

You Choose

By Derek Jensen

Do you believe that this culture will undergo a voluntary transformation to a sane and sustainable way of living?

I've asked that questions of thousands of people, and almost no one says yes. The answers range from emphatic no's to derisive laughter.

My next question: For those of us who care about life on this planet, how will this understanding—that this culture won't voluntarily stop destroying the natural world, eliminating indigenous cultures, exploiting the poor, and killing those who resist—shift our strategy and tactics?

The answer? We don't know, because we don't talk about it, and we don't talk about it because we're all so busy pretending that, against all evidence, there will be some miraculous transformation.

But with all the world at stake, it's foolishly and reprehensibly irresponsible to rely on some miraculous transformation we all know won't happen. We need to act, and we need to act decisively. The miracle we're waiting for is us.

In his extraordinary book *The Nazi Doctors*, Robert Jay Lifton explored how men who had taken the Hippocratic Oath could participate in prisons where inmates were worked to death or killed in assembly lines. He found that many of the doctors honestly cared for their charges and did everything within their power—which means pathetically little—to make life better for inmates. If an inmate got sick, they give the inmate an aspirin to lick. They might put the inmate to bed for a day or two. If the patient had a contagious disease, they might kill the patient to keep the disease from spreading. All of this made sense within the confines of Auschwitz. The doctors did everything they could, except for the most important thing of all: they never questioned the existence of Auschwitz itself. They never questioned working inmates to death. They never questioned imprisoning them, torturing them. They never questioned the existence of a culture that would lead to these atrocities. They never questioned the logic that leads inevitably to electrified fences, gas chambers, bullets in the brain.

We as environmentalists do the same. We work as hard as we can to protect the places we love, using the tools of the system the best we can. Yet we do not do the most important thing of all: we do not question the existence of this current death culture. We do not question the existence of an economic and social system that is working the world to death, that is starving it to death, that is imprisoning it, that is torturing it. We never question a culture that leads to these atrocities. We never question the logic that leads inevitably to clearcuts, murdered oceans, loss of topsoil, dammed rivers, poisoned aquifers, global warming. And we certainly don't act to bring it down.

Think about the prominent “solutions” suggested to help curb the worst of global warming. What do they have in common? I’m talking about every major “solution,” from those proposed by Al Gore (compact fluorescents, inflating tires, reducing packaging); to Newt Gingrich (giving polluters tax credits to lean them toward voluntarily reducing carbon emissions); to Barack Obama (so-called “clean” coal); to scientists suggesting schemes such as dumping tons of iron into the ocean in the hope that this will cause algae to flourish, absorbing CO₂ into the algae’s bodies and, by the way, doing god knows how much damage to the already being murdered oceans, or injecting sulfur particles high into the atmosphere to reflect sunlight back into space; and so on.

What all these “solutions” have in common is that they all take industrial capitalism as a given, as that which must be saved; and they take the real, physical world—filled with real physical beings who live, die, make the world more diverse—as secondary, as something which must conform to industrial capitalism. Even someone as smart and dedicated as Peter Montague, who until recently ran the indispensable *Rachel’s Newsletter*, can say about an insane plan to “solve” global warming by burying carbon underground (which is course is where it was before some genius pumped it up and burned it), “If even a tiny proportion of it leaks back out into the atmosphere, the planet could heat rapidly and civilization as we know it could be disrupted.” No, Peter, it’s not civilization we should worry about. Far more problematical is the very real possibility that the planet could die. Or take Lester Brown’s latest book: *Plan B 3.0: Mobilizing to Save Civilization*. To save civilization. Not to save the planet *from* civilization.

Industrial capitalism always destroys the land on which it depends for raw materials, and it always will. Until there is no land (or water, or air) for it to exploit. Or until, and this is obviously the far better option, there is no industrial capitalism.

How do you stop or at least curb global warming? Easy. Stop pumping carbon dioxide into the atmosphere. How do you do that? Easy. Stop burning oil, natural gas, and coal. How do you do that? Easy. Stop industrial capitalism.

When most people in this culture ask, “how can we stop global warming?” that’s not really what they’re asking. They’re asking, “How can we stop global warming, without significantly changing this lifestyle (or deathstyle, as some call it) that is causing global warming in the first place?”

The answer is that you can’t.

To ask how we can stop global warming while still allowing that which structurally, necessarily causes global warming—industrial civilization—to continue in its functioning is like asking how we can stop mass deaths at Auschwitz while allowing it to continue as a death camp. Destroying the world is what this culture does. It’s what it has done from the beginning.

Any solution that does not take into account—or, rather, count as primary—polar bears, walrus, whippoorwills, bobwhites, chickadees, salmon, and the land and air and water that support them all—is not solution, because it doesn’t count the real world as primary and social constructs as secondary. Any such solution is in the most real sense neither realistic nor practical. Any solution that

does not place the well-being of nonhumans—and indeed the natural world, which is the real world—at the center of its moral, practical, and “realistic” considerations is neither moral, practical, nor realistic. Nor will it solve global warming or any other ecological problem.

Do we want a living real world, or do we want a social structure that is killing the real world? Do we want a living real world, or do we want a dead real world, with a former social structure forgotten by everyone, because there is no one left alive to remember?

You choose.

To help clarify how utterly insufficient are mainstream responses to global warming (and more broadly the murder of the planet), let’s put all this a different way. Pretend that instead of industrial capitalists destroying the planet, it is space aliens. These space aliens are changing the Earth’s climate. They are murdering the oceans; 90 percent of the large fish are gone, the oceans are rapidly acidifying, there is six to ten times as much plastic as phytoplankton in the oceans (which would be the equivalent of nine out of every ten bites you take being Styrofoam instead of food), and so on. They are decapitating mountains, they are putting dioxins into every stream, into every mother’s breast milk, into the flesh of your mother, father, sister, lover, child. Into your own flesh. They are damming every river. What would you do?

