

# GLOBAL HOPE?

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In January 2014 I was invited to contribute to a publication featuring the great and the good, each with one page to answer this question: 'Do you think that humanity can find a way past the current global environmental and social crises and will we be able to create the conditions necessary for our own survival, as well as that of other species on the planet? In summary, then, do we have hope and can we do it?' The more I thought about it the more dissatisfied I became by the positive reply that seemed invited. The media is awash with unearned optimism about the future – a kind of mass it'll-be-alright-on-the-night syndrome – which opens the door further, if that's possible, to denial and wishful thinking about how things really are. So I replied in the negative, setting out the reasons.

To my pleasant surprise, the editor responded that he wanted to use what I'd said, provided I could cut it to 350 words. I did, so they will be somewhere in *Global Chorus: A 365-Person Anthology of Worldwide Concern and Enduring Hope* – see <http://globalchorus.ca/> But my original reply lays out in a bit more detail why I think the answer is no, so here it is.

When I look at the world dominated by human beings, I see (in the words of Max Weber) one of unpunished injustice, undeserved suffering, and hopeless stupidity. And I don't see that changing except to get worse. So far as I can tell, the future from here till out of sight consists of humanity sliding further into the abyss and continuing to take much if not most of the natural world with it. Anthropocentrism -- the assumption that human beings are the centre of the world and its highest source of value -- will continue to dominate actions and discussions. (The same assumption stops any serious attempt to address one of the worst drivers of the crisis, gross human over-population and its effects.) The model for how to live will continue to be dominated by capital, corporatism and big business on the one hand and the monotheistic religions on the other. Both are inherently anti-ecological, and -- insofar as human beings are natural beings, part of whose nature is culture -- anti-humanity. Both will also continue to undermine the kind of education we most urgently needed: teaching our young not to be consumers or believers but citizens.

The conversion of shared public goods into individual private profit through privatisation – now universal, thanks to colonisation and globalisation – will continue unabated. In the resulting war between the very few at the top with nearly all the power including money (daily fewer but richer) who will do literally anything to keep and increase it, and the great masses at the bottom (more every day) who will do almost anything to get some, the middle classes and civil society -- which is where any hope does reside -- will be torn to pieces. Along with them will go the only idea and value that could save us, so to speak: the common good. Acts of civility, compassion and intelligence by individuals and small groups will be largely overwhelmed by our ruthless rulers, in the name of Efficiency, and their rebellious slaves when those are not mesmerised by the twin gods (under Mammon) of Convenience and Entertainment.

Quisling public intellectuals pretending to be progressive and advanced will continue to tell people what they want to hear rather than the truth: things like, you can save the planet, make money and help the economy all at the same time, you can

have everything you want without taking anything away from anyone else, there's enough for need but not for greed, science and technology will solve all our problems, the system just needs to be tweaked and a hundred other expressions of the fact that people everywhere want a megamachine to provide for them without hurting or destroying anything, and they don't want to know they can't have one.

For the same reasons, we will continue to destroy, pollute, and desecrate the natural world past the point of our own ability to flourish and possibly even survive (see 'stupidity', above), let alone that of most other kinds. There will be no large land mammals -- elephants, rhinos, lions, tigers, etc. -- left in the wild, and insofar as these are wild animals, none, properly speaking, left at all. The mass extinction of species for which we are responsible, having taken over the job from meteors, will continue to accelerate. Our insatiable demand for meat will continue to condemn countless domestic animals to systematic suffering and painful deaths. Our collective addiction to industrial-scale energy and 'development' will continue to drive global climate change, with consequences resulting from the resulting extreme weather than we can hardly imagine. The insanity of sawing off the ecological branch whereon we all perch will go on failing to gain much purchase in how we actually live. (Witness the rush to burn new caches of fossil fuel made accessible by the effects of burning fossil fuel while trying to ignore the steadily more violent extreme weather that comes with it.)

The Earth itself will survive, of course. Its creatures may even flourish again. If so, however, it will be without us and, it would appear, *because* it is without us. Will humanity survive? I think so, although in what numbers and with what ways of life I cannot say. But we seem to be well on our way into a new Dark Age, complete with a new feudalism, where culture, in the old-fashioned sense of the word, only survives here and there, in isolated pockets. But what institutions could perform this service? No longer the monasteries, I'm afraid.

I would love to be mistaken, of course, but don't think I am. The only thing that prevents despair -- more slender reed than bulwark -- is that I don't know for certain, beyond any doubt, that this is the future. By the same token, though, no one else knows for sure that it isn't. In any case, I am sure that only after fully acknowledging how dire is the situation and the outlook, without indulging in any comforting nostrums or pious evasions, are we entitled to whatever hope remains. And if none, we can still resist; you don't need hope for that.

What do we need? Uncompromising honesty, especially with yourself, to face up to reality. The humility to forget about grandiose global solutions and instead do what you can in your precise circumstances, and the intelligence to do it with skill and grace. A robust sense of humour in order to appreciate all the ironies and absurdities. But above all, courage. Without that, you can't even get started.