

On Society

vol. 2: America These Days

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Volume 2: America These Days

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Ending the Age of Gaslightenment

Watching the brutal season finale of America's war games in Afghanistan, I find myself heartbroken, but unsurprised. Of course our nation-building project "failed." Democracy was never why we went into Afghanistan — that was just a pretense to make a deliberately-endless resource war sound palatable. "Freedom isn't free," we said; that's why we went to war. We were there to "spread democracy." Now all the lies lie out, exposed. The American Empire has no clothes.

Back on the home front, we fight each other over face masks while thousands more people die every week. Fascists and anti-fascists shoot it out in the streets of Portland while whole towns are wiped out in fires and floods. America today is torn, tense, distrusting of everyone and angry all the time. All across the country, I see a whole population hyper-vigilant, disoriented and sick.

But I look at our media, our economy and our political structures and I think, *what did we expect to happen?* America's symptoms are not medical anomalies. These are the symptoms of trauma. We're acting traumatized because we are traumatized, reacting to generations of unrelenting psychological abuse. Our flashes of anger and entrenched anxiety, our pervasive distrust and inability to agree on what the facts even are, let alone what they mean — these are the hallmarks of prolonged gaslighting.

Gaslighting is a strategy of psychological manipulation and abuse focused on making someone question their reality so that they become disoriented and pliable. The term comes from the 1944 film *Gaslight* in which a husband consistently lies about reality in order to convince his wife that she's insane, so he can control and steal from her. Interest in the term has exploded over the past decade, with a particularly sharp increase around the 2016 election cycle. These days, you can't swing a cat in a group of Millennials without hitting someone in the middle of venting about being gaslighted by partners or parents, or how we're all gaslighted by the media or politicians.

Common gaslighting tactics include lying about the past or present, denying or ignoring the facts, invalidating someone's emotional experience, questioning someone's sanity, giving false explanations, and projecting responsibility onto others. The government gaslights us about wars and surveillance. Corporations gaslight us about personal responsibility and technocratic "solutions" to climate change. Our culture gaslights us, telling us we're a democracy when plainly, there's nothing democratic going on here.

Looking around the desolation of contemporary America, I see a nation bewildered and struggling to cope. Gone are the days we can believe the propaganda. Now we face a grim present that looks nothing like we were told it would. We medicate our pain with opioids and stimulants, compulsive consumption and digital fantasies. We piece

together scraps of community and shared reality by throwing ourselves into rabid fanaticism. The slow-motion train wreck of Covid misinformation and QAnon hysteria is the outcome of a long-haul, multi-front gaslighting onslaught. We don't know what to believe. Our psyches are broken. All these years of not getting the truth have left us paranoid and delusional.

Welcome to the Age of Gaslightenment.

Though our awareness of the term “gaslighting” took off in the Trump era, the Age of Gaslightenment began long before 2016. Liberals watching Conservatives see the gaslighting in the Trumpism. Conservatives watching Liberals see the gaslighting in our dominant political machine. But it's not just the fake news, misleading official narratives and the lack of trustworthy authority figures we're reacting to. It's not just the big lie of the War on Terror. Our collective psychosis stems from a much deeper dissonance, built into the very core of what defines America.

The United States arose during what's commonly called the “Age of Enlightenment,” a period in the 17th and 18th centuries that gave rise to a sweeping interest in rationality, secularity, personal liberty, equality and evidence-based knowledge. Whereas under Feudalism, kings and aristocrats held power simply because of their birth, the Age of Enlightenment pushed for wealth and

power to be earned. Merchants and business-owners could now become rich and powerful, too. The Age of Enlightenment's value system was a philosophical rebellion against Feudalism's values, replacing the divine right of kings with the morality of reason and personal merit.

From its inception, the U.S. has touted itself as built on Enlightenment values. The Declaration of Independence enshrines ours as a country designed to embody these ideals. Freedom of speech and expression, the separation of Church and state, democracy, equality, and a reasonable government.

We've used our superior values as grounds for global military interventionism, for decades. But then, we look at the facts:

A country that claims to value freedom and equality was built on the enslavement and forced labor of Africans. A country that claims to value personal liberty was built on the genocide of Indigenous nations and theft of their land. A country that claims to value democracy practices such a bastardized form of "representative republicanism" that there's hardly any whiff of collective interest in our politics. A country that claims to value reason and rationality churns out propaganda to fund resource wars. A country that claims to embody democracy is really a global empire. History is full of empires, but never one so fixated on pretending it isn't one.

There's an intense dissonance between what the U.S. claims to embody, and how our state actually behaves at home and abroad — but in order to preserve our image, we must deny the dissonance. We have to gaslight ourselves about the fact that we're gaslighting everybody.

We're so disoriented these days because the veneer is wearing thin. The war's come home. We can't help but recognize now how the dissonance is cooked into our everyday lives. We don't know what to do, because the dissonance runs deeper than we've believe a society can change. Our country, like so many modern "democracies," espouses Enlightenment values while being built on what are essentially feudal institutions, and most people have no idea what truly democratic institutions would be like.

Prisons and police, the mass privatization of resources and land, hereditary wealth, undemocratic economies and a ruler drawn from a small cohort of existing elites— these are the institutions of Feudalism, not the Age of Enlightenment. And yet, we're told that these institutions somehow champion liberty, reason and equality.

We could have institutions that actually embody Enlightenment values, but at present, we have feudal institutions wearing Enlightenment masks. It's like we slapped organic labels on McDonald's without changing the food. Our institutions were not designed to embody our ideals. Pretending does not make it so; it just makes us feel crazy.

Face it: America has never embodied the Age of Enlightenment. Our whole history embodies an Age of Gaslightenment. We've been gaslighted for 250 years. Trumpism just made it inescapably obvious.

Our surge of interest in gaslighting coincides with a sweeping democratization of the media. As more and more people have alternative sources of reporting and commentary through which to view the world, it's grown more obvious that "official" narratives on a variety of topics have long been misleading. Naturally, "unofficial" false narratives abound, and there's a collective confusion about what's even true.

This is why scholars of totalitarianism are so concerned about our current era. In Hannah Arendt's famous works on the subject, she describes how totalitarian regimes are built by eroding the truth. The totalitarian state, along with its entrenched propaganda machine, wage campaigns of lies, fear, confusion and false promises in order to inculcate an entire population into believing whatever their regime claims is true. Totalitarianism works when our own faculties of reason and evidence based-deduction become utterly degraded. It's born, in essence, from gaslighting.

We stand now on the precipice of totalitarianism because we cannot continue straddling two realities. The dissonance between what we've been told, and what's really happening, has grown too obvious. The manipulation has broken us. What's clear now is that the gaslighting has run its course. The psychological damage is

unquestionable. We don't trust our neighbors or our leaders. We don't trust anyone. Collectively, we can't even agree on the facts.

What we have now are two options: we can either succumb to totalitarianism and do away with our Enlightenment values, or we can change our institutions into ones that do embody Enlightenment values. We can practice direct democracy in politics and the economy, allocate ownership according to actual need and use, and craft policies based on evidence, reason and respect for the living world, rather than on fear, bias and supremacy. We can enshrine real equity, rather than pretend to be color-blind while perpetuating a racial caste system. We can rebuild our government and economy on meeting real people's needs, rather than on pursuing arbitrary corporate interests.

We can do it, you know.

Call me optimistic, but I don't think even Trumpism's hijacking of the truth can last much longer. Watching Kabul, watching Texas, watching Ida, watching Covid, I feel resolute in the belief that all dissonance must be resolved eventually. For every big lie, there is a reckoning.

Though the Trumpist movement survives on gaslighting, it arose from a real collective desire for the gaslighting to stop. That desire was sincere, even if it's been coopted by a wannabe dictator and goose-step obedience from the

Republican Party. Trumpism survives because the Democratic Party has not offered a real alternative to the gaslighting, either. No one in power has. No one in power will, because the way we structure power requires gaslighting.

The alternative must come from us — from We the People. If we don't want to succumb to totalitarianism, then we need to build honest institutions that include us all, authentically, in the process of decision-making. We need economies that do embody liberty and fraternity, and public service that really serves the public.

We can't keep passing off gaslighting as Enlightenment. Our stories of democracy, liberty, fraternity, reason and sanity — these don't have to be hollow propaganda. We just have to make our institutions catch up.

Thoughts on Election Day, 2020

Somewhere in the dissonance between the lull of quarantine and the hyperactive news cycle, the sheer farce of vitriolic politics set against the serenity of so many neighbors planting gardens and engaging in mutual aid, the smoke from the fires, the rain from the storms, dates and times meaning less, the hologram of digital communication, and the chronic nausea of watching our governing institutions corrode, this year has been feeling pretty damn surreal.

I say surreal not only in the sense of weird or dreamlike, but in the rising feeling that I'm walking through a Salvador Dali painting: dripping clocks as time and reality melt around me, and less and less ability to take "reality" at face-value.

