

Existential Risk Holds a Hidden Gift

This weekend I joined tens of thousands of people in a “Grief March”, led by Extinction Rebellion through the middle of London. At the front of the march, the arrival of the eerie “Red Brigade” signalled to shoppers that business as usual was about to be interrupted. Behind the Reds, a dark jazz band with hypnotic bass drums, wailing dirge vocals, and horns playing deep enough to vibrate your pancreas. Behind the band, giant skeletons: dead people, dead rhinos and dead monkeys carried high through the streets. Behind the skeletons, block after block after block of marchers, tens of thousands of people chanting about extinction, rising waters, and climate justice.

It was extraordinary; the only time time I’ve joined a crowd of such numbers gathered expressly for the purpose of grief, strangers united by sorrow for the ecological catastrophe we’re unravelling.

I marched in silence for a couple of hours, feeling the music in my guts and the rain on my face, contemplating my relationship to existential risk. I’ve been dealing with it for over a decade.

I was paying attention back in 2006 when [that UN report](#) sounded the alarm: humans have triggered the sixth mass extinction on Earth. The impact of industrialisation on the biosphere is comparable to the asteroid that killed the dinosaurs. I remember being a young university student at the time, trying to deal with the most extreme cognitive dissonance: we’re enacting catastrophic habitat destruction, and meanwhile I’m supposed to get my degree and find a decent job and keep pushing the status quo enthusiastically. WTF!?

It took me years to make sense of this dilemma. Honestly for most of the next 5 years I was depressed, numb, nihilistic, stoned, and bitter. Luckily I stumbled into the Occupy Wellington site in 2011, and found other people that were willing to talk with me about the risk of social collapse, of mass starvation, of human extinction. It took all that time, 2006 through to 2011, before I admitted out loud for the first time that yeah, I'm terrified that human habitat is at risk, that civilisation is not certain, that the peace and prosperity of the present might not continue far into the future. I don't know how to calculate the probability of those risks, but it's nauseating just to know they are lurking somewhere in the cloud of possibility.

I want to believe that there's some responsible adults somewhere who are making sense of these risks and making appropriate plans. But the older I get, the more childish that fantasy sounds.

When I was on the board of a software company we had a risk register. It's a pretty standard governance tool. It's a table with 4 columns: Risk, Severity, Probability, Mitigation. Like:

- Risk: staff member trips and breaks an arm
- Severity: low
- Probability: low
- Mitigation: keep the floors clear, no other action necessary

We'd review the table periodically to make sure we were thinking about what could go wrong. When you mark the Severity and Probability with a rough score out of 10, you have some guidance for how to prioritise your energy. It doesn't make sense to spend a lot of time and money mitigating minor risks. Essentially, you want to concentrate on the risks that are **highly likely**, or where the impact is **very severe**.

In my imaginary personal risk register there is an entry called Social Collapse and another one called Human Extinction. In my lifetime, are we 20% likely to see

the breakdown of peaceful societies due to overshooting the carrying capacity of our habitat? 2%? 0.0002%? I don't know how high the probability is, but the severity is infinitely bad. Infinity times 0.0002% is still infinity.

So here's the logic that's governed my choices since 2011: if there's a *non-zero likelihood of infinitely severe* harm, then the only strategy that makes sense to me is to put 100% of my energy into mitigation. That's what happened to me after I reckoned with existential risk, I came out the other side with utter commitment to taking whatever action I can to avert collapse. I found purpose on the other side of existential risk.

Personally, I chose to focus on collective action problems: improving group decision-making, decentralising organisational leadership, trying to nudge culture towards a massive up-skilling in collaboration. There are a million other good places to work too: maybe you want to make an ocean-cleaning robot, or protect Indigenous sovereignty, or raise engaged compassionate kids. Choose your own adventure.

But the point is, I only found my purpose, my calling, my passion *after* I allowed myself to genuinely consider the potential threats in my future. First I spent 5 years stuck, feeling terrible, but desperately trying to avoid the feeling, and to avoid looking too weird or too disruptive. Thankfully at Occupy I found people who were willing to sit with me as I went through the emotional process of admitting my deep fear. They helped me through to the other side, to access my deepest source of love and courage.

While I walked with the Grief March I thought, maybe this is the best thing that XR will deliver. Maybe it won't develop into a full scale "eXtinction Rebellion" that brings government to its knees. But it has already created space for tens of thousands of people to reckon with eXistential Risk for the first time, to feel the overwhelming emotion of it, and to find the other people who are willing to face it to-

gether. I'm optimistic: on the other side of the grief, a lot of them will be ready to embrace a purposeful future rooted in love for all life.

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