

Saving Our Children

Dr. Alan K. Betts

On Friday, March 15, images and video flowed in from around the world, Australia, the Pacific, Asia, Europe and Africa, as more than a million students in 120 countries walked out of school to strike for the climate. Thousands of scientists supported them, but the real driver was their realization that global society intends to sacrifice them and their children, along with much of life on Earth, just to protect our consumer society and the profits of the oil companies and other wealthy corporations.

This winter, along with shoveling snow, I have been mulling over how our society's indifference towards the future of our children contrasts with the care we take to protect them in the present. There are days and nights when this fills me with dread. We need to discuss this, even though we would rather avoid it. Consider that there are political and religious campaigns to protect the lives of unborn children, but no similar campaigns to protect the unborn millions that will die in the climate catastrophe that we are creating. How can this be?

Other issues are at stake. The campaign in the present to protect the unborn is a convenient political fit for the disempowerment of women and their centuries-old subjugation by male authority. In contrast, the future deaths of the unborn, and much of creation, is consistent with centuries of exploitation of the Earth by humanity. It is coupled to the concept of human dominance, historically male dominance. This led to a misplaced sense of our power and authority over nature, which developed over the centuries in the western and colonial worlds. It led also to the ruthless suppression of the indigenous peoples, and their deeper understanding of our relation to the Earth's ecosystem.

As science and technology emerged as drivers of our civilization, this frame of human dominance and exploitation of the Earth and all its resources spread further. We became deeply embedded in a consumer society powered by oil, which could be cheerfully marketed as liberating for women, as long as they lived in a rich country.

Now the growth of our consumer society and economic system exploit the poor everywhere, the planet's resources and ecosystems, all to maximize current profit and channel wealth and power upward. Advertising and mass media keep us in line and continually feed us the sacred myths about our entitlement. Oil companies and other polluting industries bribe our politicians. Meanwhile, our time horizons get shorter rather than longer, as they would to match the time-scales of the Earth. The reality is that our global consumer economic system, powered by fossil fuels, is driving the energy imbalance of our planet that in turn is driving climate change. This is a crime against the Earth that will haunt humanity for centuries, and yes, eyes closed, we are sacrificing our children.

A rude awakening is coming because humanity does not control the Earth. This is obvious in every climate-related disaster, whether it be rising seas and hurricanes, floods and storms or droughts and fires. Afterward, we borrow the money and rebuild, but so far, our societies have refused to discuss and confront the consequences of our doctrines of power and exploitation. We can cooperate with each other or smaller scales, but the understanding that we need to collaborate with the Earth on a grand scale has been suppressed by our economic system, which is protected by well-funded propaganda.

Instead, we should listen to Mary Christina Wood and encourage our teenagers to campaign for a new planetary patriotism that transcends national boundaries and give them the resources and training to build a truly sustainable society. They need guidance and massive support, but their future is on the line, and our aging corrupt politicians have failed them. To protect the interests of our children and grandchildren, we must accelerate the transition away from fossil fuels to a much more efficient society, powered at least 80% by renewable energy. That is a morally acceptable use of our excellent technology, whereas destroying our stable climate system is not.

The snow has finally melted, and I have been thinning lettuce and spinach that wintered over under glass and admiring the rhubarb sprouting. The community farm in Pittsford, Vermont, where I live is starting its second year: growing more food locally brings communities together.

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In March 2019, South African youths protest for action against climate change outside Parliament in Cape Town. Photo: Ashraf Hendricks, www.groundup.org.za.