

I Know of No Good Way to Live

Peter Reason

When I first wrote this piece, Jakarta was flooded and monster Typhoon Kammuri was battering the Philippines. Western newspapers were full of pictures of the fires raging in Australia where thousands of people were fleeing and maybe a billion animals had burned to death. A colleague emailed: 'I am spending Xmas with family in the countryside near Canberra which is wreathed in thick smoke from the fires ringing Sydney. The gates of hell are officially open now in Australia. From here on, heaven help us all!'¹ As I revised this, our papers were full of news from frozen Texas. Then we learned that Thwaites — nicknamed the doomsday glacier — is melting faster than scientists thought. By the time you read this, some other unnatural catastrophe may well occupy our attention.

This is the Anthropocene, the epoch when human actions dominate, even overwhelm, the process of the planet.² It is also the Sixth Extinction, in which the loss of life forms is up to 1,000 times the background rate.³ It is easy to focus on carbon emissions and the consequent global heating, but the ecological emergency that confronts the modern world is a rupture in the Earth System as a whole, a rupture whose impact extends to all the major spheres of the planet: air, water, rocks, ice, and living things. The complex array of feedback loops which maintained the stability of Earth within habitable limits through the geological epoch of the Holocene have been thrown out of kilter.⁴

I am seventy-seven years old. As I look back, I see my life has been overshadowed by the gathering ecological catastrophe. I have a childhood memory, strangely both clear and hazy, that was an intimation of things to come. As a small boy in the 1950s I am sitting at the kitchen table turning the pages of a weekly magazine—possibly *Life* or *Picture Post*. I come to a double-page spread featuring a dramatic black and white photo of a filthy smokestack, illustrating an article predicting a future environmental crisis. I ask my mother about it, and her reply lovingly brushes my concerns aside, forbidding even the thought that lies behind the question: 'You don't want to think about that, dear.'

1. Professor Freya Mathews, personal communication December 2019.

2. Steffen, Will, Paul J. Crutzen, and John R McNeill. "The Anthropocene: Are Humans Now Overwhelming the Great Forces of Nature?" *Ambio* 36 (2007): 614-21.

3. Kolbert, Elizabeth. *The Sixth Extinction: An Unnatural History*. London: Bloomsbury, 2014.

4. I have taken the word 'rupture' from Clive Hamilton's *Defiant Earth: The Fate of Humans in the Anthropocene*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2017.

But clearly the notion that life on Earth was precarious lodged in my mind.

Throughout my adult life this early intimation was reinforced: I was just eighteen in 1962 when Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* was published. I recall trying to imagine a mother bird crushing her eggs as she sat to incubate them because the shells were so thin. This was followed by a plethora of warnings: in 1968 by Buckminster Fuller's challenging proposal that we live on 'Spaceship Earth'; in 1972 the Club of Rome's *Limits to Growth* report pointed out the modern economies were on a trajectory leading to overshoot and collapse; in 1987 the Brundtland Report initiated a debate about the possibilities of 'sustainable development'; in the 1990s Al Gore's movie told of *An Inconvenient Truth* of climate change. There were many more. The first United Nations Conference on Environment and Development was held in Rio in 1992. Since then we have been beset by a series of failed international initiatives and increasingly alarming reports from the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change. We now can read almost daily of rapidly melting ice caps, record temperatures, violent storms, the bleaching of coral reefs, loss of life forms, chemical and plastic pollution, all indicating that ecological catastrophe is on us faster than even the pessimists thought.⁵ *Maybe The End of the World has Already Happened*, as philosopher Tim Morton proposes in his BBC Radio 4 broadcast.⁶

Throughout this period, English middle-class society, of which I am firmly a part, moved out of the austerity that followed World War II into the delights of consumer society: the words of Prime Minister Harold MacMillan in 1957, 'You've never had it so good' rang true. My first visit to a sweet shop with my mother when we didn't need ration tokens is clear in my memory. Around 1960 a store called Goods and Chattels opened in London that sold stylish homeware — for a while bright coloured enamel teapots and mugs were all the rage. Habitat was founded in 1964, bringing the fresh Scandinavian style to moderate incomes. Clothing boutiques opened in Soho's Carnaby Street in the 1960s, offering mod and hippie styles. We began to eat better, be more conscious of what we wore, drive modern cars rather than struggle to keep pre-war models on the road, have wine with meals, and holidays abroad. We learned to be consumers. It didn't take long for that novelty to become habit and expectation: we decided that an ever-increasing standard of living was our right. I recall my mother telling me when I bought a high-powered sports car in the late 1960s, 'You deserve it' — and even then, I was not quite sure why.

