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Futures

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FUTURES

Roger S. Gottlieb, PhD

Abstract:

In fictional form, this piece explores two possible ways in which the current environmental crisis (in general) and climate change (in particular) might unfold in coming years. In each case there is great suffering and many things are lost. However, in the first humanity and other species are simply devastated, and little human learning has been accomplished. In the second, a profoundly new appreciation of our connection with and dependence on the natural world has replaced the now dominant attitude and practice of domination and exploitation.

Keywords: environmental crisis, climate crisis, spiritual transformation, social change, environmental destruction.

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I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Now choose life, so that you and your children may live.

Deuteronomy 30:19

Profound cultural transformation is always, and necessarily, unpredictable. Just because it breaks the bounds of what we think of as possible from within our own horizon of consciousness—who, after all, could have anticipated social equality, human bodies integrated with machines, or gay marriage?—we cannot comprehend what might unfold in the future.

Yet future changes are always inherent in the present. And this is increasingly true in a globalized civilization in which nearly all parts are in connection with all the others. While in centuries past colonizers and imperialists might have been able to impose a

totally different form of life on a conquered group, now China and Peru, Canada and South Africa, India and Latvia know each other. What future changes are possible must grow from what we now have and what we all know—even if we repress the knowledge or intentionally forget it.

In what follows I imagine how the change from our current wasteful, oppressive, and destructive civilization might happen—or what we will be left with if it does not. I have tried to represent the stakes as high as they actually are—and to illustrate that any change, even one for the better, will inevitably be accompanied by loss.

I

Adam

I haven't been outside for 2 days, and I'm getting pretty hungry. But the wind just won't let up. Every time Grandpa shuffles up what's left of the stairs and pokes his head out, I can hear it—howling, whining, pulling at everything it touches, trying to get in here. So he just slams the hatch door shut, and shakes his head, reaches over to pat me on the shoulder. "Soon Adam, soon. Then we'll go out and see if the berries have ripened; and maybe some kind of fish is in the flood plain. I know it's hard here, but it could be worse. There are places where the wind is as bad, but it just stopped raining. People are stuck inside without water when the blows come hard." He's right, I know. We have jugs and jars and old plastic containers full of water. And we sprout old seeds, the ones that aren't too moldy, and that's mainly what we eat when we can't get out.

But I also see what he doesn't think I can see—that look in his eyes. It's pretty bad, not as bad as the look I saw in a dog once, that we caught and chased down because it had lost a leg, just before we killed it. We roasted it slow over a fire, that last time the wind stopped for a whole week. Grandpa's eyes look like that dog's—fighting till he couldn't go on anymore, but knowing it was hopeless.

Grandpa

If it wasn't for the boy I would have killed myself years ago. He's lucky, he doesn't remember what it was like *before*...It had been happening for years. But the stuff *before* seems like nothing—a few tornadoes, hurricanes, long droughts in Oklahoma and Texas, typhoons in Bangladesh, heat waves in Moscow. A few hundred deaths here, a few thousand there. Maybe, if it was a really bad heat wave or typhoon, as many as 50,000; and maybe a few million homeless.

We thought that was bad. We didn't know. Or we knew and we didn't care.

How many of us are left? In the U.S.? The world? No way to know. The planes, the grid, the cloud, the cell phone towers, the Internet—all gone. Everything we believed in, from local hospitals, to supermarkets where we bought all that food, to the police smiling and helpful on the corner, to the gas stations—Ahh, all those gas stations, and how we loved to say, “Fill ‘er up” and whip out the smooth plastic card that made it all happen.

How did it start? With the first car or the first train? The first time some scientist said “Global warming? We'll just float white Styrofoam on the ocean to reflect sunlight.” The first time there was an “oil crisis” and we just went back to business as usual afterwards. With every stupid empty phrase: *Drill baby drill, energy security, American way of life, job creation, gross national product, economic growth, standard of living, protect the middle class*. We didn't know we were just whistling in the wind, dreaming of a future that was about as real as some little girl's fantasy of marrying a prince.

But me, I think it started with the bees. And the bats. Global warming, climate change, all that—most people couldn't get their minds around it. The earth is too big, other people's weather was just a lot of headlines; and if it was in the third world, well, we were always used to those brown, yellow, and black people dying like flies anyway. If something went wrong here—a hurricane in Vermont, twisters in Alabama—there'd be headlines and hysterical newscasters and interviews with blown-out families. But then

things would calm down, more or less, after a while, and we'd all think about the next election or the Big Game, the new American Idol or some idiot on reality TV.