Ours is an era of objectivity eroding. No longer does the news feel like some safe, stable, soothing voice of Walter Cronkite. The sense many of us lived under that the ground beneath our feet, from elections to institutions to social interactions to the economy, was somehow unshakeable and stable — that sense is resolutely gone. It feels like we're standing on water.

And that's a good thing.

From right to left, no one trusts the media anymore. We doubt our experts, our politicians, our anchors. Literally —

our anchors, those whose job it is to anchor us to the ground of truth beneath the fluctuating ocean of lies and opinions and agendas — those anchors aren't hitting ground. And it's not because the news has gotten "worse." It's because that ground was never there to begin with.

The stability and sense of objectivity we lived in was an illusion all along, and now we are slowly coming to terms with what it means to live in a world without it. Walter Cronkite and the media of old always had an agenda, a perspective, a bias. The thing is — we only really got one agenda, and so that agenda seemed objective. But the business of media has always been about framing our sense of reality, using data and events to tell us stories. There have always been a story and a story-teller in the mix, and even those whose only commitment is to truth can never perceive anything objectively.

In this murky ocean of missing objectivity, we come to understand that everything is a perspective, and it always has been. That our institutions, our social order, our economy and our laws are only as strong as we make them. Our belief in them is all that grounds us to them. Our beliefs are the only ground there is, and beliefs always come from a subjective experience of the world.

To me, it used to feel like chaos, but as time goes on, the chaos feels more like opportunity. I used to long for a return of that sense of stability and truth, some kind of resolutely objective compass to be provided for me so I could measure my own beliefs and actions against it. But

no matter how widely I read or how many facts I take into consideration, I can have no compass but my own. The same goes for you.

Realizing this is a good thing.

In recognizing that there is subjectivity, not objectivity, in every perspective and every action, we come to recognize our power in crafting reality. These beliefs are not fixed. This information is not fixed. These institutions are not etched in stone, and even stone can crumble.

When we release our belief in objectivity, and our fears of the seeming chaos of our systems crumbling, we move closer to truth. The belief we held that our systems of old were stable and resolute was never true. The understanding that everyone is acting from their own subjective experience is true. And as we wade into this new kind of truth, we flow into the recognition that we have so much more power to create the world than we thought we did.

Our systems are melting like Dali's clocks, and this is a good thing. Systems are like currents: patterns of behavior that are perpetuated enough to take on the ability to condition behavior themselves. Systems of governance and law, social codes and interactions, communication and information: these have only ever been conditioning mechanisms. They were only ever as strong as we were conditioned by them.

This lack of foundation at first feels chaotic, and the perception of chaos terrifies the mind. How can it determine how to act without a belief in something fixed to stand on? But rather than ask that question with a tone of incredulous fear, I invite us, each and all, to ask it from a place of wonder and imagination.

How *can* we determine how to act as our belief in objectivity crumbles? What will we do with this newfound realization that our systems, our culture, our institutions, our society and our lives are so much more malleable than we'd thought? What will we do with this recognition of power?

Rather than viewing this moment as the ground falling out from underneath us, we can view it as the walls falling away from around us. Our sense of the possible expands, and we're left in a place of unimaginable power to imagine and create the world as we truly want it.

Whether you believe in "creating your own reality" from a New Age perspective, or simply are understanding that we create the society we live in through our actions and interactions, you cannot deny that we have power to shape our world. How will we shape it? What kind of world do we want? What kind of world do we want, but never believed before was possible to create?

I do not believe that human nature is fundamentally loving and nurturing, and that in the absence of our dominating systems, everyone would just get along in freedom and

harmony. I also do not believe that human nature is fundamentally vicious and competitive, and that the absence of our systems would rain down chaos and violence and brutality.

Rather, I believe that human nature is fundamentally adaptable. I believe it is responsive to its environment and its experiences. My question for you, on this strange November Tuesday, comes from that old adage about wolves: there are two battling within you, one is loving and compassionate, the other, competitive and cruel. Which wolf wins? The one you feed.

And so I invite you not only to imagine a world where your good wolf wins, but also to consider carefully what it looks like to feed it. What does it eat? What kinds of social and political institutions feed your good wolf? What kind of economy? What kinds of relationships? What work does your good wolf do? How does your good wolf talk to its neighbors? What life does your good wolf live?

The erosion of our institutions does not necessarily signal a slide into brutality. It is nothing more or less than the erosion of beliefs that were only ever beliefs to begin with. And with that slipping away of foundation comes the opportunity to recognize our power to build our own foundations, in the ways that serve us and our communities and our lives.

To quote the late Murray Bookchin, "The assumption that what currently exists must necessarily exist is the acid that

corrodes all visionary thinking.” The breakdown of our systems and our societal narratives, and our belief in them as fixed and objective, need not be a time for fear. It can be a time of wonder. A time to build a world that is grounded in the truth: that we are powerful to make this world beautiful, and the things we let stop us are only as powerful as we make them.

The breakdown of our belief in solidity is a chance for consciousness: to build consciously the lives and world we want to live in. The wolves are only as strong as they are fed.

What does your good wolf eat?

America Needs a New Morality

Oh, my fellow Americans, we are having such a complete melt-down. It's not just the government, economy, pandemic and climate collapse that are making us haywire. Those catastrophes were all shaped by the principles that have been guiding our civilization into this mess for centuries.

It's our values that are the real problem.

We've been told we should pull ourselves up by our bootstraps while we turn the other cheek. We've been sold rational self-interest in a world of irrational corporate greed and performative self-flagellation. We've been fed self-help and helplessness in the face of systemic problems, packaged as wokeness that keeps putting us back to sleep. Red pills, black pills, corporate shills and social ills — it's no wonder Gen Z is into nihilistic emo rap and Xanax. At this point, why not just give up on it all and get bad face tattoos?

Face it — America's moral compass is broken. We're not going to change our systems if we don't change the values underneath them.

Our Morals Suck

To boil it all down, we've got two bleak moral camps to choose from.

The first, let's call "competitive individualism." We might blame its ills on Silicon Valley and Reaganism, but it's got its roots much deeper in our history than the Ayn Rand devotees. Corporate expansion, two-party "democracy," military colonization, and even technological innovation are built on one moralization on nature: survival of the fittest is how we evolve, and therefore, competition and domination are good things. We're all out for ourselves. To be good is to be on top. To be self-interested is moral.

The other camp is an equal and opposite reaction, a sort of "passive collectivism." It's based on a different moralization of nature: survival of the species is how we evolve; the individuals are irrelevant. This framework is found both in the more Christian emphasis on self-sacrifice, and the more modern abdication of personal responsibility in the face of systemic problems. Either way, individual will is subservient to collective will. To be on top is bad. To be self-interested is immoral, and personal action is futile.

Stuck in an endless custody battle between these moralities, it seems the kids have chosen nihilism. Nietzsche smiles down on us from nonexistent heaven. Can you blame them? Nihilism seems like the only rational response at this point, but I just can't muster it.

See, like a nihilist, I do agree that all morality is unscientific drivel. I also recognize that just because something is made up doesn't mean it's useless. Morality is very useful. We don't need to get rid of it; we just need one that doesn't suck.

Morality: What Is It Good For?

A collective morality is like a field guide for interpreting social interaction. You could figure out what everything means to you on your own through trial and error, but having a framework for understanding it makes living feel safer and less confusing. Navigating the variables of existence gets a lot simpler when you have set guidelines for how to behave that don't require you to make up a whole new worldview every waking moment.

If we want a morality worth its salt, we need to look at morals as what they really are. No morality can be objective. Moral judgments of "right" or "wrong" are interpretations of the facts, not facts themselves. The quality of a moral framework is not based on whether or not its morals are "true," but on whether or not they help people live well together.

Morals exist to condition behavior. Good collective morals condition behavior that makes our lives more fulfilling and society more harmonious.

Sacrificing others to your own ambition does not make society harmonious; it turns social life into a war. War isn't very harmonious. Sacrificing your own power (or imagining you have none) does not make life more fulfilling; it turns social life into a prison. Feeling imprisoned isn't very fulfilling.

By my calculations, both of these moral frameworks are bad at doing their job. We need a new morality, one that promotes personal well-being and responsibility, without sacrificing collective well-being and responsibility.

Make America a Non-Zero-Sum Game

The hole in both of our existing frameworks is that they're built on an assumption of scarcity. Life is viewed as a zero-sum game: either others are sacrificed for your own gain, or you are sacrificed to theirs. But life is not a zero-sum game, not if we decide it isn't.

If good morals make society harmonious and life fulfilling, then what if we made our top priority the creation of authentic harmony and real fulfillment? To do so, we'd need to decide that our own will and others' wills can be mutually beneficial, and enshrine that as our top priority.

What if we rebuilt social interactions on a morality of mutual aid?

If you've heard the term "mutual aid" before, it's probably been in reference to communities spontaneously working together to help each other through hard times, like the national network Mutual Aid Disaster Relief (MADR). The meaning of mutual aid is right there in the term: *aid* that is *mutual*.

