

Teaching at Twilight

The Meaning of Education in the Age of Collapse

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FOREWORD BY

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The Duty to Inform

If you are involved in higher education, you may want to perform the following thought experiment. Imagine that your institution has decided to develop a long-term strategic plan that will be implemented over the next thirty years. As the first step in the planning process, a task force is appointed whose job is to conduct a thorough and multidisciplinary inquiry into the nature and direction of the most significant trends; based on that inquiry, the task force will produce a report on what the world would look like in the coming decades.

A Thirty-Year Forecast

Some of the smartest and most informed individuals are found in our institutions of higher learning. Not only do they know a lot, but they are also trained and experienced in the art of finding out—or figuring out—what they don't know. Consequently, I am willing to bet that virtually any group of qualified researchers, representing a variety of disciplines, would do an excellent job of describing the world of the near future by looking closely at the current planetary and global trends. It is, of course, impossible to predict the precise details of what might happen in the future, but that doesn't mean that the future is entirely unknowable. In our everyday lives, we make countless decisions based on our sense of the likelihood of different events. The same can be done at a larger scale by examining the most reliable sources of information and by interpreting that information with the help of our most rigorous theories, models, and methods, in order to construct a rough sketch of where the world is headed. It is critical, however, that this task is assigned to a diverse group of scholars, for only a large and multidisciplinary team can be expected to overcome the effects of idiosyncratic views, biases, vested interests, and blind spots.

Suppose the report of the task force says that the world of the near future will be drastically *different* from the world of the last half-century. In fact, it turns out that the world in which your current students are destined to live will not be as rich, comfortable, or pleasant as the world in which you have spent most of your own life. Suppose you learn that society in the near future is going to suffer large-scale interruptions in its normal functioning—political stability will be close to nonexistent, economic growth will come to an end, money will lose its value, riots and looting will become commonplace, the electrical grid will be barely functional, most of the Internet will be offline, manufacturing will be virtually zero, the average life expectancy will take a sharp plunge, and there will be severe shortages of basic necessities such as food, water, fuel, and medicine.¹ Suppose you are told that these won't be temporary problems but long-term trends that will get progressively worse.

Questions to Ask Yourself

What will you do with this information? Will it affect your understanding of the kind of challenges that your students are likely to face during the bulk of their lives? Will it make you think differently about what they need to learn? Will it change your view of the role of education in society? How will it affect your interactions with students? Having acquired this rather alarming information, are you going to keep teaching the same subjects and skills that you have always taught, or are you going to try something different? If your students get their hands on this information, how do you think they will react? What sort of education will they demand? In transforming your own teaching habits, how far outside your comfort zone will you be willing to go? How will your students respond if you refuse to make any changes in what you teach?

In theory, these questions aren't very hard to answer. If you find out that life in the near future will be drastically harder to negotiate than the life that people have experienced so far, then the foolishness of maintaining the

Reflection Break: Please reread the last paragraph, and this time try to imagine that it is not make-believe, that it's all true. Sit with that thought for a few minutes and try to stay present. This time, tune in with your impulses; what does your mind want to do with this information? What, if anything, does your body want to do? Record your reflections in a notebook before proceeding.

1. The scenario is hypothetical but not arbitrary. The time frame (mid-twenty-first century) is an educated guess and may turn out to be too optimistic.

educational status quo will become immediately apparent. Your new awareness will radically transform how you see your own responsibility in relation to your students as well as to society at large. You will find it immoral, and even criminal, to not prepare the younger generation for the challenges that you now know they are going to face. You will realize that you must make fundamental changes in what and how you teach—or learn to deal with the fact that you’re basically living a lie.

How do you want to live in the memories of your students? Twenty or thirty years from now, will your students remember you as an authority figure who—due to negligence, incompetence, or just plain inertia—failed to make them aware of what was coming? Or will they remember you as a conscientious elder who did everything possible to prepare them for the future?

The State of the World

Did you notice that at some point during this thought experiment the scenario switched from imagination to reality? Indeed, the harsh world of the near future I depicted above is not just possible but highly probable. In fact, it may not even be necessary for your institution to assemble a multidisciplinary team of experts to figure out what the world is going to look like in the near future. More than enough insight into this question already exists. Much of the relevant information is scattered in the academic literature of various disciplines, though numerous book-length overviews of particular threats, and of the difficulties involved in mitigating them, are also available.² Needless to say, this literature makes for grim reading and is not recommended for the faint of heart. While we can always explain away any specific danger, it’s hard to contemplate the combined impact of all the ongoing environmental changes and still believe in a bright future for humanity—unless we are willing to embrace some form of denial. There is overwhelming evidence revealing that Business-as-Usual has already caused so much damage to the planet’s life-support system that human civilization cannot stay on its present trajectory for more than a few decades. There really is no scenario in which organized society goes on thriving at the global level while the web of life is collapsing because of the breakdown of natural processes at the planetary level. In fact, the way things are going, the state

of the world is likely to get much worse over the coming years and decades than the relatively mild picture I’ve painted above. Most people alive today will either personally experience, or will be indirectly affected by, increasingly serious societal disruptions.