5. Carson, Rachel. *Silent Spring*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1962. Originally published as 1962; Fuller, Buckminster. *Operating Manual for Spaceship Earth*. 1968; Meadows, Donella, H, Dennis L. Meadows, Jørgen Randers, and William W Behrens. *The Limits to Growth*. New York: Universe Books, 1972; Brundtland, Gro Harlem. *Our Common Future*. Oxford University Press, 1987; Gore, Al. *An Inconvenient Truth: The Planetary Emergency of Global Warming and What We Can Do About It*. Emmaus, PA: Rodale Press, 2006.

6. *The End Of The World Has Already Happened* <<https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/m000cl67>>

Of course, we now see clearly that the growing ecological catastrophe and the consumer revolution are two sides of the same coin. The latter was part of the Great Acceleration, the exponential rise in population, energy use, pollution, and consumption of all kinds that took off in the middle of the Twentieth Century. For many, the Great Acceleration is seen as the start — or if not the start, then the quickening — of the Anthropocene. My life has been an embodiment of this Great Acceleration, characterized by astonishing increases in both material wellbeing and ecological disruption.

As a professor at the University of Bath, I taught and researched ‘sustainable business practice’ — a phrase that now seems laughably archaic. I remember conversations with colleagues back in the 1990s, agreeing, ‘We have another ten years to address this, then it will be too late.’ Yet here we are now, into the third decade of the new millennium, with little really changed. Is it *still* nearly too late, as the latest IPCC report argues? Or has the moment, if indeed it existed, actually slipped from our collective grasp?

These are practical questions about reductions of carbon emissions, about changing patterns of production and consumption, about farming, transport healthcare and much more. But they are also essentially *moral* questions — as writers such as Robert Bringham and Jan Zwicky, and Roy Scranton point out: the ecological emergency forces us to look at human fragility and transience, to recognize that Western global civilization is in its death throes.⁷ This certainly means the end of the dominant culture as we have known it in the West: we have to let go of all the assumptions about identity, freedom, success and progress that we have held so dear. It may even mean the end of human species, along with many other life forms. As Bringham puts in, ‘You, your species, your entire evolutionary family, and your planet will die tomorrow. How do you want to spend today?’ There are no obvious, easily available solutions: we can either cover our heads in denial or commit to living ethically in a broken world. Most of us will probably do a bit of both.

Above all, living ethically means being willing to look squarely at the truth of our situation — while acknowledging the limits of our understanding. It means cultivating capacities of courage, self-control and self-awareness, compassion and justice. As Jan Zwicky points out, these are qualities of the excellent human being through history. It is easy for me to write this: how does it feel to the citizens of Indonesia flooded

7. Bringham, Robert and Jan Zwicky. *Learning to Die: Wisdom in the Age of Climate Crisis*. Saskatchewan: University of Regina Press, 2018; Scranton, Roy. *Learning to Die in the Anthropocene: Reflections on the End of Civilization*. San Francisco, CA: City Light Books, 2015.

from their capital and the Australians fleeing catastrophic fires? But living ethically does not mean we have to get it right all the time: as Bringhurst puts it pithily, you might not save the world, but you can at least save your self-respect.