It's the perspective that your best interests and my best interests are not in conflict. MADR's slogan is "solidarity, not charity," the idea being that helping our neighbors in times of disaster is not generous self-sacrifice, but a recognition of the truth of our interdependence: your survival and well-being are in direct relationship to mine. You having your needs met is good for me, and me having my needs met is good for you.

If you're used to seeing the world as a competition, this concept might be counterintuitive, so let me be clear: mutual aid not some sort of dewy-eyed idealistic fantasy. It's basic rationality.

Why Mutual Aid is Basic Rationality

It's a common misconception that having power over others is what keeps you safe. It's not. Power over others can't keep you safe always or indefinitely, and it only works at all if you have a whole, whole lot of it. You almost certainly don't have that much power and never will. So what are you to do? Well, you look for a new means of

forging safety and fulfillment *with* others. You help others meet their needs, seek help in meeting your own, and build social structures on the reality that the better all of our lives are, the less likely we are to hurt each other.

We live our best lives when everyone's needs are met. All needs. Our emotional and mental needs are plainly just as important to collective flourishing as our physical needs. If emotional needs weren't just as integral to our collective survival as physical needs, no one would ever commit suicide, abuse their partners, or drown their pain in heroin. Whether our own or someone else's, trauma kills, too.

Because mutual aid is about meeting our needs together, it requires us to pay attention to what's in our actual best interest, to ask ourselves *why* we want what we want. It also pushes us to have good boundaries. If you operate from a value of mutual aid, then if something is authentically bad for you, it can't be good for others.

Mutual aid conditions us to be honest with ourselves and creative about solutions. It encourages authenticity, health, imagination and compassion. We have to get real about what we really need, and a whole lot of the competition in our lives is over things we don't need.

Artificial Scarcity vs. Our Real Best Interest

Say, for example, that it's Black Friday and you and I both want that discount 72" TV at Best Buy. There's only one TV left, so clearly, it's time for the Hunger Games. The resource is scarce, the game is zero-sum, and we can't act in mutual aid... or can we? If we get creative, there are all kinds of solutions.

Do we live in the same building or neighborhood? We could put the TV in a communal space and both enjoy it. If we don't, or if you really don't want to share, I could pause and ask myself why I even want that TV. Is having it really going to contribute to my well-being? Perhaps I have a reality TV addiction that's detrimental to my mental health, and getting a new TV would actually harm me. I mean, am I really going to suffer without it? Probably not. You can have it. I can go play outside, neither one of us has to die in the Hunger Games, and I haven't sacrificed a thing.

Was that dissatisfying? Probably, because you've been conditioned to think that buying a TV is more in your interest than having a good relationship with your fellow community-members. Or, you mistake what you're currently fixated on getting for what you actually need. Lots of people think what they need most are fentanyl-laced heroin and a bad face tattoo. Do you think that's really what's in their best interest in the long run? Is mindless compulsion about your whims really in yours?

This doesn't just apply to trite examples like TVs, either. Learning how to get creative enough to act in mutual aid when more important resources are scarce is

crucial to humanity's survival in the climate collapse. I don't need a TV, but I do need clean drinking water.

How will we manage our water resources when Lake Mead gets any lower than it already has? Rather than sacrifice the entire population of Arizona to the drought, we can instead refocus on what we really need: drinking water, irrigated farms, and to not be murdering each other. We can build our ownership and distribution structures on what actually meets everyone's needs. Nestlé hoarding water to bottle and sell for profit and is not in our collective best interest.

The point is: mutual aid is not only a rational way out of our moral crisis. It's our best hope for collective survival.

Think about the implications of enshrining this as our top moral value. What happens to the housing crisis if our most important value is mutual aid? What economic system comes out of acting in mutual aid? What political system? How does mutual aid deepen what democracy means? What would the climate crisis look like five years from now if we each, right now, began enshrining mutual aid in our own actions and teaching it to our communities?

How? We Just Decide To.

Each of us can't change the collective morality on our own. We can start the process by changing our own behavior now, and use our voice in the collective to advocate for

structural changes that make mutual aid easier. Enough with personal impotence; it's never been the whole truth.

How do we make mutual aid our collective morality? We just decide to. We start with ourselves, where we can, and we take every opportunity to spread the value further.

If you want to start practicing mutual aid, then start. Don't make decisions for yourself without the needs of others in mind. Get real with yourself about what you really need, and what you could give up without really sacrificing a thing. Create opportunities for mutual aid with your community — sharing tools, vehicles, food, gardens, information. Center conviviality in all that you do, and make your political and economic decisions from that place.

We let fearful thoughts and irrational impulses talk us out of good decisions all the time. "*But what if...?*" we wonder, and we build up arsenals of physical and emotional defenses against the *what if*'s we made up. We focus on what others might do later, rather than on what we can do now. It's unsurprising, given the morals we've got. Morals condition our behavior. The morals we have now condition paranoia and powerlessness in our behavior, rather than creativity and cooperation.

Your job is not to decide if others will act in mutual aid. It's to decide that *you* will.

We said a good morality helps make life harmonious. A harmonious society is one in which everyone's needs are met, and no society that lets needs go unmet can

ultimately be peaceful. Harmonious relationships are equitable, authentic, and inclusive of each other's best interest. Happy people aren't at war with themselves.

I don't believe human nature is fundamentally good. I don't believe it's fundamentally bad, either. I believe it's just nature, and nature adapts to its conditioning. If we want to change the world, we have to change how we condition ourselves and each other.

We aren't going to change our systems if we don't change the values they're built on. Look around you — the options we've grown used to are morally bankrupt, and neither one can prepare us to handle the coming decades. Passivity and self-sacrifice lead to destruction, and cut-throat competition leads to destruction. Acting in authentic mutual aid, and prioritizing that as our highest-held value, leads to creativity and collective flourishing.

Build Back Antifragile

The other day, a teacher friend of mine told me her opinion of *Ragnarök* had recently changed. She'd always hated teaching it — so much violence and destruction and helplessness, it wasn't the kind of story children already traumatized by modernity needed any more of. But these days, amid apocalyptic levels of personal and collective destruction, she'd changed her tune. At the end of *Ragnarök*, the world is reborn anew, though no one enduring the destruction of the planet would know that ahead of time. Maybe that lesson is what we need.

This is the way the world turns: light gives way to dark, dark gives way to light. It all ends. Our joyful moments give way to grief, and our grief gives way to laughter. The fear we feel at the impermanence of joy is the same relief we feel at the impermanence of pain. As I watch the only home I have ignite its annual cycle of burning down again, I begin to understand.

Death and destruction are inevitable parts of life and creation. The latter is impossible without the former. Birth causes death, but as *Ragnarök* would have us remember, that death causes rebirth. Pain causes joy, ugliness causes beauty, and devastation causes regeneration. As we stand upon the precipice of extinction, what I want for humanity is less a revolution than a renaissance.

These days, we hear a lot about resilience. The idea is that, amid changing and worsening climate conditions, we need to build personal and collective systems to weather disasters and respond to them without our communities ripping apart in the process. I'd imagine that, like myself, most people associate the term "resilient" with a kind of robustness, an ability to endure unchanged through a period of hardship. I think a more helpful term for what we need right now is "antifragility."

The term "antifragile" was coined by Lebanese-American statistician Nassim Nicholas Taleb, best known for predicting the 2008 financial crash and writing a series of books about how we can't really predict anything. By his definition, antifragility is the true opposite of fragility: rather than crumble at shock, rather than remain the same, an antifragile thing strengthens in response. It improves. It becomes more of itself, better at being itself, more actualized in its ideal form.

Look at us, wading through this perpetual Groundhog Day of the Covid pandemic, wondering if it's ever over yet. The West burns again, the East floods again. Democracy and solidarity crumble around the world. It gets harder for anyone to live anywhere while billionaires launch themselves into space and, for some reason, come back. We take preliminary stock of all we have to mourn as the list of losses keeps on growing... shit. I don't know about you, but I don't believe much anything can remain unchanged.

Not only are the disasters here to stay; they are here to change us. We cannot weather them unscathed. What we can do is willingly surrender all they take from us, and let them do their job to make us stronger. Like real resilience, we tend to misunderstand surrender, too. We associate it with defeat when it is anything but. Surrender is the choice to end the fight, using your own will to allow what is happening. In choosing to surrender, we allow ourselves to be antifragile.

Allow me to explain.

We are, in our nature, already antifragile. Look at nature itself: its fundamental action is evolution in response to changing conditions. As it responds to change, it learns, and it transforms to become better-able to weather future changes. Nature is unceasing and unfixed, eternally emerging out of itself as it causes itself to change.

What happens when any population of creatures evolves, as biology teachers and libertarians like to remind us, is a process of natural selection. Some adaptations prove advantageous, some prove disadvantageous; the disadvantageous adaptations die off, and the advantageous adaptations prevail so that we can go on to encounter more transformative hardship.

