



Going Back to the Land in the Age of Entitlement

The threat of rapidly increasing emissions of greenhouse gases, coupled with ongoing human-driven extinction of Earth's nonhuman species, strongly suggest it is no longer just the living planet we should be concerned about. Instead, we should be deeply concerned about the near-term future of *Homo sapiens*. A moral question arises: As an individual, what is each of us going to do about it?

My response as a 49-year-old, tenured, full professor was to resign my position and go back to the land, where my wife and I share, with another family, an off-the-grid (i.e., not connected to public utilities) dwelling and I try to inspire others to change their lives to become more supportive of life on Earth. The reasons for changing my lifestyle reflect my core beliefs. I no longer contribute to an empire built on an industrial economy based on consumerism, and thus resist imperialism (i.e., the dominant paradigm, which is characterized by oppression and hierarchy), or live in a city, which is not supported by my moral imperatives. As an academic, I could not devote enough time to my messages to people of the world's industrialized nations about the consequences of addiction to fossil fuels. Because I am increasingly self-sufficient, I can extend my life for a few years beyond completion of the ongoing, human-induced economic and environmental collapse.

The first step in dropping out of the empire was the most difficult. I am a product of a culture that values economic growth and personal prestige over morality, and my abundant ego interfered with my decision to give up the "good life" of a university professor. My ego has not shrunk since I quit, and I still struggle daily with my 2-year-old decision. But recognizing the industrial economy as an omniscient, imperial beast has forced me to cross a threshold of denial, most people find far too formidable to attempt. Collectively or individually, we have never faced declining energy availability, so our culture has never been so profoundly committed to securing energy at all costs. And every message in this anthropocentric, consumer-oriented culture tells us that the Industrial Age will last forever without detriment to the living planet, that our brand of justice and goodness will prevail over terrorists and our other enemies, that progress as defined by increased financial wealth leads directly to personal and societal industrial nirvana, that the harbinger of hope will keep the oil flowing, cars run-

ning, and airplanes flying so that anyone can soak up the sun on a sandy beach any time they need a break from their tumultuous lives in the office cubicles of the empire. Rarely mentioned are the costs of industry to nonindustrial societies and nonhuman species. We ignore, rather than discuss, and therefore deny the untoward consequences of our collective actions on nonhuman species and people inhabiting locations we "need" to exploit.

The difficulty of that first step did not lessen when I crossed the Rubicon of denial. Now I understand what it means to maintain a way of life described as "non-negotiable" by U.S. politicians. Our unfettered pursuit of energy resources, the lifeblood of industrial civilization, requires quashing nearly every nonindustrial culture and every nonhuman species. Furthermore, we must live as a collective, never questioning the direction the empire steers us, as a society or as individuals. In *Power Politics*, Arundhati Roy (2001) wrote, "The trouble is that once you see it, you can't unsee it. And once you've seen it, keeping quiet, saying nothing, becomes as political an act as speaking out. There's no innocence. Either way, you're accountable."

I recognize my own accountability for a system that depends for its survival on destruction. I do not want to bring torture and suffering to humans and other animals, so I opted out of a system that requires for its persistence never-ending economic growth and therefore extraction-based abuse of the world's lands and waters. I do not want to destroy the living planet so that a few humans can continue to live comfortably at the expense of every other culture and species. I do not want to be responsible for extinguishing habitat for humans on Earth. The political, economic, military, and cultural effects of the United States epitomize imperialism because the United States occupies the world to serve its perceived needs. Dropping out of the American empire, which requires obedience at home and oppression abroad in the name of economic growth, is a legitimate first step toward resisting imperialism, and it is legal.

After taking that first step away from industrial culture, the next steps were not any easier. If the industrial economy is killing us, other species, and future prospects of human life on Earth—and abundant evidence indicates it is (Jensen 2006)—do I have an obligation to work toward the termination of the industrial economy? What actions

are necessary to terminate it? Should I risk imprisonment, torture, and premature death in an attempt to resist the dominant paradigm and save the living planet for future generations of humans? In other words, the impetus for my wholesale change in lifestyle arose when I asked myself what is the moral imperative regarding how I live?

The moral imperative is needed because the modern world essentially requires one to live immorally. There is no doubt that a society that enslaves, tortures, and kills people and abuses the lands and waters needed for the survival of our species and others is immoral, yet these actions are produced with stunning efficiency by the world's industrial economy, as epitomized by American empire. Most people know that Big Energy poisons our water, Big Ag controls our food supply, Big Pharma controls the behavior of our children, Wall Street controls the flow of money, Big Ad controls the messages we receive every day, and the criminally rich get richer through exploitation of an immoral system. This is how America works. And, through it all, we think we live moral lives in the land of the free.

