



The CommUUnicator

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Climate Change as a Domsday Scenario

By Stephen Maxwell

This article is Part Three of a series from the Social Justice Team to keep us focused on the climate crisis and what actions we might take. Parts [One](#) and [Two](#) were published in this newsletter in the Fall.

The following is mostly excerpted from “What Domsday Looks Like Today” by Joel Achenbach, which appeared in The Washington Post Magazine for November 13, 2022. In the article, Achenbach lists his top ten existential worries. Number one is “Threat X – something dreadful but not even imagined.” Okay, that’s a bit of a cheat; but his number two is environmental catastrophe, and his number three is nuclear war, which I have listed as my numbers one and two for years now.

Achenbach writes: “We are not being paranoid when we recognize that human civilization has become increasingly complex and simultaneously armed with techniques for self-destruction. There are bad omens [evidence] everywhere, and not just the melting glaciers and dying polar bears. Meanwhile, there’s this ancient threat called war. Vladimir Putin and his advisors keep rattling the nuclear saber. A nuclear holocaust is the classic apocalyptic scenario that never went away.” Elsewhere, he quotes historian Niall Ferguson: “If history has anything to tell us, it is that totalitarianism is the most dangerous thing that we’ve ever come up with.

The most destructive things of the 20th century were the result of totalitarian regimes: Hitler’s and Stalin’s and Mao’s.”

In other words, totalitarianism tips the scales in favor of unrestrained self-destructive impulses.

Toby Ord, a philosopher who teaches at Oxford, counts himself as a member of a group of intellectuals referred to as “long-termists,” who posit “we have moral obligations to the welfare of the trillions of people who might potentially follow us here on Earth, and on worlds across the universe. Highest among these obligations, of course, is to avoid destroying ourselves and our planet before those future people are born.” In his book “The Precipice: Existential Risk and the Future of Humanity” Ord wrote: “We see a species precariously close to self-destruction, with a future of immense promise hanging in the balance.”

Achenbach goes on to say that a “risk can be described [as a mathematical equation] by its probability times its consequence. The probability of significant climate change and other environmental damage is 100 percent, as we can see with our own eyes. The ultimate severity of the consequences at the global level depends on what we do about it. It’s certainly the top existential crisis for those species that are on the verge of going extinct, and for those cities that may run out of sandbags as the seas rise. We’re witnessing a mass extinction event, and we’re the cause. If we can’t solve the

climate crisis and protect the environment of our beautiful blue marble [our “Blue Boat Home”], we probably can’t solve any of the other existential threats, either.”

Achenbach, and some of the people he talked with for his article, have reason for (some) hope. As he states: “Humans are remarkably adaptable. Coping with changing circumstances, modeling the future, coming up with strategies and workarounds, mending our ways – this is kind of what we do. [It is] our evolutionary niche. But [here’s the qualifier] we do not function like a beehive. We tend [also] to be competitive, selfish, greedy, favoring individual happiness over that of the collective.” He quotes Steven Pinker, a professor of psychology at Harvard, who says: “Human psychology is attuned to the negative. It’s called the Negativity Bias. We dread bad things more than we savor good things.” In response to this, Achenbach writes: “Fear is a protective evolutionary adaptation. We need to be aware of worst-case scenarios. Fear, anger and outrage fuel action, and action lowers risk. But fear can also be exploited by charlatans and demagogues as a sales technique. Let the record reflect that many of the most unnerving doomsday scenarios of the past century have not come true.” [see Y2k]

What can we draw from all of this? We must embrace the reality of the threat of climate catastrophe but not allow ourselves to be immobilized by fear of it. We must be proactive to head off the potential disaster that impends with the climate crisis. And we must vigorously protect democracy, as our best political path forward toward our own (and the planet’s) survival.

Playground Update



Little by little our new playground structure is taking shape. A special thanks goes out to all of the hearty souls willing work on this project in the dead of winter.

Message from the Treasurer

Your statements of tax-deductible contributions to UUFW were emailed last week. A problem has been identified on the statements of people whose pledges were received directly as distributions from a retirement account, foundation or other institution, and not from their personal bank accounts. Although these payments appear on your statements, they should not be claimed as tax deductions. We will work to correct this error in the future. If you have any questions about your contribution statement, contact Florence Ferguson at treasurer@uufw.org.

