vs. Global Warming, met with political leaders and gave talks in high schools reaching 100,000 kids. Now 16, he wants everyone to "live as if the future matters." But in the global economy business is not conducted "as if the future matters." Short-termism runs economic and political cycles, counter to Alec's wisdom.

Children have the strongest moral claim on climate action. It's their future at stake. The Earth and Child lens is key. To grow Earth stewards, steward the children. This is where the restoration must focus - strategically and morally - with children. Not only do kids get sustainability, they have the most to lose or gain.

No belief system is as important as a child's need to believe in the love of family and community. This is what our societies must quickly learn and not forget.

In the midnight hour of history, how are we to stabilize climate? By caring. By loving our children enough to demand and co-create nothing less than a whole systems' shift to the caring societies that would make our world "fit for children" and, thus, for all.

In our new story, we need to live in a synergy of systems aligned in purpose and toward an overall systems' goal. Aligning present with future is a critical connection we need to make in all

our institutions to support the enormous creative intelligence of our species' developing geniuses, the children.

No faith tradition condones degrading Earth's life supports, destroying indigenous cultures and wantonly exploiting children.

The antidote for climate change is systems' change. That's the new story message: about societies coming of age, coming to their senses and moving heaven and Earth for their children. It's about growing a generation of Earth stewards on every continent devoted to reclaiming the stolen future.

Communion

"Could this not be the single thought that steers us through the dangerous passage - a world that honours all its children?" -Peter M. Senge, Senior Lecturer, MIT

With humanity's survival at stake, we have to learn to live as if the future matters. That's why "Educating for Sustainability" is gaining ground. Early on, students can learn connective, mind-expanding words such as biomimicry, ecoliteracy, consilient, multidisciplinary, systemic, fiduciary, feedback loops, synergy, holistic, and more.

I propose a moratorium on the term "the environment." (It's a cold term for our living spaces and the community of nature in which we are kin.) The same goes for the word "warrior," which progressives use as they "do battle" for social justice or an end to war.

I propose we get excited about systems' change and a new lexicon for engaging it. Let's quiet the habitual brain and grow new neurons for an epic survival adventure. Systems' change is good news!

Right to a Future. Climate collapse begs a new human right. I propose that "The Right to a Future" be added to the articles of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. Indeed, the right to a future can be for systems' change: humanity's survival depends on children's well-being and their desire to live.

Systems' Goal. Civilization is a broken system that can't be fixed. Urgently, we need to build a new civilization that is the antithesis of empire - an "Earth community," as David Kurten puts it - one whose systems' goal is sustainability and a level playing field for all children.

Communion. As Thomas Berry said, we are not a collection of objects, we are a "communion of subjects." Can you imagine commerce in a spirit of communion? What economic rules would best further that intention?

Bionomy. This means "management of the biosphere" (from economy's origin, "oikonomia," management of the household), or, stewarding the planet. Bionomy embraces what ecological economists advocate: including full cost pricing and accounting, tax shifts, carbon tax, eco-subsidies and a well-being Index.

iMatter. Alec Looz plans a global iMatter campaign for our future, featuring a multi-national kids' march on Mother's Day 2011.

Child Honoring. This is my term for an all-encompassing framework for simultaneously restoring communities and ecosystems. It is a positive vision with a unifying central organizing principle for creating peacemaking cultures.

Conscience

With all it portends, the specter of catastrophic climate change may offer our best and last chance to work toward a unity of purpose, a massive green revolution worldwide. And children hold the key to both the messaging of this profound transition and for inspiring an emotional tipping point for action.

With systems' change, we can embrace the rules of a new paradigm: to affirm the young, support the organic, favor the local, align present with future and design with Earth and Child in mind.

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By whose authority, by what legal precedent, by what spiritual claim, by what moral right can business activities so foul the living Earth so as to foreclose the future? Ray Anderson of Interface, the world's largest floor coverings company, rightly says that he's never heard "the business case for unsustainability."

Business leaders: Corporations owe the children of the world a makeover. Children need you to curb the abusive powers corporations legally hold. For the desecration of Creation is wrong, regardless of legality. Act now on the moral impulse of your fiduciary duty to the young. You have no higher duty.

Ask not how the market can serve you - ask how you and an ethical market can serve to rewrite this critical chapter in human history.

With great haste, strive to enact laws that set corporate ingenuity free to serve humanity as 100 percent shareholders of the commons and to serve the shared dream of all families to provide a bright future for their children.

Like King Midas, the corporate elite has a chance at redemption - by forsaking greed and embracing life.

We Rise Again

"We rise again in the faces of our children / We rise again in the voices of our song." -The Rankin family, from the song "Rise Again"

"If a thing must be done, it can be!" -Eleanor Roosevelt

As long as sustainability remains remote from people's everyday consciousness, this "seven generations" ethic will wither. But seen in the faces of children and heard in their voices, it can inspire us now as never before.

Governments and CEOs must act, but people aren't waiting. The transition town network inspires all manner of folks to engage the power of community with local sustainability strategies. Organic farmers, slow food proponents, green entrepreneurs and low-carbon advocates abound. Local living economies, municipal eco-bylaws and innovative grassroots initiatives are blossoming everywhere. But neither fast enough nor with enough impact, yet.

Embracing systems' change is not about economic hardship or personal sacrifice; it's about making the systemic changes that will greatly improve quality of life for us, our neighbors and our nations' children. It's something to get excited about.

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The loss of his daughter gave King Midas an immediate conversion experience, but our species has not yet conceived of global warning in such tragic terms. Remembering Midas, we just might. Litigate, legislate, liberate. March, write, act.

At the Kyoto Global Forum in 1993, I heard Mikhail Gorbachev say that the 20th century was "a century of warning," and that the 21st would be "either the century of total crisis or the century of human recovery." His idea of glasnost and perestroika - openness and restructuring - unraveled the mighty Soviet Union. Can these words help us now?

Fast forward to the digital age. Consider the Internet's enormous reach and convening power. What if social media gave the global disorder a "glasnost and perestroika shakedown," just as unimaginable as the 1989 fall of the Berlin Wall? (WikiLeaks has made a start on the openness

part.) What if the abusive, globalized money system unravels by the power of individuals connected and flexing their tech muscle to collectively demand "the right to a future"?

What if this is the tipping point - when humanity bathes in a new river?

We're in THE moral moment. We either breakdown or breakthrough to something completely new - a chance to reverse the Midas curse, thoroughly detoxify our world and cool this planet down. With the Earth and Child lens, we can redesign societies to be systems smart: just and sustainable, for the greatest good.

Schools, religious organizations, media, NGOs and policy makers need to share the new story and heed its moral imperative. A strong grassroots campaign, inspired by youth and in support of their future, can be a vital asset to building a critical mass.

For Severn and her baby, for Alec - for your own children and grandchildren - and for those to come, let's embrace systems' change. With utmost compassion let us steer a course away from icebergs and toward a welcoming shore.

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