

What a new generation can do to mitigate the climate crisis

In the previous two sections, I noted that even though the climate crisis was overwhelmingly brought about in a single lifetime, mine, my generation sees the problem as a low priority and, consequently, is doing little to mitigate it.

In this and the next section, I want to suggest an admittedly radical solution whereby the next generation can avert the worst of this crisis

Just to recap, allow me to repeat what I said in the last section: “Three quarters of all the CO₂ (that’s carbon dioxide, the principal greenhouse gas causing the climate crisis), was put into our planet’s atmosphere in the 60 years of my lifetime.” Ironically, for the most part the people who currently wield power on the planet are from my generation. And for the most part, they are not sufficiently addressing on this problem – not by a long shot.

I think of myself as a scholar-activist. In the previous sections I have been talking to you principally as a scholar (and teacher), laying out the facts, explaining the situation. When I’ve done this in person, students often ask me what they should do, what action they should take. I am going to respond to that question now as an activist, by suggesting an action.

Here it is, my radical suggestion. It, and what follows from this point onward, is spoken for my students (and your generation):

You need to take control of this planet – or at least set your sights on that goal – and you need to start now, today.

You cannot wait for the normal course of events, which would bring you to power when you’re my age, or nearly so. As we shall see throughout this series, this situation is simply too urgent for that. You do not have decades. You do not even have years to act. You need to act now, in the upcoming months to have as much impact as is possible. The future – and by that I mean sustaining a reasonably habitable earth for human beings – depends on it.

Sadly, you cannot wait for my generation to act, as we have had decades to act, but haven’t. In fact, as I noted in the last section, during our watch we continued to make this situation worse and worse every year. And even now we see this as an alarmingly low priority.

In suggesting that you need to take control of this planet, I do not mean to suggest that human beings should take control of even more of the earth. Our species already controls over 80% of our planet’s landmass. I am simply suggesting that that control needs to be transferred to a generation that grasps the enormity of this crisis – and will thus hopefully be better stewards of this planet.

Also, let me be very clear, when I suggest that you take control of this planet, I am not in any way implying that you resort to violence to do so. Seriously, violence never solves anything. And, fortunately, throughout the developed world that principally caused this problem,

democracy is for the most part still working reasonably well – though, as we shall see in future episodes, fossil fuel interests and others are spending hundreds of millions of dollars to subvert it.

The 2018 US. midterm elections can be seen as a proof-of-concept of what can be done. A month after the youngest woman was ever voted into Congress (AOC), she co-introduced the most sweeping US. legislation ever to address the climate crisis: the Green New Deal. The fact that she did this in her twenties is not, I think, coincidental.

Throughout this series, I am going to suggest a number of things that you can do to help take control of this planet. These will range from activism to engineering sweeping cultural change through decisions that you make on where you live, how you get around, what you eat, what you wear, the stuff you buy, etc.

However, political change is of central importance, even on the local level. You may trade your car for an e-bike (a great thing to do), but if your local politicians are committed to car infrastructure rather than bicycle paths, you may have real trouble getting around on that bike and even be unsafe sharing overcrowded roads with cars.

In short, one of the simplest, quickest, and most effective things that you can do to work toward taking control of this planet is to vote – and to urge five of your friends to do the same.

There is a particular urgency in doing so that is worth noting, as my generation is leveraging democracy to its advantage and interests, which is away from the climate crisis and toward things like Social Security and healthcare. How is this happening?

In the aforementioned 2018 midterm election, voter turnout in the US. was generally up. In the case of 18 to 29-year-olds, it was way up, having increased more than any other age group, as over a third voted. This is great, undeniably. However, the problem is that two out of three people over the age of 65 voted. As a group, their voting power is thus twice as great as the youngest generation of voters, simply because they are voting twice as much. My generation is not only effectively in control of this planet, we are significantly leveraging that control – two-to-one in the case of political power, which is all important – and which is, of course, exercised through voting.

It is not my intent is to cause generational discord. Moreover, I am not echoing the 1960s adage that you should trust no one over 30. I am, after all, delivering this message at twice that age. And there are plenty of people in my generation and even older, including politicians, that are deeply committed to addressing our climate crisis. Al Gore and Bernie Sanders, both in their seventies, come to mind.