Of course, the difference between humans in the 2020s and finches in the 1850s is that humans today are being called to evolve in behavioral ways, rather than in biological ones, and behavior can be changed within a

lifetime. Rather than only happening to us through patterns beyond our control, this era of adaptation is something we can choose to do consciously and teach to one another. We also already know how to do it.

Last month, in a group discussion about mutual aid disaster relief, I asked the participants to raise their hands if the worst thing that had ever happened to them was a natural disaster. Not a single hand went up. The point was: the events that really destroy our lives and communities aren't usually fires and floods. So often, they're deaths and diseases, mental illness and addiction, assaults and abuse, arrests and sentences, the loss of housing or a job, accidents and heartbreaks. It is the way the natural disasters help catalyze the personal ones that leads to their destructiveness in our lives. Without the personal disasters that follow, the natural disasters aren't all that destructive.

What causes us to weather personal disasters well is fairly universal: awareness and understanding, the empathy and care of others, good communication and mutual aid, basic competences to handle the detail, the willingness to be flexible and release our attachments, and allowing new options to open up. These are the skills we need to survive, and these are also the skills that disasters cultivate in us. Antifragility comes from learning and teaching, and above all else, from creativity. Out of the destruction, there is creation. Are you beginning to understand, too?

A few days after that discussion, I arrived at the edge of Minnesota's Red Lake River and while a man was beating a

drum in a canoe. On the riverbank above him, bulldozers flattened the land in preparation for a horizontal directional drill that, as I write, is poised to bore under the river to build the Line 3 pipeline.

To my left was a fence, separating two worlds.

On one side of the fence were big, yellow machines and a line of police, paid for in part by the pipeline company, protecting and serving the interests of big oil against the public threat of nonviolent protesters defending sacred land.

On the other side of the fence was a sweat lodge, a garden, a host of signs and paintings, music and laughter, work and play, a family cooking a community meal while a punk pushed his wounded partner around in a wheelbarrow.

On both sides of the fence were human beings, doing the things that human beings do.

Two worlds, side by side, both equally real. To look with rage and powerlessness at the bulldozers is one authentic reaction to have. To look with joy and gratitude at the utopia built alongside it is another authentic reaction to have. To hold the dialectic of the pipeline's reality and the knowledge that this utopia would not be here without it — that is antifragility.

The world turns and the world burns. Babies are born and elders die. Elders are reborn and babies die. None of it is remotely fair, and yet, we yearn for justice. We yearn for paradise. We yearn to actualize the best of ourselves, and

in little ways and big ones, we bring our brightest dreams into reality through the churning of our worst nightmares. We feel joy, distant from the pain, until pain that is worlds away arrives in front of us, is done to us, and then, we learn to respond. This is what life does to itself.

At the end of *Ragnarök*, the world is born anew, but no one suffering through its destruction would know that ahead of time. Stopping the destruction is not an option. Changing the outcome is not an option. Experiencing the rebirth before it comes is not an option. The only option is surrendering to the things that are inevitable, so we can find the choices we do have.

Me, I don't believe much in hope anymore. Hope is the wish that good things will happen in the future. I do believe in faith. Faith is the knowledge that goodness comes again, without me personally knowing how that's going to happen right now. In having faith, we can surrender. In willfully surrendering all that we cannot keep, we let the shocks make us stronger.

None of us alone has the power to decide for the world what it is. All we have is the power to choose how we alone will respond. Rather than wish for the world to be better than it is, we are being called to learn how to use every crack in its perfection as an opportunity to create paradise. In response to its ruin, we breathe new life into it. When in doubt, we do something beautiful. We live our Utopia right now, within the narrow confines of the fences built around us, and we prove that Utopia to be possible.

We practice Utopia, we perform it for each other, teaching as we learn it ourselves. In response to disaster, we cultivate grace, knowing it was disaster that called us to do it.

Surrender to what is beyond our control, so that we learn the power we do have — this is our only real option. This is what it means to be antifragile, for with every new hardship we endure, our power is increased. No other power exists.

Why Privileged Folks Are Just Starting to Realize They Are Powerful

One would think that the steady dissolution of power hierarchy in society would look like the oppressed coming to understand that they are powerful, and the powerful coming to understand that they are dependent. What I see happening, from micro to macro conversations, is rather different.

As power hierarchies dissolve, the narrative of victim vs. villain is collapsing. A new realization of innocence and agency is bubbling up, for each and all of us, as the shackles of fearful domination begin to unlatch. I choose the word “realization” consciously, because it means both “to understand that something is reality” and “to make something reality.” Counterintuitively, it is the oppressed who are realizing that we are not villains, and the oppressors who are realizing that we are not victims.

Those who are used to being blamed for causing pain are deeply stepping into their own innocence, and out of the perception of villainy. I see this most macroscopically in conversations around racism and gender, specifically in the Black Lives Matter and #MeToo movements. It’s starting to take hold in conversations around police and prison abolition, and houselessness as well. Our social order is kept in place through villainizing women, poor people,

people of color, and most especially poor women of color. While I cannot speak for the experience of anyone of color, as a woman I can say that I have long villainized myself for certain traumas, written off my own suffering as imaginary or par-for-the-course.

I see us stepping into our innocence, realizing it by making it real in the world and refusing the mantle of villain. This pain is not our fault. We are not the causers of it, and we deserve no punishment. We are not guilty. We are not villains. We are innocent.

Those who are used to blaming others for causing pain are beginning to step into their own agency, and out of the perception of victimization. I see this macroscopically beginning with some of the rich, and bubbling up in a few pockets of white people and men. I have not seen this process happening as quickly or widespread as the process of the oppressed laying claim to their innocence, but I do feel that it is starting to. Certainly, the victimized language of white supremacists, the misogynistic manosphere and the Trumpist movement are among the most glaring example of those in privilege clinging to their belief in their own victimhood. I truly believe that the cracks in the victimhood façade are too visible now for it to hold much longer.

While I cannot speak for the experience of men, as a white person, a cis person, a straight person, and most of all a person who was raised in financial privilege, I can say that I have long presumed my own innocence. If pain and

suffering were happening to me, I mostly did not blame myself.

I feel myself, and some others of privilege I know, stepping into our own agency. The suffering we encounter may not be our fault, but that does not mean we are powerless. Sometimes, we created pain through lack of awareness or knowledge, which means that once we have knowledge, we must do better now. We have to change, we can change, and changing will actually be good for us. We are not helpless. We are not victims. We are powerful.

We witnessed a prior “attempt” at this process in the humanitarian craze, though a woefully misguided one. From Live Aid to Jeffrey Sacks to every philanthropist on the planet, we’ve seen the privileged try to help lift up the world, but never at the expense of their own position at the top. The oppressed were still villainized, but in a roundabout way through infantilization. The privileged granted a mask of innocence to starving children, but maintained the belief of blaming them for their own pain through racist tropes that the oppressed are simple-minded, backwards, incapable or corrupt.

It seems counterintuitive at first, to realize that those who have long had their power marginalized would be stepping into innocence, and those who have long had their power bloated would be stepping into agency. On closer review, it makes more sense:

When you are oppressed, it must be known that you are powerful, or you would not be oppressed. Your very survival is an act of power. Your continued existence is proof of agency. Your power must therefore be oppressed through a narrative of villainization. In laying claim to the reality of your innocence, you topple the narrative that oppresses you, and your power can be actualized in the world.

When you are oppressing, it must be because you know that you are vulnerable, or you would have no need to defend yourself by keeping others beneath you. Your very position is a testament to your vulnerability. Your continued need to control is proof that you believe you aren't powerful. Your control must therefore be held up by a narrative of victimization. In recognizing the reality of your agency, you start to undo the narrative that oppresses others, and your innocence can become a reality.

While I cannot speak for others, I do wish to explain the shifting landscape of my own experience. What I've found, in the ways I am oppressed, is that I have no need for anyone to tell me that I'm powerful. I already knew that. What I needed was to see the fact that my pain is not my fault, that I did not and do not deserve the suffering I've endured. I need for others to stop treating me like my power is fearful.

What I've found, in the ways I am privileged, is that I have no need for anyone to tell me I'm innocent or good. I already knew that. What I needed was to see was my own

power to bring about love, joy, beauty, and a cessation of suffering. I need to stop treating myself like my innocence precludes me from using my power to build utopia for all of us.

I will not, nor would I ever, ask anyone to stop blaming the privileged for oppression. To cast blame like this is an understandable, and I think necessary, part of realizing innocence.

What I will say is that the opposite of a villain is not a victim, but a guiltless innocent. Our innocence can exist without anyone else being guilty. Nevertheless, trying to force yourself to forgive is to go to war with yourself. Forgiveness can only arise organically, when it is ready to. What I have found in my own experience is that I cannot forgive until I feel free. When I reach freedom, forgiveness is as natural as breathing.

I will also not tell anyone that the privileged are evil. We aren't. However, believing we are powerless has caused us to do evil things, and to fail to do good things. We have continued to let fear dominate our decision-making, and failed or refused to understand the reality of the power we have.

