

Raising My Child in a Doomed World

Some would say the mistake was having our daughter in the first place.

By Roy Scranton

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I cried two times when my daughter was born. First for joy, when after 27 hours of labor the little feral being we’d made came yowling into the world, and the second for sorrow, holding the earth’s newest human and looking out the window with her at the rows of cars in the hospital parking lot, the strip mall across the street, the box stores and drive-throughs and drainage ditches and asphalt and waste fields that had once been oak groves. A world of extinction and catastrophe, a world in which harmony with nature had long been foreclosed. My partner and I had, in our selfishness, doomed our daughter to life on a dystopian planet, and I could see no way to shield her from the future.

Anyone who pays much attention to climate change knows the outlook is grim. It’s not unreasonable to say that the challenge we face today is the greatest the human species has ever confronted. And anyone who pays much attention to politics can assume we’re almost certainly going to botch it. To stop emitting waste carbon completely within the next five or 10 years, we would need to radically reorient almost all human economic and social production, a task that’s scarcely imaginable, much less feasible. It would demand centralized control of key economic sectors, enormous state investment in carbon capture and sequestration and global coordination on a scale never before seen, at the very time when the political and economic structures that held the capitalist world order together under American leadership after World War II are breaking apart. The very idea of unified national political action toward a single goal seems farcical, and unified action on a global scale mere whimsy.

And even if world leaders somehow got their act together, significant and dangerous levels of warming are still inevitable, baked into the system from all the carbon dioxide that has already been dumped. There’s a time lag between carbon dioxide increase and subsequent effects, between the wind we sow and the whirlwind we reap. Our lives are lived in that gap. My daughter was born there.

Barring a miracle, the next 20 years are going to see increasingly chaotic systemic transformation in global climate patterns, unpredictable biological adaptation and a wild spectrum of human political and economic responses, including scapegoating and war. After that, things will get worse. The middle and later decades of the 21st century — my daughter’s adult life — promise a global catastrophe whose full implications any reasonable person must turn away from in horror.

Some people might say the mistake was having a child in the first place. As Maggie Astor reported, more and more people are deciding not to have children because of climate change. This concern, conscious or unconscious, is no doubt contributing to the United States’ record-low birthrate. Some people can’t bear the idea of having a child whose life is going to be worse than their own. Others, struggling with the ethics of living in a carbon-fueled consumer society, consider having children selfish and environmentally destructive.

Take the widely cited 2017 research letter by the geographer Seth Wynes and the environmental scientist Kimberly Nicholas, which argues that the most effective steps any of us can take to decrease carbon emissions are to eat a plant-based diet, avoid flying, live car free and have one fewer child — the last having the most significant impact by far. Wynes and Nicholas argue for teaching these values in high school, thus transforming society through education. On its face, this proposal might seem sensible. But when values taught in the classroom don’t match the values in the rest of society, the classroom rarely wins. The main problem with this proposal isn’t with the ideas of teaching thrift, flying less or going vegetarian, which are all well and good, but rather with the social model such recommendations rely on: the idea that we can save the world through individual consumer choices. We cannot.

Society is not simply an aggregate of millions or billions of individual choices but a complex, recursive dynamic in which choices are made within institutions and ideologies that change over time as these choices feed back into the structures that frame what we consider possible. All the while, those structures are being disrupted and nudged and warped and shaken by countless internal and external drivers, including environmental factors such as global warming, material and social innovation, and the occasional widespread panic. Which is just to say that we are not free to choose how we live any more than we are free to break the laws of physics. We choose from possible options, not ex nihilo.

Of course, nobody really needs to have children. It just happens to be the single strongest drive humans have, the fundamental organizing principle of every human society and the necessary condition of a meaningful human world. Procreation alone makes possible the persistence of human culture through time.

To take Wynes and Nicholas's recommendations to heart would mean cutting oneself off from modern life. It would mean choosing a hermetic, isolated existence and giving up any deep connection to the future. Indeed, taking Wynes and Nicholas's argument seriously would mean acknowledging that the only truly moral response to global climate change is to commit suicide. There is simply no more effective way to shrink your carbon footprint. Once you're dead, you won't use any more electricity, you won't eat any more meat, you won't burn any more gasoline, and you certainly won't have any more children. If you really want to save the planet, you should die.