But when the bats and the bees started to die—a fungus for the bats, a pesticide for the bees—that cut into the food supply. Fruits and vegetables started to skyrocket in price—well, there it was, right in front of us. We'd made some changes in the food chain, in the air and water, in the bugs and microorganisms. And now those changes were going to change us. But lots of things were right in front of us and we didn't look at them. A hundred thousand pine trees in the Rocky Mountains were falling every day because some beetle really, really liked the warmer weather and could eat trees for an extra few months every year. Breast cancer was an epidemic. Spring was coming weeks earlier and the ski resorts were going out of business almost as fast as the pine trees in Colorado. There was a stew of plastic junk in the Eastern Pacific that was as big as fucking Texas, some said as big as the U.S. We knew all this. At least some of us did, and tried to tell the rest.

But we didn't listen. We thought we'd ride it out. That someone else would take care of it.

Worst of all: we didn't realize all this was kid stuff, like rolling down a little hill. And that we were about to fall off a cliff.

Adam

The wind is slowing down. Grandpa says we'll go up soon. We'll try to find something safe to eat. Grandpa says there used to be lots of good things—something called bread, which he tells me about but I can't quite understand it. He even showed me a picture in an old magazine. But I've never seen anything like it and I can't really imagine. I only know this world. And there was fruit, all kinds of fruit, all year round, and so many different vegetables besides the seeds. And none of it was moldy; and you didn't have to fight the rats or the roaches for it.

Grandpa

Did we understand how easy we had it? How much we had? Couldn't we have made do with a little less, just to protect Adam and all the others?

Moot point now, too late. We wanted food without sweat, so we kept playing around with the genes and the earth and insects; and we wanted to make a lot of money off it, so we gave the power to agribusiness. When the viruses came, the ones the monocultures couldn't handle, and they hit the rice, the wheat and the barley, and something else had already begun to wipe out the bees and the bats so the pollination was way down, and then they tried something to kill the viruses, and that spread to the vegetable fields in California and what they used to deal with that spread to the wheat and corn in the Midwest and the fruit in Mexico and Brazil.

And all of a sudden the global marketplace was a series of shuttered windows and locked gates protected by armed men. Every country got more and more afraid that what we had would spread to them. They shut us out. After a few months, while we lived on that processed crap in the supermarkets, all the shelves were empty. In six months there was nothing to feed the cows and the pigs and the chickens so they died off.

In the big cities, in the suburbs, people were starving. The little isolated organic farms were o.k. But even if we couldn't eat, we still had guns, lots of them. And people started to fend for themselves and no one with a little farm could hold it for long. So the government declared martial law and nationalized all the farms, everywhere. Which worked for a while, at least it got food for the people in power. But then they couldn't feed the soldiers, who turned their guns on the great and powerful, and took the little that was left.

We begged the rest of the world for help. But no help arrived. Because each country closed its doors to everyone else, not just us. But it turned out all the technology depended on trade. When things started the break down, they had to choose between fixing the machines and taking the chance that all the food would be ruined. And when

whole nations started to suffer, they would take their weapons and do just what people here did with the farms. Take for themselves.

And then the weather really turned bad. Nothing we'd built, almost nothing anyway, was made for *this*. Cars picked up and tossed around, we'd all seen that before. But trucks, trailer homes, *bulldozers*? After a storm it wasn't twenty or thirty power poles down, but hundreds, thousands. And it wasn't just the little poles on the little streets, it was the big metal things that carried the main lines. Even if they could stand the wind, they couldn't stand the trees that smashed into the wires. There just wasn't any power you could depend on, not with the wind like this.

Adam

So we went above, and for a whole day the wind was down. There were no 'nadoes and we didn't have to fight off any of the wild dogs. There aren't too many of them left, Grandpa says, because they can't get enough to eat. But when they do come, I get really frightened. Out on the road there are lots of cars, lots. They used to move around, really fast, I've heard. But then something ran out, or we couldn't get any more of it, and there wasn't any way to use anything else. So people walk everywhere now. Some folks have horses that they ride, but it's hard to get food for them. And when the winds come, sometimes they go a little crazy and we can't control them and they run away and get eaten by the dogs.

Grandpa

When the oil stopped, that was the worst of it. No cars, no planes, no ships, no fertilizer. Suddenly we realized we'd been living on a dream, a dream of oil forever. Even most of the alternative sources—wind, sun, hydro—depended on spare parts and machines and stuff that came by truck, or car, or were dependent on other stuff that came that way. Or the people that made it or fixed it needed some medicine for their asthma or their diabetes that came that way. We could get power off the grid, but we couldn't live off it, not enough of us anyway. And the same thing that happened with the organic farms happened with everyone who had solar or wind. People tried to take it, and then

the government took it, and then the soldiers took it for themselves or their families, and then it broke or ran out and there was no way to get it back.