One definition of reality is that it is regardless of what anyone thinks. If the current trends are such that they make societal breakdowns inevitable, then the validity of that statement doesn’t depend on our knowledge or awareness. It is what it is regardless of what we believe or expect or prefer.

No one likes to receive bad news. Yet, it is better to know than not know. For if we know, we can make better choices than the ones we’re likely to make if we didn’t. If we know what the world of the near future would look like, we can at least take appropriate steps to bring our own lives in alignment with what matters most; we can try to prepare our students—as well as the population more generally—in ways that actually correspond to the challenges that are in store for them. These challenges are already emerging and are going to intensify with the passage of time. Ignoring the signs is not a wise course of action.

The Mainstream Media

I can totally understand if you are still feeling skeptical or unconvinced. Any reasonable person would expect that if civilization were actually falling apart, or even if it were facing a serious threat, then this would be common knowledge. At the very least, it would be a major topic of discussion in the mainstream media, wouldn’t it?

Not necessarily. To begin with, the issues in question are too complex to be adequately communicated by a talking head in a two-minute segment between advertisements. But more importantly, there is a virtual taboo against mentioning the Predicament or its relationship to Business-as-Usual, especially in a way that may cause the audience to sit up and pay attention. We are basically dealing with a “conspiracy of silence,” which is a tacit agreement within a group of people to never mention an embarrassing or uncomfortable truth that everyone already knows or suspects. In a similar fashion, society seems to have agreed to never discuss the Predicament, even though we can all sense that something is not quite right, mostly because publicly acknowledging its reality will have consequences that nobody wants. The mainstream media seems to be following an unwritten rule: *It is okay to mention one impact of the Predicament at a time, but only if this can be done without casting doubt on the legitimacy of Business-as-Usual.*

². Examples include Kolbert, *Sixth Extinction*; Wallace-Wells, *Uninhabitable Earth*; Jamail, *End of Ice*; Lynas, *Our Final Warning*; McGuire, *Hothouse Earth*; Hagens and White, *Reality Blits*; Servigne and Stevens, *How Everything Can Collapse*; Bendell and Read, *Deep Adaptation*; Ophuls, *Apologies to the Grandchildren*; Watkins, *Consciousness of Sheep*.

Consider the climate crisis, for example. The media will inform us that a terrible heatwave is spreading across the country, but this will be covered under “Weather,” lest we realize that it is a sign of an alarming deterioration in the climate system. As Chris Hayes acknowledged on Twitter a few years ago, climate change is “a palpable ratings killer.”³ Responding to a question about his network’s poor climate coverage, the MSNBC anchor meant to say that while he was personally in favor of more climate coverage, there were significant *structural* limits to what could be done. To paraphrase his tweet, the business model of mainstream media is such that it cannot *afford* to expose the audience to the full reality of climate change. Let alone to the entirety of the human Predicament or to the way in which Business-as-Usual is destroying the planet’s life-support system. I suspect that whatever coverage of climate change that the American audience does get is mainly because of the topic’s contentious and partisan nature, which generates controversies worth following. In contrast, the human Predicament, conceived as a whole, cannot be easily monetized or politicized, which is why a sustained discussion of the Predicament on television is impossible at this time. Advertisers won’t support the topic because it would discourage shopping, and politicians won’t mention it because it would expose the absurdity of economic growth, which is their main selling point. Moreover, we shouldn’t forget that corporate media is itself an integral part of Business-as-Usual and is therefore obligated to support its larger narrative.

None of this is to say that *all* journalists are complicit in maintaining the taboo against discussing the Predicament. There is, of course, a large space of mass communication that exists *outside* of the actual broadcasts of network television—thanks to the Internet—where many journalists are doing their part in exploring, investigating, and discussing the truly important topics. Yet, the Internet also creates bubbles of information based on each individual’s interests, which means that if you are not already inclined to learn about an issue, you may never come across news stories relevant to that topic. Moreover, even when newspapers publish important stories or opinion pieces that provide a partial glimpse into our Predicament, these are inevitably surrounded by other stories and other opinions on a variety of other topics, as well as by advertisements. It is then up to the reader to pick out the critical from the mundane and the significant from the frivolous.⁴ All of these factors contribute to the dominance of the official narratives that help legitimize Business-as-Usual.

Since the mainstream media won’t give center stage to this subject, we cannot expect ordinary citizens to show any conscious awareness of the Predicament. But just because the Predicament won’t be televised doesn’t mean that it represents some sort of fake news, or that it’s nothing more than a figment of a few individuals’ paranoid imagination. The truth is that we have all been the victims of gaslighting on a massive scale. Virtually the entire world has been led to believe that, despite a few minor glitches, the onward march of human civilization will continue in the foreseeable future. This illusion is necessary for Business-as-Usual to function. Without a baseline of collective optimism, the population cannot be relied upon to keep calm and carry on.