The opposite of a victim is not a villain, but an empowered agent. Those we have oppressed are wholly innocent, and they are also wise, powerful, capable and aware. The world needs not our charity, but our solidarity, and we cannot stand shoulder to shoulder with those we oppressed if we

insist on preserving our privilege. When we take the risk of trusting everyone with the power we have jealously guarded for ourselves, we find there was nothing to fear. If we do not give it freely, it will be taken from us. Only in resisting what is do we find anything fearful; in embracing it, we find quite the opposite.

To move beyond oppression and power hierarchy is to move beyond the narrative of victim and villain altogether, and find the integration of innocence and agency. We have no need for power over one another, not when we have power ourselves that we can use in service of creating a better world with one another.

White America's Shadow Work

Call me naïve, but I truly believe the United States, as an entity, is on a path of transformative healing. That entity is different from the sum total of all the human beings who live in the country, in that the character of “the United States” is still determined by power hierarchies within its society and culture. Because our institutions are still dominated by upper- and middle-class white people, the “needle” of America’s spiritual progress is still pinned to its dominant white mainstream. That’s why, at the moment, the conceptual entity we call the United States can’t awaken without middle-of-the-road white Americans awakening.

That was a wordy way of saying: the American status quo is still set by rich white people, so in eyeing the future of America’s spiritual awakening, the status quo won’t change much until rich white people do.

In the new age world, there’s a very in-vogue concept called “shadow work.” Shadow work is the process of recognizing and reckoning with the parts of yourself you have not previously faced: your unconscious self, your repressed self, and the aspects of your behavior you’ve turned a blind eye to in the past. In becoming conscious of them, you bring your shadow aspects into the light and can begin to consciously transform the behaviors and patterns that no longer serve the person you’re becoming.

As anyone who has engaged in shadow work, whether or not you call it by that name, knows — it's a very painful process. Shadow work requires deeply looking at everything you've been too ashamed and afraid to see, accepting the reality that all of those aspects of you are there, and deciding consciously what to do with them.

Last year, we bore witness to the beginnings of the white American mainstream truly recognizing and reckoning with systemic anti-Black racism and the legacies of slavery and racial segregation. Some white people, and far more people of color, had of course been reckoning with these realities long before May of 2020, and many white Americans have yet to heed the call. All the same, something changed in last year's uprisings. It was like that needle of the dominant collective psyche had noticeably moved, and the white American mainstream actually started thinking about white supremacy. Yes, there remain pandering and lip service, reactionaries, and denialism, but I still believe something profound has shifted. In beginning to really confront its own anti-Black racist shadow, white America has begun to learn that as painful as its collective shadow work can be, the healing it foment is worth it.

I was fortunate enough to be born in an era when the dominant mainstream had already made significant strides in its reckoning with sexism, and as I grew up, I witnessed a collective reckoning with homophobia. Transphobia and gender in general, we're still working on, but my (again, perhaps naïve) estimation is that what we're currently

seeing are hold-out reactionaries against collective progress, rather than total collective regression, when it comes to trans liberation. There are plenty more steps in all of these paths, but looking at our history, we can see how far we've come.

Watching the dominant mainstream engage with sexism and patriarchy, it becomes obvious that America's consciousness does its shadow work exactly like any individual consciousness does. The layers are peeled back, slowly and painfully, like a great emotional onion. The obvious, outer layers are tackled first (say, women's suffrage). We rejoice in the progress, and then we face the next layer (say, women's equality in education and the workplace). Then, we are confronted with further and further layers (say, reproductive rights, family and relationship dynamics, sexual liberation, rape culture), each layer growing subtler and closer to the emotional core, forcing a deeper and deeper reckoning with the conditioned beliefs upon which we'd all been building our lives. As the layers are peeled away, more people and behavior are subsumed into the reigning mainstream (for example, compare how radical the queer liberation struggle was in the '80s to the current social position of Pete Buttigieg.)

As anyone who's done shadow work, or gone through long-term therapy, is intimately aware, you don't really get to choose when you're going to reckon with what. The circumstances of your life require you to face certain

aspects of yourself, and your own readiness determines how long you spend stuck on any given layer, repeating any pattern with unconsciousness. With each aspect of the shadow you face, you tend to rejoice in your progress, until it becomes apparent how much more there is to become conscious of, heal and transmute.

As the process wears on, you tackle aspects of your shadow that sit closer and closer to the core beliefs on which you've built your entire life and worldview. You get closer to striking at the root. As you go, you get more practiced at peeling back your emotional onion, but the courage required to face each new layer increases as your work gets closer to your core. Then, the work becomes less about brute force than deep learning, and with each new layer, you're called to look at yourself in ever more uncomfortable ways. You grow more skilled, but also more scared, at uncovering the truth.

When it comes to the United States' dominant mainstream, really reckoning with how our entire empire was built on the subjugation and enslavement of Black people is almost as close to the core as it gets. The backlash to critical race theory is understandable from a perspective of shadow work — critical race theory is deeply threatening to the aspects of white America that wish to keep their unconscious shadow in the shadow and continue on in the daydream of meritocracy. The emotional work that critical race theory calls on us to do is profoundly uncomfortable.

It's close to the core of the beliefs upon which we've built our lives.

But I think there is a deeper layer to our shadow than anti-Black racism, and that layer is colonization and the genocide of the indigenous peoples of Turtle Island.

I say this layer is "deeper" not to compare traumas or systemic oppressions, but to place these layers in relationship to the core beliefs upon which the United States has built its identity. Even more threatening to our core beliefs than the reality that the totality of white American culture was built on Black subjugation, even more, threatening than the tenets of critical race theory, is the reality that this land is not our land. Even more, threatening to the material and psychological power of our institutions is the reality that flourishing civilizations existed in this land long before the Mayflower, and that they flourished here until very, very recently. What we've built here is not only a lie; it's a very recent and random one.

To really reckon with the truth of ourselves, we'd be forced to reckon not just with the fact that this country was built on genocide and that the claims the American project makes to any moral high ground are blatant lies. We'd be forced to reckon with how unnatural, arbitrary and fleeting our entire civilization is. It's a lot to take that our society is racist and morally bankrupt. It's, even more, to take that it's impermanent and imaginary.

This is work we desperately need to be doing. To have any consciousness in the systems and society we build, we must understand that our current systems are completely made-up, rather than resolute and immutable conditions of reality. In recognizing this, we stand a chance at building better ones.

If America wants to heal, then we must deeply and wholly be willing to confront colonization. Of course, when we do, we'll be calling into question everything we think we know about ourselves. This is nothing to fear. The healing that comes from facing the truth is wholly and completely worth the fear and shame of the shadow work process.

The fear is always a hologram. As soon as we fully look at the truth, we realize there was nothing to fear. We see reality, and we are transformed by seeing it. That's that. The only things we sacrifice are the beliefs and behaviors that were poisoning us. As the layers of our trauma dissolve, we're left with so much more space to grow, to cultivate beauty and sacredness.

And so, I await with eager anticipation, the day we see the white American mainstream face colonization the way it's been facing patriarchy. As deeply threatening as this may seem to the institutions we have now, what we all know from our own healing journeys is this: in sacrificing fearful lies, we are free to embody beautiful and loving truths. I don't know when this reckoning will begin in earnest; these things can never be predicted. I do know that it's coming, and it's coming soon.

We live on stolen land. Her rightful caretakers have knowledge and systems so much more rooted here than the flimsy society we know now. The cultures and practices of native people have endured and continued to flourish through every attempt to stamp them out, all across the world. The institutions of the United States are very new, built on lies, and their power is imaginary. Collectively digesting that is going to be even more painful and terrifying to the dominant mainstream than the reckonings we've seen thus far. It will be our undoing, but that undoing will set us free.

The fear we feel in the face of the truth is only ever fear of a phantom. The only things we'll have to sacrifice are the lies that poison us. As their saccharine siren calls dissolve, we'll be left with the real satisfaction that comes with healing, and we might stand a chance at learning and relearning the ways of being we need for survival.

This Land Ain't My Land

The day I really knew that property was theft was a Thursday in August just like this, three years ago. The guy who'd brought me hitchhiking was getting on my nerves, but he knew the way to the anarchist camp-out and I didn't know a damn thing. We met a couple of Irish backpackers who'd wandered down from Montreal — just saw them across the road. Backpacks? Backpacks. We were instant friends. When the storm started, the four of us huddled in the alcove of a closed bookshop, and the pizza parlor next door asked us if we wanted their leftovers. We did.

There in that alcove, I found God or something like it. Damp cigarettes and pizza, hobo songs playing in my head. I was young and free and giddy as a raccoon on trash day because the world was taking care of me all on its own. It was all so simple: a dry place in a storm, unexpected food and friends. What we need is humble and not so hard to find.

I saw truth shine in through the cracks in my conditioning. There is no scarcity; we made it up. There's space for one and all. There's a benevolence in the world when you let it in past your fear. We came from this world and we belong to it. As we care for it, it cares for us.