I heard there are some places where they still have some oil. Venezuela maybe, or somewhere in Africa. But they don't have the machines to get it out, refine it, make it do anything. Or if they do, they don't have any spare parts, or enough engineers to make it work. They always left that sort of thing to us. And even if they did, people would come to take it away, and there would be fighting. Someone told me they heard a last desperate message from some radio station in Saudi Arabia, before all contact was lost. They had a secret reservoir of oil, a fair amount of it, at least what had become a fair amount after the major wells ran dry. And they were offering to trade it, straight up, gallon for gallon, for water. They had all this oil, you see, but they couldn't get their machines to run because all the spare parts had stopped coming, and there hadn't been rain in three years, and all the other countries around them had dissolved into chaos and no one would help. They were dying of thirst, finally realizing that you can't drink oil.

I remember, when I was a teenager, some kind of storm hit New Orleans and people got very upset. Thirty years ago we had four of them in a month, and the last two just went up the eastern seaboard—Miami, Charleston, D.C., Baltimore, New York, Boston, Portland—water in the city center, coastal homes taken down, subways ruined, roads washed out. No electricity for months, no way to get food to kids, to evacuate hospitals or old age homes, dead dogs and cats and homeless people rotting in the streets when the waters went down. And then a week later the real tornadoes hit the Midwest, from Chicago and St. Louis to Lincoln and Ames and all the rest. And three nuclear power plants on the rivers got overrun with water and there was no electricity to work the pumps, so the waters turned radioactive. Millions of people without a place to go, no power, bridges destroyed so fuel deliveries were stopped, cars left on the road. And then what we used to call a freak snowstorm took out train tracks and highways from California east—and the food deliveries stopped. How many died just from starvation—and then from the gunfights for food—we never knew. That's when martial law came

in, and never left—not until the government just dissolved because there was no power and no food in D.C., or most state capitals either.

Who knows, maybe the president and the other big guys are still in some undisclosed location, waiting for things to clear up.

But in those other places, inland, it's worse. There's just no rain, no water. Whatever oil they have left they use to truck in water, or to pump it in. But they can never get enough, and then their storms kick up and smash the roads, or the machinery, or the pipeline. We never did figure out how to desalinate ocean water—too busy building smart phones and tablet computers, I guess. All we've got now is hundreds of millions dead, refugees from storms, and drought, and famine roaming the land hoping to find something better. And when they do, there are too many of them and then in a few years, or months, that's gone too.

Adam

I guess this is just what it is. I'll never understand what happened, what there used to be. Grandpa says all the broken trees used to be something called a forest, that in some places you could swim in lakes, they weren't all choked with green slime; that there were things called beaches where people went into the water, which wasn't all filled with jellyfish and old plastic.

All those things that used to be.

Where did they go?

II

Eve

I love to go out into the garden before anyone else. It's cold, but I put on two sweaters and Amanda doesn't mind. The vegetables in their beds are just coming in now. If I

push my fingers down just a little I can feel the carrots, and the lettuce just glistens (Oh I *love* that word) with the dew on it when the sun comes over the hillside. Of course I wouldn't do more than look, and touch them a little, and say a blessing over each carrot I see and all the vegetables, thanking the goddess for plants, and sun, and water.

There are new flowers on the apple trees. The fruit won't be in until the fall, but I bless them for their colors and their smell. So many beings to bless. So many.

Of course I know I have to be back in the tree house before the sun really comes out. It's too hot later, and if I get caught in the sun in the middle of the day, Amanda says, something bad could happen to my skin. But I bless the sun anyway, because without it nothing would grow.

It's not us who make the food, says Amada, it's all these others. We just help out a little, and they help us out a lot.

Amanda

Eve is a good girl, and so precious after all those miscarriages. God knows what was in the food and water for her mother, even after The Change, and what it did to her. I'm very lucky to have made it to my age —not many do. But I'm still concerned that something will start to show in her. If I go, well, it will be my time. And others will take care of Eve. That's what we do now.

Death we will always have, but at least we have stopped poisoning ourselves and the others. We eat what comes from the Goddess, we don't add and don't subtract. And thank Her for everything we have. And if there's a bad year with bugs or storms, we eat less and thank Her for helping us understand our limits. Even if that means some of us die.

Eve

Some months, even one whole year a while ago, can be pretty bad. Nothing grows right, there isn't enough rain, and we don't eat much. But Amanda says that is just the rhythm of life. The Goddess blesses us with food, and then with hunger: to teach us to appreciate every day, every moment, every song we sing and breath we take.

