



How do you fix a predicament?

Once you've looked squarely at the climate science, it's hard not to feel like Sarah Connor in the dream sequence from *Terminator 2*. It's a beautiful day, kids and parents (as well as the younger Sarah) are in a park playing on the swings. With her fingers curled around the wire mesh backstop, she's shouting, trying to warn everyone (including herself) of imminent doom. But everything is just so lovely and normal, and who is this madwoman shouting her crazy thoughts? Then the flash and the fireball, and all is lost.

Many of us are living a quiet, less dramatic, slower-motion version of that dream. Today, for example, it's glorious in New York. I'm biking around the edge of Manhattan. I pause to lie on the grass by the water. Hudson River Park, built on landfill reclaimed from the river, is the picture of tranquility: runners, toddlers, kids playing Frisbee, all framed by blue sky and handsome buildings. I try to imagine the sea wall the city elders will try to build here, before they abandon lower Manhattan—and maybe much of the city—to the chaos of Frankenstorms and rising tides.

Like Cassandra, Sarah Connor had some secret, time-traveling knowledge from the future. Of course, people thought she was mad; of course, no one listened to her. But I'm no such Cassandra. Any news I might bring has already been brought. Thousands of scientific papers. Millions of newspaper column inches. Anyone who cares to pay attention already knows that we've broken Nature, and the world we know will soon end. This park, for one, is done for. This city I love, home to almost nine million, and one of humankind's most extraordinary creations, will, under pressure from extreme weather and system-wide collapse, be wrecked and made uninhabitable by the end of the century.¹⁴ Possibly within my lifetime.¹⁵

Either way, I'm living in a ghost town. The ghosts aren't from the past, though, they're from the future. Why do I see them, and no one else? Actually, I think everyone sees them. We're all inverse-Cassandras: We can secretly see that the world is going to end, but no one wants to say it out loud because then it will really end, and we'll have to take responsibility for killing it, or at least failing to save it. Instead, we nod to our ghosts and carry on.

No one is happy about this. No one thinks this is the right way to live. But we don't know what to do. We don't know how to feel. And so, a part of us falls silent. We play tricks on our soul. We slide into a strange double life, "caught," says eco-philosopher Joanna Macy, (see page 187) "between a sense of impending apocalypse and the fear of acknowledging it." She elaborates:

In this "caught" place our responses are blocked and confused. On one level we maintain a more or less up-beat capacity to carry on as usual...and all the while, underneath, there is this inchoate knowledge that our world could go at any moment. Unless we find ways of acknowledging and integrating that anguished awareness, we repress it; and with that repression we are drained of the energy we need for action.¹⁶

Millions of us are caught in this place. Who wants to dwell on such terrible news? Who wants to be the radioactive person at the party? Who wants to open themselves to all the grief waiting for us? So we don't. And this elaborate act of self-misdirection has many an accomplice:

- Governments that can't bring themselves to announce the news like the existential emergency it actually is.
- The niceties of everyday life which shun the grief-struck herald.
- The paid agents of Big Oil and Gas who have spent millions to cast shade on news we already wish weren't true, and are hellbent on convincing us that we consumers are the main problem.¹⁷
- The mystifications of late capitalism, that train us to act as if we weren't aware of our own contradictions even though we acutely are.
- And maybe, most of all, the structure of the Climate Crisis itself:
 - Its relentless trajectory: To bring it on, all we have to do is, um, nothing.
 - Its overwhelming complexity: To fix it, not only do we have to *do something*, but, as Naomi Klein has said, we pretty much have to "change everything" about how our economy and society operates.
 - Its asymmetries of power: Those of us most historically responsible for causing the problem—wealthy, mostly white, high-carbon-footprint folks in the Global North who burned dirty coal for two centuries to build up our economies—are, for now, the least impacted, while those who did the least to cause it—poor communities, people of color, and those who live in the Global South—are suffering the most.

- Its pernicious decoupling of causes and effects: Millions of years of evolutionary programming have hard-wired us to react to immediate threats with a fight or flight response, but here we are, stuck in a slow-motion catastrophe whose worst effects many of us alive now won't feel for decades, if ever.

As I lie in the grass along the Hudson River, the sky is blue, the sun is shining, the kids are playing. In spite of a rise in extreme weather events, catastrophe still seems far off and abstract. Our backs are objectively up against the wall, but it rarely feels that way. We sense the doom, but only vaguely; at some essential level, what's happening remains unbelievable. Our scientists and our most prescient leaders and even our own consciences are telling us that we must act, but our bodies don't feel the urgency. We're not even listening to what we ourselves have to say.