We all know what we would do. We would fight like hell using every tool at our disposal. We would, using any means necessary, destroy their capacity to steal from us, and we would destroy their capacity to murder the world. This is my definition of bringing down civilization: denying the rich their ability to steal from the poor, and denying the powerful their ability to destroy the planet.

Those who inherit whatever’s left of the world once this culture has been stopped—whether through peak oil, economic collapse, ecological collapse, or the efforts of brave women and men fighting in alliance with the natural world—are going to judge us by the health of the land base, because that’s what’s going to support them, or not. They’re not going to care how we lived our lives. They’re not going to care how hard we tried. They’re not going to care whether we were nice. They’re not going to care whether we were nonviolent or violent. They’re not going to care whether we grieved the murder of the planet. They’re not going to care whether we were enlightened. They’re not going to care what sort of excuses we had to not act (e.g., “I’m too stressed to think about it,” or “It’s too big and scary,” or “I’m too busy,” or “But those in power will kill us if we effectively act against them,” or “If we fight back we run the risk of becoming like they are,” or “But I recycled,” or any of a thousand other excuses we’ve all heard too many times). They’re not going to care how simply we lived. They’re not going to care how pure we were in thought or action. They’re not going to care if we became the change we wished to see. They’re not going to care whether we voted Democrat, Republican, Green, Libertarian, or not at all. They’re not going to care if we wrote really big books about it. They’re not going to care whether we had “compassion” for the CEOs and politicians running this deathly economy. They’re going to care whether they can breathe the air and drink the water. They’re going to care whether the land can support them. We can fantasize all we want about some great turning, and if the people (including the

nonhuman people) can't breathe, it doesn't matter. Nothing matters but that we stop this culture from killing the planet.

It's embarrassing even to have to say this. The land is the source of everything. If you have no planet, you have no economic system, you have no spirituality, you can't even ask how to stop global warming. If you have no planet, nobody can ask any questions at all.

Those who come after—presuming anyone survives—are going to wonder what the fuck was wrong with us that we didn't do whatever it takes—and I mean whatever it takes—to stop industrial capitalism from killing the planet. It is long past time for brave women and men to do whatever it takes to protect this planet—our one and only home—from this culture's final solution. It is long past time we brought the industrial infrastructure down before it kills any more of the planet. It is long past time for us to be the miracle we've all been waiting for.

*This article appears in *Moral Ground: Ethical Action for a Planet in Peril*, edited by Kathleen Moore and Michael Nelson, Trinity University Press, 2010, pp. 60-64.

Commentary on Derrick Jensen Article

Dale Lugenbehl * August 8, 2015

Derrick Jensen's article is astounding in its clarity and in its absolute accuracy in identifying the crucial mindset that blocks our being able to effectively address climate change: As long as we are asking **"How can we stop global warming, without significantly changing our lifestyle?"** we will NEVER be successful in halting climate change. Annie Leonard, in the short video *The Story of Solutions* (available on-line from www.storyofstuff.com), identifies the same issue. It will never be enough to attempt to play the old game in some new way—the old game is flawed and will always produce the same devastating results. We must change the game itself.

The Occupy movement is attempting to speak to the issues Jensen raises: this movement is in opposition to corporatism, the participants are acting from outside the system, and the people come from all over the political spectrum (It is nonpartisan.). It is also not funded by large, outside entities.

As Jensen points out, industrial capitalism is central to keeping the problems going. But replacing capitalism with socialism, in and of itself will not solve these problems, either. There are numerous socialist governments on the planet today, and almost all of them are behaving toward the earth in exactly the same way as the United States (though perhaps on a somewhat smaller scale).

People want to solve problems *without* changing their lifestyle—regardless of the political system. As Dick Cheney, Vice President under George Bush, once said, "Our lifestyle is nonnegotiable," meaning, we *have to* have it. Helen Caldicott, in *If You Love This Planet*, put it this way back in 1992.

“We have become addicted to our way of life and to our way of thinking. We must drive cars, use our clothes dryers, smoke our cigarettes, drink our alcohol, [eat our meat and dairy], earn a profit, look good, behave in a socially acceptable fashion, and never speak out of turn or speak the truth, for fear of rejection.”

And like all addicts, we *will do almost anything to satisfy our addiction*: turn off our minds, ruin our health, ruin the planet, ruin the lives of other people in less developed countries, ruin the lives of future generations, and ruin our planet home.

So, yes, we must change our political economic system, but we must also act at the personal level. *We absolutely must give up the idea of finding a solution to climate change without changing our lifestyle*. Change begins when a small number of people begin to DO something different. We do not need to change the political system to eat low on the food chain, cut our personal consumption, and opt out of mainstream American lifestyle. People have done this and are continuing to do it. The movie *McFarland USA* presents a useful metaphor here: people voluntarily choosing to have less of the “American Dream” in order to have meaningful work, personal connection, and be part of a community and culture that makes some kind of sense.

Each of us must ask ourselves a crucial question: *“What am I personally doing that is helping to keep this whole dysfunctional process going?”* We must give up the idea that we can solve environmental/climate problems and still maintain our present lifestyle *because* it is the prevalent lifestyle in this country that is *causing* the problems. As Derrick Jensen has said: You choose. Do you want to hang your laundry on a drying rack or do you want a devastated planet? Do you want to drive your car as much as you want or do you want a livable temperature? Do you want to eat a plant-based diet or do you want to live in a world of consistently violent weather events? You choose.