A cop rolled slowly by, eyed us out the window, and the truth burst back into this everyday nightmare. Where just

before, I'd known the truth, now the truth seemed so hard to believe.

Property is theft, the anarchist slogan goes. I said it, I meant it, but I didn't really know it. "Private property is theft from the commons," I'd explain, but I didn't understand. And then I did. Because that alcove was not ours by right, and that pizza slice was charity, and the highways aren't for walking and Vermont is not my home. Because at any point, our tiny Utopia could have been swept away with the dust if that cop had stopped and asked what we were doing. If we'd had darker skin, he would've, and that would have been that.

All those laws and rules mean nothing to the world, and the world means nothing to them. The world that was so eager to take care of us, that wanted to be ours — it wasn't ours, not according to the law. Though in that moment the land knew that it belonged to us, by law it was someone else's property.

Around the world, there are few scraps left of what really feels like public space. In Spain, you have the plazas. In London, all the parks. They're still patrolled and regulated, but at least they feel a little bit free. When I traveled in Morocco, it felt so familiar and yet so foreign that, at edge of town, there was just land. I hiked up past a mosque outside Chefchaouen to a valley of boulders and sat on one. No buildings, no fences. A goatherd passed with what could only be measured as twelve consecutive minutes of

goats. If that land belonged to anyone, they weren't eyeing me there.

It wasn't so long ago that I remember bits of that here, too. There was wilderness near my childhood home in San Diego, places where the property would end and the land would begin. You could just be. Now, finding anywhere to just be in California is like squeezing yourself into an overfilled subway car. Campsites cost more than a night's rent. No overnight parking. The 101 is lined with fences. It all belongs to someone else and not to you. Why? Because that guy bought it from some guy who bought it from some guy who committed genocide. That's how it works.

It's insanity.

In recasting living, conscious Earth as private property, we've replaced life with cancer. This is not life. There's an order to the world, and this ain't it. Life works according to mutual care: we care for the land, and she cares for us. Clear cutting and mono-cropping, sub-developments and pipelines — these aren't good business; they're malignant tumors.

It's not that nature has no ownership or respects no individual's relationship with land. It's that private property, as we have it now, is an insane bastardization of ownership. There's a common misconception that private property means "anything not owned by the government." It doesn't. International waters are not private property. Outer space is not private property (yet). Your house might

be your private property, if you own it, or it might be owned by a development corporation headquartered in another city along with half your neighborhood.

There is a difference we all need to learn between private property and personal property. Personal property is what you use every day, what you own by living in deep relationship with it. A dog can recognize personal property — it knows the house it belongs to. Birds build nests for their chicks. Birds do not tear down trees to build fifty nests and rent them out to other birds for profit. That would be a gross, unnatural theft from the Earth.

I know you're not stupid enough to think that the only alternative to a world of private property is Soviet-style state ownership. I know you've read your history. You know that nonsense property laws like ours are brand new to the world, and their reign will be short-lived. It was not so long ago that our relationship with the land was nothing like this. You know it won't last like this for long.

See, property is only as private as our laws are obeyed. When the stakes get too high, they'll be broken. I watch water protectors chain themselves to Line 3 drilling equipment in Minnesota, and moms occupy an empty house in Oakland, and I have hope not all is lost. Perhaps we'll give up this insanity in time, but it's going to take all of us to do it. We're going to need you, too.

A continent of land from sea to shining sea, and none of us can afford to live on it. We toil away for the privilege of

paying exorbitant rent, or we don't, and we're relegated to tent cities and concentration camps. All the while, houses sit empty behind fences and land that could be a food forest is bulldozed to build more.

Look at this toxin. Look how it's poisoned us, making the truth harder to recognize and lies seem rational. The poison leaks out through our mouths, causing us to call sanity "idealism." But you and I, we know the truth: if we don't want to die a painful death, the time to commit to our ideals is right now.

Someday, the borders will come down. Someday, all the drills will stop. The McMansions will collapse into rubble, and the rivers will run themselves clean once again. The question is: will it happen by our own hand now, or will it happen after we're all dead? Nature will win either way. If we let go now and commit to the change, we won't be fighting against nature, but with her.

It will take remembering the truth, and continuing to excavate it from under the dust of all the lies. See it there between the bars of the cages we built. See how we make it so hard to believe that the truth is true — but it is. Our needs are simple. We know what really matters. Letting go of the rest is not so scary, after all.

Enough with the privatization of property. We need another way to relate to the world, an authentic way, arising out of real need and reciprocal care, not arbitrary ownership for profit.

Privatization is theft from each other, from nature and from the future. Property is theft from the Earth's ability to provide for us. When we make up insane priorities that no one needs, we steal her ability to care for us, and she'll have no choice but to destroy us if we don't change first.

Returning our civilizations to obey her rightful order will take time. It will take restructuring everything, in pockets of political reform and group disassociation, in mass movements and in waves. There will be fights about farmland and housing, about water rights and lumber. We're in for a dark and bloody night, no matter what. But the sun will rise again, someday, and when it does, it will not rise on a world of private property. That is not in question. The question is whether or not we'll be alive to see it.

There are instructions for how to change now, in your community, workplace, city, country — from housing to courts, from farming to water, from energy to education to elections. Those instructions are not the subject of this story, but do start educating yourself on what possibilities there are. Returning to sanity will be difficult, but with collective effort and creativity, it is entirely possible. All it takes is enough of us deciding to do it.

A world without fences is a world without fear, and we've grown accustomed to choosing terror over bravery. Let's choose differently now. Ownership is about reciprocal care, not about contracts or deeds. We belong to the Earth, not her to us. Property is theft, and we must give back the land

that was stolen. We must learn from those who never lost their connection to the land, and pray that working together will do enough.

What do we do? We hitchhike and squat. We rally and fight. We share and caretake. We build zones autonomous and give the land back. We practice traditional ecological knowledge and regenerative farming. We take less. We give more. We fear less. We trust more. We release the addiction to poison and remember what we need.

When we do, we learn that the things we really need are humble, and not so hard to find. There is no scarcity; we made it up. There's space enough here for one and all. We came from the world and we belong to it, still. As we care for it, it cares for us. If we keep trying to dominate it, it will dominate us.

Let truth shine in through the cracks in your conditioning. Please, while there is still time.

Social Change Works. It's Just Slow.

As a formerly die-hard anarchist revolutionary, I find myself with a new outlook these days: I think the revolutionaries are right about everything but the revolution.

We certainly need revolution-level systemic change, but I believe the notion that it's going to come quickly or cathartically is a fantasy. To what do I owe this shift in my thinking? Well, I'd chalk it up to just not being twenty-two anymore. It's not that I've gotten less radical, far from it; it's that in growing more mature myself, I'm more aware of how maturation happens.

If you're lucky in this life, then you've had at least one transformative experience of healing. You've had a time when, say, a limiting belief you inherited from your family released with new experiences, or you've had a trigger or phobia heal into a rational response, or you've shifted your own harmful relationship patterns into more helpful ones. Where before you were unpracticed and reactive to needs beyond your perception, you gained awareness and an ability to respond to your needs more effectively. If you're lucky, you've had the opportunity to grow more conscious.

If you've done this work, in any form, you're well aware that it takes a long time. Yes, you may have moments of epiphany or clarity that feel like an instantaneous shift, but actually implementing the changes those moments call on

you to make, so that even at your worst, you're interfacing with the world differently — that practice takes years.

Increasing consciousness is about both expanding our awareness, which sometimes happens in those blinding-flash leaps, and improving our ability to respond, which almost never does. The integration of our lessons is typically a slow, hiccupping, awkward practice that plays out over years, if not decades. Most of us don't radically expand our consciousness across every vector in our lifetimes, but all of us expand it in some capacity.

Now, think about society. As we gain consciousness on the personal level, so too does society gain consciousness on the collective level. Like each of us, all of us might have collective lightbulb moments when it feels like everything we know has changed — and then, integrating those lessons takes a long, long time. It is happening, but it's happening at a natural, evolutionary pace, over years and generations, not fast enough for anyone to feel safe or confident that it's happening now.

If you need confirmation that change is happening, stop looking above you and look behind you. Look to the gay rights struggle of the 80's or the feminist struggle of the 70's. Look at the way we so openly masked imperialism as humanitarianism in the 90's, how we're not getting away with that anymore. Look at the way the white American mainstream responded to Black Lives Matter in 2014 versus 2020. Look at our collective class analysis before anyone occupied Wall Street, and look at it now. Look at awareness

and responsiveness to climate change in 2000, and look at it now. Society has changed and it is continuing to change.

And yet, the changes don't seem to be wholly positive. While some things have improved, others have gotten worse. While culture seems to be progressing quickly, the institutions above us are at best not catching up, and at worst, actively regressing. Many conditions are getting worse. Many of us seem to be going haywire.

Some days, it all seems to be backsliding into reactive authoritarianism and irrevocable despair. The truth is that parts of it are, but only parts of it are. This always happens when big changes are happening.