I came to political adulthood during the wave of protests against nuclear power and nuclear weapons that swarmed the Western world through much of the 80s. Back then it also felt like we were facing a doomsday scenario. The gravest threat was a catastrophic meltdown at a nuclear plant, or an escalating arms race triggering all-out nuclear Armageddon. Apocalypse loomed, but it was far from inevitable—in fact, just the opposite: it would require an accident or a war. There were things we could do—and did do—like phasing out nuclear power plants, de-escalating the arms race—to help prevent the worst outcomes. But it was always possible that nothing too apocalyptic would happen. Not so with the climate crisis. Given the carbon emissions path we are currently on, all we have to do is carry on just as we are, and climate apocalypse will be upon us. It doesn't require an extraordinary accident, just a slow business-as-usual march into the future.

So what can we do? At one level, there's a quite a number of things we actually *can* do, both individually: bike more, fly less, recycle, compost, go vegan, put solar on your roof; and collectively: divest your self/workplace/city/church/school from fossil fuels, make a community resiliency plan, block a pipeline, sue an oil company, pass a Green New Deal, sign an international agreement limiting carbon emissions and vote people into office who'll uphold it. Just to name a few. But at another level, we sense that even if all this were happening, it still wouldn't be enough to prevent catastrophe, as it's simply too late now. So, again, what can we do?

Well, we must keep doing all of that, but also take a deep breath, step back, and try to get honest with ourselves. Here's Paul Kingsnorth trying to get honest with himself:

Is it possible to observe the unfolding human attack on nature with horror, be determined to do whatever you can to stop it, and at the same time know that much of it cannot be stopped, whatever you do? Is it possible to see the future as dark and darkening further; to reject false hope and desperate pseudo-optimism without collapsing into despair?¹⁸

He then gamely answers his own question: "It's going to have to be because that's where I'm at right now."¹⁹ And that seems to be where more and more of us are at right now, myself included. And it's not an easy place to be. It's a heartbreaking mess of a place to be, actually. A whipsaw of competing emotions and commitments that are hard to hold all at once.

The hardest part for Type-A, can-do, eyes-on-the-prize activist me is letting go of the expectation that we *can* make this right. Because I really, really want to make this right. I want to fix this problem, and make things better. I want, as they say, to "save the world." And to let go of that possibility—to even think of letting go of it—is a blasphemy, a kind of death. But the thing is, climate catastrophe, and the broader civilizational crisis of which it is a part, is not a *problem* we can fix; it is rather something quite different: it's a *predicament* we must face.

This distinction was brought home to me by collapse theorist, sci-fi novelist, and, former Archdruid of North America, John Michael Greer.²⁰ "A controlled, creative transition to sustainability might have been possible," Greer argues, "if the promising beginnings of the 1970s had been followed up in the '80s and '90s." But our politicians and CEOs failed us mightily in those decades and since, and so, "our predicament in the early 21st century includes the very high likelihood of an uncontrolled transition to sustainability through...collapse." In other words, there was a window when there might have been a "solution" to the "problem" of climate change and the general unsustainability of our civilization but that window was squandered, leaving us in a predicament. Here's how Greer explains the difference:

A problem calls for a solution. A predicament, by contrast, has no solution. Faced with a predicament, people come up with

responses. Those responses may succeed, they may fail, or they may fall somewhere in between, but none of them “solves” the predicament, in the sense that none of them makes it go away.²¹

Greer notes the striking irony of a civilization that believed it could turn every human predicament—poverty, sickness, even death—into a problem to be solved by technology, that is now “confronted with problems that, ignored too long, have turned into predicaments.” But in this irony he finds a silver lining. Unsolvable predicaments—particularly the inevitability of our own deaths—are the stuff of the human condition, and our reckoning with them has arguably given rise to what is most beautiful and profound in human culture. Could the predicament of industrial civilization, Greer wonders, “push us in the same direction—toward a maturity of spirit our culture has shown little signs of displaying lately, toward a wiser and more creative response to the human condition?”²² Could it? Theoretically, yes. Will it? Who knows. But, here, at least, was something worth hoping for.

And so, our story comes into focus: Decades ago, our politicians and engineers and other problem-solvers failed to build us a bridge to the future when they had the chance. Now, stranded here in the early 21st century, a chasm opening up in front of us, we must find a different path between the worlds. Caught in the teeth of an unsolvable predicament, facing a future “dark and darkening further,” we must still walk forward. But how? Neither pessimism nor simple optimism is going to cut it for us. Something more robust is needed.

We live in a strange time that asks difficult things of us. On the cusp of a long descent, in the face of radical uncertainty, each of us must find an ethos for the path ahead. Do we just say “fuck it”? Can we find a way to hope in spite of it all? Must we settle for the stoic satisfaction of helping things get worse as slowly and humanely as possible? Facing a catastrophe we can mitigate but not prevent, and unable to know—ultimately—whether we are hospice workers or midwives, what is still worth doing?

The Hudson River laps at the edge of Manhattan. A seagull cries. I gather this last paradox and all the others into my bag. Behind me the early-afternoon sun splashes across the water. Beneath me the Earth turns imperceptibly on its axis towards twilight. Our unborn ghosts keep vigil here. They know things we cannot yet see. Not just about the future, but about me. I’m trying to listen.