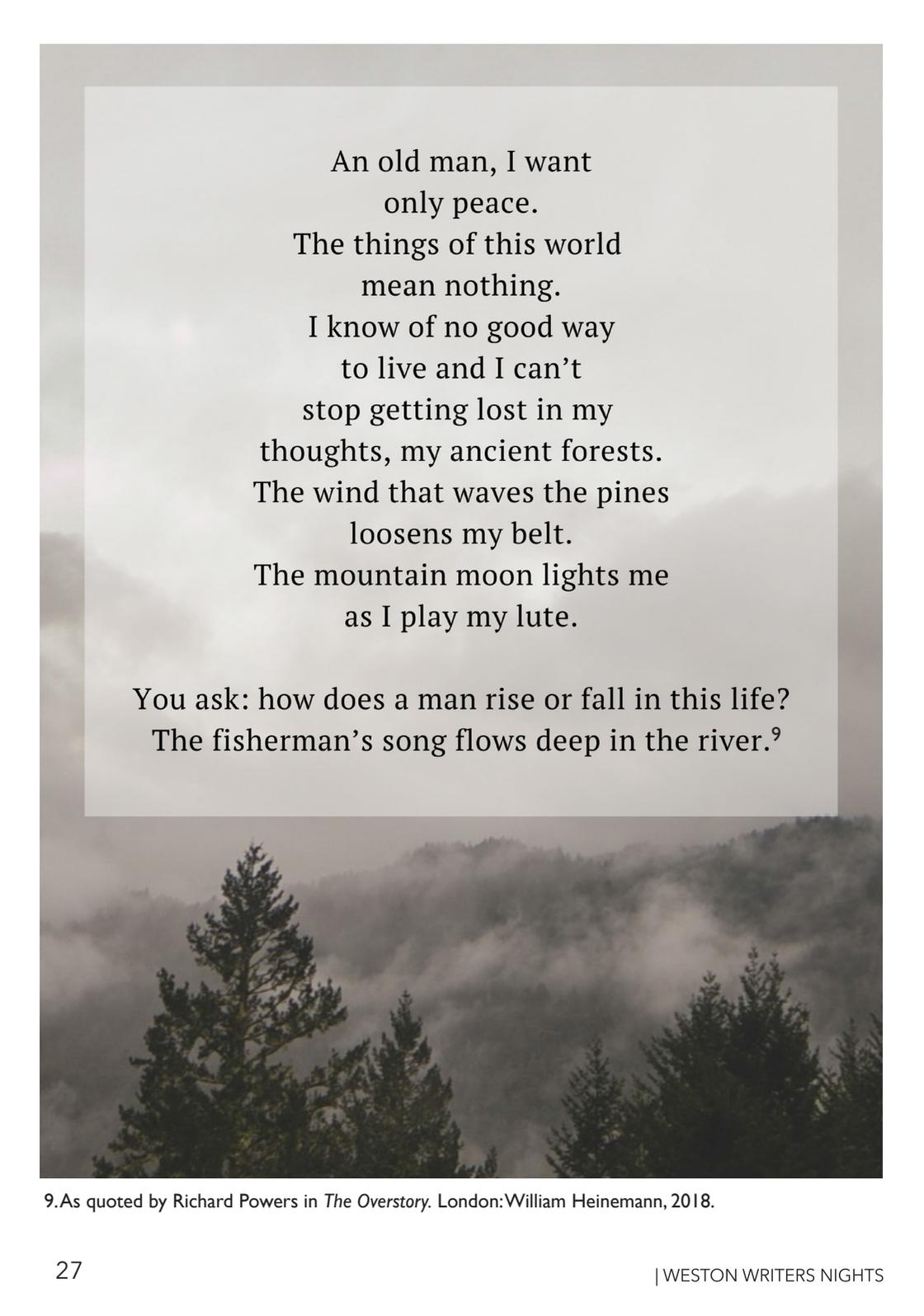
Looking truth in the face also means acknowledging that the ecological crisis is linked with the privileges assumed by patriarchy. Writers of colour are increasingly pointing out that we cannot separate climate change from the exploitations of colonialism and slavery. As African American blogger Mary Heglar puts it, climate change is not just a man-made problem, it is a white-man-made problem. It didn't start with the Industrial Revolution, 'It started with conquest, genocides, slavery, and colonialism. That is the moment when White men's relationship with living things became extractive and disharmonious. Everything was for the taking; everything was for sale.'⁸

As I move inexorably through my eighth decade, looking back I can see how my generation was complicit in the Great Acceleration: as much carbon dioxide has been emitted into the atmosphere in the past thirty years as in the whole history of humanity to that point. We are guilty of missing the evident signs: NASA scientist James Hansen and his colleagues published studies of global temperature rise in the early 1980s; Hansen himself testified to US Congress in 1988 that he was ninety-nine percent certain there was a clear cause and effect relationship between carbon emissions and global warming. His warning was dismissed by Congress and even though much quoted, ignored by liberal *bien pensants*.

While I acknowledge this, at the same time I am angry that these final years of my life are overshadowed by this looming catastrophe. In these late years, I experience a loss of innocence as the reality of our human predicament comes crashing into my protected life. I am forced to acknowledge my own sense of entitlement: after a productive and reasonably worthy life, I want to live my last years in some kind of peace, cultivating my own spiritual and creative capacities, supporting my grandchildren with love.

This evening I felt happy after a productive time writing, working in the garden, meeting friends, and making music. Then I remembered the reality of ecological catastrophe. It brought home to me the truth that the Chinese poet Wang Wei saw in ancient times, 'I know of no good way to live':

8. Mary Annaisé Heglar, *Climate Change Isn't Racist — People Are* (2019) < <https://zora.medium.com/climate-change-isnt-racist-people-are-c586b9380965>.>



An old man, I want
only peace.
The things of this world
mean nothing.
I know of no good way
to live and I can't
stop getting lost in my
thoughts, my ancient forests.
The wind that waves the pines
loosens my belt.
The mountain moon lights me
as I play my lute.

You ask: how does a man rise or fall in this life?
The fisherman's song flows deep in the river.⁹

9.As quoted by Richard Powers in *The Overstory*. London:William Heinemann, 2018.