The Responsibility of Educators

The situation described above can be boiled down to just two components. On the one hand, something hugely significant is going on at both the planetary and the global levels that affects all of us. On the other hand, the number of people who understand the nature and extent of the Predicament and its increasing threat to both Business-as-Usual and human civilization is still rather small. It follows that the overwhelming majority of humankind is disconnected from reality, which makes it ill-prepared to deal with what is coming. But whenever there is a large gap between what people know and what they need to know, society expects that the gap must be closed either by the mass media or by educational institutions, preferably both. Since the major networks either cannot or will not reveal the unvarnished truth, it is really up to conscientious journalists and educators to close this enormous gap. In this respect, educators have the added advantage of having relatively extended access to a mostly captive audience. In addition, they have access to platforms that allow them to directly communicate with their fellow citizens outside of the educational context. I am therefore convinced that educators can play a central role in helping the rest of society come to terms with the Predicament and in preparing the population—particularly the younger generation—to meet the challenges emerging from the unraveling of human civilization.

At the moment, however, there aren’t too many signs that we are doing what needs to be done, or even that we are fully aware of *why* we need to do anything differently. In fact, much of our pedagogical effort is being channeled into serving Business-as-Usual, a point I will discuss later in the book.

To be clear, I am not trying to convey the importance of ecological education, nor am I saying that we aren’t teaching enough about

3. Hayes, “Almost without Exception.”

4. For an extended example of this phenomenon, see Catton, *Bottleneck*, 104–5.

“sustainability”—even though this is true for the educational system as a whole. My point, rather, is that we aren’t preparing our students to deal with the ever-worsening *consequences* of long-term unsustainability. We are not sharing with them the whole truth about the state of the world and the direction in which it is headed. We are keeping them in the dark simply by *not* informing them about the real-world implications of ecological breakdowns.

I also do not mean to imply that the younger generation is completely unaware of what’s happening in the world, mainly because school and college curricula do address ecological issues to some extent, and because formal education is not the only channel through which young people get their information.

As I see it, the problem is twofold. First, our students are picking up bits and pieces about individual issues but they are not getting a comprehensive view of the Predicament. We may teach them about climate change or plastic pollution, but do we also explain to them that these are merely symptoms of a deeper phenomenon? Our students may learn that “solutions” exist in the form of renewable energy or stricter regulations, but do they also understand the serious limitations of these approaches? Do they grasp the relationship between the ecological crisis and economic growth, or between economic growth and debt-based money? Do we share with our students that scientists have often *underestimated* the timing and magnitude of the worse impacts of the climate crisis? Do they know what rising global temperatures mean for their future? If not, then the bigger picture is hidden from them, perhaps because it is also hidden from us.

Second, a growing number of young people are learning—mostly on their own—that the world of the near future will be exceedingly precarious and perilous due to ongoing ecological breakdowns, including climate change. This can be seen in the increasing levels of “eco-anxiety” and “climate depression” among children and young adults. A recent survey of ten thousand youth between the ages of sixteen and twenty-five, from ten different countries, has revealed the extent of this crisis. According to the survey, 75 percent of the respondents agreed with the statement that “the future is frightening.”⁵ The emotional toll of this awareness is already staggering. They feel sad (67 percent), helpless (51 percent), afraid (67 percent), anxious (62 percent), angry (56 percent), and depressed (39 percent).⁶

Do we know how many of our own students are feeling anxious or fearful or depressed about the future? Do our students experience our

classrooms as places where it is safe enough for them to explore their emotional responses to what they’re learning? Do we encourage them to express their fears and frustrations? These same students see us going about our daily routines, teaching our regular subjects, and talking to them about jobs and careers as if everything were perfectly normal. If we continue to follow our habitual ways, it won’t be long before they start seeing us either as untrustworthy or as out-of-touch with reality. In fact, to the extent that our students already know what lies ahead, they are beginning to recognize some of the ways in which society—including its educational domain—has betrayed them.

Given that you and I are part of the system that’s responsible for betraying the young, we have to confront a moral and spiritual crisis of our own...

Key Points

- Human civilization has already started to unravel, a process that will become increasingly destructive in the coming years and decades.
- Insofar as this reality is not widely recognized, no society is prepared to deal with the disruptive changes that are now inevitable.
- The mainstream media cannot or will not inform the masses; the responsibility for doing so now belongs primarily to the educators.
- Educators need to start preparing the population, particularly the younger generation, for the challenges coming our way.

5. Hickman et al., “Climate Anxiety in Children,” e869.

6. Hickman et al., “Climate Anxiety in Children,” e867.