This is the choice David Buckel made one crisp April morning, when he walked from his Brooklyn apartment to Prospect Park, doused himself in gasoline and lit himself on fire. He was in good health. He had a partner and a daughter. While some might be inclined to ascribe his suicide to mental illness, the letters he left make it clear that his act was political. "Pollution ravages our planet, oozing inhabatability via air, soil, water and weather," he wrote. "Most humans on the planet now breathe air made unhealthy by fossil fuels, and many die early deaths as a result — my early death by fossil fuel reflects what we are doing to ourselves."

Buckel's self-sacrifice takes the logic of personal choice to its ultimate end. But like most of us, I can't or won't make that choice. I'm committed to life in this world, the world I live in, in all its stupidity and suffering, because this world is the one everyone else lives in too: my colleagues and students, my friends and family, my partner and daughter. This world is the only one in which my choices have meaning. And this world, doomed as it is, is the only one that offers joy.

When my daughter was born I felt a love and connection I'd never felt before: a surge of tenderness harrowing in its intensity. I knew that I would kill for her, die for her, sacrifice anything for her, and while those feelings have become more bearable since the first delirious days after her birth, they have not abated. And when I think of the future she's doomed to live out, the future we've created, I'm filled with rage and sorrow.

Every day brings new pangs of grief. Seeing the world afresh through my daughter's eyes fills me with delight, but every new discovery is haunted by death. Reading to her from "Polar Bear, Polar Bear, What Do You Hear?," I can't help marveling at the disconnect between the animal life pictured in that book and the mass extinction happening right now across the planet. When I sing along with Elizabeth Mitchell's version of "Froggie Went a-Courtin'," I can't help feeling like I'm betraying my daughter by filling her brain with fantastic images of a magical nonhuman world, when the actual nonhuman world has been exploited and despoiled. How can I read her "Winnie the Pooh" or "The Wind in the Willows" when I know the pastoral harmony they evoke is lost to us forever, and has been for decades? How soon do I explain to her what's happening? In all the most important ways, it's already too late.

Our children will not face the choices we face. They won't have the opportunities we now have for action. They'll confront a range of outcomes whose limits were determined by the choices we made. Yet while some degree of warming now appears inevitable, the range of possible outcomes over the next century is wide enough and the worst outcomes extreme enough that there is some narrow hope that revolutionary socio-economic transformation today might save billions of human lives and preserve global civilization as we know it in more or less recognizable form, or at least stave off human extinction. But the range of outcomes decreases every day, shifting month by month toward the more apocalyptic end of the spectrum, and waiting even five years may see the window for saving humanity shut.

We live in the gap between the wind and the whirlwind, but taking that gap for a reprieve is a mistake. The catastrophe is now, even if it's almost impossible for most of us to see it. That very dissonance is perhaps the defining truth of our era, the key to its anxious, bipolar character.

The real choice we all face is not what to buy, whether to fly or whether to have children but whether we are willing to commit to living ethically in a broken world, a world in which human beings are dependent for collective survival on a kind of ecological grace. There is no utopia, no Planet B, no salvation, no escape. We're all stuck here together. And living in that world, the only world there is, means giving up any claims to innocence or moral purity, since to live at all means to cause suffering.

Living ethically means understanding that our actions have consequences, taking responsibility for how those consequences ripple out across the web of life in which each of us is irrevocably enmeshed and working every day to ease what suffering we can. Living ethically means limiting our desires, respecting the deep interdependence of all things in nature and honoring the fact that our existence on this planet is a gift that comes from nowhere and may be taken back at any time.

I can't protect my daughter from the future and I can't even promise her a better life. All I can do is teach her: teach her how to care, how to be kind and how to live within the limits of nature's grace. I can teach her to be tough but resilient, adaptable and prudent, because she's going to have to struggle for what she needs. But I also need to teach her to fight for what's right, because none of us is in this alone. I need to teach her that all things die, even her and me and her mother and the world we know, but that coming to terms with this difficult truth is the beginning of wisdom.

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