Welcome to the 21st Century - Time to "turn21"

Contributed by turn21
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This is the time for our species to “turn 21”: to transition from adolescence to responsible adulthood as citizens of the planet, before we destroy our own future.

turn21.org asks only two things of you who are reading this: that you take the time to understand the human predicament as presented below, and that on the 21st of every month from now on you make some effort to spread this understanding to one or more other people.

The story so far

We are living through the middle stages of a slowly-moving tragedy, in which the human population and its resource consumption have grown far beyond what the earth can sustainably support. We are now, effectively, waging war against our own descendants, and against all other forms of life on the planet.

This is a moral problem unprecedented in human history, and with a special character that makes it more difficult by far than any previous stage in our moral evolution, because this problem is all about consequences at planetary scale. Because of this, individual actions like giving up flying, or becoming a vegetarian, are essentially useless. Only a collective decision by the species has a hope of making the future significantly better. In other words, we need a revolution, because business as usual, and politics as usual, are evidently not going to be up to the challenge. One could argue that in a sense we need a religious revolution, in that we need to appeal to the side of human beings that values something beyond their own comfort, and beyond their own lifetime.

The main cause of the tragedy that is unfolding is this: we have been cursed with a huge supply of carbon and hydrocarbons representing the accumulated energy of many millions of years of photosynthesis, which we are now burning over the span of a century or two, without allowing the real costs of this strategy to have any economic impact on our decisions. The most familiar cost is climate change, but it might be better to think in terms of changing climate. Even if we were to stop burning fossil carbon right now, our actions have already guaranteed a period of changing climate for many decades to come.

A war with three fronts

But changing climate is only one front of the undeclared, undiscussed war that we are waging against our own children, our own future. A second front is the size of the world’s population, with its demand for food and water and the other basics of life. Population has tripled in the last 65 years.

Some argue that we have not exceeded the planet’s sustainable population: that there is enough food, just not equitably enough distributed. What they are ignoring is that most of that food is grown and brought to our tables using fossil carbon inputs that represent many times the caloric energy we get from eating it. Energy is involved in the use of nitrogen and phosphate fertilizer, herbicides and pesticides, pumped water from wells or dams, mechanical planting and harvesting, refrigeration, and shipping. The so-called “green revolution” indeed averted predicted famines, but it did so by spreading a higher-input style of farming.

The third front in our war on the future is perhaps the least acknowledged: it involves expectations. Those living in the

rich part of the world have become deeply accustomed to a high-energy lifestyle, and to an economic system that only works well during conditions of robust growth, conditions that are not going to continue for very much longer.

Politics and economics

There is a belief that is near the center of the thinking of many conservatives, especially libertarians: that if the government would reduce its role to the minimum and “get out of the way,” market forces would solve all our problems.

Markets are one of our most powerful inventions, but markets will only produce good decisions if prices correspond to reality. In the case of fossil carbon, this relationship has broken down completely: the ease of extracting coal, oil, or gas from the earth in no way reflects the cost of burning it and adding the resulting CO2 to the ecosystem, as well as the coming psychological cost of readjusting to a world in which energy is increasingly expensive, after becoming accustomed to a world in which energy is extremely cheap.

It seems unlikely that most people understand how cheap energy is, even now. Maybe this will help: remember that in the absence of fossil fuel, transport for the richer stratum of society involved horses. It takes about five acres of pasture land to support a horse, and a horse does not provide speeds of seventy miles an hour, nor the ability to haul multi-ton cargoes. If we think of energy as being about a thousand times cheaper than it has been through most of human history, we will not be far wrong. And this cheap energy is entirely the result of a geological/biological accident.

The truth is that we missed our best chance to steer the world toward sustainability by not enacting a large and continuously rising carbon tax many decades ago. We should still do it, but we will now need to couple it with other measures to reduce the pain of the resulting economic disruption.

One day a month

The truth is very painful, but living in and with the truth is the only way to keep our self-respect. There may be no hope for a better outcome; it may be that despite our assumption of the name Homo sapiens, “the wise human”, we will show ourselves as merely clever rather than truly wise.

So turn21.org suggests that you live the best life you can in the light of this knowledge, realizing that any one person’s level of responsibility for the future is very small. But keep the 21st day of each month as a time to bring your understanding of the big picture to the foreground of consciousness, and to say to people you meet, “Business as usual may be inevitable, but it is still morally unacceptable.” As the movement gains momentum, the 21st could become a day for flash mobs, media stunts, even general strikes.

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This essay first appeared on turn21.org and Resilience.org in September 2014.
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