Amanda

How did we get here? I'll tell you, I don't know. All I can say is about the part I played, me and a few others I know. The rest of the world had to do it their way.

There were some storms, big ones. And there was hardly any winter that year—it only went below freezing a few times and the river, which had always frozen solid for at least a few weeks, ran all through January and February. Then a thaw which wasn't really a thaw because nothing had frozen came in mid-March, and the May flowers were out before the first week of April was over. And it was hot, t-shirt and shorts and still sweating hot, in April when you usually needed a sweater and jacket both.

Other stuff was going on too, and getting worse. People diagnosed with cancer, scared about water quality, bats and bees were dying, a rash of frogs with horrible deformities. Coral reefs off Florida bleaching white from the warming, and a bigger than usual dead zone in the Gulf of Mexico from the chemical agriculture, and the Asian carp had gotten past all the barriers and were ravaging fishing in the Great Lakes.

It was all going to hell and no one was doing anything about it. Oh, the EPA was making its usual noises, and the environmental groups were trying to raise consciousness, but the people with the real power, from the networks to the politicians to the CEOs, were doing business as usual. Talking about economic growth and more buildings and more computers and more cars and more and more and more, God forbid we should just be satisfied with what we had right now, or double God forbid we should ever have less. I couldn't stand it. Neither could my friends. We said, "It can't go on," and "Why don't they do something?" and, most of all, we saw that our parents and aunts and uncles,

and the priests and ministers and rabbis and school teachers and rock stars and really, really pretty girls in movies and on the magazine covers and the team that won the Super Bowl—that they weren't going to do anything for us. That the people who ran everything and owned everything, well they *sure* weren't going to do anything.

So if anything was going to happen, it would have to be us.

And you know, it was easier that anyone dreamed. And it happened so much faster, too.

Eve

At night sometimes I get up and leave the tree house oh so quiet and climb down and walk to the meadow. Amanda doesn't know, because I hardly breathe when I pass her sleeping pallet, and my bare feet don't make a sound on the path. And I sit in the little space between the garden and the wild, and I just listen. I can hear things—insects and small animals and bats in the night. And even more. I can hear the earth breathing, and the sky humming along being the night sky. And sometimes, when it's perfectly clear, I think, I just think, I can hear the stars.

Amanda

It was on the parkway, one morning going to school, which was a few miles away from my house, but of course no one would walk or bike. I was driving, all by myself, and my friends Sue and Rachel were up ahead. The traffic was horrible, we were barely moving, just inching along, so we were texting about, I don't know, some nonsense or other. To think of how much time I wasted with that ridiculous phone of mine—when there were all these others to listen to, and look at, and care for. Oh, but that's just silly. We were what we were, and we're different now. And better.

Eve

I am so glad I am alive. And that Life is here to provide for me. Every breath, Amanda tells me, every breath shows how I'm connected to everything else in Life. After all, no breath, no connection...no life!

Amanda

So all of a sudden Rachel's texts get a little crazy. There's a guy in the car in front of her. He gets out. He stands on the hood of the car. He starts to yell so that people can hear him over their stereos and car TVs and iPhones. ***"This is no way to live. Don't we all know it? This is crazy; this is suicide. We have to find something else. NO MORE CARS, NO MORE HEATING UP THE EARTH AND POISONING OURSELVES. We must tell them it has to change. We must be the change. NOW!"***

And crazy as crazy as it sounds, he just leaves his car and starts to walk. Where? Who knows? Maybe to the state capital building, which don't you know was about four miles away.

Well the craziest thing is, people started to follow him. They knew what he was talking about, and the word spread to the other cars of people who hadn't heard him. They understood. We *all* understood. We'd just been too scared and too wrapped up in all the cars and phones and computers and handy little gadgets and meat to barbecue and orange juice that got shipped here from Brazil to do anything about it. And we'd all gotten so damn lazy at the same time that we were so wrapped up in the crap that we were all the time exhausted. We didn't sleep, we just passed out when we couldn't stand being online any more.

So I got out of my car. Just walked away, and joined up with Rachel and Sue and we started to walk too. What were we going to do? We didn't know! Isn't it wonderful? We didn't know—we just knew something had to change, and it was going to start right now, right here, with us. Yeah, with us—a bunch of dopey high school girls who didn't

know their asses from their elbows, as my father would have said, but just one thing, one thing we did know. The way we were all living was crazy.