Nonetheless, the bald fact is that we will be dead and buried when you will be dealing with the worst of this. We haven't and simply won't significantly suffer in our lifetimes. However, you will. Though we brought about the greatest catastrophe ever caused by human beings on the planet, the climate crisis wasn't really much of an issue for my generation, as paradoxical as that may sound. This is arguably largely because of the time delay that I elaborated on in the previous

talks. Even today, as polls reveal, it is still not much of an issue for my generation. It will, nonetheless, likely be THE defining issue for you, and for many generations after you.

Is it even possible for your generation to take even partial control of this planet? Frankly, I am not sure. However, I am decidedly of the “aim high” camp when it comes to tackling problems. Even you do not succeed at this incredibly ambitious goal, you may still have a profound impact.

Consider the last great youth rebellions in the US, which occurred in the 1960s and '70s. True, political power was not transferred from one generation to another at this time. However, these youth movements, which in many respects had their center in colleges and universities, were able to exert tremendous political pressure that ultimately resulted in significant cultural and political change.

This not only included the ending of the Vietnam Conflict through the withdrawal of American troops, but also a range of additional cultural changes, such as for civil rights. Especially for people of color, for women, for the LGBTQIA community, we live in a better world because of the youth rebellions of the 1960s – though, of course, still far from a perfect world.

The simple fact is that, as a result of these rebellions, America was in many ways fundamentally, profoundly changed – for the better.

Even if you do not succeed in taking even partial control this planet, you can have a profound influence on the older generations. Interestingly, you are uniquely positioned to do so.

A recent study found that, when it comes to promoting “collective action” on the climate crisis, one of the most effective approaches is “child-to-parent intergenerational learning—that is, the transfer of knowledge, attitudes or behaviours from children to parents.” ([source](#)) Simply put, you need to teach your parents by communicating to them the horrific severity of this problem. You need to explain to them how important this is for your future, the future of their (as yet unborn) grandchildren – indeed the future of all your family’s descendants. By taking this direct, personal approach, your generation can have enormous influence on the generations in control of this planet.

Throughout this series, we will be looking at a range of approaches, such as child-to-parent intergenerational learning, that can allow you to have greater control of the destiny of the earth, our species, and the life with which we share this planet.

I know that I have left quite a few questions unanswered here, such as just how much my generation knew about what we were doing. I will take this question up in a future section, but the short answer is that we knew more than enough to have been prompted to action. After all, the modern environmental movement emerged at the moment, shortly after the time of my birth, when we could have largely averted the worst all this.

The most pressing question, however, is what you as a generation can do to undo what my generation has done. I will be directly addressing this question in the next section, as well as throughout this series. In fact, this series centers on this question.

Simple answer is that, in order to help moderate the climate crisis, we need to fundamentally reinvent Western culture, especially consumer culture and the belief that happiness is to be found in things (it obviously isn't), a culture that we have now sold to the entire world, much to the detriment of our planet. This is not a big job, it's an almost unimaginably huge undertaking. But it must be done. Because my generation didn't do it, this job now falls to you.

Thinking back to the 1960s in the US, I am reminded of a speech by Robert F. Kennedy where he noted that "There is a Chinese curse which says 'May he live in interesting times.' Like it or not, we live in interesting times. They are times of danger and uncertainty; but they are also the most creative of any time in the history of mankind."

This is probably not actually a real Chinese curse, but what Kennedy noted was correct. While he lived in a time of "danger and uncertainty," it was also an extremely exciting, creative time. Out of his era, with all its strife, came a better world, precisely because it was not just more of the same, but a bold charting of a new future.

And yet, by comparison, it was arguably not nearly as exciting, with as much room for creativity, as the time in which we now live. Echoing Kennedy, I would argue that ours is "the most creative of any time in the history" of humanity. The challenge, at once both frightening and exhilarating, is to create a new world.

I open my most recent book, which is on the challenge of writing a new environmental era and moving forward to nature (in other words, moving forward to a better relationship with the earth), with a quote from Tennyson's wonderful little poem "Ulysses." Allow me to repeat it here, to you:

"Come, my friends, 'Tis not too late to seek a newer world."

In the next section, we will take up the question of how to begin.