If you need any help understanding this, think about yourself. Look at your own shifting patterns: the more you change, the harder some parts of yourself dig into old habits. The more aware you become that certain behaviors aren't serving you, the more vehemently you defend them. As you grow, there is more contrast between the parts of you that are moving forward and the parts of you that have yet to be unstuck. Only when parts of you are progressing can you notice the parts of you that aren't. Otherwise, all of you would still be stuck back there and this would just be normal.

Now, let's look at society. To be frank, I don't think the fascist yearnings across some corners of America are any worse now than they were under the Bush administration. In fact, I think they're weaker, less insidious, less vicious

and more overt in ways that make them easier to counteract. These days, we know there is such a thing as fake news. In 2001, we just called it the news. What the Trump administration did to our undocumented neighbors is sickening. The Obama administration was no kinder; we just weren't paying as much attention. Global heating has been wreaking havoc on North Africa and Central America for decades. Now that it's come to the Pacific Northwest, those with more power to fix it have less capacity to ignore it. The racist murders of the past decade are horrific. The War in Iraq was worse; it was just further away, where we didn't see it, where we could pass it off as normal.

It's not that I think everything has gotten better since 2003; it hasn't. But I think that American collective consciousness has gotten way more conscious.

Now, think about yourself again. Think about the ways you evolve, and how at your worst, you snap right back into the reactive person you were before. Changing that takes years. Think about your blind spots and how you certainly have some of those. Seeing them takes years. Think about the behavior you still justify, even though others say it's hurting them. Think about the patterns you still justify, even though you know they're hurting you. Think about the changes you've made, and the ones you're not ready to make yet. Think about how far you've come, how long it's taken, and how far you still have to go. Now, think about society again.

Social change is happening, but it is not happening at the rate that awareness changes. It's happening at the rate that behavior changes. From my view, the rate at which our collective patterns change seems to be accelerating, but it still changes glacially compared to a news cycle. The process of shock, rude awakening, digesting and processing, learning and increasing awareness, and cultural and information expansion — these are mental changes. They happen faster than emotional changes. Emotional changes happen faster than behavioral changes. This takes time.

We cannot expect society to change faster than we do.

Watching the world burn, figuratively and literally, it's easy to forget that society is radically evolving. It's easier still to experience emotional suffering because of how slowly things are evolving. Nothing seems to be changing fast enough, which begs the question: fast enough for what? Fast enough to instantaneously eradicate suffering before it is felt? Nothing goes that fast. Fast enough to eradicate suffering within four years? Fast enough to reverse climate change? Fast enough that it doesn't take a leap of faith to trust that anything is changing? Even just fast enough to ensure millions or billions of people don't die painful and brutal deaths in the climate collapse? I doubt it will go fast enough for that, either.

In light of that sickening and sobering probability, it's easy to point the finger of blame. The young punks are too radical, and the old liberals are too milquetoast, the

politicians are too corrupt, and God have mercy on QAnon. In light of it all, it's easy to police ourselves and each other, easy to judge ourselves and each other, easy to fear ourselves and each other. It's easy to hate. Nothing is going fast enough, not to avert catastrophe, and so it must be someone's fault. Someone must be doing social change wrong, and we must be guilty and bad. This emotional process of fear and casting blame for it — this, too, is natural. This can change too. You can take it from me, it changes slowly.

I think, for the world to change, we need anarchists smashing windows and we need liberals criticizing them for it. I think we need corrupt politicians and decent politicians, good cops and bad cops, all challenging us to ask why we have politicians and cops in the first place. I think we need utopian dual power projects and procedural institution reform. I think we need Derek Chauvin in prison while we create transformative justice and expand wellness courts. I think we need safe injection clinics while we heal the collective trauma that's feeding our opioid addiction. I think we even need QAnon forcing a reckoning with how we receive information, we need overt white supremacists causing us to transmute our own internalized white supremacy, and we need pipelines causing us to rise to defend the sacred.

I think we need it all, in order to become more conscious. I think we need coping mechanisms while we build healing mechanisms. I think we need regression so we can commit

to progress. We need tension and release, fear and faith, contrast and solidarity, suffering and the understanding it creates. All the same, I don't think there is anything we can do to stave off catastrophe. It's going to change, and it's going to change at the rate that it changes, and wishing it went faster will not alone make it so.

That's easy for me to say. By so many measures, I'm in just about as little immediate danger of death or bodily suffering as a human on this earth can be these days. Whether that fact makes me more or less able to understand the collective — that judgment is entirely up to you. But while I have your attention, have some unsolicited advice on dealing with the fear that nothing is going fast enough:

Do not expect the world to get better in your lifetime. Live the best life you can while you're here, and work to build a better world for your grandchildren's grandchildren.

It is not changing fast enough, and it is not going to change fast enough. Evolution never does. So while you're in this short and crazy life, play your part in shifting it forward, and don't deny yourself the happiness that comes your way. Drink in every ounce of joy you can find, and fill in every crack you see with seeds you know you'll never watch bloom.

Give up all expectation that you will save the world, or that anything will change "in time." The chances are that it won't, not in time to avoid massive suffering. This is no

excuse not to work your hardest to change everything you can, but it is a very good reason you might want to release your expectations of the outcome.

It is changing, but nothing real changes fast.

My Life Will Be a Net-Negative for the World

Three Americans produce enough carbon emissions to kill one person. Now we know. A study from *Nature Communications* finally calculated what they've dubbed "the mortality cost of carbon," and the numbers are in. 4,434 metric tons of CO₂, roughly the lifetime emissions of 3.5 Americans, will cause one excess death in the world this century. Just by being alive, I will bear one-third of the responsibility for someone's death in the climate collapse.

And that's just my CO₂. I'm sure I'm responsible for at least one disposable face mask and tons of Styrofoam ending up in the ocean, probably choking a family of turtles as we speak. I drive a hybrid, but it's not like lithium mines are good for the planet. I eat meat. I take long showers. I profit indirectly from continued U.S. imperialism.

However I slice it, the footprints of my life come down right on someone else's throat.

I really try to be a good person, but all my best intentions still pave the road to climate Hell. No campsite rules for this generation; we can't help but leave the world worse off than we found it. It isn't our fault — fault isn't a useful way of understanding this — but it makes me question whether the responsible thing to do might just be to off ourselves now.

I remember making a similar argument at our DegrowUS conference in Chicago in 2018. As always seems to happen with the topic of economic degrowth, one of the (white, male) speakers just needed to chime in about the population. “Overpopulation is why we’re using too many resources” is more or less how the argument goes, “so we need to reduce the global population.” It always ends up racist, classist and eugenicist, and it isn’t scientifically accurate.

I asked the speaker why, if he was so worried about overpopulation, he didn’t just kill himself. What made his life more valuable than all the other lives? And where did he get off talking about population reduction when he was a parent? He justified his choices, as we all do. He only had one kid. He was an environmentalist. His life was worth it.

I can shrug off the overpopulation question as an unscientific boogeyman, but now we have the mortality cost of carbon. Now I have to take the question seriously: whose life is worth whose death? The cosmic stock exchange of death for life now has its prices posted in emissions and resource consumption. Is being a good person enough to make my life equal to its cost? The numbers are in. The rest of the world would be better off without me.

Try as I might to be cynical and mathematic, I just can’t look at life as a series of emissions statistics. How can I measure a life like this? What about the things we contribute to building, how we shape the world by being in

it, where we come from and where the future goes because of us? Surely these things matter, too.

Perhaps I'm just trying to justify my own life, but I think every life is justified. The notion that our lives exist in competition with each other is, like the overpopulation question, unscientific. It's what we do with our lives that determines how they impact others, and no human is biologically programmed to pollute. Climate change is a societal flaw, not a human flaw.

We pollute and emit because we live in a culture that indulges productivity and conditions disposability. We pursue excess and produce waste. We must always go faster, get bigger, take more, and as a result, we throw the world dangerously off-balance. We think of resources and not nature, statistics and not people. We think we're separate, and so we think we live in competition.

If we want to heal our culture, and heal the planet with it, we cannot give in to that transactional way of thinking. Treating lives as disposable and worth as transactional are the reasons we're in this mess. By the time I die, my existence will have been a net-negative for the world, but real life is not measured like that.

Any life looked at without context is meaningless. The natural world doesn't make sense of itself in terms of individual lifetimes and the choices made within them. Nature knows itself in ecosystems and interdependent populations, adapting to change over

generations. Learning plays out over eras and ages. A single Galapagos finch means nothing to evolution.

Looking at myself without my context is meaningless, too. These words I write now are in English, and our ability to understand them comes from contexts that stretch far beyond our lifetimes. My mind is a product of my conditioning. My body is a product of human evolutionary conditioning. My hopes and fears, my dreams, my most private thoughts — all these come from outside of me. I am nothing but the sum of everything that isn't me, that which fills the space left for it like a river to a riverbed.

I didn't create me — everything did. My life didn't come from me, nor yours from you.