Cities arose coincident with the world's first civilizations thousands of years ago, and they allowed—and still allow—humans in industrial regions to extract water and food from other areas in exchange for garbage and pollution. As such, cities represent the apex of empire and the least durable set of living arrangements. My moral compass drove me away from Tucson, Arizona, a city of a million people that is typical of all that is wrong with cities and the American empire.

It is relatively easy to make a moral case in favor of exploiting the lands and waters myriad other species need to survive. We merely need to convince ourselves that we are not really part of nature. In doing so we swim in an ocean of cultural denial, awash in cognitive dissonance. It is more difficult to make a moral case in favor of the ongoing destruction of Earth's bounty, when we and future generations need a living planet to survive. How do we justify unconstrained economic growth in the name of baubles that cost the lives of plants and animals (including humans)? In destroying the living planet and all hope for future humans to occupy the planet, we are not behaving morally. We have become so thoroughly disconnected from the land and our neighbors and so complacent that we no longer recognize moral behavior that leads to societal well-being and individual happiness.

In contrast to western civilization in general and the industrial economy in particular, I think a system is right and even just if it treats people alike and allows them to live free from the bonds of culture, politics, and a monetary system developed and implemented by others. The first 2 million years of the human experience come immediately to mind. During this period, tribal humans were unshackled by cultural, political, and financial bonds.

My response to a transient and immoral set of living arrangements is focused on self-reliance and introspection. On our property, in the southwestern United States, which we share with another family, we secure our water outside the municipal system. We work hard to secure our food without having to rely on grocery stores. We maintain body temperature without using fossil fuels for heating and cooling. And, we are investing heavily in our human and nonhuman neighbors. Our nonhuman neighbors are the animals and plants, soil and water that we protect and honor as we do our human neighbors. We attempt to safeguard them from the ravages of war and from an economy built on war. We make every effort to live outside the industrial economy and within the real world of honest work and play, simple pleasures, and recognition of the consequences of our daily actions. By our example, we are demonstrating how society can be restructured so that children and other humans will understand and value the origins of food and life.

My former employer did not find my messages about global climate change and energy decline nearly as important as growth of the industrial economy that allowed the institution to grow. Leaving the university allowed me to leave the need for self-censorship behind. My writing and presentations describe the nature of our predicaments and include evidence that only complete collapse of the industrial economy will prevent the runaway effects of greenhouse gases from destroying habitat for our species on Earth (Garrett 2009). This is the good news associated with economic collapse. Mitigating the effects of our dependence on fossil fuels—global climate change and reduced availability of energy resources—will require enormous courage, compassion, creativity, inspiration, and motivation. We also need to recognize that it is too late for societal-level solutions and that we need practical, local solutions. Local solutions must be based on a realistic set of assumptions about climate and energy, and my overall message centers on the moral, philosophical, and pragmatic aspects of mitigating the effects of industrial activities.

Personal survival was the least important reason I fled an empire in decline. A reduction in greenhouse-gas emissions of at least 80% represents the single remaining hope to save the living planet on which we depend. Such a reduction in emissions of greenhouse gases will require termination of the industrial economy (Garrett 2009). This will bring an end to the Age of Entitlement and draw us inexorably nearer to the Age of Consequences. Because it spells the end of fuel at filling stations, food at grocery stores, and water coming out of municipal taps, termination of the industrial economy represents a significant threat to many people immersed in the industrial economy. Although every civilization always hovers on the brink of chaos, history suggests empires do not break up suddenly; they dissolve gradually. The demise

of the American empire has been under way for many years, as evidenced by a decade of negative economic growth in the United States. The last superpower, the Soviet Union, did not take a decade to fall (Orlov 2008), and the inexpensive crude oil required to sustain the industrial economy has been largely exhausted now that we have passed the peak in world extraction of conventional crude oil (Deffeyes 2005).

When I walked away from my city-based university position, I could barely distinguish between a screwdriver and a zucchini, which provides ample evidence about my building skills and my gardening abilities. Now, though, I have hammered, drilled, sawed, plumbed, tiled, and constructed, as well as grown in ways I could not have imagined 2 years ago. As I develop these skills further, I may be able to add a few years to my life when the ongoing economic collapse is complete. More importantly, however, I am resisting the dominant paradigm because I can no longer live as part of an immoral system and look at my face in the mirror. I walked away from prestige, money, and career in response to the moral question: As

an individual, what is each of us going to do about it? Will you join me?

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