Eve

I learned to read two years ago. Amanda and I had to walk for two days to the library. There was an old man there, real friendly, but I swear even the million creases on his face had creases, and his hair was whiter than the big clouds that build up in summer. But he just kneeled down, and smiled at me, and said that I was beginning a very exciting journey, and I was lucky to have such a wonderful guide. He let us have ten books, and said he would send more with a courier in 2 months.

That wasn't soon enough for me. But Amanda taught me not just to read, but to savor (isn't that a great word? It's like you're eating something with your mind.) each word, each thought.

Amanda

So we walked together, more and more of us. And then it spread. People called their friends and texted their parents and their grown kids, and their colleagues at work; and all of sudden, all across the country people were just walking off the job, out of their cars, out of their houses and into the streets. They went to the big office buildings where the oil companies were, and to the banks and the police stations and the mayor's offices and every federal building.

Well the People in Charge got terrified. They called us communists and terrorists and whispered that we worked for Russia or Al-Qaeda or were all on drugs. But it didn't work because there were just too many of us. Too many people who'd lost their mothers to breast cancer. Too many people freaked out about the weather, about their kids with asthma, about the strange, scary color of the sky on a hot day in August. They sent the police after us, but they just smiled and asked us please not to break any windows. They sent in the National Guard, and then the Army, but they just put down their weapons and lined up right beside us.

Easy? No, it wasn't easy. A lot of people died because we were all so dependent on The Machine. The hospitals didn't work as well, and there was a lot less food. And it got really cold and really hot and a lot of the time we were uncomfortable, or hungry, and things were harder than they'd been. People had to walk miles and miles and miles. We'd try to make exceptions for the old and the sick and women with babies. But pretty soon it just became a kind of common sense. Don't ride when you can walk; don't burn something that doesn't absolutely need to be burned. Don't use anything you don't absolutely need.

But we all knew this was what we had to do to change. And we hooked up to people who knew how to do things locally and grow food without chemicals and get power from the sun. Suddenly everything that was healthy and real became precious, and all the stuff we'd had before—everything that distracted us from what was really going on—just seemed empty and a waste of time. And we started to accept that being alive meant that sometimes you're hungry or cold and we were all going to die, so it was better to live sane than crazy.

And if a lot of people had to die...well, people were dying already: for war, for poisons in the food, for nothing. At least these people were dying for something.

Eve

We don't go to the city too often. People bring us what we need—food and blankets, wool to make clothes, the news of what's going on. Amanda says even though the cities are so much smaller, and so much cleaner than they used to be, if she is going to do her work, she needs to be out here—with just the garden for the special herbs she uses, and the forest nearby, and the animals, and the fish in the river. She is so good at being a healer that people walk or ride their bikes, or if they are really sick, the special cars for that will bring people to her. And that's how we get the stuff we can't grow ourselves.

Amanda

The change came when we realized that oil wasn't the enemy, wasn't evil, wasn't the source of some horrible poison that was destroying the earth by making the climate change. No! Oil is sacred; it holds the life force of billions of living beings that can give us heat and movement and so much else.

The problem wasn't oil, it was us—treating oil like some cheap throwaway junk, wasting it, my God how we wasted it. As if the life force bound up in it had no meaning. And that was true of everything else—food and water, even air, that we polluted as if there was an infinite supply, when really there is just this thin shell around the earth, and the rest of the universe probably doesn't have a single molecule.

We finally figured out—or was it that we finally remembered?—how we should treat the things that are the most important: air, water, food, sources of energy like oil and wood, old people who need company more than a lot of medicines, kids who need love and attention. We learned that the sacred is not some God in heaven, some afterlife, or some words in a book. It's the living beings and the sources of life. That's all. And that's enough.

Eve

I'm really glad I'm alive. Each morning I get up, and say my prayers to life. And I mean them, 'cos where we would be without life? But Amanda tells me that life means death, just like death means life. That we come in one form, for awhile, and then become something else. I hope I become a butterfly, or a cardinal, I love their calls in spring. Of course I know I won't be me when I'm something else. I'll just be something else!

But in a way, I'll still be me—not the me that says words and walks on two feet and wears clothes, but the me that breathes, and has a body, and lives on the earth. That's enough, I think.

Roger S. Gottlieb, PhD, is professor of philosophy at Worcester Polytechnic Institute, and the author or editor of 20 books on political philosophy, ethics, religious studies, spirituality, and environmentalism. These include the award winning short story collection *Engaging Voices: Tales of Morality and Meaning in an Age of Global Warming*; *Spirituality: What it Is and Why it Matters*; and *Political and Spiritual: Collected Essays on Religion, Environment, Disability and Justice*.

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