The worth of our lives cannot be understood by what our bodies do here on this earth. We certainly can't be measured by statistics. Our value lies in care, not in numbers.

We extend far beyond the bounds of our bodies and the time we spend living in them. Why we are how we are reaches infinitely far behind us, and what becomes of what we do reaches far and wide ahead. We carry within us all those who came before. We live on in how we shape everyone we meet, how they shape everyone they meet. Our lives expand in all directions, forwards and backwards, across space and time.

What is a life worth, then? I can't put a number to it. No one can.

The notion of measuring worth based on an immediate return is very new and very unnatural. Nature doesn't think in exchange value — that's why our systems are so toxic to it. Nature holds intrinsic value, and nothing else, and therefore, so do we. Nature doesn't work in profits and losses. It works in cycles and movements, interweaving stories to create a dynamic whole. The isolated thread of my own life is unintelligible to it, like a language it doesn't speak.

My life is not worthy, nor is it worthless. Life doesn't work like that.

By the time I die, my physical existence may have been a net-negative for the climate, but that doesn't tell the whole story. Our legacies on this earth begin after the fact. Our impact is found in the future we contribute to creating. They are meaningless without the lives and legacies of others.

The best we can do, then, is to keep asking what we do for the world, and keep finding more harmonious ways to be in it. We measure ourselves by the love we give, and nothing else. We can't know how we'll shape it, but we can act, like nature, with the future in mind.

I alone can't stop the current I swim in. I alone can't turn it in the opposite direction. All I can do is help to slow it down. I can help people learn how to put their heads above it, how to see themselves in context and choose their role more consciously. I can share every scrap of good I've

learned, again and again, as widely as possible. I can envision what a different current feels like, and start digging out the creeks where it will one day run.

I don't expect to see a better world in my lifetime — I've accepted that. But I don't work for me. I work for the next generations. Life runs like a river. We're all here to build the future, inexorable threads in an infinite pattern.

Nature alone knows what I'm worth to it, but I know that assessing my life based on what I can see myself is narcissism. I don't know why I'm here, but I'm here, so I'm going to be alive as best I can.

Nature sees no fault, no individual value, no exchange. It just learns. It grows, and it learns, evolving out of itself. Here we are within it, growing and learning. This world does not belong to us; we belong to it. It sets our worth, not the other way around.

As the world starts looking bleaker, and the future gets less certain every day, I hope we don't give into thinking of our lives like trading stock. Healing the planet is about far more than reducing CO₂, and impact is about far more than CO₂ emissions. We come from everywhere, and return to everything, as innocent of the cycle as we are integral to it.

Our real worth isn't found in the conditions of our lives, but in how we use our lives to create. Our worth is found in the love we give, in the truth we tell. It lives in the consciousness with which we approach the present, and the future we use it to build.

What if the End is Actually Nigh?

I work in the solar industry now, where climate change is never far from anyone's mind. But I've been thinking about it differently these days.

I like my job. It's a good job. I'm doing work that's genuinely making the world a better place, and it pays pretty well, and the company culture is lovely. But these days, I find myself questioning if it's worth having a job at all. If I could choose anywhere to live, I would not choose Boston. If I could choose anything to do with my time, I would not choose conference calls or grant reporting.

In another world, at a different time, I wouldn't be bothered so much. I wouldn't fixate on the question. I'd work hard, learn the most I could, and when the time came, graduate onto the next job. But I find myself fixating, and fixating, and fixating. This is the world I've got, and the time I've got, and I'm starting to wonder if that time is running out.

The IPCC report was a dire warning, and there are yet others saying the time before total climate catastrophe may be even shorter than twelve years. Looking at the state of politics and economics around the globe, I doubt we'll stave off crisis. We might not stave off catastrophe. Even if we do stave off climate catastrophe, we won't stave off capitalist collapse. We might not stave off fascism, or eco-fascism.

Whatever happens, the time we have left in the culture and social order we've built? It's short.

I think back to a year ago, to that time I went to a Guy McPherson lecture because some cute Deep Green Resistance guy dragged me to it. For Guy McPherson, it's always been the end. First it was peak oil. Now it's methane bubbles in the Arctic, and the global dimming of pollution as the only mitigating factor keeping global temperatures from rising even further, creating an impossible catch-22 of planetary destruction. *(Side note: I asked him what he thought of degrowth, and he totally blew off my question.)*

His advice to us was this: Remain calm; nothing is under control. There is no hope, so live a good life.

But wait! I wanted to say. But degrowth! But options! But we have to try, don't we?

I'm not sure if all of humanity will crumble into an apocalyptic inferno, but I do think all of our societal structures are going to be upended, ripped apart and turned into fertilizer for anything new that arises. The time for our regularly scheduled programming is over. This will be a rolling crisis of immediate necessity and, hopefully, rapid transformation into something that can salvage us, something that doesn't replicate fascist horror.

It's not so much the apocalypse I'm thinking about, but the wrenching pain of a new birth. I do think people will die, and I pray we can institute rapid and far-reaching economic and social changes to mitigate the worst of it in time. I do

think our entire civilizational structure will crumble, and I pray we will sow the seeds of a new order that can bloom in the passing of the flood.

I think the world as we know it will stop being the world as we know it, I think that shift will happen within my lifetime, most likely before I turn 40.

My time is running out. But the thing is, the more dire it gets, the more a strange sense of calm arises within me.

What if *this is it*?

Not necessarily the End of the World, but the End of the World as we know it. Like REM, sometimes I feel fine. I believe this is the end of capitalism, not only capitalism, but all systems based on extraction and exploitation of resources and beings. I believe this is the end of the nation state, not only the nation state, but centralized hierarchy. I do not believe we get to the other side without a massive societal shift, without a complete recalibration of values, and without a personal transformation (if we get there at all.)

But what if we don't get there at all? What would I be doing with my time?

I saw several memes to the effect of, "Given impending climate catastrophe, is it worth bothering to keep paying off my student loans?" I may not be a climate scientist, but I say: No, I think it's time to stop worrying about your student loans.

Student loans will not be weathering the storm of climate catastrophe, this is just about guaranteed. So, fuck it. Don't pay them.

And the strange sense of calm returns: *Fuck it.*

Which brings me to an idea that's been floating around in my head. What if we use the imminent threat of apocalypse to bring about Utopia? What if we use our death sentence to build a new life, even if it doesn't last?

Hear me out.

What if everyone stopped paying back their student loans *because of* impending climate catastrophe? What if we used this moment as a catalyst to make the changes we want to see in society?

We stopped worrying about our pay checks, because we don't have that much time left. We started spending more time with our families instead.

We stopped hyping up the petty dramas of the political class, because we don't have that much time left. We started building mutual aid networks with our neighbors.

We stopped living for our social status, because we don't have that much time left. We started cultivating authentic relationships and being openly vulnerable instead.

What if this impending crisis is an opportunity: a moment to officially stop giving a fuck about everything we had to worry about before? Bringing about the destruction of our

old social order by divesting from it, and investing in a new one.

I'm not looking at it through rose-colored glasses; I still think there are massive changes to make if we're going to save anything of the human population. There are yet more movements to build against fascism, isolationism, colonialism and racism for us to remain morally worthy of saving. There is so much work to do, and yet, I feel I can exhale.

Fuck it. Throw spaghetti at the wall. Live Utopia now.

Radical activism, for so long, has felt like swimming upstream against a current that wanted to move the world in the opposite direction, and all the might and terror of the power accumulated within that current. But if we've only got a decade left before the worst of climate catastrophe wipes out human civilization as we know it, we might as well just do what we want to do. Build our mutual aid networks, hold our direct democratic assemblies, organize cooperatively, respect nature, respect pronouns, and pee wherever the hell we want to. We might as well do nothing but build our Utopia right here and now. We might as well be the change we wish the world had given us. We might as well focus on what really matters: on love, community, connection, nature, empowerment, joy, and freedom.

Not because of hope, but because of despair. Because we may not live to see another day.

I think despair is our most powerful weapon.

I feel there are two paths we can take. The first is fascism, or eco-fascism. It is a path of erecting walls and building fortresses, cordoning off who gets to survive and leaving the rest to die, and using cruelty, force, and malice to brutalize the remainder into submission. Fascism is the path of hope: the hope that there is a way out, for some, but only some, if we keep ourselves safe and starve the rest.

But what of the path of despair? The void of No Tomorrow? If there is no tomorrow, what are we left with?

We are left with Now: with living Utopia right now, because we won't get another chance.

What if we use this impending catastrophe and the void of a future we're left with as a chance to do what we've always dreamed: live in a world of mutual aid, of freedom, of equity, of love, of justice. Not because we're building the future, but because we don't have one, so all we have left is this moment. Right here. Right now.

Because fuck it, that's why. Hang the consequences, because whatever we do, tomorrow might bring so much worse.

If this is it, then let's use that death sentence as a chance to live our last moments beautifully. Maybe, just maybe, living in a new way will help us to weather the storm. Maybe it won't. But either way, however long or short we had, we will have lived.